

Searching for a Forever Home

Our first cat never really belonged to us. We left the back door open one day in the dry Australian summer and he walked in with his tail in the air and announced himself with a chubby, loud 'meow'. At sixteen I hadn't new clothes or a car. All I had wanted was a cat. I didn't care where it came from or how it looked. I had just wanted a cat, and Ebenezer had just wanted a forever home.

At first Ebenezer sat close enough to the backdoor to make run for it, but far enough inside our home to fake confidence. For years I had asked for a cat and had been given a firm 'no', so firm that not even a determined teenager could turn it around. Until I was fifteen we had a deaf Dalmatian, and before that a ginger tomcat my brother couldn't take to university with him. Ebenezer didn't know any of this. So here was a cat, a living, breathing and apparently healthy cat that I could love and call my own.

Ebenezer had no microchip, he was not recognised by any of the town's vets, nor by any of our neighbours. There were no missing posters in the corner store's windows or advertisements in the local papers. We asked around and said we had found him, to let his owners know so could take him home. This returned zero phone calls and no emails, and by this time Ebenezer had made himself comfortable and he had settled into our hearts. Without a microchip, sending Ebenezer to the lost dogs' home would have been a death sentence. The hot and cramped shelter already had too many animals, was so outdated that no amount of renovations could save it and it was not a place we could send a cat.

Our door was always open if Ebenezer needed space. A new microchip and file at the vet would help him home if he got lost, but he didn't need it. He came home every night and snuggled into the crook behind my knees to sleep. When I woke in the middle of the night he would lift his head, give his signature meow and look at me with the sophistication of his namesake. *Two Lumps: the Adventures of Eben and Snooch* tells the story of two housecats. Ebenezer was the intelligent, complex and artistic one, Snooch was a professional at bad puns and Haiku. My Ebenezer was a mix of both and had his moments where his inner kitten came out.

Less than two years after Ebenezer had marched into our lives, I carried him home for the last time. Wrapped in a calico bag, I placed his still body in his favourite sun spot, while I dug a hole in the garden. He was laid to rest by the family he had adopted, and we planted flowers in his name.

After two failed operations we were faced with the choice of a slow natural, but painful death, or a quick dignified passing.

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In America around the same time the streets of Alexandria, Virginia, became the home of Nori as he tried to live the carefree life of a loved kitten. After he found himself homeless, fighting off other stray cats, dodging traffic and finding a warm place to sleep at night left Nori frightened and timid, with a look of sadness tattooed on his face. Amidst this he found a place in the heart of a kindly woman who fed him, but never tried to cage or own him. Soon his friend moved away, but not without a final kind act of kindness. She took Nori to King Street Cats.

Fifty-two university students, including myself, had flown across the world to America on a study tour to learn about the American Dream. We spent a week in Washington DC that focused strongly on government and community. Between visiting Arlington Cemetery, the White House and the Naval Criminal Investigation Service (NCIS), two dozen members of the group were sent searching for the American Dream at King Street Cats.

The sunspot by the window was the desired position, with half a dozen cats claiming beds by the window. Some turned their head to lazily look at the gawking Australians; others placed their paws on the glass and gawked back.

Three at a time we walked through the two doors, designed to stop escapees and adventurous kittens. The adoption room at King Street Cats was lined with cat trees, high shelves, boxes, baskets and chairs; each spot occupied by a sleeping cat or a curious set of eyes watching us. Our eyes wandered around the 30 odd cats and kittens that slowly turned their attention to us. Some sprang forward, curious or seeking affection, others waited at the sides, and a few slunk deeper into their baskets.

On a shelf with two baskets and two cats, there was cat that had ears which flopped in two directions. Nervous, he cast his golden eyes down. When we reached out he warned us with a weak, drawn growl and buried himself in the plastic basket, turning his face away. With black velvet fur, specked with white flecks, and round eyes, Nori should have won anyone over. He stole my heart the second I saw him: His shy manner and less than perfect fur reminded me of Ebenezer.

On Nori's Petfinder profile he is described as 'a sort of quiet guy' who appreciates peace, and in a room full of energetic kittens and free roaming cats, there isn't much peace to be had.

King Street Cats is the only cat-exclusive orphanage in Alexandria and little tiffs are to be expected, yet for the two hours we were there we saw only a few swipes and a quick hiss. Within the

walls abandoned, rescued and previously unloved cats can live without fear of being euthanized because of space, resources or simply because they are unloved.

The financial cost of caring and housing pets often presents challenges for shelters, and without donations and volunteers King Street Cats would not be able to operate as they do. For shelters without this level of support, euthanasia is an unfortunate and frequent occurrence, leading to a healthy animal being euthanized every 11 seconds in the USA. Unlike many shelters that are forced to take this action, King Street Cats provides a haven where the cats can live until they are adopted. For those who are never adopted, King Street Cats becomes their home, with several cats becoming long term residents over the years.

Because of generous donations and passionate volunteers, King Street Cats is able to shelter these long term residents. If a cat is not spayed or neutered, she and her offspring can produce 370,000 kittens over seven years. In Australia, shelters spay or neuter their animals before they're sent home with a family, but according to PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) only twenty six states in America have the same requirement.

I was brought up with a core belief around animals; if they had babies, they were your responsibility. If you didn't want this responsibility you took them to get the snip. It was an act of love and my Nana, the original cat lady, showed me what compassion is.

My grandparents have lived on the farm for my entire life. Inside the mismatch farm house porcelain cats sit on every window sill. There are two twin black cats that sit in my grandparents' lounge room, and they have always been my favourite. Maybe that's where my soft spot for black cats comes from.

Unfortunately farm life has one huge problem for a lady who loves cats. When I was very young, before I can recall things clearly, I went to see the kittens. Curled around their ginger mother, they mewed with the high pitch of a new born and squirmed blindly as a family. I was too young to question where they went or realised that this ginger cat was one of many pregnant cats that was dumped on the farm. As I continued to grow, I remained just as naive. I think I used to tell myself that all the cats would climb into the back of my grandparent's red Ute and go to new homes. What really happened was they all went to the local shelter, and we can only hope that they all lived full lives with families.

No shelter I had visited could compare to King Street Cats. The moment I stepped inside King Street Cats I understood the society of the cats. Cats love to be up high, and there wasn't a high

surface without a cat. Older cats slept, shy cats, like Nori, watched from the walls, and the kittens and courageous cats met us at the door.

At the centre of these cats was Allie Phillips, volunteer and attorney. One of the things that struck me about America was how polished everyone always looked, and between the sheer joyfulness of being surrounded by cats, I could not believe the lack of cat hair on Allie's white pants.

When I arrived in America I was completely against euthanasia, unless it was for medical reasons. Choosing a dignified death for Ebenezer was the hardest choice I'd ever had to make. The vet had shaved Ebenezer's leg and injected him with what would put him to sleep. I tried not to cry as I held onto Ebenezer, telling him that there would be no pain anymore and that there would be always be a lap to sit on and a hand to scratch his chin where he was going.

Allie's story of loss was so much darker, where cruelty won at first, but her pain inspired compassion and led her to King Street Cats. Ethical euthanasia didn't sound as terrible or as heartless now, especially after Allie recalled the tiny, pale cat that was snatched from her arms, and away from the cat's three month old kitten. During her lunch hour on June 10, 2001, Allie was spending time with Lilac, a tortoiseshell with large green almond-shaped eyes, and her black kitten, Linus. Lilac and Linus were waiting to be adopted at a shelter in Michigan, where Allie used to volunteer. With three foster cats already at home, Allie didn't have the space, but knew Lilac and Linus would be in a foster home by the weekend. Maybe it was hope that made Allie think the man that snatched Lilac out of her arms was an adopter. When she saw his cold and uncaring eyes Allie realised swiftly that there was no love in his actions, that he was seizing Lilac for experimentation. She acted quickly, and within minutes her attempt to adopt both Lilac and Linus was halted by the shelter director and staff. Lilac was no longer available for adoption. This shelter allowed the seizure to take priority over a rescue.

Allie returned to the cat room and Lilac was gone. Taking Linus in her arms, Allie vowed through tears of rage to that she would keep all the cats in the room safe and end pound seizures. The next day Allie adopted Linus. By the time *How Pet Shelters are Brokered for Experimentation* was released almost ten years later, Allie had kept both promises.

The image of Linus in a cage, alone, was something I could picture easily. After I grieved Ebenezer I was ready for a new friend. I rang the local shelter and the first cat they mentioned was a black kitten. Call it instinct, but I placed a hold on her, promising I would be in as soon as possible to meet her. By now the local animal shelter was new, but it was not warm or homely. All three of the cat cages were occupied; one with a litter of kittens and their exhausted mother, one with a tired

tortoiseshell, the third held a tiny black kitten that was captivated by the dust in a sun beam and did not notice when we entered.

It was love at first sight. Alice was too young for a home, so we paid the deposit and waited two weeks for her to be vaccinated, recover from being spayed, and grow just enough to come home. Alice was the size of my hand when she left the shelter, and was so nervous that after her first cautious steps around the lounge room, he bounced into the side of her cat carrier and sat dazed with her tiny claws gripping the carpet. Then she was fascinated by the threads and just like the dust in the sunbeam, they had her full attention.

Alice, and the cats at King Street Cats, will always be safe to be distracted by the little things and nap in the sun. The only cage they will experience is the cat carrier to take them home, or if they are separated for medical reasons. In Virginia pound seizures are illegal, but in Michigan, and some other states, shelter becomes a deceptive term. When an animal is seized their future changes from hope, to despair, and trusting animals may have no idea what awaits them as they leave the shelter.

Electrodes could be inserted into their brains in the name of science, their blood harvested, and for some of the unluckiest creatures, an undignified and painful death from an introduced condition, illness, or from the strain of being used day after day. PETA's website unapologetically features images of cats with equipment strapped to their head. One of these features a slack-jawed tabby with one pupil dilated and one contracted as a result of the experiment. 94% of American cat owners attribute human qualities to their companion animal, but it's difficult to see a cat's personality when they're left in a state where they are no longer able to express themselves with instinctual body language.

Docile adult cats are often chosen for pound seizures; their trusting natures make it easier for the scientists. These qualities also make animals sacrificed to education easy to work with. Cats used by veterinarians who are training to anaesthetise animals suffer the same treatment and procedures up again and again. Until recently Washington University in St. Louis (WUSTL) was using cats for healthcare professionals to learn how to intubate human infants. Cats would have a hard plastic tube forced down their throat up to 15 times in a row, leading to swelling, bleeding, collapsed lungs and, sometimes, death. WUSTL will start using infant simulators, like more than a 1000 other training facilities.

I struggle to imagine having to make the choice between euthanizing a cat and sending them away for experimentation, because I know I'll never have to make it. Every experiment I read about

had a face and I gave them a story, unconsciously. It's too easy to picture their fur warmed by the sunlight while they napped, or their tail flicking lazily as they walk around.

Cats like Lakshimi, a favourite of King Street Cats volunteer Linda Bean, benefit the most from living in a free roaming shelter. With little human contact before she came to King Street Cats, Lakshimi is often overlooked by potential families as she hides in the corners. Even with my efforts to spread a little love to the shy cats when I visited, I missed Lakshimi. As I was showing my Niece and Nephew the photos I took of the cats, I realised she was sitting behind Nori, watching us gather with her stunning green eyes.

The depth of human love for their pets is something that isn't always recognised, this love led to new laws after Hurricane Katrina. When orders for evacuation were given not everyone left. People refused to leave unless their four-legged friend could come. Now evacuation plans must have provisions for companion animals. It may be this love that inspires young people to become veterinarians, but like any job it has its pitfalls.

For every cat and kitten that is euthanized, there is someone holding the needle, ending a life because an owner, someone where in the past, didn't sterilise their pet or didn't want them. These dark angels, as PETA calls them, undertake the work that no one wants to do or acknowledge. It's easier to tell yourself that the litter of kittens you take to the shelter or dump on a farm will end up in a loving family, than to admit that there may not be enough homes for them.

When Alice falls asleep in our fruit bowl, now long devoid of fruit, I often wonder if she realises that black cats are one of the least adopted categories. I've never seen her bewitch someone, and never believed she's caused anyone bad luck. If anything, Alice has done nothing but love our family.

In the introduction of *How Shelters Pets are Brokered for Experimentation*, Allie Phillips shares that she "... always found animals had the keep ability to listen and understand humans, especially when life was difficult or stressful." During Ebenezer's short time with us, we never experienced anything too stressful, but when my Mum unexpectedly broke her hip, Alice felt it just as much as the humans in our family did. I had moved three hours from home to study at university when Mum broke her hip, and as a result of Multiple Sclerosis, a broken hip meant six months in hospital. For half a year it was just Alice and Dad at home, and if anyone felt what we went through as a family, it was Alice. Diagnosed with feline depression, Alice didn't understand where two thirds of her family had gone. On weekends when I went home and when Mum eventually returned, Alice

perked up again. From then Mum became Alice's favourite lap, and she started licking and head butting the phone when I called home.

Alice will never have kittens, it has been ensured, and she will never be placed in a situation where experimentation is possible, regardless of how many still squirming geckos she gifts us. I will always be thankful that I picked that week to look for a cat to adopt, even after Alice wakes me up at three in the morning because she's bored. I always joke about getting a sibling for Alice, but being an only child has made Alice independent and reluctant to share attention. For the two short hours I was King Street Cats I wondered about Nori's future. If King Street Cats was in Australia, instead of America, I would have begged my parents to let me take him home.

Recently King Street Cats posted a photo on Facebook of Nori sitting by the door, waiting for his forever family. I know I'll never see Nori again, but my heart soared when I saw the cat I barely knew grow in confidence. Now in photos his face tilts towards the camera, and he has the half smile of a quiet gentleman.

King Street Cats gave me hope, even as I learnt about pound seizures. They may be one small organisation, but for cuddly siblings Josephine and Napoleon, Gracie who jumped onto a box and squashed the cat inside, and Dazzle who had kittens when she was still a kitten herself, they provide life, a chance and a future.

Although these cats kept a piece of my heart, the hope I felt bloomed from the knowledge that there were people more passionate than me, who worked harder for animals. Euthanasia and pound seizures may be reality now, but as no-kill becomes no-birth, through animal birth control, and science progresses, maybe one day they will become a memory.

But until then Lil BUB, who went from starving runt of a feral litter to having her won YouTube talk show and book thanks to the compassion of her owner, has some simple advice; 'Adopt your next pet. Support your local shelter. Spay and neuter the ones you've got now.'

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