

ISSUES

What My Dead Partner's Surly Cat Taught Me About Healing

“I can’t believe your inheritance from a lesbian relationship is a cat,” my 18-year-old nephew observed the last time I was visiting. “That’s the most lesbian thing in the world.”

KELLI DUNHAM · DEC 30, 2014

First dates are seldom easy, and even less so when you're in your 40s and sharing an apartment with two other people and three pets. But when you're in your 40s, sharing an apartment with two other people and three pets, and one of those pets is a finicky Russian Blue cat who belonged to your now-deceased partner, and even three years later, still hisses at any other romantic visitors to your room? Sexy time becomes awkward time.

I would say that Lulu the Cat, the aforementioned Russian Blue, wasn't always so difficult, but that would be a lie. [When my partner Cheryl became sick with Hodgkin's lymphoma](#) it made perfect sense for us to merge our apartments and live together so she could have the care she needed. It made perfect sense to everyone. Everyone, that is, but Lulu.

Lulu, like most cats, has an extremely well developed idea of how humans should behave. I would decide I was going to sit on one side of the couch and she would wedge herself between me and my computer until I petted her or got up and left the couch entirely.

“Hey cat,” I’d say, “You aren’t the boss of me.”

And Lulu the Cat said, "Screw you."

When Cheryl was hospitalized with a toxic pulmonary reaction to the chemo she had been given, I moved into the hospital with her. I would come home on Friday afternoons and pet Lulu and tell her everything would be okay.

“Just because I’m here and Cheryl isn’t doesn’t mean anything special, you’ll see, she’ll come back later.” I would say, almost certainly believing this myself.

And Lulu the Cat said, "Screw you".

Cheryl got worse, then got better, and then got much worse again. Three months after Cheryl went into the hospital, I came home to the apartment and put Lulu on my lap, "Hey little cat dude, I seriously did the best I could. I'm sorry."

And Lulu the Cat said, "Screw you."

Cheryl didn't have a will, and so Cheryl's apartment legally belonged to her mom. Lulu and I moved to the apartment I had lived in before cohabitating with Cheryl. Up until this point, Lulu had only been exposed to the very orderly Cheryl in a very quiet apartment. Now she lived with me, two roommates, another cat and a huge dog. The first night at the new place, Lulu climbed onto my chest as I was falling asleep. "I'm sorry, little cat dude," I said, "I did the very best I could. I'm sorry our little family is so small."

And Lulu the Cat, as she laid her head on my chest and fell asleep said, "Screw you."

Lulu didn't like that I piled my hoodies on my bedroom chair, and that sometimes I don't make my bed. In the beginning, both these things bothered her very much. She would attempt to paw down the hoodies and would also not sleep on an unmade bed. But she also started to sit on my lap pretty much every moment I was working at my computer, and she began to follow me around the apartment, even sometimes into the bathroom.

"I can't believe your inheritance from a lesbian relationship is a cat," my 18-year-old nephew observed the last time I was visiting. "That's the most lesbian thing in the world."

I've lived with cats before, but a Dead Lover's Cat is a special kind of emotional responsibility. I worry if she is getting enough socialization, if she wants more toys, more catnip, better food. I worry that there is too much stimulation in our apartment or not enough. I get choked up when I play a video of Cheryl and Lulu hears her voice and runs to the computer. Hoping to understand more about cats and how their brains work, I watch "My Cat From Hell" obsessively, tearing up along with Jackson every time a traumatized cat is helped.

And then there's the matter of Feline Romanticus Interruptus. I declared myself Healed and Ready to Date two years after Cheryl died, but Lulu clearly felt like I was rushing things. She became the cat version of the Overprotective Dad With Teenage Daughter. Instead of gruffly asking each of my dates "What is your intention?" she hissed and then meowed loudly just inches away from each person's face. She would proceed to turn over the litter box and dig madly underneath it, as if she was convinced my sanity must be buried somewhere.

This was embarrassing at times, but I now wonder if perhaps Lulu knew something I didn't. Even after I stopped offering my apartment as an option to hang out, I went on 47 first dates in an eighteen month period but no second dates. I undoubtedly scared some folks off with [the dead partner\(s\) story](#) and my insistence on talking about the Haiti earthquake and a personal clothing style that can only be described as Late Apathetic Butch.

It would however, seem statistically likely that at least one person would want nothing more than to make out with a disaster-obsessed queer with a traumatic past and a penchant for wearing old cargo pants and brand new dress shirts and that they would, in turn, engage me. But I felt simply and completely and universally uninterested and couldn't ethically agree to second dates in these circumstances, even if pressed.

Since I didn't seem interested in second dates, it seemed unethical to continue the first dates as well, and so I tabled my romantic non-desires for a while. I didn't feel broken, exactly, but I was starting to despair of ever feeling healed.

Enter stage left, The Fabulous Diva (TFD), a friend of a friend who had annoyed me at a queer beach outing the previous summer by putting up a huge tent that crowded out what I had decided was my sun. I was annoyed with her even though she was six feet tall, exceptionally beautiful and was wearing a chain mail bikini. This should have been a tip-off to my relative non-readiness to date.

However, months later when we ended up stuffed in a crowded car together on the way to a friend's housewarming party, I realized, "Oh. What is the feeling? I'm. Um. Oh. I'm interested."

Luckily for me, TFD was also interested and on our first date, I invited her back to my apartment. I went to the kitchen to grab some drinks and when I returned to the bedroom I found that TFD had plopped herself on my bed and was petting Lulu. My surly cat was snuggled into her side like they were old pals. I couldn't exactly complain -- this would make the rest of the night much smoother -- but I also couldn't believe what I was seeing. I addressed the cat directly, "What the---"

And Lulu the cat said, "Screw you."

I later related this to a friend who reacted in surprise: "Wow, I knew you had another relationship in you, I just didn't know Lulu did!"

I don't believe that my cat has psychic abilities to select the best person for me to date, nor do I believe in soulmates or even monogamy for that matter, except as one of many possible relationship models. But TFD is a gift to be sure. She is fierce enough to scare me a little (in all the best consensual ways), we are exceedingly sexually compatible and she has the steady kindness that you need if you are dating someone like me who might panic and think you've been struck by lightning because a text conversation stops abruptly.

"I'm not dead," the next text after a delay will say, with all the information I need and none of the cloying sympathy I don't.

One sunny Wednesday afternoon this fall I was chopping vegetables with TFD. She asked me what I was thinking.

"I was thinking that I am grateful for this moment," I said, choking up and not really stopping to consider if maybe this was a little bit of an overshare, "that sometimes sorrow really does stretch out in room in your heart for joy."

I am hopeless at small talk.

Every time Lulu climbs over me to snuggle with TFD, I am reminded that especially with grief, healing comes when it comes, not when we demand it, and not in some linear fashion. What seems like a hopelessly aggravated wound might be instead trauma that will heal, but not on our deadline.

We aren't promised timely healing or sunny afternoons spent chopping vegetables with people we care about or really much of anything at all. But sometimes healing comes and sometimes sunny afternoons come and sometimes just recognizing how precious the sunny afternoons are is the best way to heal, and then begin again to build something new.