

Stanley Takes a Nap
Personal Essay

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This story haunts me and it is only hilarious retelling it because it turned out fine in the end. That's the thing about hilariously dark stories, they have twists, but are only fun to share when they end up totally fine. This story has so many chapters packed into a short time frame; one that seemed to last an eternity, ranged over many emotions, and quite a few lessons learned. Most importantly though, it is a story about my cat, and I am admittedly obsessed with him.

I will start by sharing pertinent information regarding my cat. He is small for a male cat, with long curious whiskers and a tail that tells you his every emotion. He's a gray and white tuxedo cat who is devilishly handsome, about a year and a half old, and his name is Stanley. "Stan the Man" if you will. I rescued him from a reserve on November 2nd, 2020, and when I chose him from the litter that day, he was the tiniest in the group. The mother was gone and the whole litter was very sick with ringworm, a stomach infection, and an intestinal infection. Kittens are typically adopted at 2 months old when they have benefitted from their mother's guidance, but this litter was barely a month old. As I fed him antibiotics twice a day and nursed him back to health, we bonded quickly - a bond formed in lots of love, a maternal responsibility and trust that I'd do my best to provide a wonderful life for him.

As deep as my love for the feline friends in our world is, I have an equally deep passion for the great outdoors. As Stanley got older and stronger, I would take him along on my adventures. I wanted to provide him with a greater sense of freedom outside of the walls of the apartment. The first time I took him on a hike; he seemed to enjoy it and followed along right beside me down the path. When he got tired, he'd ride along perched on my shoulder. The first hike was a great success! With confidence built, I continued to take him on longer hikes and camping trips. Hiking, he would walk alongside me or perched on my shoulder. On camping trips, he'd never wander too far from the tent and always come back to hang out. Weeks and months continued, and I took Stanley on hikes most weekends. We built trust in each other, I thought, "Wow this is great, he is living the best cat life ever".

Fast forward to July 2021 when Stanley was almost a year old and had transitioned out of his dependent kitten stage. Now Stan was a bit bolder, he would spend more time exploring logs, tree holes, big ferns, and things just off the path. He was slightly more defiant on these hiking trips and would often wander far ahead or behind on the path. This made me slightly nervous, so I decided to invest in a harness and attach a lightweight pet GPS tracker. This system worked well because he could wander off the trail without me worrying because I could just find him on my phone which linked to his tracker.

One hot day at the end of July, we went for a hike, and he was not having it. Usually, we would go hiking in the morning, but on this day, I decided to take him out around 12:00 PM. In hindsight I

realized I'd made two mistakes right off the bat. First, an afternoon hike was out of routine for a nocturnal animal who napped in the afternoon. Secondly, it was about 35 degrees, and he wears a forever fur coat. It was even a bit too hot for me that day, and Stanley was very sluggishly trailing about 20 meters behind me. I turned around occasionally and made sure that he was still there or slowed down to keep pace with him. I realized this wasn't going well, so we did a loop to cut the hike short and head back to the car. I started to feel guilty the closer we got to the car because I could tell he really didn't want to be doing this.

We were about half a kilometer away from the parking lot and he just stopped in the middle of the trail! I thought to myself, "Ok, I should take off his harness, it's probably just adding weight and heating his little body. We're almost back to the car and I don't need him to have his tracker on..." This proved to be my third mistake of the day! I took his harness off and then turned to keep walking, thinking he would follow me. I turned back and he was not on the trail anymore. I quickly ran back to where I'd just left him and saw his tail slip through the ferns, off the trail into the thick forest. He looked back at me, and I said, "Stanley come here!" As if a cat has ever responded to a command! He proceeded to run fast into the thick forest. It was too thick for me to make my way through as fast as he was moving. My mind is screaming, "You just took his tracker off! Why did you take his tracker off! We were almost back to the car!" I darted into the forest, trying to follow him but couldn't keep up and lost track of him. I then proceeded to comb the area saying his name, but there was no sign of him. I grappled with the gravity of this situation. I didn't feel equipped for this. I felt guilty. I felt scared. I felt hurt! After about an hour of combing the area, looking for spots I think he might be spending some cool napping time in, I began to head into panic mode.

I sat on a log, surrounded by thick forest and tried to keep holding onto the precious fact that Stanley and I had been on enough camping trips where he'd been allowed to roam freely, and he always came back to the tent after a couple hours. I went through this loop of reassuring myself that he was going to come back, it was just a matter of time. The panic kept cracking down like a sledgehammer, breaking up the confidence I was building. I thought, "...but we aren't camping, we're just hiking, and he's never wandered off like. You have no way to track him down and there's no established tent spot that he will recognize". We are in deep, thick, expansive forest. He's never been a free agent without any kind of identification or way for me to get to him in the wilderness. This is a first-time occurrence!

I was really battling with my level of trust for him. It was 1:30 PM. I rationalize that it's too hot and this is when he typically naps. He must have found a cold, dark spot to sleep for a while. I establish a quasi-tent spot, instead of roaming around calling his name. Fast forward to 4:00 PM, and I'm still sitting

in the same spot in the forest calling for him and there's been no sign or sound of him. In the last three hours I've experienced every single emotion. I've wept. I've raged. I've felt guilty. I've been fearful. I decided to stay. I decided to leave. I decided to stay. I looked at what my life looked like without this cat, my little best friend. Many "what if" questions came to mind. The main one I struggled with was "what if he gets hurt?"

Naturally, I called my mom as she is sage and knew she would be a salve to my prolonged panic. I explained the situation to her, and she said, "You're going to have to make a decision of either leaving and probably not finding Stanley again or you're going to have to just stick it out and trust that he's going to come back and find you when he's ready". I was kicking myself that it could have been such an easily avoided situation.

At 5:00 PM, I called my best friend, Danielle, who happened to live nearby the trail. She loves Stanley and I knew if I told her I needed her help, she would. I told Danielle, "I've decided that I'm going to camp here. Is there any chance you can bring me some food, water and a blanket?" I couldn't leave in case he came back. I wanted to be there. Danielle was an airtight vessel of stability for me. She talked me out of my tree and said she could be there soon. She knew the location where I was because we'd walked this path many times together. It was the first time in hours that I felt stable and hopeful. I knew she would breathe new life into this dismal situation.

At 6:00 PM, Danielle found me off the path in the forest. She unloaded her armful of snacks and unpacked her backpack with a lantern and blanket. She was ready to stay there with me! Just as she threw out a blanket for the two of us to sit on, we heard a little rustling in the bushes to our left. Who poked his head out of the ferns? Who emerged with some slow blinking, yawning, and stretching? Who sauntered over to the blanket to greet us with a few cute meows? That's right... Stanley! He strolled over to us with a smattering of soil in his fur and I just knew he'd found a hole under a log to take a nice cold nap in.

Ultimately, Stanley is an individual, regardless of my responsibility for him. He is more than a pet and I learned this on that day. I learned that despite being a cat, Stanley is an individual capable of making decisions that are best for his own well-being. He didn't make his decision with the greater intention of hurting me. Sometimes the people, or cats, we love make decisions that are hard for us to accept and understand. Within our love for them there must be a willingness to seek and gain an understanding of why they make these decisions. Within this the virtues of love, patience and understanding, truly come through. We may not always agree on what is best, but we must seek to understand each other's perspective.