

What My Cat Taught Me About Bouncing Back

One difficult divorce, two confused kids...and a cat who wouldn't let Mom down.

By Jane Delury



Photo: Georgiana Chitac/Getty Images

Less than an hour after my ex-husband and I told our two daughters that we were separating, I had promised my then seven-year-old that I would get them a pet. "How about that?" I said into the backseat of the car, where she was crying with her head on her older sister's arm. I was taking them for ice cream, and also trying to get out of the house that no longer felt like mine. The crying stopped. My daughter's face stilled. The three of us started to talk about dogs versus cats, rabbits versus hamsters. Thank God, I thought. I'd come up with a pleasing idea to follow the announcement of a terrible truth. I was the Girl Scout of divorce, marching everyone along a new trail to the future. I know those woods ahead look scary, I was, in effect, saying, but we will find

wildflowers and berries! You will have two houses, I'd declared to the girls earlier, but those two houses will make one home. In my half of the home, which I was already imagining, the three of us would watch BBC shows, grow a vegetable garden with a lot of mint and—it had been decided by the time we reached the ice-cream shop—have a cat.

Down the trail a month later, I found that the woods were as dark and scary as they'd appeared. Fifty-fifty custody sounded fine, until I knew what the 50 percent without the girls felt like. On my off nights, I'd ring the doorbell of what had once been my house to give them hugs on the threshold. Money was tight. My children were suffering. The financial and emotional complications of mediation were exhausting. I fell down the stairs while moving boxes into a rental house and lay on the landing, wondering how long it would take for my corpse to be found. In a life now measured in percentages, I felt as if I spent 75 percent of my time crying.

"That one," the girls said at the animal shelter. They pointed at a black kitten named Popcorn, who was bouncing between the cages. I wanted a different cat, a sleek Siberian named Aziza, with luxurious gray fur. The girls said no. Aziza might be beautiful, but she seemed aloof. As I was learning to do, I bit my tongue and we went with the cat the girls wanted, since the thing they most wanted was impossible. We bought food and water bowls, a bed that Popcorn eschewed for an empty IKEA box and an assortment of toys—fishing sticks and balls, ribbons, mice stuffed with catnip, until Popcorn that first (miserable) Christmas stole the stuffed hedgehogs I'd put in the girls' stockings and adopted them as her faux kittens.

When I was 16, my father died. In our family, it had been my job to set the table, and for years after his death, I would instinctively take four sets of cutlery from the kitchen drawer and have to put one back. I found myself doing this again the first year in the new house. As my seven-year-old put it, we were used to being a square, not a triangle. I avoided our former routines and the foods we once ate, because doing otherwise was too painful. The only distinctive feature of my half of the home—aside from a dark house with a basement deemed haunted, mornings of driving the girls to school still in my nightgown as they finished breakfast wrapped in a napkin and the occasional spontaneous dance party when we were all so sad that I put on music and

yelled, "Let's dance!"—was Popcorn. The girls would come through the door, all of us lugging stuff from the other house—the books, the iPads, the extra jackets, the shoes for P.E.—and they would drop everything at the sight of her in the hall. "Poppy!" they called. "Pop Pops!" She'd swoon at their feet, happy as I was to have them back.

There have been a lot of messes to clean up in the past three years, and some of them have been Popcorn's. Litter is disgusting, and vets are expensive. Though I have support and relative ease—financial stability and an excellent co-parent—mothering on your own is draining, and a pet is yet another responsibility. Still, one of the few good surprises in these woods was discovering that I, who had always declared myself not an animal person, liked having a pet. When the girls are with their father, I come home from teaching a night class and there is Popcorn waiting for me at the front window. Her affection means more because it had to be earned. We learned, early, that Popcorn is a lone-wolf cat. She will sit next to you on the couch, but not in your lap. She will lick your face, but she will also attack your ankles if she's hungry. When she carries her hedgehogs, one by one in her mouth, to my room at night and curls up at the foot of the bed, I feel like one of the elect.

Popcorn is now a cat, not a kitten. The divorce is final. My eldest daughter goes to high school next year. My youngest daughter's paintings of a boat and a pear decorate the walls of the living room. Though our sadness hasn't lifted, it has lightened. The plants in the garden have established their roots. We are trying our hand at potatoes this summer. Popcorn chases the rabbits away from the snap peas, and she sits under the coffee table when, on Monday nights, the girls and I eat dinner in front of *Call the Midwife*. We aren't the family we were, but we are finding a new geometry.

Jane Delury's fiction has appeared in publications including Narrative, The Southern Review, The Yale Review, and Glimmer Train.

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