

## My Girlfriend's Cat

I hate Arbor Day. Not because I hate trees or because I want to be a nonconformist. My hate is really not Arbor Day's fault. My girlfriend left on a Tuesday that just so happened to fall on the day all about planting trees. I woke up that morning to the sound of meows from the cat. *Her* cat. Maria insisted on getting this exact kitten because it needed our help. It could not survive if we didn't adopt it. That was how Miss Pickles, nickname Missy, came into my life. Missy was special because not only did she have seasonal allergies, but she needed someone to force feed her medicine on a daily basis. Missy was not easily fooled by me wrapping the medicine in food. My hands look like I reached into a thorn bush because of her stubbornness. The cat only weighed four pounds, nearly all of it coming from her bushy silver fur, but she had the claws of a tiger. Or so Maria liked to say.

A quick tap of my phone revealed my situation. One text. "Connor, I left. For good. I had to, I'm sorry. Please take care of Missy. I'm blocking your number because this is too hard. Bye." I am able to read but I still frantically tried to text and call her number. Nothing. Just an empty dial tone on the calls and an error message on the texts. Just like that, one year of dating right out the window. I got out of bed to make sure it wasn't all a bad dream and I heard rapid movement. Before I could look down the cat sprinted toward me and bit hard into my foot. She was only playing. I blame the bite for my tears.

I tried every social media channel available. Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram. Blocked on all of them. Friends offered to reach out but I didn't want to be the creepy one in an already messed up situation.

"What are you going to do with the cat?" my mom asked once I calmed down and gave her a call.

“I think I’m going to give it up,” I said as Missy sprinted up and down my steps. “I never wanted the thing in the first place.” My mom hated cats so there was no argument on her end.

I spent the rest of that terrible Tuesday in my apartment that I guess I now had to pay for entirely. Maria didn’t leave any money, but she did leave all of her stuff. All that was gone was her clothes. Pizza was for dinner and the rest of the alcohol in the fridge was for dessert. I had beer and then wine and then some mango vodka and then followed that up by passing out face down on the couch. My Wednesday began with shrieks from Missy because she ran out of food. That was to be the last time I woke up like that.

Maria and I met in the most romantic way possible. On the Internet. A swipe, a few messages, and we agreed to meet up. A month later we were officially dating and four months after that we moved in together. Everyone said it was too soon but our leases were both up and it seemed like the smart financial move. Sometimes it is wise to listen to your parents.

“Can we please go to the shelter?” she asked me one oddly warm winter day when we still lived in separate places. Anything in the fifties is notable winter weather in Ohio. We drove through the slush to the shelter and said we were there to look at the cats. Only those ready to adopt a dog were allowed to see the them, much to my chagrin.

“Oh my god, Connor, look!”

“Yeah, we found this cute little girl out in the cold all by herself,” said the volunteer who knew what she was doing. “She almost didn’t make it.”

Tears welled up in Maria’s eyes and she wouldn’t put the kitten down. It was so tiny the volunteer told us that you had to help it go to the bathroom so it could learn. The creature couldn’t even open its eyes and was clearly going to need a lot of care.

“I need her,” Maria said through muffled cries.

“If you want her we will actually set you up with everything you need,” said the volunteer with a hand on Maria’s shoulder. “We want to make sure she gets the best care.”

I saw where this was going but I didn’t care at the time. We had only been dating a few months and I didn’t have to live with the thing.

I woke up the morning after Maria left with a bit of a clearer head. My first priority was to take the cat back to the shelter. I just couldn’t look at her and not think of Maria. I knew it was selfish, but it wasn’t my cat in the first place. Missy was hiding under the couch when I came out with the box that was her makeshift travel container. Almost like she knew what was going on. I reached my hand under the couch and my hand was met with a sharp bite. Once the swearing subsided I was able to grab her quickly and get her in the box with only a few scratches to show for my trouble. The kitten looked up at me with sad eyes, but I knew how cats were. All evil until they decided to turn on the charm for some hidden purpose. I just decided to avoid looking at her as much as possible to avoid the guilt. I was the one who had a lot on my mind.

The drive was filled with total silence that was almost eerie. The cat that never shut up had decided to be good for once. But it was not going to work on me. We got to the shelter and those inside met my gaze with visible frustration.

“Hi, I’m, um, here to drop off this cat,” I said with only a hint of shame.

“Did you find this cat or is it yours?”

“It was my girlfriend’s cat, but she left us, I mean me.”

“Wait a second,” said the volunteer. “I remember you and your girlfriend.” It was the same woman who had convinced Maria in the first place. I was hoping she would have forgotten

by now. "This isn't a drop-off, sir. You can't just give up animals whenever you feel like it. That's just cruel."

I was not in the mood to argue. I explained the situation in full and when they said they didn't care, I put the box on the ground and walked out. I left enough medicine behind to last several months. The cat was not mine and I know it was wrong to just leave her there. I just couldn't stand looking at it after being left out of the blue.

I spent that night with my friend, Josh, who came over when I told him what happened. I found myself slowly turning corners expecting to see or be attacked by the cat. Moving past that would take some time.

The two of us had a few beers when Josh began looking around. "I'm guessing she took the cat?"

"No she left it here."

"Uh, so where is it?" he asked. "Did she leave you too?"

"I actually took her back to the shelter," I said quietly as Josh ceased his laughter.

"Dude, that's messed up."

I gave him the same monologue I gave at the shelter. He didn't seem to be getting what I was saying.

"They might put her down, man," Josh said.

"Why would they do that?" I asked. I refused to believe they would kill a perfectly healthy cat.

"I'm being serious." Josh pulled out his phone and began searching for something. He pulled up a story that said the exact shelter I took the cat to had a history of putting down animals.

“That article is from three years ago,” I said as my heart began to race.

“Whatever you say,” Josh said. “If no one gets her soon and the shelter is full I don’t know what will happen.”

I shrugged my shoulders and the conversation ended as Josh finished his beer and left. My goal was to talk about what I was going to do with Maria gone. Yet that cat always found a way to get involved in my life.

I woke up the next morning before the sun came up. I swear I heard a meow somewhere in the house. Only a dream, I told myself. I sat up awake for two hours before I grabbed my phone and looked up something. I had another hour to get ready.

I sat in my car for about ten minutes debating if I should actually go. The thing was a pain in the ass, but I didn’t want it to die! Then again, Josh was probably full of it. It was quiet the night before. Almost too quiet. I had grown used to the sounds of my carpet being torn up in the middle of the night. That, and loud thuds that signaled the sprinting had begun.

My car was on the road at 8:52 for the seven-minute drive to the shelter. I had to make sure I was there before anyone else. I arrived one minute before it opened and pretended to be on my phone in the parking spot directly in front of the door. The clock app on my phone told me it was 9:00 and I jumped out of my car, slamming my door, doing my best to act casual as I approached the door. The same volunteer who shamed me a day prior was unlocking the door as I walked up. The bell rang as I walked in and the woman, who stood eye-to-eye with me, offered up a fake smile.

“Hello sir,” she began, “how can I help you?”

“I came to get my cat back,” I said. I noticed my hands were shaking. “Can I please just take her and go. I’m sorry about all of this.”

The woman offered up another smile. "Sir, we have a process that all prospective pet parents must go through. We can't just hand out animals to anyone who walks in."

I took a deep breath and did my best not to lash out. Getting the cat back would be much harder if I threatened an animal shelter volunteer.

"Ok," I sighed. "What is the process?"

The woman went behind a desk and grabbed a piece of paper.

"I will need you to fill out this form telling us why you want to become a pet parent," she said as she handed me the form. "Then we will take some time to think it over here and decide if you are a good fit."

I thought back to when Maria and I were here the first time. There was no form. Barely any vetting process. She took the cat home within fifteen minutes. They practically forced the cat on her. Now here I was, begging to have it forced on me.

"Look," I said. "What is the fee, \$150? I'll pay double. Or even triple. Just please let me have Missy back." I realized my hands were still shaking.

The woman folded up the form. "I'll be right back."

I thought back to the first day Maria took Missy home. The cat was so small it needed to be watched at all times. Maria and I laid together as we watched the tiny thing slowly crawl around the room, her eyes barely open. She made a joke about how we may be watching our kids crawl around one day. That thought scared me but made me excited at the same time. I was 25. When I was just a little kid I always assumed I would be a dad by 25. So the thought didn't have me running away screaming.

The woman came back with no form in hand. That was a promising sign. I think?

“Look,” she said. “I’ll give you your cat back, but you owe us \$500 and you can’t bring her back here ever again.”

A shriek almost escaped my mouth. I managed to hold it in as I realized I had no leverage in the situation.

“That is fine,” I said. “Just bring me my cat.”

Maria and I only had one major fight. It came about one week before she left and looking back I’m guessing that was the final straw for her. The whole thing was my fault. I got home from work at the dealership and all I wanted to do was sit in silence. Getting yelled at about interest rates for nine hours was enough human contact for me that day. The second I walked in the door she was in my face. Apparently, she thought something had happened because I didn’t text her back for a few hours. I decided to lay into her, telling her how her not working put a strain on our relationship and how I couldn’t fathom how she could barely take care of the cat. How was she going to survive in the world? Tears began rolling down her face and she went to what was our room at the time. I noticed two bags of my favorite Chinese takeout sitting on the counter. I ended up sharing with the cat.

This time around there were no extra supplies given to me. The exchange was me handing over \$500 for a cat I had already owned. It was like I was bailing her out of jail after turning her in for a crime she didn’t commit. The woman handed me a form to fill out declaring that the cat was mine and registered to me in the state of Ohio. I could hear Missy purring and even if she didn’t care I was taking her home, I was glad to have her back. As soon as the form

was filled out I ran to my car and put Missy in. She proceeded to jump out of the box and pee on the floor, but it was alright. She owed me some bad behavior after what I did.

A month went by and I still had not heard from Maria. Memorial Day was approaching and I swear Missy started to get more well behaved with each passing day. She even weaned herself off needing daily medicine. That was good because I had a date that night and we were meeting at my place. The girl, Rachel, said she was not a cat person. That made two of us. I pulled the vacuum out an hour before she was set to arrive and Missy immediately ran away like I pulled out a gun. I hadn't even turned the thing on and her eyes looked at me like "How could you do this to me?" Odd animal. The hour went by and still no sign of the cat, or her hair. Just a few here and there. It would all be back the following morning anyway. I heard a knock at my door and I knew that would keep Missy away as well.

The date didn't exactly go great. She was nice and smart and we had a ton in common. But she kept saying how she could never live with a cat. There I was, defending an animal I had just given up not too long ago. I had become a real sucker and had to confirm with a few friends that it was indeed weird for someone to hate on your pet during a first date. That is like calling someone's kid ugly. Even if it is true and the kid is hideous you can't say that. You just have to be polite until you are in the comfort of your own home. Then you can recreate the sight for your friends.

I pulled back into my parking lot and could see someone sitting outside my door. I slowly got out of my car and the person turned toward me. I already knew who it was.

"Maria?"



“Hi Connor,” Maria said. Her usual sandy blonde hair had been dyed dark red. “I’m so sorry about everything.

She began to cry and ran up to me. She squeezed me in a hug and I did the same. I was confused and angry, but it was still nice to see her again. I invited her inside to what was technically still her place according to the lease. Maria began looking around for Missy who was probably hiding after hearing two sets of footsteps. We sat on the blue polka-dotted couch the two of us had picked out at Goodwill at a polite distance from one another.

“I came here to tell you why I left,” she said. “It had nothing to do with you. I’m seeing...”

That was my second guess after the fight we had. I knew there was someone else. Not that it mattered anymore. I was just curious if I knew him.

“I’m seeing a woman,” she said. “Her name is Tara and I didn’t know how to tell you so I just had to leave. I’m sorry, Connor.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” I said trying to be comforting. “That’s just, wow, not what I expected.”

We sat there talking for nearly two hours. She told me about Tara and showed me pictures of the two looking happy as can be. She asked about my dating life eventually and I told her about the girl who couldn’t stand the fact I had a cat. Almost on cue Missy appeared and Maria ran over to her and picked up the cat who was no longer a tiny kitten.

“This little peanut,” Maria said, “is the other reason I came here.”

“Well I’m sure she missed you too,” I said. “You can visit her anytime.”

“No, I mean I came here to take her with me.”

That caught me off guard more than the whole Tara thing. I had a flashback to the day I dropped Missy off at the shelter, remembering the disgust in the eyes of the woman who eventually collected my \$500.

“I can’t let you take her,” I said. “She’s my cat. Legally.”

Maria set Missy down on the ground.

“Connor, I bought her,” Maria said with an incredulous look on her face. “She is *my* cat. I know I left for a bit, but I came back to get her. You never even wanted her.”

I got up and went to my bedroom. Maria gave me a confused look and I came back with the form.

“See, right here,” I said. “I am the legal owner of Missy. I can’t let you take her. It’s the law.”

Maria read the form and shook her head. She stood up and started walking toward the door.

“You know what,” she said, “I came here to be civil. But you’re still the same person you have always been. I can’t believe you went out and got that. Was it to spite me?”

“Not quite,” I said. I wanted to explain the situation but that would have only made things much, much worse.

Maria left, still shaking her head. That was almost a year ago and I haven’t heard from her since. Though I did notice I’m no longer blocked on social media. Not that I have anything to say to her.

Spring in Ohio is a time for optimism and new beginnings. It is much easier to make a resolution for the year when the weather starts to change. New Year’s resolutions are tough to

hang onto in Ohio when the temperatures are in the negatives and the last thing you want to do is better yourself. Netflix and takeout dinners are the more likely outcome. For me the goal was to not let another relationship get away. Around the Fourth of July I began seeing Emily. We met up at a bar and had to be kicked out at the end of the night because we didn't realize all the time that had passed. We hung out the next day and the day after that and continued doing so for the rest of the year. Then came the end of December when her lease was coming to an end. I had met her parents and she had met mine several times. Things were getting serious and I asked her to move in with me. She accepted and Missy and I had another roommate.

Emily *loved* Missy. She grew up without any pets and spent a good amount of money on a cat tower far too big for my little cat. She created an Instagram account called "Missy and Me" and actually grew a bit of a following. I even noticed that Maria followed the account. Emily didn't need to know about that.

One day in April when the leaves began to appear Emily brought up the idea of getting a puppy. She showed me a picture of a litter of puppies just dropped off at the local shelter. A few hours later we were in separate rooms when I heard her scream. I ran in thinking something had happened, but she just shoved her phone in my face. It displayed the same article Josh had showed me last year about the shelter being accused of killing animals.

"We *have* to go get one," she said. "They are beagle puppies, so they won't be too big and if we get a puppy it can learn to love Missy!"

I was going to bring up that adopting one wouldn't save them all but I didn't want a house full of beagle puppies.

"Connor, I need one of these puppies," she said looking at me with puppy eyes of her own.

Emily ended up convincing me. She did work from home all day and made double what I made selling Hondas. She could use a buddy, since Missy slept all day, and I wouldn't mind having a dog around for some extra security. My feline security system failed anytime there was so much as a gust of wind outside.

I looked at my phone calendar to double-check what time I got off work the following day. The new boss loved to change things up by calling it "dynamic scheduling," or something dumb like that. I noticed a note was already in for the day. It read "Arbor Day." Uh oh. I went to bed that night with only a lot of anxiety but Emily's snores reassured me that this Arbor Day wouldn't be a disaster. Maybe I'd even go plant a tree.

I woke up before Emily, who had not left in the middle of the night, and headed off to work. My phone blew up all day with pictures of puppies and toys and everything else Emily had been getting ready while I was at work. I arrived home to see her already waiting for my car. We had an hour to get to the shelter.

"Are you excited?" she asked with no expectation of a response. I knew she was excited and that was all that mattered.

"I'm not sure I should go in," I said as we pulled up to the shelter. I never told Emily about my \$500 cat retrieval and I was afraid I would see the same employee for the third time.

"Stop being weird," Emily said. "Let's go inside and get our puppy!" She was already near the front door by the time I turned off the car.

I slowly approached the front door and opened it to see Emily excitedly telling the woman at the front why we were there. It was not the same woman from before, but I remained wary. I didn't want my association to ruin things.

“It’s a good thing you came today,” the woman said through sniffles. “We only have one little girl left.”

“Oh, a girl,” Emily said with a smile that threatened to rip the skin around her mouth. “A girl buddy for Missy!”

The woman took us back through a door I had never been through before. The cat room was off to our left but straight ahead we went to the secret dog room. A chorus of barks greeted us as we were led through another door. One tiny beagle puppy sat in the middle of the room on a pink blanket. The thing was about the size of Missy when we got her. Emily squeezed my hand and I realized there was a zero percent chance we were leaving without the dog.

“We just need to do a quick background check and you can take her home,” the woman said. “And the adoption fee has been waived.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“We recently had a volunteer who had been embezzling money for a few years,” said the woman as her expression turned sour. “She would charge more than what was necessary to take advantage of people. Can you believe that?”

Missy owed me for that \$500.

Emily answered all the right questions and proved both her income and residence. That was all it took for us to take home Bailey. We spent the next week keeping a close eye on the puppy and made sure Missy didn’t attack her. It only took two smacks to the head for Bailey to realize she couldn’t attack the cat at will.

One random Friday night Emily and I came home from a night out. She immediately ran up to Bailey and picked her up. Pee was scattered in a trail all over the kitchen floor but I didn’t

have the heart to get mad. Emily took the dog out to pee and then went to bed, the two cuddling up like long-lost friends after only a few hours apart. I sat on the couch and saw I had a Facebook notification. It was a friend request from Maria. I clicked on her profile and saw a picture of her and a woman, who I assumed to be Tara. The two were holding up their hands and Maria wore an engagement ring. On her lap sat a black cat that was twice Missy's size. She had found her family and I was happy for her.

I accepted the request and noticed Missy had jumped up on the couch next to me. She walked right up onto my lap and laid down. There she was, my ex-girlfriend's cat who was now legally mine thanks to an act of bribery.

I'm not sure if Emily and I will get married. We have different goals and have talked about moving different places. But things are good right now. What I do know is that no matter what happens, if I ever do have kids they are going to get an interesting origin story for the family cat. And if anyone ever lets the cat out they owe me \$500. Plus interest.