





Did you ever....? Smack in the middle of January, a small green shoot began to unfold in a pot of marigolds brought in from last summer's garden. The marigolds, alone, cheered us on through arctic temperatures and bleak days reminding us that warmer times were, indeed, coming our way – eventually. A very long way.

The small shoot grew a bit taller, a bit taller still, leaves began to emerge along its stem. Up, up it grew; did we have a Jack and the Beanstalk here? Eventually, in its own time, now close to the end of January, a bud formed at the little plant's very top. What on Earth could this volunteer being be?

From deep within the pot's dark soil, a miracle was emerging, growing, rising upwards toward the light, and slowly, from a tight bud, a bit of bright yellow. Petals slowly spread up, then outward, reaching for the afternoon sun.

"Ta-Da." This tiny bloom declared; "Here I am! And, hello!" Would you believe, a miniature (and I mean, it has to be the tiniest ever) *sunflower!* "Keep reaching up and out," it tells us, "find the light, grow and bloom strong, no matter who or where you are, whatever your season or your size. Because we are all are miracles. I mean, just look at me!" We've named her Sophie; she is, after all, so very wise.

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Juliet's balcony scene

Recess with Juliet

By TJ Banks

Juliet lies on her side. She wraps her paws around her beloved cat-track toy and pulls it close to her so that she can reach the white ball on the bottom tier. Sometimes she goes for a blue or an orange ball on one of the upper levels, but the white one is her favorite. You see, it's on the widest tier, and with one good smack, she can keep it going round and round that much longer.

Her playful side took me by surprise initially. An older cat, she came here when my friend Donna's mother developed dementia and had to go into a memory-care facility. At first, Juliet pretty much kept to a shelf in my basement, coming down (or so it seemed) only to eat, drink, or use the litter box. She wasn't aggressive toward the other cats, but she did seem very shy and hesitant around them. Presumably, she hadn't spent much time around her own kind.

A few months after her arrival, Juliet had to have a tumor removed, and it soon became clear that her shelf was *not* going to be the best place for recuperating. So I moved her into my son Zeke's old room. There, she began coming into her own.

Nowadays, my big white girl with the black patches looks the same; inwardly, however, she has undergone a wonderful sea change. She has become extremely affectionate: in fact, she's even considering the possibility of becoming a lap cat. Nothing definite, mind you – a cat can't be too careful. She loves her room, which she feels very safe and content in. There are some cat trees and comfy chairs for her to lounge about on and a couple of windows that she can watch squirrels and birds from.

Sometimes she hangs out with me on a desk that used to belong to my oldest brother: on top of it, there's a wooden lap desk that Zeke gave me the holidays a few years ago, and Juliet claimed *that* one for her own almost immediately. In fact, she's perched on it right now, purring as I write this. She's trying to act super cool and professional about the story, of course. But when you're a cat who has known hard times – Donna's mom adopted Juliet from a rescue in the northwestern part of the state – you appreciate suddenly having toys, a room of your own, and a human who thinks you're worth writing about. It's all very purr-worthy.

The play sessions come about gradually. One day, I buy Juliet the cat-tracks toy. She already has a large gray mouse, some balls, and few bat-around toys. I'm not sure if she'll go for something interactive, but I decide to take a chance.

She loves it. At first, I just sit on one of the chairs, enjoying the sight of this shy older cat morphing into a total kitten. "The cat is above all things, a dramatist," writer Margaret Benson wrote – which to me, is just another way of saying that felines are incredibly good at make-believe. They throw their whole being into play: a toy, a twig, a flickering rainbow from a crystal prism, or even an ice cube crackling in a water bowl on a hot day becomes Something More in their imaginations, and they are off and running.

Juliet's enthusiasm draws me in. I rise from my chair and stretch out on the floor, lying on my stomach the way I used to when I was watching T.V. as a kid. The white ball is at a standstill. I flick my fingers against it and set it rolling. Juliet's delighted. We continue the game this way for awhile – with the understanding, naturally, that I don't step in unless the ball loses its momentum.

I've always enjoyed keeping my cats company, but I have to be honest: I don't do a whole lot in the way of regular play sessions with them. I'm too tired, there are still a slew of chores to be done, an article needs finishing...I'm good at coming up with excuses.

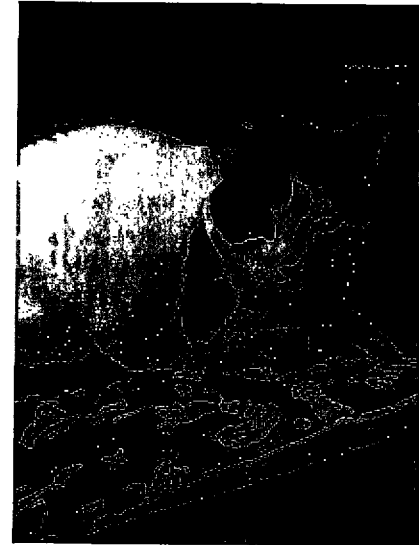
Only this time, I don't want to. Playing with Juliet eases something that has been pent up inside me for months. The summer that she had her surgeries also saw the loss of three long-time stand-out cats. Derv Jr., my thoughtful red tabby guy who used to join me on the stairs at night (*Into every generation a stair-cat is born...*). Fey, my quirky but loving Ruddy Somali who made a habit of dipping her feathery tail into my coffee. And Moonlight, my Lilac muse with all the magic of Abydom in her paws and then some. Their deaths came so close together, I felt as though there wasn't time to breathe, much less to mourn. As though life had somehow lost all its joy.

But now, joy has begun to creep back, thanks these play sessions with Juliet. They're kinda like I remember recess being...only at recess, my friends and I used to play horses and all sorts of magical games. Now, I am simply bopping the little white ball back and forth for Juliet. But it

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helps. I'm really connecting with her for the first time since her arrival, and in the process, reconnecting with my other cats. *Small paw steps*, her yellow eyes say to me as she whaps the ball my way.

I study her white face with its black half-mask and chin splotch. I still haven't cried for Moonlight & Co., but the pain has let up. Juliet has shown me how to play again. I flick the ball back toward her. She looks at me and winks. ~



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Banks has written for numerous anthologies, including *Chicken Soup for the Soul: The Magic of Cats*, *The Widow's Handbook*, *Their Mysterious Ways*, and *At Grandmother's Table*. Her poem "Moonlight" won the 2020 Cat Writer's Association Muse Medallion for Poetry, and both her fiction and non-fiction have received awards from *ByLine* and *The Writing Self*. She lives in Simsbury, CT. Photos courtesy of the author.

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