

Front Porch Review

Smokey the Therapy Cat Andrew Miller



Last week Jeff Streeter and I rode to the clam flats in his Ford Model T to scatter Patricia's ashes. We arrived before sunrise, her favorite time of day. Jeff stayed with the car, one foot on the running board, while I trudged along the shore toward the Deer Isle Bridge. Patricia's ashes, light gray, gritty like coarse sand, slid through my fingers. She wanted to become the stuff of soft-shelled clams and intertidal worms.

Patricia loved this section of the Maine coast, and we strolled it often – ankle-deep in gray mud, weaving around boulders, across water-slicked slabs of granite, rockweed popping under our feet. It had been a quick three weeks from cancer diagnosis to a double handful of her ashes in a silver-colored cardboard box. We had been together thirty-six years.

After that morning, life in the spruce forest settled into a dreary dullness, leaden and gray. I spent much of the day sitting on the front deck, a cup of cold coffee at my side. Gloom sustained me. It gave me an excuse to turn down dinner invitations, to skip get-togethers with friends. I even ignored the garden, stood by while the zucchini turned woody, green beans dried on the vine.

Now it was just me and Smokey, our male Maine Coon cat. Three years earlier, Patricia and I adopted him from the Ark Animal Shelter near Cherryfield. I hadn't known much about this breed but learned quickly that Smokey had a personality somewhere between a dog and a four-year-old boy. When he spotted me outside, he'd race toward me, jump up nearly to my waist, then run along behind. Or he'd crouch behind a bush until I was close, then spring out and tackle me. The Ark people asked for a \$50 donation, but Patricia gave them \$100. She felt guilty because we promised he'd never go outside, which of course was a lie.

Jeff reappeared a few days after I scattered the ashes. Usually he called first, but this time he just showed up. Patricia and I met Jeff at a book signing twenty years ago. After the event, she dropped her scarf in the parking lot. Jeff picked it up and chased after us. It isn't often that one is pursued by a Model T, its driver waving a red scarf. We learned that when Jeff was sixteen, he purchased the T from its original owner for \$100, money earned delivering papers. Patricia was

immediately enchanted. If he'd asked, she'd have gone off with him that evening. The next week he invited us for a ride, and we continued doing that every so often when the weather was good. We'd cruise into Blue Hill, stop in at the wine and cheese shop, then have lobster rolls at a drive-in restaurant. Sometimes we just cruised the side roads that wove along the coast.

Today he drove the Volvo, which meant he had something on his mind. I brewed a fresh pot of coffee and we sat on the deck. For a long time we sat in silence. Smokey stalked a grasshopper.

Eyes still on the cat, Jeff set his cup down. "Alex...have you ever thought of enrolling Smokey in a Pet Therapy Program?"

"Since when does Smokey need therapy?"

"It not for him, it's for kids. You take him to the hospital – visit children waiting for surgery, recovering from an accident, getting cancer treatment..."

Smokey crept toward the grasshopper. His belly fur scraped the grass.

"Isn't that for dogs?" I pictured a Pomeranian or Welsh Corgi racing up to a kid, licking his hand, anxious to be petted, begging for a treat. But a cat?

Jeff reminded me of the time that Patricia and I put on a ventriloquist act for his ten-year-old nephew. Randy had just broken his leg and was in a deep funk because he couldn't sail or play baseball. His recovery started that afternoon in our living room when I made Smokey talk.

Smokey: "Randy, how come you're walking around with those sticks?"

Randy: "I fell out of an apple tree and broke my leg."

Smokey: "How were the apples – any good?"

And so on. It was obvious that Randy was more comfortable talking to Smokey than to adults.

When my grandfather was a kid, he saw a ventriloquist act with a dog instead of a dummy. That gave him the idea of putting on comedy shows using live animals. From then on, his pets always talked. I picked up the idea from him. After Patricia and I got together, she joined in.

One of our cats: "Who's going to feed me?"

Patricia: "There's food in your dish, go look."

One of our cats: "I'm sick of that old Turkey Fixin's in Giblet Gravy; it's cold and crusty. I want Salmon Florentine."

Patricia: "Since when do cats know about fancy salmon dishes?" She'd scrape his old food into the garbage and open a new can. "There, Salmon Florentine and Garden Greens in a Delicate Sauce – hope you're satisfied."

After eating, "I'm not being well-cared for."

Patricia: "Oh, come on."

We did this often, taking turns being Smokey's voice. But Smokey quit talking when Patricia was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

Jeff broke into my thoughts. "Take Smokey to the hospital and do your act with kids. Sing songs, read stories –"

Smokey pounced on the grasshopper. He had it pinned, then, in a flurry of beating wings, it broke free and buzzed into tall grass. Smokey reared up on his hind legs and gave chase.

Jeff didn't press the issue. After he left, I did a little research on pet therapy programs.

The animals had to be healthy and up-to-date on all their shots. Most were dogs, but they did take cats. They all had to wear a vest and walk on a leash –Jeff hadn't mentioned that detail. Smokey never wore a vest and had never walked on a leash.

“Smokey, what do you think about being a therapist?”

Suddenly, Smokey started to talk.

“For kids?” he said. “Sounds like dog's work.”

“They take cats.”

“What if I catch a disease?”

“You can't catch human diseases. Besides, kids might be recovering from an accident, getting ready for an operation.”

He rolled over onto his back, stretched out his fore and hind legs and began to purr. I rubbed his belly.

“I miss Patricia,” he said.

“So do I, Big Boy. It was so sudden.” I picked him up and squeezed. He squirmed out of my arms, dropped to the floor.

“Quit squishing me. I don't like being force-purred.”

“All right, all right.”

He jumped onto the couch. “Maybe...” he licked his right forepaw twice, “maybe that therapy stuff wouldn't be so bad after all.”

Later that afternoon, Jeff called, asked if I had thought more about pet therapy.

“Yes,” I said. “Smokey wants to do it. How do we start?”

“You have to sign him up at the Blue Hill Veterinary Clinic.”

“Smokey doesn't like to travel. Can't we do this over the phone?”

“A vet has to check him out.”

“There's nothing wrong with him.”

“It's just a formality.” I could hear him drumming his fingers on the table. “I'll drive you in the Model T. Afterwards, we'll have a picnic at Mariners Park.”

His words clutched at my throat. This would be my first outing with Jeff in the Model T since we scattered Patricia's ashes. It would be just Jeff and me. No Patricia. He gave me no time to unpeel old memories. “Bring a bottle of wine; I'll take care of the rest. Your appointment is at eleven o'clock next Monday.”

“Appointment?”

“You can't just walk into pet screening unannounced.”

This was sounding like a big deal. I started to protest, but he interrupted me.

“I'll pick you up at ten. Tell Mr. Smokes to be on his best behavior.”

Smokey dropped from the couch, ambled toward the front door and yowled. I held it open. He stopped partway across the threshold and sniffed the mat.

“Hurry up – going out or not?” What is it about cats? They rush into the house but must be coaxed out.

He glared up at me. “What happened to the frog I caught this morning?”

“You told me those things were no good – cold and clammy.”

“I never said that.”

“Hurry up, I don't have all day.”

“Don’t rush me – I’m sniffing.”

I nudged him with my foot. “What do you want for dinner – some fancy salmon dish?”

“Let’s go simple: Beef with Gravy.”

If Smokey was going to be a therapist, he needed a vest and a leash. The nearest pet store was in Ellsworth, almost an hour away.

Several hours later, I returned with Smokey’s new vest. Dark gray, sprinkled with multicolored stars, it was the fanciest one in the store. It was tough getting him into it. First, I stuffed his legs into a couple of holes in the front. Then I held him steady while snapping two flaps over his back. It was hate at first feel. But no matter how much he walked backward, writhed on the floor, or scrapped against door jams, he couldn’t shuck it. When he calmed down, I attached the leash and carried him outside.

Once on the ground, he refused to follow; just sat back on his haunches and pouted.

“Come on, Smokey, you’re supposed to walk beside me.”

“I am not a dog.”

For a long time, neither of us moved. Be patient, I thought. When he spotted a grasshopper, he jumped to his paws. For the next thirty minutes we zigged and zagged about the yard. Finally, I unsnapped the leash and took off his vest. Not bad. Lesson number one was a success.

We worked with the leash twice a day. He began to follow me, rather than the other way around. He still tended to wrap around tree trunks and get stuck under bushes. But I figured he’d do okay. At screening he’d only be on the leash for a few minutes. And, it was bound to be inside.

Monday morning dawned bright and clear. I stepped outside with a coffee cup in hand just as Smokey ran up the steps. A deer mouse dangled from his jaws. He stopped by the front door.

“You can’t take that inside!”

“Why not?”

“Is it dead?”

“Of course.” He crouched down, turned his head sideways and began to chew. Bones cracked and crunched; it sounded like someone stepped on a strawberry box. When he stopped to swallow, I kicked the remains off the deck and nudged him through the door.

“Hey – I just got started.”

“Forget the mouse, your breakfast is ready.”

He dashed over to his food dish. After filling up on Roasted Chicken and Gravy, he jumped onto the window sill and began to wash his face. He stopped in mid-lick when he spotted the carrier. “Are we going somewhere?”

“This is Pet Therapy Screening Day – don’t you remember?”

“Oh...that.” He went back to licking.

“Jeff will be here at ten.”

“Are we still going on a picnic?”

“Yes, but you have to be screened first.”

“Did you pack my Roast Chicken Flavored Yummies?”

“Don’t I take good care of you?”

Smokey yawned. “Not as good as Patricia. She used to warm my food in the microwave. Salmon in a Rich Creamy Sauce is no good straight from the fridge.” Smokey settled into the bread loaf position, all four paws and tail tucked under. I spread an old towel on the bottom of his carrier and printed off an article on childhood diseases.

At ten o’clock we heard a rhythmic chug-chug-chug from the Perez Crossroad. Smokey stood and stretched, fixed his eyes on the driveway. When the Model T burst through the spruce trees, I stepped outside. Jeff waved, stopped with a metallic screech. “Is Smokey ready for his big day?”

He bounded up on the deck and gave me a quick hug. I told him we were ready, went inside and slipped the amateur therapist into his vest. He struggled when I pushed him into the carrier.

“How come I gotta wear the straight jacket and ride in this little jail?”

I tossed a couple of yummys into the carrier. “Here, and don’t mouth off like that when we get to the clinic.”

Jeff peered into the carrier. “He doesn’t look very happy.”

“He’ll be okay.”

I maneuvered the carrier into the back seat. The T shook with anticipation. Jeff released the emergency brake, advanced the hand throttle, and put us in low gear. We leaped forward. He shifted into high gear, and we careened onto the Perez Crossroad.

Jeff slowed as we approached a stop sign. “Is he OK – not too noisy, is it?”

“He’s fine.”

After we crept out of Deer Isle Village, I thought about Patricia. When the three of us rode, she and I took turns in the front seat. When she sat in front, I kept quiet. I liked to sit in the back and listen to the two of them talk.

I turned to the back seat. “Smokey, how do you plan to entertain the children?”

Smokey’s ears were back, his claws deep into the towel. “I’ll tell them about all the mice that live in our garden – how tasty they are.”

I remembered the sound of bones crunching. “Don’t be too graphic; that might frighten the kiddos.”

“I’ll talk about the wood pussy we saw last night.”

“What?” Jeff turned to me. “What did he say?”

“He means a skunk.”

Jeff frowned. “Mr. Smokes, you better clean up your language. That kind of talk won’t sit well with parents.”

Smokey said, “Make that, ‘wood puddy.’”

Jeff stayed in the car while Smokey and I hustled into the clinic. The Pet Therapy Program Director met us in the waiting area and led us into her office. She dropped to her knees, peeked in at Smokey. His eyes were bright, his fur fully fluffed out. It had been chilly in the T. She pressed two fingers through the cage. Smokey gave them a couple of licks and began to purr.

“Well, my goodness.” She dropped her hand on my shoulder for a second. She glanced at his medical records then dropped them on her desk. “Let’s get this boy screened.”

We followed her down a dark hallway and into a large room. Inside were more than a

dozen chairs arranged in a circle, with an adult or child in each. When we entered, every head turned. The director motioned toward the chairs.

“Lead him around, let him greet the children.”

Smokey and I were not expecting this. He was scrunched down in the back of his carrier, ears flattened. I dragged him out, towel clinging to his claws, and clicked on his leash. It was obvious he was not about to walk, so I set him down in front of two girls. Did he purr, rub against their ankles, beg to be picked up? No. He ignored them, strained on the leash, eyes fixed on the exit. There was nothing else to do but carry him around the room, stopping in front of each person. He shuddered and squirmed, forced his head under my arms. The adults, who were probably seasoned pet therapists, smiled. They were thinking: nice guy, attractive cat, but no therapy team.

“He seems a little shy,” the Director said after we circled the room.

“He wasn’t expecting so many people.”

“Has he ever been around children?”

“Once.”

She nodded, flashed a quick smile. “Try again next year.” Her eyes narrowed. “He needs to get used to children if he is going to be in the program.”

Smokey slunk into his carrier, dug his claws into the towel. I grabbed his records from the office and toted him back to the Model T.

Jeff stuck his head out the window. “Where’s his diploma?”

I shook my head. “He failed.” I set his carrier in the back and jumped onto the front seat.

“I told you that wood pussy story wouldn’t fly.”

I explained everything as we lurched out of the lot and made for Deer Isle. Jeff asked if that experience might have traumatized him. I told him that cats recover pretty quickly from situations like that.

“That wasn’t much fun,” Smokey said.

I put one hand on the carrier. “You were supposed to walk around the room, purr and be pleasant.”

“That place was crawling with kids. And not one of them was sick.”

“That was a dry run,” I said. “You were supposed to show your stuff.”

An icy chill settled over us. All this talk about Pet Therapy had given me a boost. We never imagined Smokey wouldn’t cooperate. I looked over at Jeff, saw the disgruntled look on his face. He rubbed the back of his neck.

We passed the clam flats where Patricia’s ashes lay. This wouldn’t have happened if she’d been here. Patricia would have worked with Smokey more. She would have researched what the test entailed and prepared us. Jeff and I had just jumped in, assumed everything would be alright. I could feel his eyes on me. A few miles later, just outside Deer Isle Village, he said, “As my father used to say, ‘we’re not retreating, we’re charging in a new direction.’ It’s time for Plan B.”

We bumped fists. “Plan B?”

“I’ll explain after we open the wine.”

Just past the village of Deer Isle, we swerved onto Haystack Road. We shot past the

entrance to Mariner's Park.

"You missed the turn."

"I found us a new place."

I knew why we skipped Mariner's Park. It was one of Patricia's favorite spots. A few hundred yards down the road, we slowed, darted onto an overgrown two-track lane. We slid to a stop in front of a wide puddle. Two muddy tracks wound up the hill. A sagging barn slouched at the top.

Jeff revved the engine. "There's an awesome view of the Reach at the top."

"It looks slippery. We can't make it."

"Nonsense." He depressed the shift pedal, slipping us into low gear. The T growled, reared up and splashed through the puddle. Left rear wheel churning, the car swaying from side to side, we charged. I bounced up and down, gripped the seat with one hand, reached around and steadied the carrier with the other. The car bucked and snorted, spewed a stream of mud from the left rear wheel, then the right rear wheel. Near the top, we slid off the tracks and whooshed through a berry thicket. As we came to a stop by the barn, Jeff smiled. "I believe we widened the approach."

We spread out a blanket next to a fallen oak. Jeff had brought chicken sandwiches, two packages of cheese, and a box of rye crackers. I set out a can of mixed nuts, a bottle of red wine, and a bag of cherry tomatoes from the farmer's market. I tethered Smokey to a branch, poured the wine.

Smokey sat up, licked his lips. "Where are my Roast Chicken Yummies?"

I tossed a handful onto a paper plate. When Jeff and I touched glasses, he said, "Here's to Mr. Smokes, the almost Pet Therapist." We each took a drink. He gazed up at the sky. "What a wonderful day." The hillside, littered with maples, oaks, and pines, dropped away to a ribbon of black rocks and white surf. Sailboats dotted the water. He unwrapped the cheeses, opened the crackers and poured nuts onto a paper plate.

I couldn't stop thinking about the Pet Therapy Program Director and how foolish we must have looked. I asked Jeff to tell me about plan B. He spread brie onto a cracker.

"You know I visit the Island Nursing Home, give folks rides in the T?"

"Sure, once we went together."

Jeff stared at the label on the bottle. "I love a good Merlot." He swirled his glass, watched the legs creep upward. The sun was hot on my forehead, the Merlot warm in the back of my mouth. Jeff popped a tomato in his mouth, picked up a sandwich. "Plan B is you, me, and Mr. Smokes visiting folks at the Island Nursing Home."

I shook my head. "He flunked his test."

Jeff laughed. "The Island Nursing Home doesn't screen volunteers. You just show up. What say you, Smokey?" He raised his glass. "And, the old guys would love wood pussy stories."

Smokey glared at Jeff. "Will I have to walk around a room packed with old folks?"

Jeff set one hand on Smokey's back. "You meet one person at a time, in their rooms or on the porch." He spread more cheese, then continued, "You'll like old people. They're quiet, not like children." He bit down on the cracker.

My spirits began to lift. I took another drink of wine. Jeff's voice dropped an octave.

“Mr. Smokes...want to give it a try?”

Smokey yawned, dropped his head to his forepaws. “I suppose.” His eyes closed.

Jeff stopped chewing, frowned. “Hey, what kind of nuts are these?”

I looked at his plate. “You’re eating Smokey’s Roast Chicken Flavored Yummies. How are they?”

“Well goll-lee!” He spat a wad into his palm, tossed them into the weeds. Smokey’s eyes snapped open. He scrambled to his paws, strained against the leash. “My yummys!”

I tossed a few fresh ones at him. He dug them out of the grass.

Jeff watched me pour more wine. “How are you doing?”

I had thought that riding with Jeff and going on a picnic without Patricia would be painful. But it wasn’t. I thought about how Jeff had suggested Pet Therapy for us. He was a simple, straightforward guy. He took life at its own speed, never complained about much. Not planful; much like Smokey. But he had engineered a rehab program for me under the guise of Smokey entertaining sick kids. It would please Patricia to know that Smokey and I would go to the Island Nursing Home. She would smile at his star-speckled vest, be happy to know that he was entertaining the folks.

Guys don’t hug other guys at times like this. Instead, I grabbed Smokey, pressed him tight against my chest. I looked at Jeff. “Did you know that Maine Coons are especially loud purrers?”

“No, I did not.” He leaned the wine bottle up against a clump of grass. “But you better not squeeze him so hard.”

When Smokey got restless, Jeff drove us back home. He helped us out, waved, then disappeared into the trees. Smokey scooted out of the carrier, raced over to a sandy spot in the driveway. He flopped down, rolled on his back, squirmed back and forth, paws in the air.

I pointed to a fur tuft at the edge of the driveway. “Where’d that come from?”

“What color is it?” He stopped rolling.

“Light brown, some white.”

“Probably from a deer mouse.” He sat up straight. “Or, it might have been a white-footed mouse.” Twigs, dust, and dried leaves clung to his coat. “Is everybody still mad at me for flunking out of Pet Therapy School?” He whacked his tail on the gravel.

“Of course not.”

“When do we go to the Old Folks House?”

“The Island Nursing Home.”

“Whatever.” He scampered toward me, eyes wide. Just like a dog. He hadn’t done that since Patricia died. I picked him up and scratched under his chin. He closed his eyes. I sat down on the steps, held him tight. He’d probably already forgotten all about therapy screening. He twisted sideways, snuggled his head between my knees, made low murmurs deep in his throat. When I rubbed his belly, he began to purr, long, deep rumbles that ended with a squeak. Smokey was ready for the Island Nursing Home. He would have plenty of stories to tell.

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Andrew Miller retired from a career that included university teaching and research in endangered species and aquatic habitat restoration. Now he has time to pursue his long-held interest in creative writing. Until 2020, he and his wife Kathryn spent their summers on Deer Isle, Maine and their winters in Florida. Now their permanent residence is in Tallahassee. Their Maine Coon cat, Smokey, of “Smokey the Therapy Cat” did fail his Pet Therapy Screening, except it was in Tallahassee, not in Maine. The Jeff Streeter character is based on a real person; he owns a home in Maine and is the second owner of a 1917 Ford Model T. Andrew’s fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Front Porch Review*, *The River*, *Arkansas Review*, *Northern New England Review*,

Northern Woodlands, *Down East*, *Maine Homes*, and *Fatherly*. His website is <http://www.andrewcmiller.com/>

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