**Catman, Covid, and the Coath\*** 

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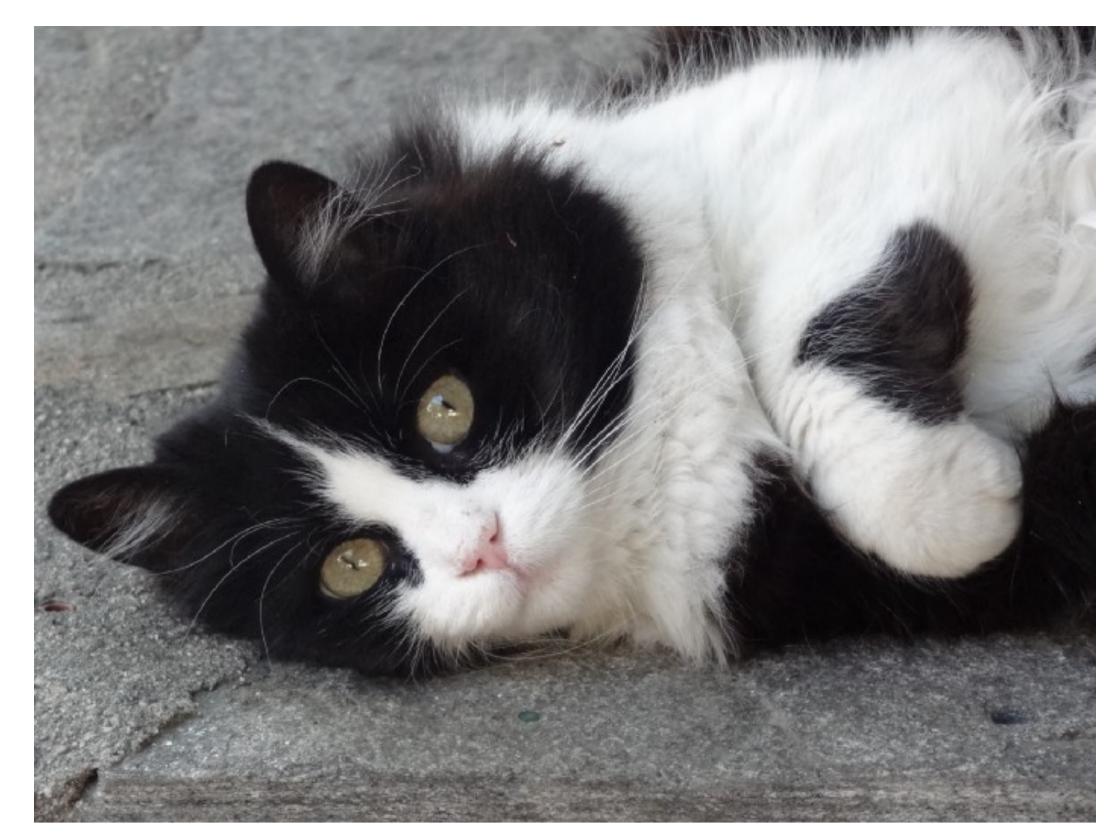
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by C. Flisi

Like a cat, my husband was born with nine lives. He is lucky that way. Unlike a cat, he has already burned off way more than nine. He is unbelievably lucky. I can't figure out why the celestial cat-life counters haven't caught up with him.

Not too long ago, they did, or so it seemed. The land phone rang at 9 am on a Saturday morning. The only calls we receive on a landline are from government officials and hospitals, and government officials don't call on Saturdays. Sure enough, the chirpy voice at the other end was from a local hospital. My Catman had just been there to do pre-testing for an eye operation scheduled for the following Monday. Note: cats like mine may have great eyesight but they are susceptible to (well-named) cataracts.

Chirpy wanted to speak to my husband about the results of the Covid test he had done the day before. Since he had been in another hospital last month (more about that shortly) and every day of his weeklong stay had included a Covid test (always negative), he wasn't worried. Except this time his test resulted positive. He looked at the phone, incredulous, as did I.

A positive test wasn't possible. He h ad absolutely no symptoms of Covid. Not one. No fever, no cough, no headache, no chills, no aches, no sore throat, no shortness of breath. He checks his oxygen levels from time to time with an oximeter, and the readings are always within normal range.

None of this mattered to the hospital. He had tested positive, so his eye operation was postponed indefinitely, and he was required by law to isolate himself at home, and to isolate himself from me as far as reasonably possible.

And by the way, I was also subject to quarantine because we live together. Didn't matter that I too had no suspect symptoms and my oxygen reading was consistently a perfect 99.

When the phone call ended, we stared at each other in disbelief. "This has to be a false positive," I announced. "I don't think so," said my husband. "They didn't swab just one nostril, they tested both, and the nurse was thorough. It was awful."

"Then the hospital made a mistake. They mixed up your results with those of someone else who IS positive," I countered. I was convinced the explanation was either a false reading or a mistake because my husband has every single medical vulnerability in the book. He is a male over 75, quite overweight, diabetic, one kidney, thyroid deficiency, high blood pressure, heart issues, breathing issues, well, the textbook gamut of co-morbidities, nine of them for poetic symmetry. So for the last year we have lived with the assumption that his exposure to Covid-19 would be a death sentence. As a result, I have been scrupulous about my own exposure, not because I was worried for myself but because of his situation.

And now this? How could it have possibly happened, when he doesn't go out, when we don't have people in our home, when his existence is pretty much fourcornered by the TV, the kitchen, the computer, and bed. His highly circumscribed life became more so for the next two weeks, as did mine. We tested our temperature and oxygen levels every day, and both of us were in normal range the entire time. No fever, no cough, no sneezing, no shortness of breath, no aches, no pains, nada. After 14 days, he was swabbed again by a community health care doctor, and I was tested too. Negative for both of us.

We were convinced that his first test had been a false positive, so we bought antibody tests from the local pharmacy, pricked our fingers, and waited for the results (kinda like a pregnancy test). Mine was again negative, indicating that Covid and I had never been acquainted. But, unsettlingly, my husband's test results were different: antibodies were detected, suggesting that his first swab had been accurate. Catman, with all his co-morbidities, had brushed up against Covid and emerged as asymptomatic as a nine-year-old.

The same could not be said of his second-most-recent brush with death. Three months ago he wound up in the emergency room of our local hospital, complaining of stomach pain, vomiting, and diarrhea. Because of Covid, he hadn't wanted to go to the hospital. That's the last place you want to be during a pandemic. But the online physician he consulted was adamant that he get himself to the nearest ER pronto. So I drove him there, and turns out he arrived just in time. He had an intestinal blockage and the medical personnel described his situation as "acute."

Immediately a nasal gastric tube up his nose and down into his stomach. Another tube, attached to a needle, into his arm for an intravenous flow. A third tube into the appropriate place as a catheter drawing off his urine. He stayed triple-tubed for a week until the immediate danger passed, and then he was allowed to go home.

Five years ago he was diagnosed with a potentially malignant tumor in his kidney and he was scheduled to have one kidney removed. It's not a fun operation but it's not exceptional either. Except in my husband's case. He had a heart attack on the operating table and almost died. This unforeseen complication was aggravated by the fact that he had chosen this hospital for its proximity as opposed to quality. The facility wasn't equipped to handle a heart attack patient with one kidney needing intensive care. So, in a precarious state, he had to be transferred to another hospital with an adequate ICU. He risked his life during that 40-minute ambulance ride. He made it with little to spare, and remained for a week in intensive care. That was a quad-tube time: one down his throat to breathe, an intravenous in his arm, a catheter, and another tube to catch the excretions from his operation.

Cats tend to land on their feet when they fall. It's known as their "righting reflex." My Catman has always been athletic, though his agility has declined with age. A few years ago he was on a ladder at home, changing a light bulb, when the ladder collapsed. He landed on his back, not his feet, but at least he didn't land on his head, and he wasn't holding a light bulb at the time. The floor where he fell still has deep scratches and indentations from that episode, but he got up gingerly, somewhat sorely — without a single bruise.

A different kind of fall happened some years before that. We were horse trekking in deep woods and our guide suggested we tie up our animals and follow him on foot down a steep ridge, a 20-foot drop, to see some ancient carvings by a rocky stream. Slipping and sliding, we made it down the bank okay, but it was too sheer for a return climb. So our guide scrambled ahead and dropped a rope for us to pull ourselves up. I am no athlete but was able to do it. Then it was Catman's turn. As he was halfway up, the rope broke and he fell backwards onto the rocks, head first. Fortunately, he was still wearing his riding helmet, so nothing at all happened to his head. He had an abrasion or two on his arms, but that was it.

Two years earlier, he was riding his bicycle without his bike helmet. An aggressive car forced him onto the curb and he flew into a stone wall, cracking open his head. But he has a tough skull, so it was just a few stitches and an overnight in the hospital, and he walked out as good as new. Well, except for the Frankenstein scar permanently curlicued across the top of his head.

No visible scars to show for the time he ran out of air when we were scuba diving. Fortunately I was his diving buddy and had plenty of air in reserve, so it only got dicey as we were hanging on the ladder waiting for our turn to ascend to the boat. By then my reserve was dwindling. We passed my mouthpiece back and forth and I tried hard to breathe as slowly and sparingly as I could, because I knew he couldn't. Hey, cats don't like water.

But they have lightning reflexes and so does he. Once he was driving a highway he knew well on an insanely curvy road that also happens to have a plethora of tunnels. As he entered one, he saw that a car had stopped shortly after the entrance and was blocking his lane. (It had experienced mechanical difficulties). He applied the brakes instinctively and managed to avoid hitting the vehicle. But the force of his maneuver sent him spinning into the opposite lane, where an oncoming car came within inches of demolishing his. He walked away without a scratch . . . and the drivers of the other two vehicles could only shake their heads in disbelief.

Those same lightning instincts had saved the two of us from a head-on collision years earlier. We were driving north on a major thoroughfare, and a car from the southbound lane suddenly swerved in front of us, trying to make an illegal turn. Catman steered our car sharply to the right, avoiding a full collision, and we wound up with only a broken headlight. The other car had it much worse, as did its driver, a drunk who had turned to pull into a liquor store he had spotted on our side of the road. My husband had nothing to show for this experience; I had a few bruises from my seatbelt . . .which thankfully was buckled.

Another time we were hiking in the mountains on a well-beaten path we knew. Catman decided to deviate and take a shortcut up a grassy patch instead of sticking to the gravelly trail. I met him at the top where patch and trail intersected. Looking back down our respective paths, we noticed what appeared to be a snake mostly hidden by the tall grass. Another hiker warned us sharply: "Don't go down there. That's a poisonous viper. Someone died here two weeks ago after being bitten by one." The snake was lying exactly along the route Catman had taken two minutes earlier.

That accounts for 10 lives. But my Catman began running the clock very early in our marriage. At the time he was a technical advisor for a tire company and one day he was inspecting a defective truck tire when it blew up. He had been holding a sharp instrument as part of his inspection and the explosion thrust it right into his heart, puncturing the pericardial sac — a mortal wound.

The situation became a four-card flush of cat lives within minutes:

1. His accident occurred in Jacksonville, Florida, which just happened to have one of the best (read: FASTEST) emergency response organizations in the US. The ambulance arrived in three minutes.

2. The ambulance drivers saw that he had a heart injury and should be taken to the nearest heart hospital. But it was 10 minutes away and his situation was critical. So they brought him to the NEAREST hospital instead, a four-minute trip.

3. That closer-by hospital had just finished equipping a new operating room to handle open-heart surgeries THAT DAY.

4. An EXPERIENCED TEAM of doctors and nurses just HAPPENED to be in that brand-new OR practicing for what they thought would be their first open-heart surgery the following week. The team included a surgeon who had cut his teeth in Vietnam, operating in emergency situations, and an anesthesiologist idem.

All these stars aligned to save Catman's life. If any one of them had been missing, he wouldn't have made it. So he used up four lives in one fell swoop, making his total cat-lives tally 14 to date. If you want to combine the four into one, he is still pushing his luck with 11. He would be on dicier ground if we lived in a Spanish culture, where cats reputedly have seven lives. Not to mention the Middle East or Turkey, where cats claim merely six.

Fortunately, Catman and I live in Italy, where a cat officially has nine lives and a popular saying is "Fare la gatta morta." The translation is "to act like a dead cat" but what it really means is to feign indifference or innocence so as to play a situation for personal advantage. Maybe he is playing these near-death situations

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