

Lion in Kitty's Clothing

On my own again in the midst of the pandemic, I longed for company. Should I get another cat? Years ago, after losing the last one, I'd decided it wasn't fair to family members who are allergic to felines. Now, however, my own needs began to gain importance.

Then it happened. A friend's daughter needed a room to rent. Fine, I'd have company! Could she bring her cat? A minute later, I accepted with a hint of hesitation. Perhaps this was the answer to my longings.

As a little girl, my parents had given me a yellow ball of fluff to help me overcome my fear of cats and dogs. Inspired by the *Dick and Jane* books, I naturally called him Puff. I'd rather longed to have a yellow-orange cat again, and had images of several around the house – on a cushion my daughter embroidered, in a framed print, and so on.

Then the new arrival turned out to be a ginger cat! He adjusted well and was surprisingly friendly. Before long, he chose my comfy bed to sprawl out on, in regal fashion, for much of the day. When the sun shines just right through the window blinds, they cause his stripes to be shadowed with other stripes, camouflage upon camouflage.

He loves to arch backward, baring his fluffy belly for me to scratch. The stroking gives both of us pleasure, and the eventual purring becomes my prize. At times, however, he's in a playful mood and the 'innocent' soft pink pads of his feet unsheathe their claws. Even those friendly scratches can draw blood. Like the king of the beasts, he can be more dangerous than one suspects from a distance.

When contemplating having a kitty again, I didn't think much about the downsides. A domesticated animal in theory, cats still have much of that wild nature at their core, and are famous for their weird behavior. I understand that much of it is related to their instincts in the wild, as predator and prey.

'Ginger' leaps onto a high shelf and shatters an heirloom, one of two antique inkwells that my father had owned. My *human* reaction is shock and rejection. But *he* is a tiger in the jungle, seeking the best viewpoint to spy on his prey.

His real name is Pancraccio, but I prefer Punky; after all, he *is* pumpkin-colored. Half tiger with his stripes, half lion with his tawny tones, he is also quite shaggy. He would blend in well with the dry grasses of the African savannah.

Several times I've surprised him trying to pry open a cupboard or closet door. Once I was frightened by a sudden clatter within the closet as I prepared for bed; he had popped in when I'd left the 'cave' open unawares, hours previously. Some felines are crazy about boxes; enclosures seem to draw them in. This, I learned, also arises from

instinct. Cats can also be prey, and seek hiding places. Then again, even as predators, secrecy can offer the opportunity to pounce upon smaller creatures from within the jungle shadows.

For much of the day, our lion in kitty's clothing cultivates his domesticity lolling about, but after dark, his hunting skills awaken. It may be innocent crickets who entertain him for a while, chirping and leaping about as he scampers to catch them. As the weather warms up, cockroaches sneak out of their hiding places; when I see Punky leaping and batting something back and forth, I know that soon 'something' will be near the state of inertia and ready for the final broomwork. I hope there is never an opportunity for him to trap and dispatch a mouse, leaving it for me as a 'gift', as one kitty so graciously did, years ago.

The true test of our pet's innate wild nature is his longing to escape beyond the suffocating confines of the house. In the morning, we often hear small, 'pretty please' meows asking to be let out; I call it his 'me-owt' voice. As time drags on, his requests turn into demanding yowls. These are even more desperate when the female kitty next door is allowed out, even though his love is merely platonic after being neutered. When his humans are unresponsive to his needs, Punky will try to make a crazy run for it when the door opens, sometimes succeeding even after our block-and-tackle attempts. He learned to leap up and sneak out of windows opened a crack, especially by sliding them, until we installed screens.

Then there are those all-too-short visits to the great outdoors, when he more fully transforms and takes on his savage feline nature. He no longer walks, but hunkers down and slinks, the explorer and hunter par excellence. He rolls in the dirt... is that supposed to improve his camouflage? He sneaks into spots where lizards hide, sometimes catching one and 'wrassling' it to bits. Suddenly he raises his head to follow a bird whooshing over, obviously longing for it to be closer.

Born to be wild...

...totally predator lion in his own personal jungle...

...but kitty again tonight on my bed.