Nine Lives

Thought he was a goner, but the cat came back

July 1, 1998 By Peter Kurth

It’s going on two years since I popped my first protease inhibitor and joined the ranks of the Resurrected. In fact, when I last saw my doctor, he was so amazed by my soaring CD4 cells and rosy cheeks that he accused me of sneaking alternative treatments behind his back.

“Have you been eating Chinese cucumbers?” he asked suspiciously.

“No,” I said, as reassuringly as I could. “It’s just my charming personality. And my lover. And my cat.”

“Your cat?”

“Yes,” I said. “Nimrod, the Hunter, first among the mighty of the Lord.”

My doctor did a double take. “You’ve been letting this Lazarus thing get to you,” he said with a sigh.

So maybe I am a little stuck in the Bible these days. But I’m perfectly serious. Without Nimrod—all 11-and-a-half frenetic, maniacal, pompous pounds of him—I don’t think I’d be around today. He was my best friend and closest companion during the darkest time of my life. He was my lifeline and stand-in, the creature who convinced me—before the so-called protease miracle—that I still had a lot to live for.

Don’t worry, I’m not going to get all sentimental on you. I’m not one of those people who think that animals are our spiritual masters or that pets are put on earth in order to teach us the meaning of unconditional love. Trust me, there’s nothing unconditional about Nimrod’s love for me. It’s strictly quid pro quo. By nature, he is wily, deceitful, arrogant, vain and determined to be the center of attention. He’s like most of the people I know, in fact, only with this one little difference: He doesn’t pretend to be otherwise.

You have to understand that I got Nimrod right after my health collapsed and I left New York City despondent and staggered back to my mother’s house in Vermont. Nimrod is a barn cat, born and bred in a hayloft. I called him Nimrod after the famous hunter in Genesis 10:8–9, because for the

first few months after I returned home, I did nothing but sit in the yard and watch him chase after flies. He was only a kitten, intrepidly tripping all over himself and running straight into walls when not landing flat on his face. The runt of the litter, even his own kind took him for a rube, as they say up here in Vermont.

In my own struggle out of depression, I'm not exaggerating when I say that I attached 100 percent of my emotions to the fortunes of this cat. Every time he went outside, I was terrified that something would happen to him. Sensing this, he learned to hide, no doubt laughing to himself when he saw me frantically combing through bushes and peering into trees. Nimrod knew he would be rewarded with meaningless reproaches and shouts of joy when he finally came into view. And when I wasn't outdoors, I was lying in bed, waiting to die or snap out of it, whichever came first. At those low moments, Nimrod quietly materialized, stretching himself full-length on my chest and poking my nose. So much for dying with dignity.

Maybe it takes two completely self-centered individuals to really understand each other. I don't know. I only know that there was an economy of emotion between Nimrod and me—a devotion stripped of extraneous details—that freed my spirit and fed my soul when the world looked very black. Thanks to him, I was halfway back in the saddle when Crixivan came along, bright with promise and filled with optimism.

I'd like to say that there's a happy ending to this story, but the truth is Nimrod is mad at me these days. Like many of my friends, he liked me better when I was a wreck, pathetic and needing him desperately. Then, I met my lover John, who obviously could never take the place of Nimrod, but who does take up a lot of my time. The other day Nimrod actually jumped in my lap and smacked me across the face to get my attention, managing to simultaneously knock my cap down over my eyes and leave a sticky paw print on my glasses. I reminded him sharply that he was born in a barn, and that if it weren't for me…

Well, let's just say that Nimrod wasn't convinced. He knows who's important around here. So do I.

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