

Upfront

I've experienced a death in my family. My loss is not unique. The slight nuance is that I have a bi-weekly essay column to discuss whatever. At this moment, it's Mushu. Mushu is on my mind.

Mushu?

He is – or was – a cat. A flame point Siamese. Which, perhaps, should be a “flame point Thai,” given the evolution of the sovereign name “Siam” to “Kingdom of Thailand” in 1939. “Thailand,” as it is commonly known, is a constitutional monarchy with modern parliamentary leanings. Its current king is a guy named Maha Vajiralongkorn, who – depending on exchange rates and your chosen news source – is worth roughly \$30 billion, maintains a bona fide harem, sports fake tattoos, and spends a lot of time in Bavaria. “Maha X,” he calls himself: Who could reasonably expect him to remember and write out that messy string of characters every time? A cardinal-billionaire has better things to do, for sure.

Anyway, Siam has a history of kings. Thailand has a king today. Which is appropriate since we have long considered Mushu to be the little king of our household, indeed.

“A cat?” you ask, incredulously. I would have thought the same thing 19 years ago. But that was B.M. (before Mushu). Times change.

How did Mushu come to be, anyway? Apparently, he was sired and birthed in Jesup, Georgia, sometime around the spring of 2004, welcomed into the world by the only breeder who was running classified ads in the

Savannah Morning News. My daughters – then as now – precocious and clever at 9 and 7, respectively, developed strong pet yearnings. They proposed a canine solution, which was summarily rejected due to practical concerns (we were away from our house more often than in it). So, they landed on cat. Which was of zero interest to me, having never spent a memorable moment consciously in contact with a feline creature.

Hence, “Absolutely not.”

Given their mother's nature, the kids understood “absolutely not” to be little more than the first step on the pathway to “hell, yeah!” They were (and are) as diligent and resourceful as they are stubborn, so they didn't leave things to chance with respect to the cat-quest. They crafted a PowerPoint presentation, detailing the general virtues of pet ownership in a family context, the relative ease of cat maintenance, the attractive assets of the aforementioned flame point breed, and the interesting coincidence that a typical specimen from such a litter would perfectly match/blend into our monolithic travertine floor. Their pitch included language like:

*“They bond more (deeply) with their owners than other cat varieties. They're great with families, kids, even other pets. (It's) an adorable cat with unique colors, an intelligent outlook, and an extremely friendly and outgoing personality.”****

Per usual, I was the last of our quartet to be looped in. “We're going to Jesup to ‘look’ at this litter of flame point Siameses.” It was a Saturday morning. I was dressing for golf.

“We're just looking,” their mother added for emphasis.

“You're just looking,” I repeated back to her, to them, for clarity.

“We're just looking, yes.” Like a well-rehearsed chorus.

Golf ended. I returned. I watched TV in the peaceful quiet of an empty home. And then Mushu arrived. In a plastic box with holes on the side, along with a Santa's bag of foods, toys, gadgets, medicines, cat “beds,” and other things that had been brilliantly conceived by a massive pet-industrial complex previously hidden from me.

Shockingly, shamefully, then shamelessly, I fell in love. Mushu was indescribably cool. Often friendly, yet frequently aloof. Scarily smart. Unimaginably self-aware. As I once described him to my friends, Joe and Cindy: “incredibly intelligent and generally miserable.” Though, he wasn't – miserable. He was moody and affectionate and distant and sol-

itary and needy, all at once. I got him. He got me.

He was an indoor cat. Unfortunately, our house, at the time, was roughly 80 percent glass. Floor to ceiling, everywhere. So, his domain was inside but his field of vision was expansive, natural, and green. He escaped whenever he sensed the slightest opportunity. Prompting me to become an obsessive searcher, sometimes under the darkest of black night skies. I developed a sing-song-y, high-pitched “Mu-shu,” inexplicably assuming he preferred alto to baritone. Once, in advance of a dinner date with the same Joe and Cindy referenced above, I spotted a distant white-rust ball atop a mound of mud well out in the marsh. Eventually, we were late by more than 45 minutes, the result of oozing into the earth up to my thighs with every step I took to retrieve my wayward cat.

I was due back in Boston in 2018, and Mushu had been missing for a day or two. We were living downtown, now...he and I alone. I could easily argue he had become my closest friend. We looked and looked, seemingly everywhere – me, my mom, our neighbors, friends. Eventually, I gave up, numb – maybe in shock – begrudgingly resigned to his permanent departure and/or demise. A night or two passed and my phone rang...it was a FaceTime call from a young girl who lived next door. She chronicled her approach as she corralled Mushu in a parking lot diagonally across our square. I hadn't felt such joyous relief since one of my wife's more encouraging oncologists' reports: “no evidence of disease.”

Near the end, Mushu weakened fast. On the last day, he lacked energy to rise from his side. His ribs had been visible for months, if not years, and stroking his back felt like running your hand down a long set of gears, as his spine pushed through his thin skin. We cried as we said goodbye to him. Hard.

“I heard the faucet trickle last night,” I said, knowing I didn't because I could see it was off.

Mushu preferred a dripping stream from the tub tap to a traditional bowl.

“So did I,” said Jenna. And she was serious.

Maybe, we did. Those whom we truly love are never fully gone.

Scott A. Lawrence

****from the esteemed digital cat authority, Hepper.com*

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