

## A Raccoon Tale

Every afternoon, I hurried home from high school, changed into a pair of jeans and leather boots, and prepared for an assault of sharp raccoon teeth on my legs. This was the game we played. Cooney lowered into position, then barreled towards me, his trilling sounds announcing 'Battle Speed!' I taunted, "You can't get me," as I leapt over him, then raced around the living room.

When Cooney's energy had worn down, he usually climbed onto the small bed we used for a couch and settled in to rest, his face covered by a thick tail. It was then I could gather up the folds of his fat bottom and press him close, whispering sweet love into his ear. His pudgy paws encircled my neck and his body relaxed into my chest as we walked around the house.

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My younger sister Bu loved animals, the wilder the better. A year before, she had brought to our Chicago home an injured squirrel, followed by the squirrel's friend. We called them Danny and Carol, named after our squabbling neighbors. They dominated our living room, climbing up curtains and leaping from one chair to another. At times tiny claws clambered up my leg, then used my shoulder to jump to another piece of furniture. When Danny healed enough to head back to the trees of the city, they walked out the front door as if they had been relatives concluding an extended visit.

We had a baby raccoon before Cooney, a gift from my uncle, who found the abandoned kit in his suburban back yard. Bu kept it in a cage in her room, only letting it out when we were home, which I preferred. Shortly after coming to our house, the raccoon became lethargic, then began seizing up, signs of distemper. There was nothing we could do except ease his passing.

I checked on him often. On his last night, I crept downstairs and lay next to his cage. He was quiet, splayed flat. Only his glittering black eyes followed me. He seemed so tired from fighting the losing battle. I held his paw, as his breath slowed. Finally he raised his head and turned away. He took a breath that lifted his chest, then released a sigh and was gone.

There were other creatures that shared our home, including an indifferent monitor lizard. But only Cooney took my heart and burst it open.

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It was early summer. Slow to rise that morning, I stayed curled up under my blanket, reading Tolkien. My mother knocked on the door.

“Come on in.”

“Bonnie, look what we have.” The lilt in my mom’s voice betrayed her excitement. She and Bu filled the doorway. Tossing my blanket aside, I rolled off the bed, not noticing the ‘holy terror’ entering my room. A young raccoon rushed in between their well-shod feet, aiming straight towards me. Suddenly my naked toes felt far too vulnerable.

“Ahhh!” I screamed, triggering his attack response. He chased me as I leapt over my study chair, then wove between my mother and sister, who stood calmly in the center of the room. Finally I jumped onto the bed. The raccoon stopped short, unable to climb up. My mother and sister were in hysterics.

“Get him out!” I yelled. Bu grabbed him up and both retreated, seeming to enjoy my panic much too much. Leaning against the closed door, I considered my position. *I’m cornered. A wild animal is roaming our halls and clearly my family is okay with it.* Could I ever get used to him? Would I ever feel safe around him? Despite the heat, I armored my skin with long sleeves, thick pants and leather shoes, and ventured downstairs to face the beast.

My mother and sister were busy setting up a feeding area on the kitchen floor.

“I suppose we aren’t going to put him in a cage?” I asked.

“No, he’s potty trained to use kitty litter,” my mom said.

I sighed in frustration. This was too much. And yet what could I do?

Cooney lived with us like a family pet. I was the last to recognize his pet status, staying well-defended behind thick clothing and a cautious distance. But my heart softened quickly. I had no choice. I could not ignore his antics, nor pretend he wasn’t the best entertainment in or outside our house. For me to survive comfortably, I had to adapt to his rhythm. He slept all night and into the day and woke full of aggressive energy just about the time we came home from school. Then the boots went on.

My favorite time was when he was sleepy. With my school so close, during lunch break I often walked home to find Cooney nestled between Bu’s mattress and box spring. He had the ability to flatten, making it through surprisingly small spaces. After pulling himself

inside, he circled til his nose faced outwards for fresh air while he slept. I lifted the corner of the mattress, then softly stroked the hairs on his fleshy paws and nose. Eventually he would stretch, yawn and roll over so I could rub his belly. He reciprocated by lightly biting the bare skin on my arm as if to get any fleas that might be there.

When he lay on the living room bed, I often scratched through his thick fur, down his back to his tail. And in return he ran his nails through my hair. It was these quiet moments that forged our bond.

My sister slept with him under her covers every night. One time I joined them. He crawled to the end of her bed, nipping my feet to get more room. I never did that again. A nighttime of nibbled toes was not worth the cuddling.

Cooney did use a box of kitty litter. But, to my mother's consternation, he cleansed himself by dragging his bottom on the carpet afterwards.

Water was always an attraction. He was captivated by the toilet bowl. After every flush he leapt up and watched the water disappear then fill up again.

When I forgot to shut the door while taking a bath once, he jumped up to the tub rim, where he balanced himself while running his paws through the water. "Mom, can you get Cooney out of here?" I called, afraid he might jump in. I imagined floating fur coating my scratched and punctured body.

Food searching filled his day more than anything else. His hunting trips took him deep into the kitchen. After school, Bu and I usually made a beeline to the refrigerator. Cooney caught on. He followed us close behind, then grabbed onto the bottom shelf and slid inside, flattening himself to fit into the space. Despite our attempts to pull him out, he clung to the metal rack. We had to remove every food item from the shelves to dislodge his interest.

One day I heard the banging of falling pans. Cooney was exploring the lower cabinets, a long open space with doors for access. He had cleared everything out while looking for the cereals he smelled in the drawer above. Our cookware suffered his mining efforts.

He was not above grabbing food directly from us. One dinnertime, I engaged in a tug of wills with that raccoon over my pork chop, which he had skillfully slipped from my plate as I prepared to put my knife and fork into it.

We were kept busy cleaning up after him. Occasionally, when I

returned home, I would find Cooney sitting upright on the overstuffed chair in the living room, trying to get peanut butter fragments out of an empty jar or licking yogurt residue from an old container. I could see in the distance a cornucopia of garbage tumbled out of the fallen garbage can.

Cooney was a natural climber with very little to climb. Our Christmas tree was sacrificed to the little bandit. He had gained a lot of weight by wintertime, a natural condition for raccoons living in snowy areas. Our tree never stood a chance. Yet we lifted it upright time and again.

Friends learned to be vigilant with their possessions around him. Cooney followed every intriguing scent; penetrated every defense. He ripped through the lining of a friend's pea jacket to get to the cigarettes in the pocket. Another day, a friend's purse was breached, a shredded joint lying in pieces on the couch. "Hey, I was looking forward to smoking that!" she said.

Perhaps the scariest event happen when no one was around. One evening I came home to find Cooney rapidly pawing the wool bedspread, over and over again. His eyes glowed green as if possessed.

"Mom, what happened to Cooney?"

"That rascal found my diet pills," she answered. "They were hidden in a medicine bag in the hall closet. The whole bag was ripped apart. I have no idea what else he ate."

Worried, we watched him carefully. A few hours later, he began to slow down.

Each bit of destruction taught us greater care in storing our things. Like a hyperactive child, he tore through areas of our house we assumed were safe and secure. Anticipating his next exploration was never an option. We were always one step behind. The force of his wild curiosity dominated our home.

Cooney had been outdoors only once while he lived with us. Winter was moving into spring, and the sun warmed the front porch invitingly. And someone left the door open. Once we realized Cooney had gone, we searched the trees in the yard, then followed the sidewalk to the back alley. There he was, perched high up a large tree. From the heights, he watched us bribe him with gooey sweet rolls and savory bacon.

"Cooney... come on boy," we called, softening our voices to seduce him down. Nothing worked.

The night was cold, with a sleeting rain. I tossed and turned in bed, worried. Is he okay? Would I ever see him again?

The next morning, I opened the front door, and there he sat, shivering and wet. I wrapped him in a towel and carried him to my sister's bed. He slept through the day and into the next, occasionally sneezing, his nose dripping.

In contrast to my increasing love for him, my mother's relationship with Cooney went off in another direction. It began with the vacuum cleaner. He hated that machine.

"Bu, come and get this raccoon. I'm trying to vacuum." Cooney was biting wherever he could find soft purchase, which included her legs and feet.

Cleaning our white World Book encyclopedias covered in grape jam paw prints was just annoying. Green globs on the carpet leading to a tube of green oil paint was one of my mother's 'last straws.' And Cooney was maturing, taking out his aggressive energy on her. Whenever she returned home from work, he lowered into attack position and chased her into her bedroom. She was beginning to feel afraid.

"That raccoon has gotta go!" she ordered. We didn't want to hear it, but knew it was inevitable.

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One spring afternoon, my father drove to our house with a borrowed cage on his back seat. We planned to drop Cooney off at an animal sanctuary in a forest preserve. My heart was breaking as I gathered him up. He wrapped his arms around my neck, trusting me as he had done so many times before. I carried him to the car. He pushed off from my arms, not sure what was happening, but we managed to cage him. Bu and I sat on either side. As we drove away, he paced, trilling his unhappiness while testing the edges of the cage for any weakness.

"It's okay Cooney," I said softly, trying to keep my voice steady. "It's okay."

So many things were wrong that day. For almost a year Cooney had not been in a car. And he had not been in a cage. What kind of cage could hold an adult raccoon? We didn't know. This cage door had a single latch in the middle. Cooney managed to get the door askew enough to start to squeeze through one side of the opening. We pushed his arms back in, but the latch gave way. My sister threw her body over the door, hoping her weight would keep it shut, but that raccoon was

relentless. At first his paws and arms emerged, then his face and the rest of his body slid out from under her. I tried to redirect him, only to be bitten, blood dripping down my hand. All this occurred in silence. It would not help to upset our father, who lived in the suburbs and had never met the raccoon before.

I finally had to inform him. “Uh, Dad, ... Cooney is out of the cage. We’ll hold him in our laps.”

“What!” My father was furious. He was driving out to the suburbs with a loose raccoon in his car.

My sister and I took turns restraining Cooney, trying to keep him calm, all while tears of sadness streamed down our faces. Time and again we pulled him back from exploring the rear window or climbing onto the front seats.

I knew how hard this was for all of us. But it was not a time for reflection; it was a time for forcing one foot in front of the other. Only later did I wonder, would he survive in the wild, not having the guidance of a mother?

The sky darkened as we pulled into the parking lot of the nature preserve. To our left a wildlife center had been built next to a pond. The forest surrounded us as Bu carried Cooney to a cement porch next to the entrance. I laid out a cardboard box with an old blanket for bedding, a bowl with water and an open bag of cat kibble. We hoped he would transition to other food when he found his bearings.

There was no time for long goodbyes. As soon as my sister laid him down, and I placed a note on top of his box, we took off running. He immediately followed, emerging into the clearing near our car, only to be stopped short by a couple walking a dog. This was something new for him.

We jumped quickly into the back seat and took off. Through the window I could see Cooney watching us curiously, one paw raised as we drove away.