

Onyx's time



By Nate Smelle

It was around 10 years ago when a former acquaintance asked me if I would be willing to look after her friend's cat Onyx for a few months while she was in rehab. At the time I was just starting to chase news stories internationally as a freelance journalist, so I was hesitant at first as I didn't want to tie myself down and miss out on any exciting opportunities. However, as John Lennon sang after leaving The Beatles, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." Assuming that she would be able to find someone else, I told her that I was sorry, but I was just too busy to properly care for him at this time. Around a week later I received an email from Onyx's owner, asking me if I could please help her find someone to look after him because she had tried everyone she knew, and no one was willing to take him in. She also informed me that if she could not find someone by the end of the week that she would be forced to take him to the humane society in Ottawa, where she was afraid he would be put down. Understanding the slim chances of a black cat that was at least five years old being adopted from a shelter in Ottawa that was already housing dozens of cats many of which were kittens I told her that I would be there on the weekend to pick him up. When I walked into her fourth floor apartment there was Onyx checking me out from his perch atop the television cabinet. Looking into each other's eyes I could immediately tell we were going to be friends. Sitting down on the couch, Onyx came down from his lookout to say hello. Rubbing his head on my chin he sat with me for a few minutes as I petted him and then walked over to the sliding door to the balcony, put his paws on the glass and meowed; obviously asking to go outside. Uncomfortable with the idea of letting Onyx outside on a balcony four storeys high, I disregarded his meowing and tried to lure him back over to my lap with some treats. Though I was successful in enticing him, as soon as his owner came into the living room, he ran to the door and she let him out. "Is he ok out there?" I asked. "Oh yeah, he loves it outside," she replied. "But is it safe?" As I asked the question Onyx leapt from the chair on the balcony to the one and a half inch wide railing and began walking from one end to the other; proving to me, at least in his mind I'm sure, that there was nothing to worry about. Uneasy with his tight rope performance, I did my best to ignore the potential danger of the concrete below, and began loading his things into my car downstairs. By the time I made my way upstairs Onyx was in his carrier, meowing loudly in disapproval. For the next four months, Onyx and I bonded closely. Wherever I went in the house he followed me almost step by step. As soon as I would open my laptop to write, there he was, on my lap with his paws on the keys. When it was time for bed, he would make himself comfortable on my side or my back as I slept. Even when I was on the throne, he would jump up on my shoulders and get comfortable. Soon a few months had turned into four months, and the four had turned into six. When I found out his former owner was out of rehab and was ready to take Onyx back, I was sad to see him go, but knew her son would be happy to see him. So, back to the national capital we went. Saying our goodbyes when I arrived at her apartment, I promised that I'd come back to visit the following month. I slipped back into my old routines over the next few weeks, but still found myself missing his eccentric and playful presence in the house. When I called to arrange a visit a month after dropping him off, I was shocked when his owner told me that she was having trouble looking after him, so she had dropped him off at the humane society earlier that week. Stunned and furious that she did not call me, I found out which facility it was and called to see if he was still there. Speaking with the

woman on the phone she told me that he was indeed there and that they were going to do their best to find him a good home. She also mentioned that if they couldn't find him one within a few weeks they would have to euthanize him. Not in the position to take Onyx in permanently?or at least that was what I had convinced myself at the time?I asked her to please call me if they did not find him a home, and I would come get him.Two weeks passed with no word about Onyx, so I called back to see how he was doing. Noting that he was a lovely cat, the woman on the phone said they were still going to keep trying to find him a home for a couple more weeks. Reminding them to please call if they couldn't, I hung up with the same uneasy feeling in my stomach that I experienced when I saw Onyx walking on the railing of his former fourth floor balcony.Now, where I live in L'Amable there is still today a very weak cell signal. It is one of these places, to which I am sure many of you can relate, where in order to make or receive a call one must hang out the upstairs bathroom window with their phone held as high in the air as possible. Assuming that the humane society would leave a message if Onyx's time was up, I still found myself driving down the road once a day to check my messages just in case.Recognizing that the two weeks had passed and I had yet to hear from the humane society, I figured that they had found Onyx a home and imagined him living a happy life. Two days later, with Onyx still on my mind, I was in the garage?an area on our property where I have never been able to receive a text let alone a phone call?when suddenly the phone rang.Answering, the voice said, ?Hello Nate, it's the Ottawa Humane Society and we have Onyx here. Unfortunately our shelter is overwhelmed with animals at the moment and we are about to euthanize him so wanted to check to see if you could take him one last time.?The woman on the phone said they had called me four times that morning but it went straight to voicemail, so this was their last attempt.?Yes!? I responded. ?Please don't put him down. I can be there in the morning.?How that call came through I still do not understand. Why? Because it wasn't Onyx's time.When I arrived at the shelter the next morning I walked into the room where Onyx was waiting. Seeing only the tip of his tail poking out from behind the cardboard box with his blanket in it, I could tell he was terrified. Walking in the room I called his name, ?Onyx! Buddy!? Hearing my voice he ran from his hiding place and jumped onto my knees; rubbing his head on my beard and purring louder than I have ever heard a cat purr.Three weeks ago, the energetic spirit within Onyx suddenly began to fade. Noticing that he was sleeping more than usual and not eating or drinking much, I decided to take him to the vet. Since no vets within almost a two hour radius of Bancroft were accepting new patients, I ended up taking him to an emergency clinic in Peterborough. Expecting it to be some minor illness we could fix with meds, and in the worst case scenario surgery, I was not ready for the news that his kidneys were full of cancer and failing rapidly.They told me it was terminal and that even if he had 24-hour a day care at best it would only give him two to four more days at the most. Noting that this would cost around \$5,000, they recommended that I have him euthanized that day. In disbelief, I sat there in the office trying to figure out what to do. Calling my wife, the two of us shared tears over the phone and made the decision that considering he had not eaten in almost three days, or drank in 24 hours it was Onyx's time to move on.Thinking about how he could hardly walk that morning, although still struggling, I was ready to say goodbye when they brought him back in the room to give us a moment. To my surprise, as soon as they put him on the floor, he ran, yes ran, over to me and jumped, yes jumped onto my lap. As he sat there he looked in my eyes and began rubbing his head on my beard as he always has done. He then jumped from my lap over to the counter, knocked the lid off a time of dog treats and proceeded to try and eat them.Not ready for the sudden burst of energy I started thinking about the 24-hour care the vet had mentioned they could provide. One thing for certain was that it was clearly not Onyx's time. When the vet came back in I asked her what the 24-hour care entailed. Explaining what they would do for him?meds, hydration, food?I decided to take Onyx home and provide him with the same care myself. Remembering how frightened he was in the humane society almost a decade ago, there was no way in hell I was letting him die in a cage when he could spend his last days at home and in peace.After a week of mostly sleepless nights, Onyx's condition began to worsen, and it was obvious that the end was near. Since there were no vets available to care for him locally, I called a mobile vet named Dr. Chris to come and check up on him. When the vet arrived at our home, Onyx immediately perked up and ate his first meal?nearly a full bowl of dry food?in two days. Acknowledging that ?he still wants to be here? she provided him with fluids and pain medication and was on her way.Onyx spent the majority of daylight hours over the next five days strolling through the grass, watching birds, and even, somehow, chasing a chipmunk. When I noticed on the morning of Sept. 11 that he was for the first time unable to stand I called Dr. Chris again to come out out, and if necessary help him on his way.Onyx passed away peacefully in the grass later that day.While some might say Onyx was just a cat, I know there are more of you out there who understand the kind of bond you can establish with your non-human companions when you take the time to get to know them. When such a deep bond is formed, you come to understand what Paul McCartney of The Beatles meant when he sang, ?In the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.?