

TIGGER



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listen to the music at:
michaelharren.com/tigger

design by luke kurtis

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For years I have been telling the story of how Tigger came into my life. It goes like this: my cat rescuing friend Francesca reached out to me out of the blue and said she had a cat for me. I never said I wanted a cat, but she knew Tigger was right for me. I met him, we fell in love, and the rest is history.

Except, as it turns out, that's not true.

I started digging back in my social media history to recover the bits of this story that remain there, only to discover that the story I have been telling is entirely untrue. Seriously.

I completely fabricated that story. I have no idea how, or why, and I have no idea how many people I have told this lie to, but if you are one of them: I'm sorry.

I do this pretty frequently. I forget the details of things and instead create my own adventure. Like the time when I was with my friend Britt in Syracuse and I tried to explain to a Wegman's cashier that I was excited to find they had those vegan s'mores I love so much even after the tragic flooding of the Sweet & Sara factory had forced the company to close for good. Britt looked at me like, "What the hell are you talking about?" as I recounted this tale. Her bewildered expression told me I might have accidentally embellished the story. And now that I'm writing this, I realize I may be embellishing the story of the embellishment. But we are already pretty far off course, so let's move on.

The unembellished story about Tigger is that I was browsing Facebook in the summer of 2012, a couple of months after my mom passed away. Francesca posted a photo of a cute little kitty with this caption:

"This is Tigger, who was thrown out by his 'owners' and living under a car. He isn't neutered, had fleas and worms but is negative for FeLV/FIV. I am only in NYC one more month. I'm living at a friend's. I really really need help with this kitty. I will get him neutered and vaccinated and microchipped. Please, can anyone help us? He's an incredibly sweet boy who loves head rubs and food. Foster or adopt."

I decided to go meet Tigger where he was being fostered on the Upper East Side, just to see how we got along. Pretty quickly, I became enamored with his charming aloofness, his clumsy-cool gait, and his mostly calm demeanor. I decided to take him in. We took a cab back to Brooklyn and



started our lives together in my tiny studio apartment.

Tigger was pretty shy at first. He hid under the couch for the afternoon, not even

emerging to eat or use his new litter box. I tried to gently encourage him out by cooing his name and placing bits of kibble on the floor. I could see his eyes peering back at me: curious, but not quite ready to take the risk. Not ready to trust. It wasn't until I stopped trying and just sat on the couch later that night to watch TV that Tigger cautiously appeared. I was pretty engrossed in *The Walking Dead*, and maybe it was that lack of attention that gave him the space to investigate. I felt his cold nose on my hand for a second and slowly reached for the remote to pause the DVR. I sat, still and silent while Tigger crept around the small space, sniffing out the corners, the fabrics, the wood. He seemed to keep one eye on me and maintained proximity to his safe spot beneath the couch. Even though everything in me wanted to jump up and bound toward him and smother him with hugs and adoration I knew I needed to wait. This needed to happen in his time.

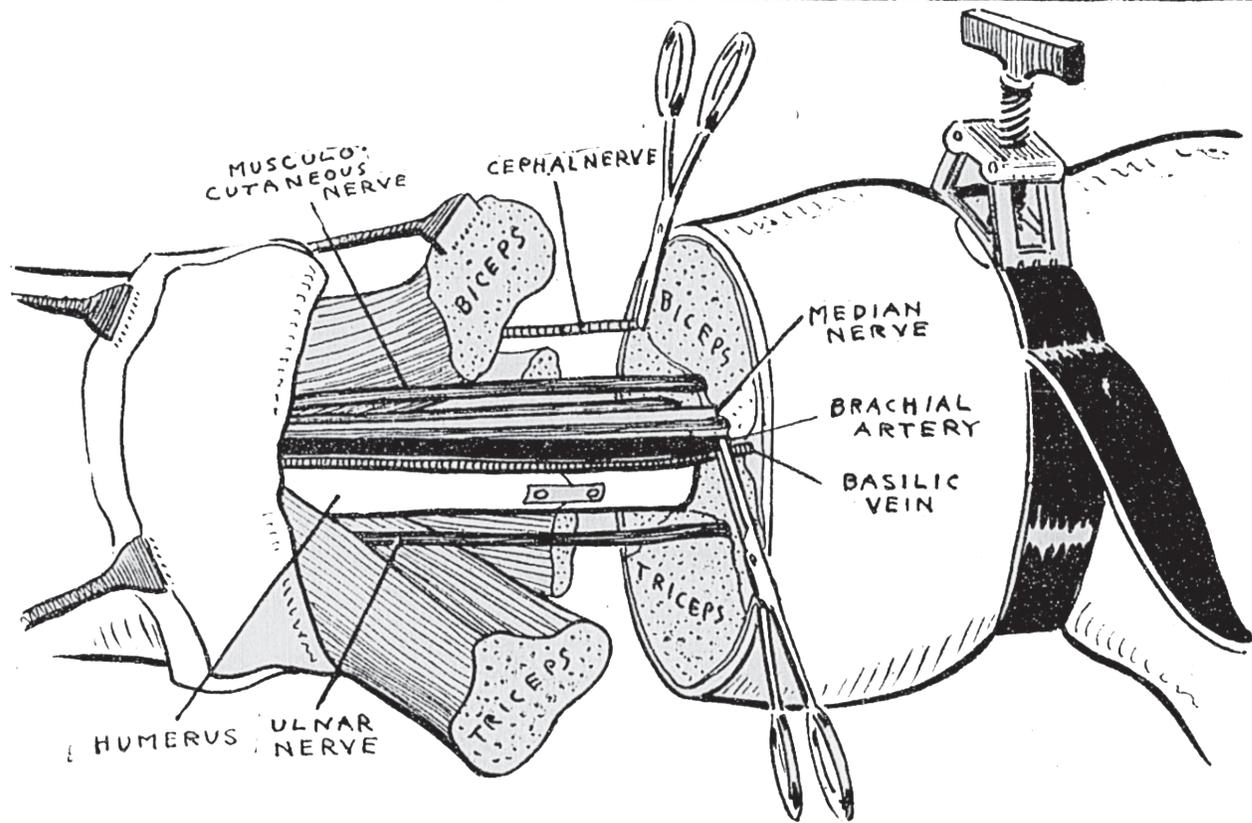
I don't know how long I watched him, but he eventually came back over to the couch, gave me a slow blink, and then hopped up and started sniffing me. I sat still for a bit, letting him do his thing, and then slowly placed my hand on his head and started petting his head.

We were friends.

As much as I loved Tigger, our first couple of months together were pretty harrowing. He had a bad case of fleas that proved difficult to get rid of and he inexplicably vomited frequently. I finally got rid of his fleas and realized that his vomiting was caused by his exuberance for eating. He would gobble up his food (just like daddy) and then barf it up on the floor (just like daddy in his drinking days). Just as I was wrapping up the whole flea thing and discovering that if I fed him smaller amounts of food, he was puking less, he developed a new issue: peeing all over the apartment.

I was exasperated. I have had cats before, but never with this particular issue. I had been reaching out to Francesca so much about the flea and barfing thing, I was worried I was becoming a pain in the ass. I tried to redirect Tigger to his litter box. I tried changing the litter. I tried relocating the box. I tried burning sage and praying over crystals. Nothing helped. Finally, I took him to the vet who told me that Tigger and I had something else in common. Tigger had bladder crystals. Just like daddy.

Technically, my "crystals" were kidney stones, and I started getting them chronically in my early 30s. I was on an airplane flying back to Houston from New York City when I experienced my first kidney stone. It started as a dull cramp in my gut which quickly progressed to the feeling of 900 evil demons having a rave in my urethra only instead of glow sticks, they were dancing with razor-sharp icepicks. #NotAnEmbellishment.



Interestingly, the stones started showing up around the time I made a conscious decision to give up on ever finding a boyfriend. I remember thinking it was too painful to be feeling so much about the string of guys I was falling for who vanished the moment I expressed interest in them. To deal with it, I managed to just turn off the desire for a relationship, and with it went my ability to connect with folks at all, even my family and friends. It's odd looking back at this time and my ability to do this. I was always a pretty sensitive person, so to replace hope and longing with distance and bitterness, well, it's kinda sad but also impressive the way we humans can shift so fully into someone else for a time.

There were moments though when I couldn't hide my loneliness and the feeling that I was defective and unloveable. One of the challenges of being a single adult with health problems is that I needed someone to go with me for major hospital visits. One

year, I was hospitalized twice for lithotripsy, a medical procedure where they use ultrasound waves to break up kidney stones. Each time I had to find someone to go with me because the hospital wouldn't release a patient who had been anesthetized without an adult companion. By this time, most of my friends had partnered off, thus securing their attendants for such moments. Maybe there were more people than I realized who would be willing to abandon their lives for a day to help me out, but at the time it was a really hard question to ask.

On one occasion it was particularly hard to find someone. I wound up going to the hospital by myself. I had a friend who had planned to come and pick me up when it was over, but I had to check in to the hospital alone. Fuck, that's lonely. I'd been through this procedure a number of times at this point, so I wasn't exactly terrified, but I was nervous. As I checked in for surgery, each step along the way a different nurse would



ask, "Who is here with you today?"

Each time I responded with a name and phone number they should call when I was done, the lump in my throat grew. I remember moving through that morning observing myself almost like I was in a movie.

This is what it's like to put on this ridiculous gown when you are alone.

This is what it's like to lay in a hospital bed when you are alone.

This is what it's like to receive intravenous fluids when you are alone.

This is what it's like when the nurse says, "do you want me to get your companion from the waiting room?" when you are alone.

This is what it's like to be wheeled down a corridor to surgery when you are alone.

This is what it's like to grow older when you are alone.

This is what it's like when nobody loves you, I mean really loves you.

This is what it's like when you are a loser piece of shit who is going to die unloved and alone.

Contrary to this embellishing pattern of mine, words aren't sufficient to thoroughly express the dark place I found myself that morning while I waited alone for surgery.

By this point, my bed had been rolled to an out of the way spot outside the operating room. I heard the team inside busily preparing for surgery. Meanwhile, the lump in my throat had reached epic proportions and I was furiously biting my lip, trying unsuccessfully not to cry. Tears streamed down my face and I let out a sharp gasp and

a guttural sob. A nearby nurse turned my way and awkwardly asked if I was okay. I nodded and managed to pull it together. She's the only person who knew about that moment until now.

Of course, I went in for the procedure and everything was fine. I woke up, and once my doctor cleared me to leave, someone called my friend to come and pick me up. The nurses loaded me into a wheelchair and rolled me outside to wait. My friend arrived and I'm sure I said everything was great. I'm sure I insisted on getting out of the car and going inside my apartment by myself. I went right back to my sealed off emotional state after that day in the hospital, but I remember that being the first inkling in years that maybe I should consider opening up again.

It was many years after that when I met Tigger. Looking back, my relationship with him was my first step out of emotional isolation. We worked out our differences and

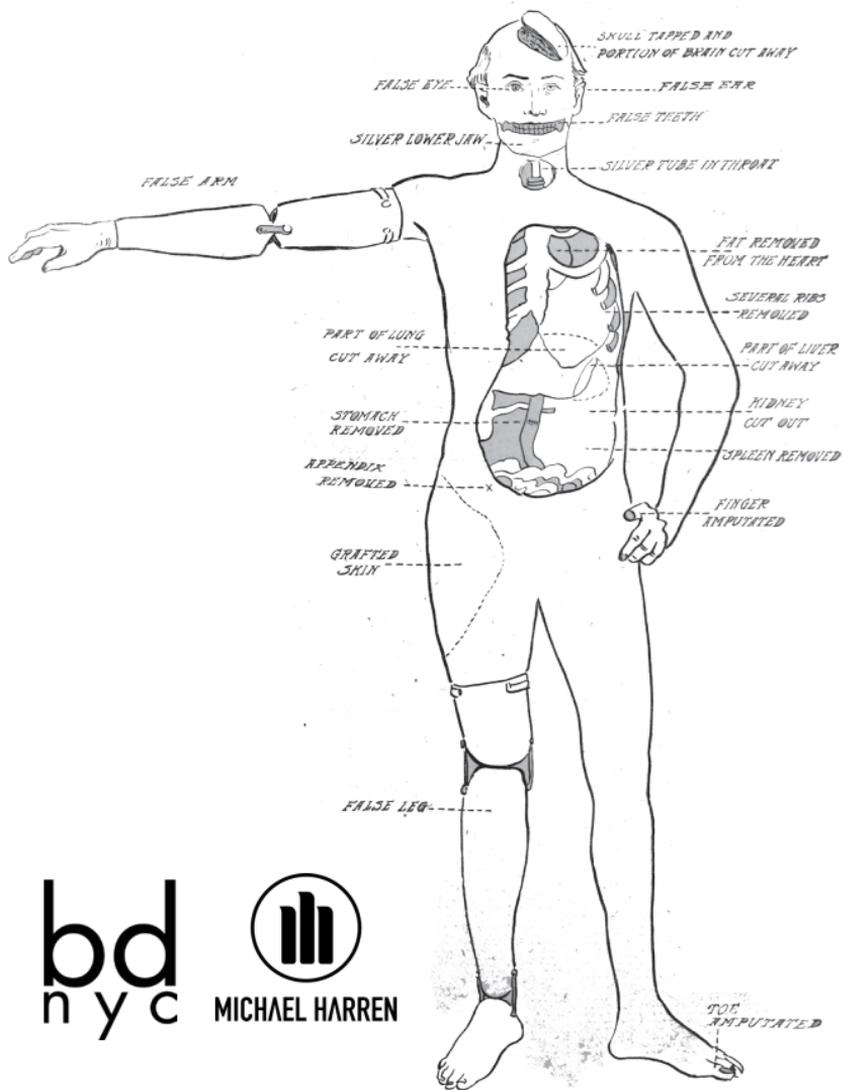
learned how to live together. I got rid of his fleas, put him on prescription food to prevent the crystals, and got him a special bowl that keeps him from gobbling up his food and then puking everywhere. He's never been one for lots of cuddles, but he sleeps on the corner of my bed and knows just the right moment to brush across my ankles when I am sitting at the computer weeping and recounting tales of lonely hospital visits.

Tigger teaches me that even when things seem too tough to handle and maybe it would have been better to stay in my little isolated world, there's something magical that happens when I allow myself to connect with and rely on someone. There's something magical in loving someone for exactly who they are and if you take a moment, you might see how they are loving you too.

I tend to write off my exaggeration habit by considering it my brain's way of making up

for what it lacks in memory retention, but I am starting to think there is more to it than that. Maybe it's my way of trying to connect with people instead of pushing them away like I used to. Like, unconsciously I am thinking, "I better make this story really good if I want this person to like me." That's another thing that Tigger teaches me: as long as I keep things authentic, show up and respect who he is, our relationship is going to be just fine. I don't have to embellish who I am to make him, or anyone, like me.

I hope I am teaching Tigger something too.



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