



Randy: The saga of a long-lost cat

By Tom Dalton

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SALEM — Patricia Woodward crawled into bed Friday afternoon feeling sick. That's when the phone call came from the Northeast Animal Shelter in Salem.

"Do you have a cat named Randy?" the caller asked.

"Yeah, well, I did," Woodward said from her Everett apartment.

"We scanned a computer chip, and we have Randy," the shelter worker said.

The 39-year-old Woodward, a mother of three boys, was stunned. Their beloved family pet, the cat they walked on a leash and that went swimming with them in the ocean, was alive. The cat they lost last summer, the animal they feared was killed by coyotes or had frozen to death, was alive.

"I started crying," Woodward said. "I don't remember what I did then. I threw my clothes on and went to get my friend's cat carrier. I just couldn't believe it. What are the chances that six months later this cat comes back?"

"I was crying all the way there," she said. "My girlfriend took me. ... I couldn't even drive."

The saga of Randy, a 21½-year-old cat with eight lives remaining, began last summer when Woodward and her children went to stay with friends in Reading. They took along their two cats, Bear, who was 8, and Randy, who was named for Patriots star Randy Moss.

Although Randy was kept inside in Everett, he was allowed to roam in the spacious Reading yard, usually staying near the children and coming right back inside. Randy, it turns out, was no ordinary cat and usually could be trusted to do the right thing.

"This cat was like a wicked family pet," Woodward said. "He was like a person. We have a summer house in Maine, and he goes to the beach with us and goes into the water. He's like my baby. He will walk on a leash. He'll do anything."

One day in late July, however, Randy disappeared. They don't know what happened but guess that something scared the cat and kept it running.

They made posters of Randy and put up signs all over Reading, on telephone poles, on grocery store bulletin boards, anywhere they could think. They called police, contacted the Animal Rescue League and posted a lost cat notice on the Web site of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Nothing.

"I was devastated," Woodward said. "I like panicked. I lay in the grass and cried."

By the end of summer, Woodward's family returned to Everett and the kids were back in school. They even adopted a kitten to try to forget.

"I thought he was honestly gone or dead," she said. "I was traumatized, so I moved on."

It was some time last summer, she doesn't remember exactly when, that Mary Ann Rosen first noticed a long-haired, brown cat standing near the bird feeder in her Wilmington backyard. Wilmington is next to Reading, and her house is about two miles away from the one where Woodward was staying.

"To be honest, I was shooing it away," she said.

Rosen, 57, a Salem native who has lived in Wilmington more than 20 years, saw the cat off and on during the fall. "I kept seeing it not only in my yard, but my neighbor's yard, just walking around aimlessly."

Around Christmas, the cat started appearing regularly in her yard, sitting in the sun on a wooden beam supported by old garden fence posts. Rosen, an animal lover, has a soft spot for cats. She took in a feral kitten years ago that she found under her husband's car and kept it for 18 years. Friskie died five years ago this month.

When she saw this brown cat eat an old, rotten chunk of suet she had put out for the birds, Rosen knew the animal was starving. She broke down about three weeks ago and began to feed it.

"I was sneaking cans of tuna to him," she said.

She thought it was a wild cat, so she kept a safe distance, but there were other signs that made her wonder.

"It was so vocal," she said. "When I was feeding it and talking to it, it was like it was talking to me."

A few days ago, by mistake, her hand brushed the cat's head. All of a sudden, the cat started rubbing against her hand. She knew then this cat had a home.

Last Friday, with forecasters predicting bitter cold, Rosen called the Northeast Animal Shelter and asked what to do. They said to bring in the cat.

She got a cat carrier and went searching and calling. She found the cat inside the unfinished addition of a nearby farmhouse, where the owner had recently died. It was peeking out through a broken window.

With the cat in the carrier, Rosen jumped in her car and started driving to Salem. She turned up the heat as high as it would go and the cat started to meow.

At the Northeast Animal Shelter, workers did a standard intake, checking the cat's health and scanning it for a computer chip, which usually is embedded between a pet's shoulder blades. The chips have a number for the chip company, which keeps data on the owner's address and phone number. It costs around \$60 to have a chip implanted and the data recorded.

"A lot of (pets) don't have them but really should," said Laurie McCannon, director of development at the Northeast Animal Shelter. "You just never know."

The shelter called the chip company and got Woodward's phone number. That's when the screaming and crying started.

Later on Friday, when she was back home, Woodward sent an e-mail to the kind soul in Wilmington who had rescued her beloved cat from the snow and cold.

"We are a happy family," she wrote. "Our family is now complete."

Rosen read the e-mail and started to cry.

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Photos



Thanks to a computer chip, Patricia Woodward was reunited Friday in Salem with Randy, the cat she lost last summer and feared was dead. Courtesy photo