Pigeonhole Podcast 58

Introduction

[chill, lo-fi music]

CHORUS OF VOICES: Pigeonholed, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole, pigeonhole.

MC: Live from the Pacific Northwest, it's Portland Story Theater's Urban Tellers: real, true stories. May the narrative be with you.

CHERYL NARRATING: It's 2015. I've signed up for this storytelling workshop that will lead to a live performance. We learn about storytelling and practice our own original stories with the group. A handful of weeks later, we're each given an over-the-ear microphone and thrust onstage at the Alberta Rose Theater. The house is packed, about 300 people or so. I mean, who doesn't love a good story? [chill music fades]

LAWRENCE: Cheryl's story is called *You Change Me*. Please welcome the one, the only, the famous, the fabulous, the beautiful, the talented Cheryl Green!

The performance

CHERYL NARRATING: I take up my spot, front and center. I'm wearing a teal shirt and a black three-quarter sleeve cardigan. My skirt is just past the knees, pleated, very slick, white satin printed with galaxies, stars, space dust of all kind, and floating cat heads. My cosmic cat head skirt: a gift from my dear, neurodivergent cat-loving friend Sara. Next to me is jett, the ASL interpreter.

CHERYL: Let me ask y'all something. Who here has ever had that cat? You know what I'm talking about? Yeah, that cat. Brandon, wherever you are, just pretend I'm talking about dogs tonight.

[Brandon guffaws from the audience]

CHERYL NARRATING: That was Brandon guffawing from his seat in the audience.

CHERYL: I used to have that cat. You know, that cat! It's just the perfect companion for you. And my cat was named Pigeon. She was the finest cat in the universe. Cat haters loved this cat. [audience chuckles] She was calm and relaxed and easygoing in absolutely every situation. And I really wished I could learn a little bit of that from her. But in the time we were together, I didn't have any confidence that I could learn anything like that. So, although she could've been a great teacher and role model, I was not prepared to be her student.

After Pigeon died, I went out and got some replacement cats! And I wanna tell you about one of them tonight. His name is RouRou. [dramatic pause] RouRou is not. That. Cat. The problem with RouRou is that he's exactly like me. He's wound up and high-strung and anxious, and it's too loud and it's too bright and don't touch me. [exasperated] RouRou!

I tried to make it work. I really wanted this to work, so I took to every day telling him how much I loved him. "I love you, RouRou. You're such a good boy. [sounding sad] I love you. I love you." And inside, I'm just thinking, oh, why aren't you Pigeon? Or why can't you just be a little bit more like Pigeon? Can't you just change and be like Pigeon?!

Now, I'll be honest that even though I had some adopter's remorse around these cats, but [chuckles] it was mutual. They didn't really want us either, so. [audience chuckles]

Now, I grew up Jewish, but kind of the Jewish when we wanna be Jewish type of Jewish. [audience laughs] We didn't do anything meaningful or spiritual, like, I don't know, go to temple or fast on Yom Kippur. We didn't do any of that. We did Hanukkah because 8 Nights of Christmas. [audience laughs] Yeah! Including lots of pairs of socks.

And we also did Passover because it's so much fun. There's a lot of food, the family comes together and tells stories, and then you eat food and talk and you eat more food.

And my favorite part of Passover, though, is this song and this story, Dayenu.

And I'm gonna sing you—I apologize in advance—I'm going to sing you just a little bit of the chorus from Dayenu. It goes like this: [sings solo] Day, Day Dayenu, Day, Day Dayenu, Day, Day Dayenu, Dayenu Dayenu! No clapping, everybody! [resumes singing] Day, Day Dayenu, Day, Day Dayenu, Day, Day Dayenu, Dayenu Dayenu. Hey! [laughs]

CHERYL NARRATING: They actually were all singing along. There were no microphones pointed at the audience, but believe me: It sounded truly magical. I'm not religious at all anymore, but Passover was something my family did with a lot of gusto for the ceremony, ties to the past...and the food. Oy, the food!

CHERYL: All right, all y'all coming to Passover at my house. Great singers! [audience laughs] "Dayenu" translates to, "it would have been enough". It's a way of saying, thank you. I didn't ask for that. Thank you. I would not ask for any more.

And the way the story goes is that God freed the Jews from slavery under the Pharaoh, Dayenu. Who's complaining there, right? But he did more. He parted the Red Sea so that the Jews could escape! Dayenu. This would've been enough, and then he closed the Red Sea over Pharaoh's soldiers, so further protecting the Jews. Dayenu, right?! Yeah. And he kept them alive in the desert for 40 years while they wandered looking for a new home. Dayenu. Yeah. [dramatic pause]

I'd take a little wild guess that perhaps there were maybe one or two Jews in this scenario kind of like me, who were like, mm, I'd rather be sitting on a nice soft couch with a cat on my lap, maybe a bagel and lox every now and again. But they didn't ask for that. They were so grateful for what they did get. They got their lives, they got their freedom, they got 40 years of matzah, which is so flavorless and dry! [audience laughs] But it apparently will keep you alive for 40 years. Dayenu. [they laugh again]

Now, really, nobody in my family is a Dayenu kind of person. We're just not. We don't like change, we don't roll with the punches, we don't take it as it comes. In fact, if life changes on us, we're sort of... [whistles with pretend nonchalance] Maybe change won't notice we were standing here!

[audience chuckles]

A couple of years ago, when RouRou was about 4 years old, I noticed one day that he looked deathly ill. This cat clearly, to me, was dying. And my partner says, "Well, Cheryl, you know you have a flair for the melodramatic. I'm sure he's just constipated. It's fine." [audience laughs] But I could see something in him a little different from constipation. He just looked so agitated? His box wasn't comfortable. Sitting in the lid of the box wasn't comfortable. Sitting on the floor

looking at the box was not comfortable. Nothing was working for this cat. And after four days of this, I quit second-guessing myself and took him to the vet.

And they called me a little while later to tell me that RouRou had swallowed some kind of foreign object. They didn't know what it was from the X-ray, but it was lodged in his small intestine, and it was not going to move. He was in tremendous pain, and in fact, if we didn't do surgery right then, he would die.

They wanted to give me an estimate, and I said, "Don't waste my time. Don't waste RouRou's time. I consent to the surgery. I don't care what it costs. Just give me my cat back."

I hung up the phone, and this really weird, foreign thing was happening. I was crying tears and feeling emotions. I felt terror. I felt grief at the thought of losing this cat, and I thought, oh my gosh, wait, I think... I think I feel love. [sounding skeptical] I love this cat.

So we got to bring him home from the hospital the next day, and we had to keep him constrained in this big dog crate so he wouldn't lurk around the house and get the stitches caught on something, or he wouldn't jump up on the mantle and strain a muscle. And it was so awful seeing this boy locked in this crate. He is wild and mischievous and curious, and he's trapped in this crate. And what's worse, we had to put a little toddler t-shirt on him so he wouldn't lick the stitches, and they were Oregon Duck stripes!!! [audience laughs] And I'd safety-pinned the sleeves to make them real tight so he could only wriggle out of it once or twice a day.

It was awful seeing him in there, so I wanted to give him a taste of freedom. I wasn't going to reach into that crate. For anyone who's met RouRou, he is famous for his gigantic fangs, and he has talons. So I pushed the crate over to the bathroom door, opened the door so he could sorta saunter out on his own time. And then I climbed over the crate and sat on the bathroom floor with him, and waited for hell, all hell to break loose. And it didn't.

He just said, well, thank you, Mommy. Thank you so much for letting me out of the crate. Thank you. And he got in my lap, which is something he didn't do, and he rubbed his cheeks on me and [purrs] a little chirpy, happy purr. And he was so thankful.

We did this every few hours a day for 11 days. Each day he got a little stronger, and he could climb up onto the toilet. And then he could climb up onto the bathroom counter. And then he would just come right back to me. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you."

Listen, I know this cat really well. He could have scratched me till I bled. He could have bit me. He could have peed on me, pooped, hissed, ignored me. He's very good at all these things. I have his résumé. [laughter] And I expected that, and he didn't do it. He was just grateful. And the weird thing for me is that he knew I was the one putting him back in the crate. He knew I was the one feeding him a pain pill every day. He knew I was the one putting that damn Oregon Ducks shirt on him. [audience laughs] And all he said was, thank you.

Now... if you recall, RouRou and I are a lot alike. And I thought, wow, you know, if this little guy here, under these circumstances, could change so much and show this other side of himself, I wonder if maybe I actually have more capacity for change than I realized. I wanted this cat to survive. That would have been enough. Dayenu. But what I got was this beautiful relationship that kind of grew and blossomed, and I got to know him in a different way, and we got to bond a lot more. And for that, I am forever grateful.

Wrap-up

[lo-fi chill music returns]

CHERYL: Transcripts, show notes, and so much more at WhoAmIToStopIt.com. I'm Cheryl, and...

TWO VOICES: this is Pigeonhole.