

# MICHAEL N. GRAHAM

## One More Day: Our Trip from Hell

Our cross-county pandemic car tour featuring: Covid-19, an earthquake, cats off their meds and a petrified chihuahua.

Our saga begins in Michigan where my girlfriend and I are first year medical students. Life there a short while ago was fairly mundane and predictable with lots of classes, no time for socializing, constant exhaustion as never enough sleep with our schedules and all the studying, a quiet small apartment, and our animals: a chihuahua named Arty and two neurotic cats Dolores and Augusta.

For some background to our little story, Dolores is on meds—Paxil—to calm her down. If we miss a dose, she often becomes completely psychotic and can terrorize the other cat no end, the dog, any visitors and both of us. Some days when she is really is on a bender, our apartment will be strewn with clumps of materials that once belonged to things like furniture, laptops or even bicycles. Arty is left trembling under the couch for hours on end totally bug-eyed hoping that Dolores would somehow miss seeing him. Augusta scampers for the highest point in the apartment and back into a place to watch Dolores on her rampage. Since we have so many classes to attend, many days when we leave Arty at the door, he seems to be begging and pleading “please for God’s sake don’t leave me alone with “that cat.”

That was our rather normal world and then Covid-19 struck.

Even with our rather rudimentary knowledge of healthcare in general given we had completed only six months of study, we laser like understood the implications of this virus. Regardless of the politics of the back and forth that was going on between our Governor and the White House, we knew that there was about to be a shit storm engulfing the country. Those of us in medicine knew it could also get bad here after seeing all that was going on in China and Europe. So, we quickly arrived at the conclusion it was possible the US would shortly be on the brink of a lock-down. After classes went all online, our thinking was, “let’s see, we could be freezing here in our small apartment or we could get the hell out of Dodge and drive back to home to Sonoma, Ca. At least we were there with family, lots of wine and a mother who had formal training in the culinary arts.”

We quickly began jamming the car for our cross-country jaunt from Michigan to Sonoma. Checklist: clothes: packed; toiletries: packed; sandwiches, candy and Red Bull: packed; kitty litter: packed—can't ask the girls to hold it for 3 days; leash for Arty: packed; cat and dog food cans with opener: packed; water bowls: packed; meds for Dolores: God yes, packed; cat carrying cases: packed. So, we were ready to go. All we had to do is round up the animals and be off and we set off just as the shelter-in-place orders started to be issued around the country.

Cross country road trips can be a fun adventure if the car has good music, plenty of unhealthy nourishment to snack on and some people who take a delight in seeing the new sites around them. Dog's enjoy riding in cars usually...head out the window, ears blown back, the excitement of leaning out the window with wind in your face. In contrast, cats do not fall into any of categories and do not enjoy seeing America from a car. In fact, they hate traveling in cars as the only place they ever go in a car is to the vet. Fun is not the optimal word.

That said, for long periods of time we would hear guttural sounds coming from Dolores and Augusta making sure that we fully understood the extent of their displeasure with the circumstances they were in and that the Paxil for one was wearing off. The cat carriers rattled, bellowing would come forth and Arty would try to cram his small body under my girlfriend's seat trying escape from the horrific experience and noise. Loud music did not help...podcasts did not help.

We would make periodic gas and pee stops for all of us. My girlfriend would dash to the bathroom as I took Lucy for a quick stroll to relieve herself. She would come back; hold Arty and I would take one of the girls out of their carrier so they could get into the kitty litter. The one thing about cats is they don't relieve themselves on cue...it is on their time and when they are good and ready. So, often, we would have to stand outside for long periods of time peering into the car to see if Dolores or Augusta would get it into their mind to relieve themselves. "Stop sniffing the damn kitty litter and just go." I know Arty was sitting there thinking "WTF, let's get going and leave the cats."

Despite all the bathroom breaks and stops for feeding, post stop hand sanitizing, glove and sometime facemask removal, things seemed to progress without too much pain. We were determined to make our 36-hour journey in 3 days to limit our exposure and were on a pace to have just two overnights in motels. We were in parts of the country that had little impacts from Covid-19 as we were outrunning the virus, the animals seemed to be adjusting and Dolores was being a model citizen on her dose of Paxil and sometimes Dramamine for an extra kick. And thank God, the guttural bellowing had diminished.

The first day we made it to Nebraska and found a small motel that allowed pets and bedded up for the night thinking the trip was not as bad as we had thought. We let the cats out of their carrying cases to roam around our deluxe accommodations and Arty scooted under the bed to once again protect herself from the prowling Dolores. Dinner of stored provisions for everyone's safety, animals fed, litter box cleaned and ready for another fun day's drive.

The next day we were on the road early making our way west while telling our furry companions that this adventure would soon be over, and they should think of themselves in the pioneer spirit. By the time we got to Salt Lake City, we had driven enough and were exhausted and figured we could make Sonoma the next day, so we would stop—the animals nodded in agreement.

This time we decided to splurge a bit and got into a hotel with a nice big room and a comfy bed. Some good food provisions from our cross-country moveable feast allowed us to have a picnic in the room. All was good with the world. What a dream, we were surrounded by beautiful mountains and scenery and went to bed exhausted.

All was good, so what could possibly go wrong? I will tell you.

Wednesday morning came with a lurch and the day greeted us with our bed moving in various directions, shaking violently. At exactly 7:09 AM Salt Lake City and our building started to experience an earthquake.

Having never experienced one before, this was our first and sent us into a complete panic. Things began falling around us, and to add to the joy of the moment, all the motels alarms and sprinklers came on in unison. We quickly grabbed Arty, but had no time to grab the cats who in complete panic fled to different crevices in the room, their fur standing straight up and in no mood to hear the logic behind getting the hell out of the building.

In our pajamas and with only one of our animal menageries and no possessions, we ran to the parking lot. People were coming out of their rooms in varying state of dress with panic looks understandably in their eyes as the tremor kept on.

My girlfriend only had Arty under her arm and her purse, and I insisted that she immediately get into our car. Fortunately, she had another set of car keys in her purse as mine were still in the room in the table. That problem solved, I now turned my full attention to two other important issues: finding the two cats who I assumed were out of their minds in fear and getting out of our pajamas and collecting our possessions still in the room.

Our little band of earthquake hotel guest survivors, still not fully comprehending the extent of what just happened, were milling around the parking lot when the hotel manager and some security people came out to make an announcement. “Ladies and Gentlemen, can I please have your attention,” the manager bellowed in a rather officious voice. “we have just experienced an earthquake of 5.7 on the Richter scale, the largest one we have had in the valley in the last 30 years.”

“Grand” my girlfriend whispered, “so thrilled we were here to experience this fun, how lucky can we be, perhaps next a cruise.” “And,” the manager went on gaining volume, “there might be some aftershocks and so we must take all precautions. Therefore, we first

must have the hotel inspected for structural damage and we expect that should take no more than 5 hours when it will be possible for those of you to go back to your room to collect your possessions. You need to remain outside.”

We both looked at each other in stunned disbelief and immediately thought, “are you shitting me, Dolores and Augusta alone and on a rampage for 5 hours and off meds.” The woman next to us in her short nighty and her husband in his boxer shorts, T-shirt and flip flops were not too thrilled with the news and the thought that was what they were going to look like for 5 hours in 40-degree temperatures.

The management was simply not going to let us in.

But with my famous gift for persuasion and adding some lines from my lengthy medical background about the need to get to California on a mercy mission—not saying it was for our cats, one attendant reluctantly agreed to let me in as long as he could follow me in the building. Big mistake on his part...little did he know.

I grabbed one cat carrier thinking this will be trip one after I found the girls and I would get the possessions on the return. The good news was that the girls were still in the room also trying to comprehend what the hell had happened as this too was their first earthquake. I grabbed the carrier, somehow wrangled both cats into it at the expense of a great deal of skin on my arm and started to run down the hall towards the car with the attendant in hot pursuit. Both cats were hissing at each other in dramatic fashion and the good news was Dolores had not had her meds yet, so she was even in full hyperdrive hissing mode. The other bit of good news were the fire alarms were in full screeching which added immensely to the cat’s calm demeanor at that point.

Just as I was about to make it to the stairs, the handle of the carrier broke, the carrier crashed to the floor and sprung open. Out popped Dolores and Augusta now wide eyed, ears flat back, fur standing up on their backs and wired from their close encounter with each other. Freedom. And with that both cats bolted down the corridor in different directions screeching past me and the befuddled attendant.

The great news for the cats was the fact that all the room doors were 100% open to ensure two things: proper evacuation of the occupants and to make sure that they had their choice of locations to hide. The attendant with me was looking if he had wished he had chosen another profession. Standing there dumbstruck and soaking wet as some of the sprinklers were still on, he was wondering what part of the training manual had the part about earthquakes and guests rampaging other guest’s rooms looking for their psycho cats. Did he miss that section?

I raced back into our room and grabbed two large plastic grocery bags that we had placed food in and in full panic started my hunt for our wayward cats. The tremor had stopped, no bricks had fallen on my or our cat’s heads, so now it was just detective work on my part as to where they might be hiding.

With my amazing tracking skills suddenly kicking in (more blind luck), I was quickly able to find Dolores on someone's desk sniffing their possessions—wham, quickly he went into the shopping bag. With Dolores in hand, now the search began for Augusta. The earthquake after tremors had stopped, but my heart tremors had not, as I ran from room to room with a dancing cat bag emitting yet unrecorded types of guttural noises. I found her under someone's bathroom sink curiously looking at some woman's pink furry slippers. I grabbed her, much to her delight, and ran downstairs for the car with her tucked under my arm. My attendant friend had given up figuring he would rather save his life should any other disaster beyond the two cats stuck.

I got to the parking lot with the two cats and loaded all animals into the car figuring we could get our stuff and make a swift exit the hell out of Salt Lake City. We had some sweats in the car that we put on but now we had three very pissed off animals in the car with no food, no kitty litter, only one carrying case as the other lay broken in the hall and importantly, no meds. Now what?

We were able to get to a store for some food for the animals and only 4 hours later, we were able to go back to the room and collect our things as well as the broken cat carrier in the hall. Dolores received her dose of Paxil and all cats went back into their carriers and once again we were on the road leaving Salt Lake City and the earthquake as fast as we could. We have vowed not to return until there are no more fault lines under the city.

We made it home to Sonoma and placed ourselves in quarantine for two weeks (thanks to the lack of social distancing in at the Salt Lake motel which is always hard to do in an earthquake with your parking lot neighbors.) We have prepared for the long stretch of a shelter-in-place with the wine country. All the animals have begun to adapt to their new surroundings, we are settling in and the great part is my mother, the chef, is delivering delicious meals to our doorstep that we pick up as she steps away. I have stopped sharing the Paxil with Dolores for our collective nerves and am happy to announce that cruises and cities with earthquakes are now off any itinerary planning. Medical school will be revived sometime soon.