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Strange and Wonderful

At the age of three, I learned what it felt like to yearn. There was nothing in the world I wanted more than a cat. I was consumed with the idea. It utterly possessed me. A cat of my own that didn't belong to anyone but me. I had to share a room with my brother, but a cat would be mine alone.

Everyone knew I loved cats. My room was full of cat stuffed animals, cat themed toys, and books about cats. Kind family members sent me greeting cards on special occasions that usually featured illustrations of cats. How I loved staring at these pictures, cats in gingham dresses with white pinafores holding birthday presents, or fluffy kittens curled up in front of a fire beside a Christmas tree.

Family stories about me are either about my stubborn nature or desire for a cat. It would seem I had no other characteristics as a young child. I was either belligerently defying my parents or scheming to acquire a feline. An oft-repeated anecdote is the story of a trip to the San Francisco Zoo. This was back in the seventies before it dawned on anyone that animals in captivity would do better in enclosures that echoed their natural habitats. The cat house was nothing more than a cement building with rows of barred cells containing the big cats. The story goes that the male lion roared, his tortured lament assaulting the eardrums of the visitors gathered to view the prisoners. My brother hid behind our mother at the sound, but my dad remembers that I, as a toddler strapped into a stroller, fearlessly held out my tiny hand to the beast and said: "here kitty, kitty."

This episode is undoubtedly exaggerated, as most family fables are. Still, the likelihood of my brother having cowered behind mama struck a note of veracity and made the rest of the tale more believable. Merlin was my first cat. I don’t remember much about the details of our first meeting. Something about my parents having a surprise for me, and then a cat was in my arms. Nothing else mattered after that. It wasn’t as if something extra had been added to my life, but an empty place had been filled. ‘There you are’, my void called out to him, and he softly padded into the hole and made himself comfortable.

Before his arrival, my universe was limited to the houses on my street separated into two spheres; backyard and neighborhood. The fence in the back was a low, white picket fence that made it easy to look into the yards of the people surrounding us. To the right was Bea. She was an old lady in my view, but the number of years she lived past my childhood made it likely that she was no older than late thirties or early forties at the time. Property laws were beyond my brother, Mikey, and I and we never understood why she got upset when we picked flowers that poked through the fence. We wouldn’t have dreamed of reaching through to pick her flowers, but once they made it through the fence onto our side, didn’t that make them ours?

Next to her were the Collies. Their house was on the corner, and it was a marvel to me that they had what appeared to be a whole extra yard on the side — a free bonus in addition to the same backyards we all had. Slender grapevines curled tightly around the wires of the chain-link fence bordering a small garden. Inside the house, where we were frequent visitors, and I learned about indulgence. Mr. Collie would sit in the den in his armchair smoking a pipe If we were lucky, we would be there when the cuckoo clock's bird would come out from behind its arched door to announce the time. If we asked, he would perform the mystical ritual of pulling on chains with acorn-shaped weights at the end that magically kept the clock running.

Mrs. Collie had a round case holding stacks of poker chips and decks of cards.

“Would you like to play a game of cards?” she would ask.

Eagerly, we would agree.

“How about 52 card pickup?”

At our enthusiastic nods, she would arch a deck of cards backward in her hand then flip them in a spray all over the floor.

“Now, pick them up,” she’d laugh.

The house to the left had a revolving door of renters, sometimes with children, sometimes not, but no one who stuck around long enough to impress themselves on my memory. Next to them were the Dunbars. From them, I learned about white trash.

Mr. Dunbar was a quiet man who wore grungy coveralls and was seldom around. His wife, Betty, had a mouth full of crooked teeth, wore faded clothes, the waistline of her jeans sagging to reveal underwear with holes perforating the top edge. On sunny days, she wore a wide brimmed hat assembled of panels cut from sides of beer cans, perforated, and crocheted together with bright yellow yarn. The first time I ate Spam was in her kitchen. Here I witnessed her place a mixing bowl on her youngest son’s head and cut his hair around the edge of it. Behind the matching recliners in the living room was a row of seven ceramic toads, descending in size. They scared me.

“Go ahead and touch it,” Betty would invite as I stared in trepidation at the biggest, a monster eight inches wide and five inches tall.

After much debate, and finally working up my nerve, I’d poke a tentative finger. Betty would make a loud, buzzing sound the second my finger touched the cold, bumpy, ceramic skin. My squeal of surprise made her laugh every time.

Their oldest son was Curtis. He wore jeans and tight t-shirts and was always under a car jacked up in the driveway or on the lawn. A five by seven of his senior picture, he in a tux, with his shoulder-length, greasy, black hair curling around his acne pocked face, was tucked into the corner of a picture of a back-lit mountain stream with a clock on one side and a Coors Beer emblem on the other. Dawn was his younger sister. A high school girl who wore powder blue eye shadow and feathered her hair. She was sweet and let me go in her room every once in a while. I was in awe of the ceramic pickle bank she had painted in sixth grade, and I looked forward to going to school and one day making one of my own. Dean was the youngest and my brother’s best friend until the two went to kindergarten, and Mike learned about the social pecking order which he quickly rose to the top of, while Dean stayed at the bottom.

Roscoe, their ferocious, barking junkyard dog, was the scourge of my childhood. We seldom played in Dean's yard, preferring our neater, carefully mowed one, but whenever we roamed, if we got too close, Roscoe would burst out from beneath a pile of building materials, car parts, or other mysterious collections in the Dunbar’s yard, snarling, snapping and terrifying us. He had misaligned, crooked eyes that looked in two directions at once. When I asked why his eyes looked like that, Dean told me that once, his eyes popped out of his head. When Mr. Dunbar put them back in, he hadn’t made sure they wee straight. I promised myself that if my eyes ever fell out, I would make sure whoever put them back in for me made sure they were straight. I didn’t want to look like Roscoe.

The last house on the street belonged to a woman who had shelves built into her big front room window. On these shelves were glass vases, dishes, and figurines, including a brown Mrs. Buttersworth syrup bottle. A square of sidewalk was missing near her house in which a patch of clover grew. I would pick the small pink-tinged white flowers and admire her collection, respecting how she chose to see an everyday kitchen product as decoration.

Merlin redefined the parameters of the neighborhood. I now had to think of it in context of his place in it. It was a busy, high-speed road in front of the house. At night, in bed, I remember the headlights hitting my bedroom window and making squares from the window circle the upper edges of the wall through the thin curtain. I worried about the unfamiliar places he roamed. I worried about him getting hit by a car. I worried about the nails the neighbor behind us nailed upward though the crossbar of our shared fence, to keep cats out of his yard. But he also made us closer. Bea would ask me about my cat, Dean complained that Merlin would tease Roscoe, walking just beyond the range of his chain, and it was Mr. Collie I rant to for help when Merlin got stuck under my doll’s crib.

"Tell him to bring his tools," my mom had said frantically as she tried to free him. He came out of that mishap with a broken leg and had to wear an awkward, white cast that kept him in the house and made it necessary for my mom to wipe his behind after using the cat box.

I liked having him in the house. It was safer. I would lie on my back on the thick, orange shag carpet and pet him, burying my face in his long black fur that always smelled slightly of dust. A close second to my obsession with a cat was that for high heels. When I finally acquired the second, a pair of faux alligator skin, square-heeled shoes, I combined my two passions. On came the oversize frilly dresses, empty handbags, and floppy brimmed hat, and Merlin took his rightful place, wrapped around my neck like a fur stole.

"Jenni, you are a strange and wonderful child," a close friend of the family used to tell me when she saw me playing dress-up. I failed what to see was strange about wearing a cat as part of my ensemble.

Merlin was a good sport. Or mentally challenged. It's a rare cat who has the patience for the constant manhandling her endured. I remember dressing him in my doll’s clothes, and still have a photo of him in a rare moment of having had enough of my crap, escaped onto a high fence wearing a pink doll’s dress. Everyone has their limits.

Around this time, my mom had reached a limit of her own. One day, all of my father’s things were thrown out on the lawn. He’d been sleeping with the babysitter. Marilee was her name, and my mother delighted in telling us what a bitch she was and how awful my dad was for his actions. This was before amicable divorces for the sake of the children were the trend. I liked Marilee. She’d been nice to us, and she loved cats too, but now I had to agree with my mother that she was awful and I hated her. I wracked my brain to remember 'bad' thing's she'd done to us and shamelessly embellished these minor offenses, learning how delicious trash-talking someone to an eager audience could be.

We’d moved to a bigger, nicer house in a small community that was a dream for children. Most other houses on the street had kids, and we were within biking distance of a convenience store for a constant supply of candy. With my dad gone, my mom had a friend and her daughter move in, starting what would become a steady stream of roommates in ever-changing houses. That didn't last long and my mom decided to sell the house. The grief my brother and I felt about leaving our friends, school, and neighborhood was bought off with a trip to Disneyland, and we moved in with my Nana. She wasn't my real grandmother, just a longtime family friend. I was consoled through this upheaval by having Merlin at my side.

Nana had a house in the country with a two-bedroom guest cottage. It was never clear to me why the final shuffling of people resulted in my brother and me in her house and my mom alone in the cottage. We were now being raised by someone else, while my mom enjoyed the single life, close, but not tied down by her children.

Into this mix came two new kittens, One gray, one black.. I wanted the black one, but so did my brother, saying I was unfair because I already had Merlin. We adored these new little darlings and thought hard about what to name them.

“How about Black Bart and Grayball?” Nana suggested. We’d never heard of such stupid names in our lives, but that didn’t stop her from continuing to call them that.

“Mom, we hate those names,” we’d appealed to our absentee parent on a rare moment of getting her alone.

"Just let her have her way," my mom had tried to smooth it over. It was then that I learned about what it means to be beholden. Nana owned the house, we were there at her mercy, and neither we, nor my mom, had any power to oppose her.

Mike had never had an easy time at Nana's. I felt sorry for him because he had to sleep in the cold and scary back bedroom, which was just a few yards from the creek that ran through the backyard at the bottom of a six-foot retaining wall. I was tucked in cozily with my Nana, physically and emotionally. She was a smart cookie and saw my brother for the selfish, spoiled child he was. But she and I got along fine. She would take me with her on town days with Venita, her best friend, who lived next door. I loved going out with these two old ladies who called each other 'Kid,' bickered constantly, and would treat me lunch in the drug store's diner. They would drink Sanka coffee as we ate toasted sandwiches with pickles speared through the bread with frilled top toothpicks. If the waitress didn't come soon enough with a doggie bag for leftovers, Nana would wrap the oval plates in napkins and stick them in her purse. A cupboard in her kitchen had a whole stack of these pilfered plates.

It was then I learned that the parameters of stealing were fluid. Plates that fit in a purse were fair game, so were ‘all you can eat’ food items. The rare times we went out to dinner, we didn’t leave J.J North’s Grand Buffet without Nana’s purse full of fried chicken tucked into plastic bags she brought just for that purpose. At times like this, she and my brother got along well. Nana was a lot of fun, especially when she and Venita got to drinking, and the arguing got more colorful. I've known how to make a gin and tonic since I was seven years old. Mike and I would play bartender and sit back and watch the two sots go at each other, arguing about everything from their ex-husbands to the names of crackers, my brother once digging through the garbage to produce the box of the crackers in contention.

We never knew what happened to Black Bart. He just disappeared. He may have fallen into the creek, gotten hit by a car, or eaten by a wild animal. We were skeptical of my mom’s theory that someone took him home because he was so cute. I was sad, but he'd never been my cat. When Merlin was diagnosed with leukemia, I was very sad but didn't believe he would actually die, just that he was sick. He was outside all of the time now because Nana didn't think cats belonged in the house. She didn’t think kids did either, so we still spent a lot of time together. He loved to stretch out on the warm squares of cement on the path in the garden. I would spread my Barbies around him and incorporate him into my play. Sometimes combing doll hair with the little pink plastic brush, sometimes brushing his fur.

One night he didn't come home. My mom went out looking for him and found him on the side of the road. Not hit by a car, just sick and likely looking for a place to die. We brought him home and got him into his bed in the shed, but he died a few days later.

It was then I learned about grief. I was devastated. Inconsolable. I couldn’t accept that it was true. How could my best friend be gone? I was in denial. I tried making deals with God, I unkindly wished it had been the subordinate Grayball who died, and not Merlin. I couldn't stop crying, couldn't get out of bed. I remember lying there in the dark, listening to my mom make one phone call after another, apparently needing to tell every single person she knew about the calamity. I got to the point of memorizing her lament that got better and more dramatically embellished with each telling.

"I've got some bad news," she'd start in a quavering voice. "Merlin died!" she'd wail, and then break down into a torrent of tears. Through her sobs, she'd tell the tale of how he'd disappeared and her heroic rescue of him, ending with a heartfelt rendering of his last moments, then detailing how sad I was. After extracting as much sympathy as possible, she'd hang up the phone, and a few seconds later, I'd hear the rotary dial turning again.

"I've got some bad news. Merlin died!" I don't know how many times she repeated this pathetic bid for sympathy, but I remember being confused about why she was crying, it had been my cat, and why wasn’t she helping me through my sadness instead of focusing on how it affected her?

The things I chose not to learn from my mother’s role in this episode were how to always make everything about yourself, how to exploit another person’s misery, or how to extract as much drama from any situation as possible.

The one who stayed beside me, curled up on my bed as I cried, was the unfortunately named Grayball, unaware of my unkind thoughts toward her. She wasn’t Merlin, but she was a warm, furry body, faithfully there with me. I loved her too, but a first love can never be replaced.

Life is full of lessons that run the spectrum from amazing to awful. Some are taught by our pets, and some we are lucky to have pets by our sides to help us through. I'm grateful for every cat I've had. My companions in this sometimes strange, sometimes wonderful journey of life.