

IN MEMORIAM

I once had a cat, or should I say, it once had me. I mean, does anyone ever really own a feral cat? Anyway, one day I opened the back door and there he was. Now my wife is not one to let a stray cat go unfed, and this cat was not one to give up a meal ticket, so thus began a long relationship.

He was a beautiful white cat, on the small side but all muscle. His ears were in tatters and his face had more scars than a Zulu warrior. As to his breed, I would say that he was a West Virginia Manx as he had no trace of a tail, though I can't say if it was genetic or by accident. One thing for sure. He was a genuine fighting, hissing, pissing alley cat.

Don't get me wrong. He was very friendly, loved to greet us, and would rub up against our legs in a heartbeat. For obvious reasons, feral cats do not gain immediate admittance to our house, so we put a bowl outside and fed him when we saw him, which became more regular as time passed. After a few months he had trained us to the point that we fed him breakfast and supper. Before leaving he would greet me at the back door first thing in the morning, and he was sure to be waiting for me at the garage door when I returned from work. Such a friendly greeting, replete with meows and a few passing rubs against my legs. I would rub my hand down his back from neck to tail, which he seemed to like just fine. As the months passed he would almost always walk me from the door to the car in the morning and from the garage to the door in the evening.

On my days off, if the weather was fine, I would drink my coffee outside in the early morning, and he was sure to keep me company. One morning in particular he really begged for attention and I obliged and ran my hand down his back and he got closer and purred and then out of the blue, sunk his teeth into my hand and jumped up and kicked his hind legs in the air which made his tail-less butt go way high in the air, and he scampered off to a corner of the garden and began to nonchalantly lick his paws.

Well, I went inside and washed my wound and then dressed it because we all know how cat bites can abscess and God only knew what diseases this cat had, but it never did swell up too much so I didn't worry about it. I told my wife, but she pooh-poohed me and told me that I must have rubbed the sweet cat the wrong way, and a few weeks later she suffered a repeat. Tender heart that she is, she was sure that she too must have rubbed the cat the wrong way, but was quickly set right. Then we found out that some neighbors had suffered the same fate. So we ended up feeding the cat and he continued his affectionate greetings, but an alley cat is an alley cat and we had had quite enough of his compulsive biting.

On my days off we would both wait outside for my wife to get off work, and at the same time that I saw her car cresting the top of the hill, he would hear her and he would rush to the garage door to greet her and she would open the door and he would mew and rub his body against her legs and her coos of endearment served as pets.

Alley cats are always fighting, and it would piss me off if another cat came into my yard to fight and I would rush out and grab a stick or stone or brick or whatever was handy and I would find the combatants hunched down, hissing, spitting, yowling, and coiled like springs. The intruder would stay frozen, eying both of us, unsure of what to do until I showed what I was going to do, and he would then bolt with the tail-less wonder hot on his tail, and if the intruder was lucky it would make it out of the yard before it got wacked, and the tail-less wonder would look at me and then the fence as if to say, "And don't come back."

For all intents and purposes he was our cat, so we made it a little house out of a large planter laid on its side and resting in an armchair, lined inside with pillows and insulated on the outside. For the winter we bought him a heating pad that is normally used for reptiles. He came and went as he pleased, with free room and board.

Before I knew it ten years had passed. We were both getting older, him faster than me, but that's as it should be. Sometimes he would not be at the door. Damned foolishness worrying about a feral cat that bit the hand that fed it, but I did. And one night he took ill, so ill that we made preparations to take him to the vet. He died during the night.

I knew he was dead and yet I was still surprised when I opened the door and he was not there. This continues to this day, many months later. When I leave or return home I anticipate as if what awaited on the other side of the door was an echo of a half life, a trace element, an essence.

Well, you tail-less old thing, wherever or whatever you may be, I kinda got used to having you around.

2-27-13