

MY FINE FERAL FRIENDS

Dogs are from Mars. Cats are from . . . Well, I don't know where they come from. All I know is that they find Nancy and I. They positively rain on us. We found our first batch in the shoots of a lilac bush on a cool, rainy spring day. Six of them. The mother, a juvenile, and six new born kittens.

I have written about this before, so I will not re-tell the tale of our permanent guests. But do let me tell you about Mother Cat, her four kittens, and Copper, the juvenile, plus all of the others.

How Mother Cat came to lay her litter in our lilac bush I cannot say, for she did not tell us. Nor did she tell us who Copper was, though he could have come from a prior litter. We called her Mother Cat because she seemed to be the archetype of all mothers. Though her circumstances were meager and cruel, she cared for her charges as best she could, never straying far and always nurturing them. From the moment that we took her in the garden was her domain, and she neither needed nor wanted another.

Mother Cat was a genuine American Calico. Sometimes a Calico's markings will cut across the face in an awkward manner, deforming the mouth, menacing the eyes, or ridiculing the nose. Not Mother Cat. She was perfectly beautiful, painted by an artist using perfect balance and exquisite colors. Her manner was dignified, reserved, yet affectionate.

Copper, whoever he was, was a black and white saddle shoe of a cat, not unlike my grandmother's Sputnik.

And then there were the four kittens. I'm so glad that they were not our human children because we certainly had our favorites. Number one in our hearts was Nuit, a jet black sable furred beauty that was as gentle and affectionate as a cat could be. Sandy was tan and white with fur as long, soft and luxurious as any Persian. There was also another black cat, and as to the fourth, well, I just don't recall. Unlike dogs with their slavish devotion, cats can take you or leave you. Apparently the two kittens whose names we no longer remember left us.

I'd always been allergic to cats so I couldn't get too close to them, but they were a joy to behold. When we brought them their supper served on a large platter, it was a study in frenetic motion as they wove in and out of our legs, all the while meowing, and on occasion launching themselves into the air in an attempt to land on the platter for first dibs. All but Mother Cat. She would hang back and as her charges ate she would come to us to be petted and would not eat until they had eaten their fill.

The kittens got bigger, as they do, and a funny thing happened. More cats began to drop into our garden. Whether or not the cats marked the property like the hobos of old used to I haven't a clue, but at one time we took care of a dozen ferals. We built them their own barracks with shelves on the walls that served as bunks. This is when things really got crazy. I mean, cats are like people, with all of their peculiarities, quirks, and territorial ambitions. The only one who stayed regally aloof was Mother Cat.

One of the crazy dozen was a medium sized yet heavily muscled short haired black cat we called Zanzibar. This cat was feral with a capital F. Yet he was one of our most affectionate cats. He loved to be petted and would drool like an old bulldog, but he would reach the point of ecstasy and would nibble with his sharp teeth, and if you weren't attentive, he could bite. Not that he meant to, he just couldn't help it. Anyway, Nancy was petting him when she was six months pregnant and got herself bit. She yelped, and Zanzibar got a look of anguish on his face, but it was a deep puncture wound so we went to the hospital. But because Nancy was pregnant they did not want to treat her and endanger the baby. So Nancy soaked her hand in hot salt water for two days until the swelling went down. Did we stop petting Zanzi? Hell no. He was just an excitable boy who meant no harm.

With this profusion of cats we certainly didn't want to add any of our own, so all of the female cats were taken to Doc Myers to be spayed. We didn't do the males. We figured that it was the neighbors job to look after their own female cats.

Doc Myers lived in an old house, and his surgery was in what had once been the stable. What with the spaying, diseases, and injuries we were there about once a week. These were the days before vets figured out that they could charge as much for Fido as a doctor could for a human. It was \$10.00 for a visit, but since we cared for ferals in a responsible way, he charged us half price. And you now, not a single one of our cats ever died under his care.

The first to be spayed was Mother Cat. Being feral she did not want to be taken anywhere, least of all to the vets. But take her we did and we were doing alright until Doc Myers put her on the examination table whereupon she bolted and leapt onto a shelf loaded with glass bottles. Being Mother Cat, she broke nothing and I was able to grab her.

One of Mother Cat's kittens, the jet black one named Nuit, one of our favorites, was the first to break our hearts. He would always come running, loved to be picked up, and was about as loving as a cat can be. One day he went missing. For any cat, much less a feral, to not come home is awful. You never know what happened. Was he hit by a car, caught by evil people, lying gravely wounded and suffering from a vicious fight? We just didn't know. We spent a week searching and waiting. Nothing. That night as I did laundry in the basement I looked out of the window and there was Nuit on the sill, looking in at me. Elated, I rushed outside to get him, but he was not there. Now the door was no more than four feet from the window, and Nuit was not one to play games. In a flash of intuition I knew that Nuit was no more, at least in our dimension.

Our next door neighbors had a malevolent, vicious, nasty cat that was twice the size of any of ours. This creature used to come into our yard to fight with our cats. Now ferals do a lot of fighting, but this creature injured our cats so badly that we had to take them to Doc Myers for treatment. There is something about the puncture wounds left by cats' teeth that causes them to

abscess and become seriously infected. Not only have I seen hideous wounds in cats, but I saw firsthand what can happen to a human.

I have a casual acquaintance who has a cat that he dotes on. In fact, if he was given a choice between his cat or his wife, she would be gone, but we won't go there. Anyway, somehow his cat got caught in one of those plastic grocery bags and panicked and was running around the house banging into walls and falling down stairs. My friend caught the cat in the bag but was bitten while extricating him. I saw my friend a month after the fact and his hand was still hideously swollen to twice its normal size.

So I took it quite personally when I saw that damned cat in our yard tormenting our cats. Mess with our cats, will you. I would chase it out of the yard, throwing rocks, bricks, sticks, anything that I could lay my hands on at it. I never did hit the rotten bastard, but it was not for lack of trying. Then I noticed it. Every morning when I went to my car, on the driver's side only, was a crusty, crystalline ooze that was quite disgusting. That ornery cat was pissing on my side of the windshield. And to let me know who the perpetrator was, he would leave his calling card. A tuft of his fur on the windshield wiper. I would look around and sure enough, he would be there, just out of harms way, staring at me, and as we made eye contact he would slowly turn around and sashay away as if to say, "Throw shit at me, will you."

And then there was Marmoset. Dear, sweet, gentle Marmoset. We called him Marm. When we found him he was a teeny little thing knocking on the pearly gates. We took him to Doc Myers immediately. Doc took one look at

Marm, shook his head, and put him on his examination table. Just about gone, he said, gave him a shot and just about did him in, but he coaxed him back to the living. Doc Myers told us that Marm probably wouldn't make it because he was so weak, small, and motherless, but he gave us a powder that he called orphan food that we were to mix with water and feed the little fellow as often as he would take it.

Well, we got Marm home and Nancy mixed some of the orphan food and got a little in him and pretty much didn't put that cat down for a week. The first night Marm slept between Nancy's breasts. That is also, by the way, a great cure for tension headaches, but I digress. In a week Marm was climbing up the drapes, and a month later he was with all of the other cats. And you know, they liked him just fine.

We had never had a cat like Marm. He was just plain homely in a funny way. He was long and thin and his legs were way out of proportion to his body, and his tail looked prehensile, and when you picked him up he would go limp and stretch like a slinky toy. When he mewed he sounded like a rusty gate being opened, but he more than made up for it with his endearing ways. This cat truly loved us if cats can be said to do so. We could wear him like the old ladies used to wear their fox furs, his front legs and head draped over one shoulder, his rear legs and tail dangling over the other, and his body wrapped around the back of our necks. One day we found him dead in the street in front of our house. We didn't fret or worry about him, didn't agonize about what had happened or

where he was. We knew the awful, painful truth, and we buried him in the flower garden.

Dear God, why Marm? But that's a useless question to ask.

Did you know that cats can be crazy just like people? Let me tell you about Mitzi. When you have ferals there is always something going on. I mean, who knows what goes on in their universe. One day there was such a commotion in the yard that we just had to investigate. The cause of the ruckus was a smallish grey and white cat that was attempting to eat out of the food bowl that we put out for the cats. Mother Cat and all of the rest had gathered around Mitzi to check her out and the closer they got, the more berserk Mitzi went, and the cats knew that Mitzi wasn't quite right and didn't chase her off. Mitzi wanted to eat but was so worked up that all she could do was yowl and hiss and spit. We had a small isolation cage where we would put the new arrivals until they acclimated to the other cats, so we opened it, put some food and water in, and prepared to do the tricky maneuver. By then we had worked out a routine. After all, aside from illness and wounds, we also took all of the females to Doc Myers. So I put on a heavy jacket and thick gloves and grabbed her and threw her into the cage. She quieted right down and began to eat, happy as could be.

The next morning I opened the basement door, opened the cage, and Mitzi bolted out and shot through the door, hopefully never to return. Feral is one thing, crazy is another. That afternoon there was the same commotion in the back yard. She had returned. I opened the cage, put in food and water, put

on my jacket and gloves and prepared for a repeat. But when I opened the back door Mitzi shot past me and ran into her cage and didn't calm down until I shut it. Again, she was as happy as could be. We did this, without variation, for as long as we had her, which was for a couple of years.

Did I mention that Mitzi was crazy? That fool cat could climb trees but couldn't get down. The first time she went missing she was gone for a week. From inside the house we could hear a pathetic meowing but when we would go outside, absolute silence. When we finally pinpointed Mitzi's location she was in a neighbor's tree barely 100 feet away. Do you know how I got that fool cat down? I got my coat, gloves, and a five foot step ladder and plucked her out of the tree like an apple. She was six feet off the ground. I've seen cats jump from second story windows, 20 feet off the ground. Like I said, Mitzi was the craziest feral I've ever seen, crazier than most people, even.

And she kept doing it. Another time that she went missing she was gone for ten days before we located her. By this time she would mew when she saw us, not when she didn't. We found her a block away from home at 10:00 p.m. in the judge's tree. We did not want to be fooling around in the judge's yard at night. Might get shot or something. So I called him. He was peeved at the late call and incredulous that it was about a cat in a tree. It will come down on its own, he said. Not this cat, Your Honor, sez I. You see enough stupid behavior in your courtroom every day. Do you think recidivism is limited to humans?

So I suited up, got my trusty five foot ladder, and plucked my furry little apple out of the judge's tree. Eventually we were not able to find her. I can not

help but feel that somewhere, about eight feet off the ground in a nearby tree, is the skeleton of a very troubled cat.

Ferals have the lifespan of your average NFL running back. Mother Cat was different. Perhaps she had already used up most of her nine lives, I don't know, but we had her for fifteen years, long after her four kittens were gone, and also Copper, and Marm, and Mitzi, and Zanzi, and all of the others. She had no interest in straying and stayed mostly in the yard. If we sat outside she would jump onto our lap, curl up, and take a cat nap. If we worked in the garden she was never far off lazing in the sun. As she got old and feeble she spent most of the time sunning herself, waking only to follow the sun as it made its daily journey across the heavens. To catch the last warm rays of the setting sun she would crawl under the picket fence and lay down on the sidewalk just outside the yard, and as the sun set and the air cooled she would wake up and crawl under the fence and make her way to the back door to be let in for supper. I found Mother Cat peacefully dead, just inside the yard, tail pointed towards the outside.