

PERMANENT GUESTS

I never imagined that I would have a cat for a pet. Not that I dislike cats. On the contrary, ever since I became acquainted with my Grandmother's cat Sputnik, I have both respected and admired them. But Sputnik taught me my first lesson about cats. I'm allergic to them. In my childhood innocence I picked up Sputnik at first glance and buried my face in his sable like fur. Immediately I discovered the misery of allergies. I sneezed. I wheezed. My eyes swelled to closing. A rash appeared on my face and spread at an alarming rate. Only a quick trip to the doctor restored me. I could look at but not touch cats, so having one for a pet never occurred to me. Until I found myself with nine of them, that is.

Yes, allergies aside, my wife Nancy and I lovingly cared for nine cats. Nine stray cats. We took in our first houseguests on a cold, rainy day in late October. While in the garage warming the car for a shopping trip, I heard a pathetic mewling. Puzzled, I searched for the source of the sound. To my surprise I found a tangle of fur, legs, and heads nestled in the shoots of an old lilac bush. I stared at the wriggling mass of fur. Numerous wary eyes stared back. I bent down to reassure my doubting eyes. Agitated news erupted from the pile. A calico cat sprang from the heap and fiercely glared at me. I ran to get my wife.

My discovery enchanted Nancy. And what a discovery. There were six cats in all. The calico turned out to be the mother. And the mother cat had

four precious kittens. Another cat, ironically, looked just like Sputnik. The first thing that Nancy did was to bring the cats a bowl of warm milk. Suspiciously, the mother cat sniffed the offering, then sat down to drink. Careful, Nancy set Sputnik's look alike before the milk. Then, as gently as possible, she reached into the rude bower and set the four squirming, mewling kittens before the milk.

That's how our love affair began. When the last drop of milk was licked from the bowl, the mother cat acted as if she had been rescued. She purred in ecstasy as she wrapped herself around Nancy's legs. Trust was established. Nancy carried the cats out of the drizzle and into the garage. She played with the cats as I stroked them with my eyes. Finally, unable to restrain myself any longer, I picked up the kitten that was the most curious and held it to me. What a delight it is to hold a kitten. Before I knew it, all four kittens were tumbling in my lap.

Then it started. My eyes watered. I sneezed, and breathing became difficult. I had to go outside for fresh air. Nancy quickly joined me and suggested that fresh air and a shopping trip would do me a world of good. She was right, of course. We chatted about the "cute and cuddly" kittens as we shopped, but we both agreed that keeping the cats was out of the question because of my condition. Yet I must admit that I saw the writing on the wall when we wheeled the cart down the pet food aisle and she picked up a few cans of tuna fish. "Just in case they are hungry", she told me. "Fine", I told her but we could not keep the cats. "Yes Dear", was all she said.

When we returned, the cats were enjoying the shelter of the garage. As Nancy fed the adults and played with the kittens, I watched from a safe distance. She then suggested that we make arrangements for the cats so that they would have a warm spot to sleep. Again I reminded her of my allergy, but Nancy smiled sweetly and assured me that I wouldn't be affected as long as they stayed in the garage. As usual, her logic was sound, and I didn't have the heart to pitch our guests out into the rain, so I busied myself preparing their bed. I found a large wooden box and lined it with rug scraps and old towels. Nancy tucked the kittens into their box and we bid them good night.

Early next morning we rushed to the garage to visit our new charges. Eyes warily peered at us over the rim of the box. Nancy sent me back to the house for a bowl of warm milk. When I returned, the mother cat was in Nancy's lap, but everyone else was still in the box. Sputnik's twin grew bolder as he watched the mother cat lap the milk and bounded out of the box to join her. Nancy brought the kittens to the bowl one by one. What a picture of contentment, as they gathered around the milk.

The following morning, the two adult cats were waiting for us to bring their milk. They made an endearing commotion as they mewed and wove in and out of our legs. Nancy smiled at me as she said, "Looks like we have some new friends." I didn't respond.

Our first catastrophe occurred that night when we went out to feed them their supper. The adults greeted us as before, but there was no sign of the kittens. We peered into the box and saw them huddled on the bottom. They

did not move. Nancy picked one up to examine it. We both gasped. Where the eyes should have been were swollen lids of oozing yellow-green mucus. A close inspection revealed that all four kittens suffered from the same condition.

Limp, lethargic, with dreadfully swollen eyes.

“We have to take one inside and check it out,” Nancy said. I agreed. Once inside, she drew a bowl of warm tap water and handed me a washcloth. “You wipe the eyes clean”, she ordered. She clutched the kitten as it gave a weak mew. I moistened the washcloth and stood poised over the kitten. I stared at the horror of the swollen eyes and felt the little creature’s pain. What if I wiped away the crusty mucus and found no eyes? I felt very warm. My knees began to shake. “You wipe the eyes, Honey.” She stared at me in disbelief, then laughed and handed the kitten to me. Tenderly, she wiped away the crust and mucus. After a few minutes she said, “I can see its eyes.” Relieved, I opened my own eyes to look.

“We must take the kittens to the vet.” She was already putting on her coat.

“But they are not our cats,” I protested.

“They drink our milk, they live in our garage, they are our cats.” She did agree, however, that we needed to take only one since they all suffered from the same affliction. Thus began one of many visits to the vet.

The vet treated the illness and informed us that the kittens had probably caught a cold from their exposure to the rain. When he found out that the kitten was a stray, he even cut his bill in half. We returned home and quickly

administered the medicine to the kittens. We also decided to protect them from further illness by building them a warmer, more substantial home.

The kitten's eyes cleared up within two days. I built them a home much like a dog house and lined it with plush carpet that Nancy talked a local rug merchant into giving us. Nothing gave us greater pleasure than to watch the cats jam up in the small opening as they rushed out simultaneously to greet us and their morning milk.

A month after their arrival found the kittens healthy and growing. They were as much a part of our life as we were part of theirs. We gave them shelter, food, and love. They returned our love, and gave us joy, laughter, and a wealth of experience. We watched in fascination as the kittens cavorted around, relishing their madcap antics. Each cat became special to us as they revealed their own individual personalities.

As the kittens grew, I learned to cope with my allergy. I could even handle the cats without adverse effects as long as I was careful to keep my face away from their fur and didn't touch my own face with my hands until they were thoroughly washed. The risk of discomfort was nothing next to the pleasure of holding them.

When we brought them their milk one crisp morning in mid-December, we noticed that their water bowl was frozen solid. To make matters worse, the kittens had grown so large that their little house had become very cramped.

"It's far too cold for them in the garage. Besides, their little house is way too small. We've got to bring them inside."

I protested. I reminded her of my allergy. If the cats lived in the house I would be in constant misery, I told her.

“But Dear, we don’t have to let them upstairs. We can let them sleep in the little room in the basement that we never, never use, and let them out during the day. You could make it into a great cat room.”

“No”, I told her. “No, no, no.”

“You don’t want them to get sick again, do you? Just let them stay in the basement for the winter. When spring comes, you can kick them back out if you want to.”

Needless to say, that was a few years ago and the cats still have their own suite in the basement. Furthermore, our cats must have spread the word because three more stray cats have since found our house. And as Nancy said, “What’s one more mouth to feed?” So, if you look hard enough in the backyard on a mellow day, you can see the cats emerge from the background like one of those puzzles with hidden figures. As for my allergies? Well, I just don’t let them bother me anymore.