

Untitled Newspaper Column

The man spent a week trying to get rid of the cat on the front porch, then he gave up. For that week, he hissed every time he walked out the front door. He lobbed firewood over her head, let his dogs chase her up trees. He told his wife to leave the cat food across the road in the woods.

None of it worked.

In the morning—every morning—the cat would be there to curl around his leg when he came out the door, and after a week he gave up hissing and lobbing firewood, but he did not give up wishing she would go away.

He said to his wife, “As soon as it warms up, quit feeding her and maybe she’ll go someplace else.” He said that in January.

Two months went by, and it got warmer. The wife quit leaving food. The cat got pregnant. When she rubbed her stomach against his leg now, he thought he could feel the kittens. He didn’t say anything when his wife began feeding her again.

The cat was gentler than the other cats that lived in the woods. They showed up from time to time on the front porch too. She was also cleaner than the others. The man noticed that. He had a year-old daughter, and he didn’t stop her when she moved to hug the cat. And he had lost things that mattered before and was not inclined to take chances with his child.

The litter of kittens came in the middle of April. There were five of them, all except one looked like the mother. They were white and had brown and black circles on their heads and shoulders and tails. The fifth one was gray.

The delivery occurred behind a pile of stacked bricks in a neighbor's yard. The neighbor had a German shepherd, and the man's wife climbed the fence between the yards to move the kittens into a cardboard box near his front porch.

As she was going back over the fence for the second one, the mother cat was coming under the fence with the first one, carrying it back to the bricks.

The wife worried about the kittens at night. The man said he was worried too. "I don't know what we'll do if the dogs get them," he said. Imagine being doing to eleven cats again. Oh, Christ, I can't think about it. . ."

But when he looked again one afternoon a week later and there were only three of them left, the feeling he got stayed with him through supper.

A day or two later he moved them to a pile of scrap wood in his backyard. He had been planning to haul the wood away for eight months, which meant—conservatively—that the kittens had another half-year before they had to worry about finding a different place to stay.

That was the way the man was.

The hawk was waiting in a high limb of one of the tallest pine trees in the woods across the road. The man had seen her hunt from there before. She was brown in the face and wings and redder color across her chest. When she left the limb, her wings would pump the air slowly, and it was the nature of her power that you could see the effect of each of the strokes on her flight.

Tip to tip the wings were five feet across.

Right now, though, the man wasn't watching the hawk. He was watching the cat, who was moving her kittens away from the wood pile. They were only two of them left, the gray and one that looked like the mother.

The cat picked up the white one by the skin around its neck, walked to a tree. She dropped it, picked it up again to get the right hold, then moved up the tree and onto the flat part of the roof. She found a protected spot behind a roll of tar paper that the man had left there—planning to fix a leak—and put the kitten down.

The man was watching all this in the garden, wondering what had eaten his bean sprouts, and that didn't make him any happier about having a nest of cats on his roof. He began working on the two plans at the same time, one for the beans, one for the cats. The mother came back down the tree.

She was close by when the hawk got the gray kitten. It had been nursing when she'd decided to move and it had held onto a nipple for a couple of seconds after she'd gotten up. The kitten had dropped off in the sunshine, a foot or two from the pile of wood.

It was too young still to move without its mother, so it lay in the grass and waited, half again the size of a mouse.

The mother cat was almost back to it when the shadow blocked out the sun. She ducked, then looked back. There was the shadow, the sound of the hawk's wings, pine needles and dust blowing off the ground, and then the gray kitten was gone.

It seemed to happen all at once.

The hawk carried it in her talons out over the lake, banked through a long circle and disappeared behind the trees across the road.

The man walked over to the cat. She searched his face, then came up on her hind legs, asking for her kitten back. He held out his hands to show her he didn't have it, then started for the house to get her some milk.

As he moved, his shadow crossed the cat and she cringed, and that is what he would lie awake thinking about that night, and the next.

The man had lost things that mattered before, and he knew what it was to cringe at sudden shadows, the ones that just drop on you out of the sky.

—Pete Dexter