

The Cat Coming Back

By Michael Fine

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It was a plain domestic tabby, fat, and striped orange, with round green eyes and vertical, diamond shaped pupils, eyes that glowed red when they caught a beam of light in the dark, and she thought she had gotten rid of it forever when she drove it out to the countryside and gave it to a farmer who had answered her advertisement in the newspaper, the one in which she claimed the cat was a mouser.

The woman lived alone now and she wanted a cat for company, or at least thought she did. She worked in an office and was well paid for her thoughts and ideas, recorded in memos and articles, mostly published in obscure journals read by experts, but some occasionally appeared in one of the large city newspapers that acted, or thought to act, as the moral compass of the nation, although those papers were far from pure themselves. She lived in a garden apartment just a few miles from town, and had a late model car with many conveniences. She had tried marriage and tired of it, so left it when her children were grown and while she still had her looks, energy and desire. She had tried lovers, some of whom entertained her, from time to time. She would have more lovers yet, but in the main had tired of the game of love, as few of

her lovers were truly compelling, few had anything new to say, and fewer had anything new to teach her. The constant jostling of seduction, of prowling about and tempting and being tempted, which was rewarding from time to time, had become old and now seemed like it was all in bad faith, as though it all existed simply to affirm her ego, although her ego was secure, and so all the sturm und drang wasn't justified by any kind of satisfying, soul rewarding result. She wanted neither to control nor be controlled. All she wanted was calm.

The cat had come into her life simply, without any forethought or expenditure of energy on her part. A colleague, an editor of an online journal that published her work, one of three where she was listed on the masthead as a contributing writer, was moving to the other coast, moving in with a new partner who was allergic to cats. That colleague said she hated to part with this cat, and joked about how the decision between taking up with a new partner and abandoning her beloved tabby was difficult, and claimed that the new partner won out only because of the new city and the beautiful digs, but that the call had been a close one. In fact, that colleague had little love for the cat, who ignored her when she was home – the cat and the colleague tolerated one another, admitting only some small mutual dependence – the colleague fed the cat and changed its litter box, and the cat presented itself on the colleague's lap from time to time when the colleague was reading at home alone to be scratched, but neither glowed with pleasure when the other was about.

And so the cat had the expectation of a certain degree of privacy when she came into the woman's life. The woman, for her part, had few expectations, having shed expectations about

other people and thus other beings long before. They had the makings of a perfect symbiosis, when the cat came to stay with the woman in the garden apartment.

But two things happened to upset the balance that should have been achieved between the woman and the cat. First the cat, out of the city for the first time, became obsessed by the out-of-doors, by the trees that were planted between the buildings, by the grass and the flowers, and the sunlight and the birds and the flitting insects humming about in the gardens just beyond the glass and screening of the windows, just out of the cat's reach. And the woman, completely unexpectedly, without warning and without reason, fell in love, lost all her sense of proportion and then completely lost her balance and her bearings.

For the cat, that meant endless attempts to escape from the apartment, and a new unruliness whenever she was inside. The cat learned to crouch on a counter near the back door, shrinking herself into a corner and remaining perfectly still, as if she was stalking a mouse. The cat learned to time her crouch to just after dark, when the woman routinely took out the trash. The woman, distracted by her thoughts, or cradling a portable telephone as she opened the door to the garden, wouldn't see the cat against the tawny grain of the cabinetry. The cat would spring the moment the door was open, bound past the woman, sometimes knocking her off balance and occasionally causing her to fall, spilling the garbage, as the cat disappeared into the bushes.

The woman, more out of obligation than desire, would then spend an hour, calling and searching for the cat, almost always unsuccessfully. The cat was spayed and well-immunized, as all city cats are now, so there was no real fear of either pregnancy or disease, but the woman

worried at first, without real justification, about an inside cat in the outside world, which appeared to the woman to be a world of menace, a place where cats are lost or run over crossing highways, a place where there are unnamed but fearsome predators – dogs, other cats, mean and street-wise, raccoons, possums and birds of prey – who might destroy this animal for which she had little real affection but which was her responsibility alone.

Even so, every morning, the cat came back. Every morning the cat was on her front doorstep, clean and perfect but for her muddy paws, her claws packed with dirt and filthy from doing who knows what with anything and everyone. The cat tracked dirt into the house and across the white carpet in the front hall which the woman now had to clean. Every morning after the cat escaped, the woman set out cat-food, and used the food to bribe the cat to be still, so she could clean the cat's paws. Soon the woman learned to feed the cat on her tiny cement porch, so the cat's tracks didn't cover the inside of the apartment, but that didn't keep the cat from escaping most nights.

But when the woman fell unexpectedly in love the problem with the cat became most acute.

The woman had stopped looking for love or thinking about lovers. She liked her work, which had become her life's focus, liked it tremendously because she could read and think and was recognized for her ability to know, conceptualize and make clear ideas others did not see or understand. She knew the territory and had control of it – she could see what she needed to know, learn it, write about it, and got tremendous satisfaction from the respect of others she earned in this process. She liked her life. She'd rise in the morning, put on music and make

herself a cup of tea, and then work all day at her dining room table, writing. She looked up from time to time and saw trees and sky out the window, as she listened to music she loved. She read in the evenings. The woman had become the master of her own world, and didn't need to depend on anyone else for anything.

Then one day a carpenter driving a green truck with his name and telephone number stenciled on the driver's door came to replace a window whose sill had rotted. The man had been send by her landlord after the woman had complained about the problem. She showed him the window, which was in the kitchen and looked out on the garden behind her apartment, on the trees and on the grass and flowers, which were in bloom because it was late in the spring. The window was open to receive the breeze from under the trees, and the breeze carried in the sweet pollens of mid-afternoon.

Then the woman went back to her work, which was spread over a dining room table. She worked there because of the light, and because she could look out the window from time to time, and see the living world, which helped her to keep her center, her thoughtfulness, which was what most people liked about her writing. There was music playing in the background, music she loved and knew inside and out, which she used to keep her emotions alive while it drowned out other distractions – the frictive, blowing sound of cars driving by on the street, one by one; the rolling hum of washing machines; the quiet hum of air-conditioners and the clicking of the refrigerator, interrupted intermittently by the crunch of its ice-maker, which sounded like someone at the door; the rumble and grinding huff of a garbage truck, growling in the street as it

made its rounds, and the cry and squeal of distant sirens which often punctuated the mid-afternoon and early evening.

She ignored the carpenter at first. He was thin but with big shoulders, broad forearms, and strong, knowledgeable hands because of his work. He had brown-silver hair, with a little pony-tail behind his head, and was only ever so slightly balding at the temples. He was perhaps fifty, perhaps fifty five, and he carried himself like a blues musician, someone who kept to himself, whose inner life was a secret, – and he worked without interruption, measuring, sawing and hammering, and stepping back from time to time to eye his project, checking his work for square and fit even after he had measured twice or three times and made exactly the cut he wanted to make, all the while dipping his head to the beat of the music, which the woman hardly heard anymore because it was so much a part of her. Van Morrison. Bonnie Raitt. Emmy Lou Harris. Ray Charles. Linda Ronstadt. Singers whose voices gave vent to where the woman had been, what she felt and who she was.

The cat lay on a chair in the living room, asleep. From time to time it would awaken and walk to the woman to have its head scratched, as was its habit. Then it would return to its perch to sleep again.

But this day the cat didn't go directly back to its place. Instead it padded cautiously towards the kitchen to study the intruder, stalking him, and then, once it had taken stock of what was different, went right up to the man and rubbed its side against one of his legs as he stood a few feet back from the window and studied his progress to plan his next task.

“Just ignore her,” the woman said, her eyes on her computer and her mind on her work.

“She’ll go away. She doesn’t like people.”

“No problem,” the carpenter said. “I’ve dealt with worse. I don’t like people either.”

The woman raised her eyes for a moment, but she couldn’t see the carpenter’s face.

Even so, she thought she heard something intelligent in his voice, a little bit of humor and a quiet put down, all at the same time.

But the cat did not return to its seat. The carpenter returned to his work. He knelt on the kitchen counter and sanded a part of the window frame. Then he inserted the new window into the frame, tapping one corner with a rubber mallet so it settled into place.

The cat jumped onto the counter with the carpenter, arched its back, and rubbed its side against the new window, so that it stood just between the window and the man with the upraised mallet.

“Hey cat. Vanish,” the carpenter said.

“Don’t let her out the window please,” the woman said. “She’s supposed to be an inside cat, but she gets out most nights. I try to keep her inside during the day as best I can. She’s an inside cat, so she really can’t defend herself.”

“Got it,” the carpenter said, and he pushed the cat out of his way with the back of one hand.

But the cat came back. It crawled between the man and the window again, and rubbed its back against the man's chest.

"Okay cat," the man said. "You win. Time for a break, I guess." He picked up the cat, turned around, sat on the kitchen counter with the cat on his lap, rubbed its back and neck, and held it up to his face, eyeball to eyeball.

"Let me take her," the woman said. "Sorry she's been a bother." The woman rose from her chair, walked into the kitchen, took the cat out of the carpenter's arms, carried the cat into her bedroom, tossed it inside and closed the door.

"Would you like something to drink?" the woman said as she came back into the kitchen, because she was always polite. "I've got ice water and tea."

The carpenter hopped down from the counter.

"Never drink water," the carpenter said.

"I know, fish copulate in it," the woman said, finishing the man's sentence.

Just then Bonnie Raitt's version of "Angel from Montgomery" came on.

"Love this," the woman said.

"With you on that," the carpenter said.

The man and the woman looked at one another. Then they were dancing on the kitchen floor. The window would have to wait for another day.

The cat tolerated the man at first. She avoided him, the way she avoided the woman most of the time, and she preferred the woman to the man on the rare occasion that she desired the touch of a human, when she wished to be stroked. The man's presence was occasional, at least at first. When he was present, after the window was installed and painted, the cat took to sleeping on a chair in the living room, and avoided the woman's bedroom entirely, though from time to time, when the man was there, the cat would come and rub against his leg when he was sitting in the kitchen, drinking coffee, but did so warily, as if pretending that she (the cat) had made an error, and intended to rub on the leg of the woman.

The woman ignored the cat altogether, and was shocked by the depth of her passion, as she had been determined that she would never love again. Her needs and her wants and even her beliefs submerged into her desire to be with this man, to listen to him speak, to see the music in his movements, and to touch him, to be assimilated into his body, a kind of love the woman had promised herself she would never give to anyone again.

The man came in and out. This thing, with this woman, it was a good thing. But sometimes it was too much. And he was suspicious of too much of a good thing, whatever it was. So he kept his bearings, and charted his own course. No promises, no apologies. He liked knowing the woman. He didn't need to own her, and he always needed air to breathe.

One night the man, staying over, decided to surprise the woman and take the garbage out. He had watched the ballet with the cat and its nightly escape, so he was not fooled when the cat crouched into her usual corner, waiting to spring. He lifted the cat before he opened the back

door, and put the cat in the living room on her usual chair. Then he stepped out of the door, leaving the cat inside. The cat, surprised but never off her game, shot out of the chair and towards the door, but she was somehow too late. The man was quicker than she was. The man had beaten her at her own game, and she was shut inside for one night, which meant the woman didn't feel the need to awaken at dawn to feed her, clean her paws and let her back in, and everyone could let their guard down and sleep.

But the cat, unaccustomed to a night inside, didn't sleep, because she never slept outside. Instead she prowled the house, unhinged, and in the depths of the night knocked over a lamp, as she stalked unseen prey or searched for an unseen partner, sensed but not present, somewhere in the garden outside, in one of the trees or in the hills beyond the house.

The woman woke with a start in the middle of the night to the sounds of an intruder in the house. There was movement in the living room. The springs of a chair creaked. Then there was a thump of weight falling on a soft surface. Papers rustling. A different thump – paws on glass. Then the padding of feet on wooden and then linoleum floors, the shadow of a sound, barely discernible but still there. The woman listened, alert and ready to find a lamp or a shoe to use as a weapon, and was about to wake her partner who was breathing heavily with his arms around her and his warm body pressed against her -- when her thoughts cleared and she recognized the intruder. It was only the cat, prowling about. But now the woman couldn't sleep. So she rose and quietly opened the back door, and the cat ran out of the house.

But about a week later, the next time the man stayed over, the cat did not let herself out when the woman took the garbage out, and the woman, thinking much more about the man and

transformed by being with him, a transformation she hated in herself but which happened despite her decision that it would never happen again, didn't take notice.

Again the woman awoke in the middle of the night to what sounded like an intruder, only this time she awoke to sounds of violence and destruction, of lamps knocked over, of broken glass, of the dishes she had left drying next to the sink pushed off the counter and smashed on the floor, and pots crashing as they were thrown from the stove. This time the woman thought twice about the damage that could be done by an intruder against whom she had no defense, and she thought for a moment about purchasing a gun with which to defend herself, in that instant before she became completely conscious, until she realized that the noises came from the cat, who was acting out in the other room. The woman swore a little to herself, as she got out of bed.

The night air was colder now. Rain fell against the windows as the woman let the cat out. Yellow and brown leaves were stuck to the glass of the window the man had installed. It took the woman over an hour to clean up the mess the cat made. The cat had become more trouble than it was worth.

Then man and the woman had words for the first time. A new infection. There were other women in the man's life. He had no secrets. Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies. Distance. Uncertainty. Reconciliation and its intensity.

Three nights later the man stayed again. When it was time to let the cat out, the cat was nowhere to be found. Not that either the man or the woman were thinking much about the cat.

The woman woke in the middle of the night to sounds of destruction. This time she didn't imagine an intruder. She jumped out of bed. The cat had fouled the living room rug, pushed a beautiful blue blown glass bowl off an end table, shattering it, knocked over a vase filled with flowers and overturned the pothos, the ficus, the aloe and the rubber tree, so there was potting soil all over the floor in front of the dining room window. It was a disaster. The woman opened the back door and shooed the cat outside. That was it. The cat would have to go.

The cat was waiting on her doorstep when the woman returned from the farm just outside of the city. It didn't surprise her that the cat was back. What the woman didn't understand was how the cat beat her home. She had stopped for gas and groceries, but that stop was only a few minutes.

The woman waited a day. Then, without telling anyone, she drove an hour out of town, fifty miles away to a county park she knew, where there was a lake and hiking trails into a gorge that had tall pines growing up from its floor, a waterfall you could hike to, and trails that took you up a mountain side, so you could look down and see the stream that flowed from the mountainside and see the waterfall from above. It was late afternoon, in October. The sun hung low in the south western sky and glinted in the woman's eyes as she drove to an empty parking lot next to a deserted campground. There were trees here and flowers in the spring and summer and the air was fresh. She opened the door and the cat sprang out of the car and into the bushes, without pause and without looking back. So much for attachment, the woman thought. So much

for guilt. She hunts. Perhaps she'll feed herself. Perhaps she'll survive the winter. The woman stopped on the way home at a dive bar. She bought herself a whiskey, and sat at a table outside, alone, to think a little about her life. Not about the cat though. She was done with the cat.

It seemed impossible, but the cat was on her doorstep when she got home again. Fifty miles in two and a half hours. That's more than twenty miles an hour. The woman opened an internet browser. Do cheetahs run that fast?

The man had made no promises. He had become an open wound. She wanted him. She wanted to be with him. It was as simple as that. He was clear enough. She was fine from time to time, but he wasn't going beyond that. The more she wanted, the less he wanted her. It was usually the other way around, for her. Usually she kept her head in relationships. But not this time.

In any case, the cat was making things with the man worse. She sensed that cat confirmed what the man already thought about her, that she hung on to what wasn't working, that she shouldn't keep a crazy cat that stalked her nights and wrecked her house. So a part of her believed that she needed to get rid of the cat if she wanted to keep him. And a part of her knew she had lost him already, and that her beliefs about getting rid of the cat to keep the man were false beliefs, were magical thinking.

Could she have the cat put down? No sooner than she could buy a gun for protection against intruders. She thought of sending the cat, unannounced, back to its previous owner in San Diego. Or keeping the cat locked up in a cage and never letting it out.

At any other point in her life, the woman would have accepted that the man was gone, allowed the cat to come back, and allowed herself to go back to living as she always had, in quiet symbiosis with a cat she didn't care for, one more fixture in a life that was intended to allow her to work, to read and to think in simple elegant ruminative solitude.

But now her emotions overruled her rational self. She had to get rid of that cat.

Could five hundred or a thousand miles accomplish what fifty miles had failed at? Perhaps a thousand miles, a mountain range or two, and a few rivers. She loaded the cat into a cage in the back of the car because she thought the cat had become completely unhinged. Then she drove south and west. And felt conflicted, because she was leaving the man behind, to his own devices. I'll go without warning, she thought. Disappear. Perhaps he'll miss me.

But she felt the beauty of the country, even from a superhighway, and did not think about the man. The hum of the car and the gentle swerve of the road were calming. It was late in the fall. Most of the trees had lost their leaves, but there was an occasional tree that was still yellow or bright dark red, almost a blood red, almost purple; and the dark green pines could now be seen clearly across the hilltops, arrows pointing to the sky. The day was clear at first, the weak, angled yellow light felt warm, like dying hope, the brave remnant of the past summer, and the

promise of survival and another summer to come. She smelled wood smoke, here and there, and saw plumes of white smoke that rose out of some chimneys. There were no herds of cattle on the hillsides now, no cornfields filling the bottom land between mountains. That was a distant memory from her youth, but some people still kept a horse or two or a beef cow or two, and that let the woman feel somehow that all was not yet lost.

She crossed a broad river. It had no boats. The cattails in the shallows had turned brown. There was a restaurant and a marina on the far shore that she could see from the bridge, but the boats had all been wrapped in white plastic and drawn up and then stacked in a boatyard, waiting for the winter to come and pass.

A storm came up as she crossed into the hill country. The sky grew dark and a wind came up, whipping yellow, red and brown leaves into the air, and then a heavy rain pelted the car, flying at her in sheets, as the windshield wipers beat a drawn-out rhythm, the rubber of the wiper blades cawing against the glass. It was late. The woman was tired. She found a cheap motel, and stopped for the night.

The sky was clear again in the morning and the air was warmer than it had been when she left home. She drove again without stopping. She crossed another river. There was a town on the far side, even a small city with warehouses near the river, and a capitol building or a city hall with a gold dome that had flags fluttering in front of it.

Then the highway crossed a mountain range. Towers of sharp-edged grey and black rock lined both sides of the road. Streams of water dripped or fell from between the stones and crevices. The rock walls were wrapped in netted wire fencing to keep landslides from reaching the road, and yellow signs with swerving black lines or pictures of falling rock had been planted every hundred yards or so, sometimes under the rock walls and sometimes next to steep drops beyond which the woman could see deserted harsh valleys that stretched for miles.

Mordor, she thought. This might work as a place to drop the cat. No reasonable being can cross this country without a machine, without a car or an airplane or one of those overcharged motorcycles twenty-seven-year-old men with too much testosterone ride, screaming down highways in the left lane, going a hundred and thirty.

The cat slept in its cage in the back of the car, a hatchback that had its two rear seats folded up, content. The cat had food and water. The humming of the engine, the hiss of the tires, the gentle swerving of the road and the presence of another living being was all the cat needed. There weren't the kind of sounds or smells that aroused the cat anywhere about. It was at peace. The future has no meaning to a cat. Nor the past, as long as what had threatened or hurt it once wasn't present. Only now.

The land began to smooth on the other side of the mountains, folding into ridges and waves. The highway became a broad two lane road, snaking next to a river, more straight than

curvy. The sun stayed strong but angled and was difficult because the woman was driving into it and its glare made her squint, made her brow furrow.

But they were a good distance south now, and the weather was warmer. More of the trees had leaves here. There were stands of birch on the hillside, their leaves bright yellow, their trunks lined in formation like toy soldiers.

Then the rolling land gave way to a broad plain, with plowed fields and huge empty barns.

This is a good place, the woman thought. The cat will be fine here. Winters are milder. There is plenty to eat. Those old barns are good for shelter. There are likely plenty of mice scurrying in the barns, voles in the earth and squirrels and birds in the trees.

She pulled off the road into a picnic spot, opened the hatchback and then the cage, and waited.

The cat awoke, saw its freedom, leapt from its cage and disappeared.

The woman drove home by a different route, not hurrying. She drove east, not north and east, to the coast.

The southern seacoast towns were still green, warmed by the sea, and there were strong warm breezes at midday, warmer air blowing in from the ocean. The surf pounded the beaches,

and strong tides flowed into the estuaries, as if there was a storm somewhere out in the ocean, whipping up the tide. Seabirds glided on the wind and dove into the waves from great heights, fishing. There were still boats in the harbors, but they were pleasure boats, not fishing boats, by and large, and the coast was lined with retirement communities, golf courses, and strip malls, where early retirees, younger than the woman, drove aimlessly from place to place in late model cars in search of bargains and early dinner. The nation has lost its soul, the woman thought.

She spent an afternoon reading on the beach in a state park, her cell phone turned off, drawing out her return home. Then she had a dinner of blue crab and beer in a dive bar on the beach, reading or pretending to read, as the sun set to the south and west over the water, the sky red and orange, and then purple and green, brilliant as only it can be in the fall, with cumulous clouds on the horizon that flamed into color as the sun disappeared and then darkened, like a bruise that was slowly healing. The man didn't matter to her now. He was a lost cause, like a sunset that had faded, nothing more and nothing less, her cell phone still quiet. By this time he should have called her, just to see if she was still alive, or at least sent her a text. A bad rock band made of balding paunchy men in their fifties who all had day jobs, thank goodness, assembled on a little stage in the dive bar and started to play bad top 40 songs that all sounded alike, songs she'd hated twenty and thirty years ago for their meaninglessness. It really was time to move on.

She found a cheap beachside motel for the night. The mattress was too soft, and the cheapness of the place gnawed at her, the fake pastel art and the flimsy furniture, all made of composite faux wood that oozed formaldehyde into the moist air, the heater/air-conditioner that

grumbled when you turned it on but didn't make the air any warmer or make the room smell any less of mold and bleach.

She didn't really sleep. There was coffee, pastries and a basket of oranges and apples in the motel office at daybreak, the motels' take on bed and breakfast. It was instant coffee. The pastries were all individually wrapped in plastic. She poured herself a cup of coffee which she held in her hands to warm them but didn't drink, watched the sun rise over the horizon, took two oranges from the basket, and got herself back on the road, more out of boredom and disappointment than desire.

There were cities and old friends between her and home, great black and brown cities which once had industries and grit but were now just places people lived until they died, cities where she once would have stopped to see, listen and learn. But the cities and friends weren't going anywhere. She could see them another time. She was better off alone.

She drove on the seacoast road, a slow route, with many stoplights and shopping malls. There was no hurry. No reason to be home after all.

She arrived home six days after she'd set out. The man had texted her on the fifth day. She hadn't replied. Time to let it be, she thought, and crept back into her apartment just after sunset on the sixth day. Her apartment was as she'd left it. The rooms were hollow and cold.

She packed up the cat's things – its food and water bowls, its litter box, the cat bed that lay between the couch and a window that the cat had never used, a scratching post and a soft orange

belled ball meant to be a toy that the cat never played with. She thought for a moment about putting them in the crawl space, just in case, but then she remembered the rivers and the mountain range, and put the cat's things out on the curb on garbage day. She remembered stories of courageous loved dogs that traveled thousands of miles in midwinter and endured insurmountable dangers to return home, of course, but this cat wasn't loved – and anyone who found it as a stray would give it a better home than she had given it. She thought of the cat chasing birds and mice in one of those crumbling barns, living out its life in cat splendor, or adopted by a kindly old woman who lived in a trailer park and set out milk for it once she saw it prowling about.

The woman rarely thought about the cat after that. Her life returned to what it had been, to the routine of writing every morning, reading every night, and traveling once every few months to a meeting or a conference where she'd sit on a panel of other earnest people, and talk about ideas that made sense, in their own way, to people who thought about the world pretty much the way the woman did.

She saw the man's truck around town from time to time. She turned her thoughts away from the truck and the man when she saw it. He would text her from time to time, "just checking in." She ignored the texts.

Winter came and went. Spring came and went. Summer came and went. There were terrible tornados in the southwest and the worst hurricane in a generation that flooded the coast. With each weather event, the woman thought briefly about the cat, and was pleased with herself that she'd found a place for the cat that wasn't in the path of either. The woman knew the cat could very well be dead, that she'd abandoned the cat in a way that wasn't humane or responsible. But the woman wasn't going to revisit how she'd gotten rid of the cat. What was done was done.

The man returned in early October. She came home one day and found his truck parked in front of her house. I like your company, he said. I miss talking to you. You have a brain and a sense of humor. The woman barely listened, the muscles in her neck and back tight and her eyes focused elsewhere. She didn't want any more of this. Her life had order. She knew the drill. It was about freedom, for him. What he said in the moment didn't matter. He might be telling the truth as he felt it right then, but he'd backslide the moment she relented. His ego needed women to love him. He might love in the moment, a little, but he loved his freedom most. Not her.

Still, he persisted. She relented, despite her better judgement. It took three weeks. He clearly believed what he told himself. The woman knew better. He would backslide. A month, maybe two months. She took him back but didn't want to fall in love with him again. Because she knew.

The following February the woman heard a noise at the door.

It had been a cold winter. The first frost was in October before all the leaves were off the trees. There had been a wet snow before Thanksgiving that lingered and left a crust of grey ice on the lawns and roofs. Then came a freeze into the single digits which lasted through January, and seemed even colder than it was because of the short days, because there wasn't real snow to reflect the little light that came from the sun, which barely rose over the horizon, briefly, even on cloudless days. Even the moonlight seemed weak, on the few nights the moon could be seen, not obscured by clouds, although on clear nights the stars glittered with a special luminescence, the only real light anywhere. There was a deep snow at the end of January, so deep that people were trapped in their houses for days and cars were buried. The groundhog saw its shadow. The woman felt as though spring would never come.

The woman was working at the dining table when she thought she heard someone at the door. She was wrapped in a blanket. She wore a beret, had a scarf wrapped around her neck, and had an electric space heater turned on next to her. The heat in the apartment was adequate to maintain a comfortable temperature, but the woman, like most people that winter, were cold wherever they were despite that heat.

The woman stopped typing for a moment. Anyone at the door would knock a second time if in fact there was anyone at the door at all. But there was no knock. Perhaps it was just the wind rattling the aluminum storm door. The woman resumed her work.

The door rattled again, a rattle, not a knock. She ignored it. Then she heard a faint sound, a mewling. She listened. Was it the wind? Or a car? Or the whine of a distant chainsaw, still cleaning up from the last snow? But no. It was closer. Weak, but close. And persistent.

Angry now about being disturbed, the woman rose from her seat. It was hard enough to establish her train of thought, to develop clear ideas and express them in ways that others could understand. Interruptions like these destroyed her concentration. People need to leave her alone. Life needed to just let her be.

The woman went to the door to discover the source of the noise and put a stop to it. She didn't see anything when she opened the inside door. But then she heard a sound at her feet, and something just below her, rubbing against the storm door.

It was a cat, thin and bedraggled, brown-orange, so dingy to be almost gray. Its moth-eaten fur was crusted with gray slush and crystalized gray ice. Its ribs stood out and its teeth showed with each purr because the flesh around its mouth was so wasted. It had green eyes.

"Poor thing," she thought, because of the icy rain that was falling and the withering cold. She opened the door.

The cat bounded into the house, first to the kitchen where its food and water bowls used to be. And then, not finding them, to the chair on the living room on which it used to sleep, its muddy paws leaving tracks on the white carpet.

Suddenly the woman realized what she had done. This was no random stray. The cat had come back.

The man came right away. He walked into the house with a hammer. Enough was enough. It was time to put a stop to this cat, and to the woman's vacillating. He would do for her what she couldn't do for herself. He had no ambivalence.

He grabbed the cat by the scruff of its neck, jerking it off the chair, and carried it to the kitchen sink, so he could smash its skull without splattering blood everywhere, the woman following sadly, hopelessly. The cat yowled and scratched but the man held it at arm's length where it couldn't reach him with its teeth or its claws.

He held the cat in the sink and raised the hammer. The cat clawed the porcelain, a frenetic sound like a pile of dishes shattering.

"No!" the woman screamed, and caught the man's wrist as his arm came down.

The man's arm jerked. The hammer flew out of his grip, and smashed the kitchen window. Shards of glass sprayed the countertop. One flew into the man's forearm.

"Shit," he yelled, and he released his grip.

The cat found its footing, leapt out of the sink, jumped through the broken glass window and was gone.

Then the woman embraced the man. She picked the shard of glass out of the man's arm, washed his cut with cold water and bandaged it with a dish-towel, applied pressure to stop the bleeding and then drove him to the hospital so the wound could be stitched.

Two weeks later, they moved together to San Francisco, never to return. First they lived in San Francisco. Then they moved to Portland. Then to Vancouver and then to Montreal, Auckland, London, Paris, Glasgow, Prague, Budapest, and Dublin, moving whenever their relationship got stale, whenever one or the other developed the kind of wanderlust that tears couples apart.

The current location of the cat is unknown. It could still come back. Most likely it is on its way back now.

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