

Roger's Cat

Roger brought home a stray cat. It was a juvenile, a skinny black shorthair with long legs and a limp. It had scratched him pretty badly but was too weak to resist and went rigid under his coat. Already it was eating his guts. When he got home it was so stiff he thought it was dead. Roger laid it on the floor; as soon as it felt the ground again it was gone almost with a pop and hid under the couch. Roger coated his scratches with neosporin and went to make dinner.

We didn't see it for a month. The food and water we left out disappeared in the night, and cat droppings appeared in the corners, sometimes in the cat box where it scratched so vigorously that the bathroom floor was always completely coated in grit. It's digestion permanently ruined by eating garbage, probably noxious, it outgassed a constant rank stink. I mumbled a remark about the methane torch on the landfill. Roger named it Asparagus because of the smell. After a while it was calm enough to box up for the vet to worm and neuter, but it still smelled and it never liked people much. It would let Roger rub its neck but it was wary of me and no one could pick it up. The vet had looked at its crooked leg and guessed that it had been abused.

Asparagus was not an inspiring animal. Messy, cowering, and a little mean, certainly not affectionate. It kept apart. Roger was tempted to put it out, he admitted. After all, he had done his part to keep down the population of feral cats. He tried hard to incorporate it into some story of courage and persistence (*dogged* persistence, as he thought of it) but it was no use. The animal's zeit was too black for ihr Da. It was hardly *there* at all.

Every once in a while, though, he would forget to feed it. Then it would look at him from under the couch, following him with its eyes, ears alert, until he put something in the bowl, upon which it would disappear again. Its fear would

always be too strong for its neediness. Roger supposed it was fear, and not some anthropomorphic resentment or existential rage.

At that time I was often teaching at night. Being the low man I always got the most inconvenient hours. Most terms I took on six classes. It was the money, I said.

Roger scoffed at that. What money? You got paid and could barely afford your half of the rent.

Roger and I didn't see a lot of each other. We got on well enough, with no squabbling about dirty clothes or food in the refrigerator. From his working with deaf children, Roger talked in some code which I didn't understand and much of the time I paid little attention to his muttering, like a radio with the volume turned way down. I sometimes wondered how Roger managed to be intelligible in class but I supposed it was all right. People have different personalities at work. Probably Roger was natty and urbane when he was not around me.

Roger left for school in the mornings, often before seven o'clock, when I was asleep. The library was supposed to open at eight. Instruction didn't start until nine, but as most of the students were resident there were always a few who wanted something before class. He closed the library doors at four thirty. Usually he went home. Sometimes, he said, he simply turned his chair around and stared out of the library window for an hour. There was nothing to see, really. Just grass. The main building was of brick and had been built in the twenties and the windows were seven feet tall and went down almost to the floor. Sometimes there would be a single figure moving across the lawn, a student talking to himself or a teacher, smoking.

And so we went on from day to day, until one evening when Roger came home from school he could not find Asparagus. He was not under the sofa or in the closets or behind the books. Roger thought that maybe I had absent-

mindedly let him out. He waited up to question me, but I said I hadn't been home since before breakfast. I didn't at the time notice the panicky sharpness of Roger's voice.

Roger found he couldn't sleep. Most of the night he padded around the apartment signing agitatedly to himself and in the morning when he reluctantly locked up he looked pretty haggard.

However, after a few nights of Roger's walking the floor Asparagus reappeared and was back on his usual food vigil, always suspicious that Roger would betray him and forget. Or worse. Roger almost cried with relief.

Eventually, Asparagus had to be put down. Internal injuries from his feral life as a kitten, the pain in his hips which finally immobilized him, stress, and weeks during which he ate almost nothing, combined to do him in.

Roger got himself another cat, finally, after he'd done grieving over his betrayal of Asparagus. Would that be what would happen to Bertie? Always hiding under the sofa, coming out only at night to eat, looking at everyone with longing but only able to scratch and hiss when anyone reached out a hand?

That was too easy. Roger chided himself for sentimentality. People are not cats. They're more complicated than that, maybe.

Maybe not.

Roger had thought he might go down to the pound or find a rescue society but decided he didn't want another traumatized cat. He wasn't up to that, or very good at it either. So he bought a kitten from a breeder, one of those kittens which hadn't come out quite right and so couldn't be given papers. A nice, cheap, brand-new kitten, black with white boots and a white tip on its tail. Roger got it neutered and immunized and took it home. He thought, briefly, about naming it Asparagus, but that made him wince. In the end it became simply Cat.