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Pottery

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Poor Leora. Anytime she went to do some gardening, there was that cat — hiss, hiss, hiss — and there was that girl upon the fence — yap, yap, yap.

"Leora," Winnie would say, "you ever give Hissy milk?" And I'd hear about it.

"Leora, why don't you ever smile at Hissy?" And I'd hear about it.

"Leora, who teaches pet store cats to be nice? You suppose people teach 'em, or do mother cats?"

"Leora, do cats go to Heaven?"

Leora told Winnie that Hissy was sure to go to hell. "Cats are like people," she said. "Some good, some bad. The wheat and the chaff. That's how God made it."

"So you think God made Hissy a bad cat?"

Winnie was sassing her — I say so, too.

"I leave it to Him" was all Leora said before she stomped inside to call me.

I listened to the whole story, then settled Leora down — again. But this time I told her everyone saw the situation for what it really was: Here was this no-good cat, every day pitching a hissy-fit, and there was Leora patiently caring for it even though it didn't deserve none. I told her all that hissing only highlighted the kind of woman she was, and not to let it get her down. She thanked me, said what I'd said would send her to her evening prayers comforted, and would I stop by tomorrow and relieve her of some bell peppers? I promised to oblige. Went to bed feeling right comforted myself.

'Course there was no suspecting the morning. The wind kicked up, TV said gusts at thirty-five miles an hour, which I figured to be a sign fall was falling, so I was glad. Leora never liked wind, but then she's always kept her hair too long. Down to her shoulders, even at her age. I waited at her kitchen table while she rummaged in the junk drawer for a rubber band. She said her fingers were stiff, so I made her pony tail, and we headed out back.

Right away, we heard the wind playing Leora's rickety, old fence like a wooden harp. Not exactly music to pay money for, but we both knew that

sound was fixin' to cost her plenty in the way of a new fence. I was telling her about Chuck's wife's cousin with the fence business out in Forney when we neared the shed. Suddenly Leora turned rock hard, stopped in her tracks.

Oh my. That fence had been clattering so loudly that little Winnie Fletcher didn't hear us coming. We caught her, not that she knew, squatting next to the shed with Hissy rubbing up against her legs. Winnie laid her thumb right between the baby cat's eyes and stroked up. I swear I could feel fire burning in Leora's heart.

She marched right up to the girl, who spun around, but not before Leora had an old-fashioned hold of her ear. "Move," she barked. 'Course, Hissy was long gone. "Let go!" The child squirmed, but Leora had a firm pinch. Ear dragging is all in the elbow. You have to hold your elbow just right. And Leora did that — through the gate and right on up to the Fletcher's front door.

I stayed on the sidewalk, figured this was Leora's battle, but I didn't miss nothing. You know those Fletchers got the smallest lot in town. A hop and skip from stoop to sidewalk. Not that that's important. Not everyone

makes a decent living. Regardless, soon as Mrs. Fletcher opened the door, Winnie spun free, boo-hooing. Clear as day, that Mrs. Fletcher stretched out like a mother bear protecting her baby.

I turned away, shaking my head, and not quite knowing what to do with myself. I'm not saying I didn't want to be there. Leora'd want me to stay, I knew that, or she'd have told me not to follow her when I did. But, well, I felt like the mother who waits in the car, waiting to see if her thirteen-year son scores his first kiss on his date's doorstep. Awkward.

"Is something wrong, Leora?" I heard Mrs. Fletcher say. Glancing over, I saw her scoop up her year-old boy, half-naked in a t-shirt and diaper. He banged on her chest.

"Winnie was trespassing," Leora said, and Mrs. Fletcher put the baby back down. "I caught her handling a dangerous stray."

Winnie's head popped out from behind her mother's back. "Hissy's not dangerous to me!"

Mrs. Fletcher glanced at me, then touched the top of Winnie's head and said, "Go on to your room." The girl scooted away and the baby wailed and banged

on its mother's thigh.

"Wait, Win," the mother called. "Take Bubba."

"She could get hurt," Leora said as Winnie stomped back in.

"Leora," Mrs. Fletcher said, all sweet, as Winnie hoisted the baby onto her hip, "My daughter does have an affection for animals."

Leora told me later that the little darling with an affection for cats stuck out her tongue before carrying the baby down the hall.

"I'm very sorry Winnie troubled you," Mrs. Fletcher said, "but I have to tell you I've been concerned about this cat. Is it true you're feeding some wild thing you found under your shed?"

Leora straightened, said boldly and real loud (which I figured was for my benefit), "It seemed the right thing."

I took about four steps and came up beside her, so she wouldn't think she had to work so hard for me to hear. I tipped my head at Mrs. Fletcher, but she ignored me. Kept on talking.

"But the kitten hasn't had any shots."

POTTERY Beverly Fetterman

