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Mamaw's House

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Leora stared at her blankly. I'm sure, toting up the cost of those shots.

"I don't like a stray being so near my children."

Leora got that same look in her eyes that she gets when she's fixin' to beat me in gin.

"Mrs. Fletcher," she said, "Hissy's not even big enough to climb the fence. Maybe if you kept Winnie on your side . . ."

"I can do that," Mrs. Fletcher nodded, shifting her weight, "but just how long do you think you can keep that animal on your side of the fence?"

Leora hushed real fast, glanced at me. What was I supposed to do?

"Cats carry diseases, Leora. Parvo, dysentery, worms . . ."

Leora looked Mrs. Fletcher square in the eye, then turned all of a sudden, and walked back across the Fletcher's weed lawn to her own home. I bid Leora's neighbor a civilized farewell, but added, "Climbing that old fence, it's just not safe."

The woman closed the door, but I was already moving after my friend.

I tried to tell Leora what was what, but she didn't want to talk about it. Just said, "Let's go to a movie." I asked which one and she shrugged, said I could pick.

I got out my car keys, and we stopped at my place first so I could pick up a sweater. The whole drive, I could tell that a part of Leora was real angry, being scolded like that by a woman half her age. But there was another part of her, too — that part that makes her get up in the middle of the night and buy cat food at the twenty-four hour Wal-Mart — that was thinking it all over. I took 80 west to the Starplex exit. We ate lunch at the McDonald's. Sat in back by the restrooms, nowhere near the playground, then we took in a Julia Roberts movie.

The next day, I saw Leora at the market and teased her. Was she buying more Cats D'light? She told me she had plenty of cat food left, but that she didn't think she'd feed Hissy today. "Oh," I said. I didn't know what else to say.

The day after, my phone rang and Leora asked me, "Could I stop by?" I said I wasn't baking 'til tomorrow, but she insisted.

When I got there, she picked up a half-empty bag of Cats D'Light and took me out by the shed. I waved at Winnie, who I could clearly see peering through the slats, then watched as Leora unlocked the shed. She walked deep inside and poured out some cat food pellets. As soon as we backed far enough away, Hissy darted out from beneath the shed, ran inside it, and pounced on the food. Leora dashed forward and slammed the shed door.

"Why'd you do that, Leora?" Winnie asked, all frantic, her left eye and nose showing through where a slat was missing.

Leora didn't answer, just snapped the lock, then led me back inside and used the telephone.

I sat with her, watching Fox News and talking about that missing pregnant woman. Two hours later, Animal Control rang the front bell. Leora answered it, said to meet her round back, where she explained everything to the catcher as he pulled a long pole with a wire noose on the end out of his truck. Leora opened the gate, worked the combination of the shed, then stepped back. I heard Winnie breathing hard behind the fence.

The cat hissed up a storm soon as the catcher stepped inside. He had a little trouble slipping the noose around Hissy's neck — the cat climbed up the aluminum and perched on an interior cross beam — but he got it. He swung the stray, still hissing and spitting, out of the shed, through the gate, and into a cage on the truck.

Winnie screamed and ran for her mother.

"Thank you," Leora told Animal Control, and he nodded. She offered him the half-empty bag of soft-chew Cats D'light, but he said they had a special brand they used at the shelter and not to worry. He climbed in his truck, but Leora stopped him. "You think she'll get adopted?"

The man kept his eyes on the steering wheel and shrugged. "Stranger things," he said, then turned on the ignition.

As the truck drove away, I slipped my arm around Leora's shoulder, told her she'd done the right thing. She nodded, then held up the bag of cat food. "What do I do with this?"

"Throw it out."

She grunted and smiled at the same time. "I think I'd like to see that movie again, the one from yesterday."

I understood. "But no McDonald's this time," I said, following her inside Roy's old shed. "Let's try that new Chinese buffet 'cross the highway."

She nodded, placed the cat food bag on the floor, then picked up the few tools — a wrench, a screwdriver, and I don't know what — that the catcher had accidentally knocked off the pegboard when he yanked Hissy out.

"Chinese. . ." Leora wondered as she replaced the tools. "Do they eat cats?"

I laughed. It was wicked, but I laughed. "That's dogs," I said, "with Chinese barbeque."

She smiled and picked up the Cats D'Light. "You know, this stuff really stinks." She swung the bag toward my nose. I ducked, told her to knock it off.

"Chinese, it is," she said, then looked over at me, her eyes all smiling. "You think Winnie will survive?"

"Nope," I said, and we started walking toward the house. "So it's a good thing she's saved."

On the way into town, Leora asked me to stop by Helping Hands Thrift Store and Food Pantry. She marched straight to the back door, rang the bell, and handed off two things: A brown bag full of home-grown tomatoes, green peppers, and jalapenos, and, well, don't you think some poor family out there has a cat to feed?



MAMAW'S HOUSE Toni Hubbard

In Memory

Susan Blick

Each time I tell myself
I will not remember you,
But thinking of you now,
I travel down that path of memory
Becoming trapped in the thicket,
Where the barbs of the brambles
Still exist, as pointed and sharp

As they ever were
Piercing me to the bone
And drawing blood anew.
I struggle not to cry out,
Not to slip inside mind's suicide
Of self-inflicted thought,
And so turn my attention
Away from the deep woods
As if to heal and scar,
And I think I shall not
Travel there again