In Memory

Susan Blick
Collin College

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

“Don’t like a stray being so near my children!”

Leora got that same look in her eyes that she gets when she’s faint 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 Fesper, 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 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

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 flipped my arm around Leora’s shoulder, told her she’d done the right thing. She grunted and smiled at the same time. “I think I’ll like 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, picked up 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?