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A Stray

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When Did I Fall in Love With You?

Mary Baumgartner

Was it that early September day,
When as we spent time by a quiet lake,
You heard my call and came my way
Your arms the drowning child to take?

Maybe it was at the end of that evening,
When in your eyes I saw the longing
To give your love to those around you,
Until the loneliness would no more abound you?



MISSED A SPOT Jennifer Triggs

Or was it that time when I ceased crying,
Because in the endless depth of your blue eyes,
That day I found myself forever smiling,
My heart so full of joy that it could touch the skies?

Perhaps it was the day I felt alone inside,
And I could think of no one else but you.
And when I found you by my side,
My soul's search ended and I felt so new?

I know not when my love for you began.
I know that I'll never find someone like you again.
For it is God who joins soul to soul.
And God is love by you I once was told.

A Stray

Lisa Torcasso Downing

LEORA HOISTED HER SLACKS AT THE KNEE **AND DROPPED TO THE GROUND.**

With her bottom stuck straight up in the air, she peered under the shed and clucked, "Here, Kitty," then went still, not even breathing as her eyes darted back and forth, hunting for the stray that had attacked her for no good reason. Why, all Leora'd done was turn the hose to the tomatoes when out from under that shed jumped a black fur ball, making the most god-awful sound. From where I stood, it looked to nearly cause Leora — well, there ain't no polite way to say this — to nearly wet herself. I could've laughed 'til high noon, but I knew Leora wouldn't take kindly to that, so I kept right on picking myself some tomatoes from her garden while she grabbed Roy's old rake from inside the shed.

Now, Leora never was soft on inedible animals, especially strays, and I could see she had no intention of letting that little beast terrorize her garden. She fisted that rake and lowered herself so that her cheek set right in the dirt beside the shed. It was clear as anything that she meant that little homeless cat no good. Problem was, she couldn't make out exactly where under the shed the animal was hid. That shed was one of those assemble-yourself, aluminum contraptions — just the kind of thing Roy'd buy — but he didn't trouble to flatten the land before he screwed it together. Needless to say, it didn't set level. So Roy took himself a wheelbarrow and borrowed some bricks left over from the church addition. When he hoisted up the far side, he created a gloriously dark crawl space for critters in the family way and saddled Leora with her current strife.

It was dark as Hades under that shed and so was the cat. Though Leora made some valiant pokes under there with the rake handle, she just couldn't get a good smack on the thing, much less scare it off. One thing about Leora, she ain't easily discouraged. One thing about me? Well, I'm not stupid. I got my tomatoes, said my "thank-yous," and "va-moosed" out of there before she dragged me into her battle with that wild kitten.

The way Leora tells it, she'd been flat on her belly for more than an hour, fishing around like that for a solid hunk of cat, blindly chasing hissing sounds, and — I'm certain, though she ain't likely to admit it — cursing up a storm. All of a sudden, out of the blue, behind her she says she heard a fence plank groan.

So, she glanced back over the rake tines and found that little Winnie Fletcher had clambered up the back side of her fence and was standing on the cross board, staring down at her through eyes as round as store-bought onions.

(continued on page 6, second column)

Autumn 2001

J.P. Reese

We always believed that spring would come;
Believed that summer would flower again,
Ill-prepared for this season of drought.

The Angel-Wing mounds in finished growth.
Petals drop over the berm.
Red cherries ripen under an Indian sun.

Apples firm for picking, their juice runs tart, cool
Over our tongues. Seed rests in fallen fruit to spread
The possible beneath this always uncertain earth.

We crate the remains of this final harvest;
Wrap roots pulled from furrows in yesterday's news;
Avert our eyes from its pictures of death.

We shoulder the leavings of all that is past.
The end of the season begins.



BASKET Justin Houston

(from page 5)

"Whatcha doin', Leora?"

Leora let go the rake. "That's Mrs. Harper to you," she said and pushed herself stiffly to her hands and knees. "You shouldn't be up there." She steadied herself by leaning against the shed wall as she got on her feet. "You get on down, you hear."

"Why?"

Leora wiped her palms against her pant legs. "Because it ain't safe."

"Why?"

That just iced Leora's cake, this child questioning her like that. She picked up the rake and shook it at the girl. "Because I say so." Leora turned her back and marched toward the shed door. It was no secret that my dear, old friend had rued the day the Fletcher clan moved in next door, "all a hundred and ninety-three of them," as she liked to put it. Truth is, the Fletchers only had five kids, but they were home-schooled and fast-moving little creatures, so Leora got her fill of them after about a month of neighborliness.

And Winnie? That Winnie . . . Why, she was the worst of all.

"Precocious" is what the girl's mother called her. She bragged that Winnie had accepted Jesus when she was just three, said the child marched right down to the altar and told that preacher, "I'm saved!"

Leora leaned the rake against Roy's old smoker, just where they always kept it, and then backed out, closing up the shed door. She had her own word for what Winnie Fletcher was, but she was trying real hard not to say it anymore.

Winnie said, "I know you got a baby cat under there."

"That so?" Leora turned, looked up at the child. She told me the sun shone right in her eyes, but she didn't want the child to see her blink.

"Uh-hum. I know something else, too."

Leora folded her arms. "Surprise, surprise."

"I know Jesus wouldn't like the way you're treating that kitten." And with that, Winnie leaped off the fence, leaving the slats to quiver like plucked guitar strings.

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I can't say Leora is much of a talker, but she called me next morning, said how all night long, she tossed and turned. Couldn't sleep what with worrying about how Winnie was right. "No matter how ornery a creature is," Leora said, "if God made it, I suppose it has a right to be treated respectable." She confessed she'd been awful to that little cat, even after Winnie skee-daddled. Not only had she tried to skewer it with a rake and flush it out with the hose, she'd shot at it with a can of Raid Roach Control.

"And it's too young to even skitter up the fence," she said.

Now I could hardly believe my ears. It just didn't seem like Leora to fret so about a stray, but darn if she didn't get up out of bed and drive to the all-night Wal-Mart there in Mesquite, bought a big ol' bag of soft-chew Cats D'Light. Said she wore her robe and slippers right into the store. Then — she said it was after midnight — she poured cat food in the grass by the shed and went back to bed.

In the morning, the food was gone.

Leora's bosom swelled with pride over her generosity. We could all see it, the way she walked into Bible study, walked around the block, walked through the grocery store with her chest all puffed out like she was a teenage girl who'd just discovered underwire braziers. Of course, it was Liddie Sykes who made the first wisecrack out loud. Something about how those Hollywood starlets wouldn't need boob jobs if they'd only find themselves a stray cat to cuddle. If it hadn't been so funny a thing to say, I might've shot back and defended Leora, but as it was, I just laughed. And I kept on laughing — we all did — and she kept on feeding that darn cat.

It was no surprise to any of us, except Leora, how fast that cat grew. Doubled its size in a week. Problem was, though, it never got any friendlier, at least not so's I could tell. Leora and me, we have this arrangement. I get fresh vegetables from her and she gets fresh, homemade bread from me. Not that bread machine junk with a crust as stiff as bark, but good, hand-kneaded honey wheat that let rise in my kitchen and cook on a stone. So I'm at her place fairly regular. I saw her try, really try, to make

nice to that cat. She fed it everyday, like I said, but she also stopped chasing it, swinging at it and hollering at it.

Still, every time I was over there, no matter how Leora tried to share her space with that cat, it'd arch its back. Shoot every hair straight up like a porcupine. And hiss? Why, that little fur-ball hissed something fierce at poor Leora. It was bad enough when the thing was tiny, but what with it growing so fast, I figured it just might someday sink its claws into Leora's throat. Draw fatal blood like its relatives the she-lion over there in Africa. But I didn't say nothing. Just watched, day by day, as the kitten grew.

Not 'til mid-August anyway, when we had that cold snap. Temperatures fell to, oh, I'd say about ninety degrees, so Leora and me, we fixed up some iced sweet tea and enjoyed the afternoon on Leora's front porch, fanning ourselves with folded newspaper and eating from a platter of sliced and salted tomatoes. All she wanted to talk about was that kitten. The way its eyes turned to dark slits and how its tongue turned white if it hissed a good long time. It was clear Leora's pleasure in doing right was curdling, even if she didn't let on to anybody else.

She poured me a second glass, and I commended her for taking on responsibility for one of God's creatures. She huffed, said nothing good had come of it, then added, "Isn't love supposed to win all?"

The words popped out without me thinking. "Do you love the cat?"

She gazed at me a while. The horse across the road whinnied. The Johnson boy drove by in his new Chevy truck. "Well, I might love it," she said, "with a little barbeque sauce."

I darn near fell over laughing, but the point was made. Leora decided to name the cat. Hissy. I said it fit.

But even named, that cat was a devil, spitting and hissing and gulping its Cats D'Light. Leora might have been able to endure if it weren't for Winnie's blue eyes constantly watching over that fence. A home-schooled child can have too much time on its hands, and Winnie was obsessing on Hissy. Leora complained that each morning, that child climbed her fence and stayed there nearly all day, singing and talking and cooing, trying to coax Hissy out from under that shed.

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



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