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## Ch. 6 My Three Ferals

Fri, 2008-08-22 16:02 — Robin Olson

"There's a cat outside!" Sam shouted from the living room.

"Where?"

"Over there, on the hill by the big rock. See it? Is it a tabby?"

I leaned over and looked where Sam was pointing.

"Yes, but what's a cat doing outside in the snow? It's bloody cold outside. Who would let their cat out in this nastiness?"

Sam just looked at me and shrugged.

Sure enough there was a small tabby weaving her way between the boulders in my front yard, not seeming to care about walking on the snow. She looked well enough, but I had to wonder if she was a feral.

A year ago, I began to volunteer with a rescue group that specializes in TNR (Trap, Neuter, Return) of feral cats. I've been keeping an eye out, wondering if I'll ever see any in my neighborhood. There are calculations that say we have 10,000 here in my town alone, and further figures that place 500,000 to 1,000,000 free-roaming (ferals and friendly strays who are abandoned) cats just in Connecticut! At the alarming rate cats can reproduce, it's vital there are groups like ours, who actively seek out cats, get them sterilized and if they can't be socialized, return them to the outdoors. It's a far better life, than a short stay at an overloaded shelter where no one would adopt them and they'd eventually be euthanised after going through a fear filled life in a cage.

While I hate that the cats do live outdoors, it's a much more noble life for them and being sterilized, they, at least, will be healthier and less at risk for spreading or catching disease. They are never released to "fend for themselves." Their groups are managed by caring humans who feed and monitor them, trapping them if they ever get injured and need medical treatment. Other than that, they are free to do their cat-thing.

Of course, this is all great on paper, until you actually get involved on a deeper level than donating money or doing graphic design for "Supper for Strays" events, which was mostly what I'd been doing before.

Over the course of the next week, we spotted the tabby and her feline companion, a black cat...then a third, all gray cat. They were out at all hours, in all weather. I asked around but no one knew anything about them. I put food outside in small paper bowls and it was always gone when I'd go to check on it after a few hours had passed. I checked on the feeding station every so often, until I actually saw the tabby eating. She was gulping down the food as fast as she could and she ate an entire bowl full of food. This was no pampered house-cat who had three square meals a day.

A few times I caught a glimpse of the tabby and black cat walking through the yard, stopping to mark selected fallen trees or rocks. They seemed to be companions of some sort. I was glad they had each other, but with the winter chill far from gone, I did worry about them each night when I went to bed. What were they doing? Where did they sleep? How did they manage when it rained or snowed?

There were days when the weather was so poor that the food didn't get eaten. I didn't see any paw prints in the snow. I worried more and more.

With the guidance of Monica, the co-founder of our group, I set up a feeding schedule—only putting out food during the day (to help keep other wild animals, who tend to be nocturnal, out of the food). If the food wasn't eaten or if I saw a cat, I made notes. After three weeks, I knew the cats would come late morning, early afternoon. If I put out a trap during that time, I'd be likely to capture one or more of them fairly easily.

Monica showed me how to set up a humane trap and how to keep the cat in the trap until it was taken to the Vet to be sterilized. There were ways to change out newspaper pads, so the cat had a place to void and ways to put in food and water without risking being bitten—and with Sam already having been bitten badly once, I had to be careful, myself.

I had two traps. I had two days. It was Wednesday. By Friday, there was a mobile Spay/Neuter Vet group coming to do cat sterilizations, for very low cost and it would help our group a lot if I could trap these cats in a timely manner.

But I never did this before!

I set up the first trap in a screened in three-season porch that's under the first floor, off the basement, of my house. I lined the trap with newspaper, just as instructed. I placed very expensive, very very tasty canned cat food in the trap. I had a big

blanket ready to drop over the top once the cat took the bait. Keeping the trapped cat covered would keep the cat feeling safe and more importantly, calm. I couldn't leave the house while I had a trap out. It was too dangerous to leave a trapped cat alone for too long.

I went upstairs and set the timer on my microwave to 60 minutes. I'd have to check the trap every hour for the time I had the trap set. My cats were napping, post-breakfast, so I figured I wouldn't be bothered if I wanted to make my daily egg sandwich and watch the news while waiting.

No sooner than I sat down to take a bite of my sandwich, I heard a muffled "thud" from downstairs. Could it be? Did I trap a cat???

I raced downstairs and just before I got to the door of the porch, I peeked slowly around the corner. The black cat was in the trap!!!! It was bouncing around, frightened. I grabbed the blanket, opened the sliding door and tossed the blanket over the cat. I told the kitty it would be OK, then awkwardly grabbed for the handles of the trap, feeling for it under the folds of the blanket. I lifted the 3 foot long cage. As soon as I did that the cat started to bounce around inside the cage making a terrible clatter! The trap was long and off balance. I had to struggle to get it up two short flights of stairs and into the living room. I knew the cat could have fleas, worms, or worse..so with my heart racing, I rushed through the house, fumbling with the double front doors and into the open garage.

I tossed flattened cardboard boxes onto the floor and placed the covered trap onto it. That way the trap wouldn't be sitting on cold concrete and the cat would be more comfortable while waiting for the Vet visit in two days time.

I lifted the blanket off the end of the trap to get a better look at my frightened captive and to make sure it wasn't a friendly stray. The small black cat stared fearfully at me. It had a little white spot on it's chest, just like my former-feral, Cricket. It was very small with a sweet little face and round yellow eyes. It hissed at me, then cried. I was told that ferals don't cry, so I hoped that perhaps this cat knew human contact, but had been on it's own for awhile and reverted to being wild. I couldn't know. From the crouched posture, it didn't seem like this was a lovey-dovey cat. It was safer to let things be. All I could do was give it some food, re-cover the trap and leave it alone to calm down so as not to hurt itself.

Then the guilt began to trickle into my veins. I had never known a cat that didn't like me sooner or later and I certainly never had a cat I might never be able to touch. What was I doing, trapping cats? Maybe this was just a mean house cat?

I went back into the house and with hands shaking and dialed the phone, reaching Monica with the good news.

"One down, two to go!"

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The next morning I did the same thing—prepared the second trap. I was already an old pro, so I was certain I'd easily catch the tabby or gray cat. Ha! I'm so arrogant! Or maybe not. Maybe it was making egg sandwiches that caused the cats to trap themselves? Just as I lifted that morning's egg sandwich to my eager lips, I thought I heard something, ran downstairs, ready to drop an old mattress pad over the trap, but it was empty. No sign of a cat ever being there. Gee, 15 minutes had passed, you'd think I would have trapped a cat already.

I finished my breakfast while it was still warm—a special treat for me. Then I heard a thud, again. I ran downstairs with Pavlovian determination. There in the trap, flailing miserably was the tabby. I grabbed the covering and tossed it over the trap, then brought my latest captive up to the garage to reunite with her buddy.

I put the traps close together and covered them with the same cloth. The cats were very quiet, other than a hiss if I got too close. The tabby was probably a feral, too, but she was in very good condition. Her fur was lovely brown with jagged black stripes, a proper "tiger" pattern. Her eyes were similar in shape and size to that of her brother or sister. She had a very sweet face, but looked so very sad. I began to feel very badly. Not only were the cats stuck in a small trap for at least another day, but their next experience was going to be having surgery and waking up back in a trap, not knowing what was going on. I found myself wishing animals could talk or understand what I was saying. There was no way to tell them that all this effort was being done because we care so much, not to be cruel in any way.

I got the Tabby set up with food and water and left her to quiet down, knowing she was near her sibling.

I managed to get a third trap to set up for the gray cat, though I was worried about managed three more cats with the seven I already had. What if it belonged to someone? I'd seen it the day before, walking from my yard to the neighbors. I wanted to chase after it, but there was no way I'd ever outrun a cat. I never saw the cat before that day and didn't know if it was a feral, too. I'd been told there was a feral cat who had a litter of kittens last summer just down the street. A neighbor had called our group, looking for help, but was unable to trap any of the cats. Perhaps this was the mother (the gray cat) and the two known offspring? It sure would be great to finally help this family since they'd already survived most of the winter together.

That afternoon, I was working on the book and I thought I heard something, but dismissed it. The timer went off on the microwave some time later. I went downstairs just to take a look. Sure enough, the gray cat was sitting forlornly in the trap. It was a big cat, much bigger than the others. Surely this was their momma!

I brought the cat to the garage and put her perpendicular to the other two traps. They could all see each other, but none of them gave me a sign that they were acquainted and I didn't know if they would do anything in front of me, anyway. I thought this was a good idea so they wouldn't feel too lonely, but I didn't want them too close in case they weren't as friendly with each other as I had hoped.

I looked at the grey cat. One ear was deformed from fights, her face was not very handsome, but her eyes told me she might

not be feral. There was just something about this cat. She didn't hiss at me or growl, but just sat quietly in the trap. I gave her food and water and changed out the dirty newspaper liners from the other traps. The next morning I was going to have to figure out how to get the cats to the mobile Vet using my very nice, clean, non-smelly car. Monica had casually mentioned the cats might pee while in their traps and once I started to drive. The traps barely fit across my back seat. I'd have to stack one on top of the other and hope to fit the third one between one trap and the back of my front seat. It was going to be an impossible task...and if any of them peed...there goes the upholstery. Ugh. I was thinking about the metal edges of the trap scraping up the nice leather. What I will do for a cat!

...or not.

So I opted to beg my trusty boyfriend, Sam, to give us all a lift in his small wagon. He could drop them off on his way to work. It was perfect for transporting the cats and we could easily put a tarp down on the cargo area-if he would agree to help out.

After a few promises and small bribes, Sam agreed. The next morning, at 7:30 AM we loaded the cats into the car. The traps just fit. I followed Sam in my car with 3 empty cat carriers. Once the cats had been sterilized, they would be placed into the carrier, not back into the traps. This was always a tough thing for us to deal with because it meant most of the cats would have to be moved BACK into a trap for the recovery period of one to two days, then released back to the outdoors once they were back on their paws, so to speak.

We got to the mobile Vet in good time, early in fact. After unloading the cats, I really started to feel ill with worry. None of the cats were going to have the luxury of a pre-surgery blood test and I had no idea if any of them were already sick...or much worse..pregnant. This is what worried me more than anything else. If any of the cats were pregnant, I'd have to know about it before they went to the Vet. Odds are there was no way I'd be able to tell without touching them. Being wild, there was no hope to touch them and no way to know if they were carrying babies.

I don't care to make a political stand about pro-life or pro-choice in humans, but being a Buddhist, it would be very wrong for me to knowingly let any beings die at my hand. I had to be rational. A pregnant feral cat is firstly not as healthy as a well-fed domestic. She is most likely very taxed by the growing kittens and with no food easily at hand, she is likely to lose some of the litter or even die, herself. The kittens can easily die from exposure to the elements or wildlife using them as a food source. It's a cruel, ugly existence for creatures who are not native to Connecticut outdoors and who really don't do well fending for themselves. With overpopulation burdening the animal shelters, if I had a pregnant feral and chose to keep her confined to a large dog crate, I'd have to deal with a wild cat, then hope to help her offspring become domesticated and face putting the mother back outdoors as soon as the kittens could survive without her. I realized I had gotten myself into a terrible crossroads...I so wanted to do what was right for those cats and all I could hear was the sound of my Mother's voice, telling me to let them go and "Be free" and forget about doing all these things to the poor cats.

I didn't even know if the cats were male or female. I knew that once they were anesthetized, any offspring would die in utero right away. My throat got dry and I felt woozy. I started to plead silently in my head that all the cats would be male or that they would all be fine. Please don't be pregnant.

I asked Monica to look over the cats. We couldn't tell much about them. There was no hope. I had to let them be taken into the Mobile Vet van and wait. It was 9am. I had to wait until 4:30pm to find out how they were doing and what their prognosis was. It was a long wait.

After the others claimed their cats, mostly good folks who could only afford the low cost spay/neuter for their pets, I was called upon to pick up my three ferals. The Vet tech, rude, obviously in a bad mood after telling many nervous owners how to care for the pets post-surgery, she quickly glanced down at her notes and blurted out that the tabby was a female, the black cat was a female, the gray cat was a...MALE! They were all sterilized. Nothing was said about any of them being pregnant! So I was wrong about the gray cat, but at least everyone was fine and they'd recover in a few days time. What a relief!

I gave Monica back the traps and loaded the now-filled cat carriers into my car. The cats were all woozy from being drugged. It was a very cold March day. I couldn't face having those cats in the garage, in the cold, to recover. They hadn't been really nasty to me at all. I thought that maybe if the girls were still about a year old, that I could help turn them around?

Monica, sensitive to my naive desire to give them every chance, said she would go get me a big dog crate to put the girls in and the boy could live in the big cat carrier for a day, until I could get another crate. I'd let them warm up in my guest room (of course) where I'd begin evaluating their temperments and hope to help them become domesticated.

I had time. I'd done this before—sort of. Maybe I could help them? But...3 more cats? That would make 10. 10 is too many cats. These 3 would be separated from the others, but still...that's a lot of cats. What had I done? Maybe I should just let them go back outside? I would give it a few weeks, then decide.

We got the crate set up and got the girls settled. I felt awful, but the best I could do for the big boy was to face his open cat carrier up against another open, larger cat carrier. One side had the cat, the other side had a small litter pan. It was less cramped than the trap was, but still not great. I vowed to run out the next day to get him a crate, too.

The cats were miserable and groggy, but they were safe and in a nice room with cable TV and a phone! Hopefully they'd be impressed with the fancy digs and just come around in 24hrs. Ha!

Again, I left them alone with a heavy heart, hopeful I was doing the right thing for them. This was a complex situation-I didn't necessarily have litter mates and most likely none of the cats had much human contact, if any. I just had to wait and see.

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The next day I went shopping. Always fun if it involves buying cute things for cats. I got a second, smaller dog crate, two

small, one-level kitty "condos", some toys, treats and food. I also bought synthetic feline phermones in a handy plug-in air freshener dispenser. Theoretically, the scent released from the diffuser would let the cats know to be calm and relaxed. I put a second diffuser outside the door to the guest room so any of my bratty cats wouldn't be stressed by the new smells.

The clerk at the register made a comment about if I'd like to donate to their pet charity and I told them that everything I was buying was for a local charity already. Hearing that he excused himself for a moment and left me wondering what was going on. A few minutes later he came back and handed me a fat coupon book, filled with special savings on cat related goods. I took it as a sign I was doing the right thing.

I got home and set up the new crate and loaded the big gray into his new home. He immediately crammed himself into the tiny kitty condo. I have no idea how he fit into it, he was such a big boy! The girls stuffed themselves into the bottom of their kitty condo, too. I realized the condos would have to go. If I was to have any success domesticating these cats, they would have to feel like they could not hide from me. I gave them a break, vowing to take their small comforts away, for now. It was tough love. I hated it.

Over the next few days my guilt grew worse. Working with basically two sets of cats was going to be very tough. The gray, I was calling; Buddy-boy, was too big for his crate and too big for his small litter pan. He still had that unique, harsh, intact male scented urine and he often overshot his litter pan. The room reaked. I knew it would fade in a few days, but I had to make some changes. I also tried to interact with the cat, but he was very depressed. I put on thick padded gloves and tried to pet him. He shrank back from my touch, but did not hiss or growl. I kept at it and slowly and suddenly he started to PURR! I could tell that this big guy had had a family. Probably not a very nice family, based on the way he shrank back from my hand, but a family nonetheless. I felt relief. This was the right choice. In time he could come around and we could get him a home. He was 5 years old, so they thought, and had been outdoors for a long while, which explained his battered appearance. Within a few days I decided to just leave the door open on this crate and allow him to explore the room and stretch out. I also changed out his litter pan for a much bigger model!

Letting Buddy out was a good idea, but it did cause the poor females some stress. They were still caged, so I knew they were safe and Buddy was fairly mellow around them, but when I wasn't in the room, that's when I would hear them making a rucuss. This certainly wouldn't help me get the girls calmed down, but what would I do? Now my job was going to be a lot harder.

Monica came over to visit and evaluated the cats. She thought Buddy might be potentially adoptable, but he DID nip. I think it was a matter of being love-starved and wanting it so badly he would nip. He would probably overcome that in time.

Of the two girls, the black kitty, Madison, was the most brave and willing to come to me (if I had food in my hand). She liked to play, while her sister would sit in a corner, hunched up, looking down at the floor. Monica thought she could take Madison, once things settled down with her fostering situation and that the separation might push Madison to seek out the companionship of humans over her sister-cat.

That would leave me with Bronte, her sister, and Buddy-boy. So for the next few days I just kept everyone fed and clean and didn't worry about trying to socialize them further. The weather was getting warmer and with the arrival of spring, came time for my birthday and I had a lot to do.

Instead of having a miserable, depressing, nothing on my birthday, this year I was determined to celebrate with a real party. I'd been planning it for the past few weeks and time was quickly running out. The cats were doing well, so I focused on getting things set up for the party.

The Friday before my party, I decided to open the window in the guest room with the feral cats. I had had it open a very little bit, for the first few days to air out the male stinky-pee smell. Buddy seemed to be uninterested in the ripping up the window screen, so I opened the window a few inches-besides, the room was on the second floor and below the window was dirt and big rocks. Surely it was fine to give the cats some nice fresh air?

You know that "voice" people have in their heads? The one that warns them about things...the one we all ignore from time to time then regret it later? I heard that voice warning me not to leave that window open so much, but I disregarded that voice. I so wish I hadn't done that.

Sam took that Friday off to help me prepare for the party, which was the following day. I spent a few minutes with the cats in the morning, opened that fateful window, then left them for the remainder of the day. That night I heard something up in the guest room, then got distracted by some chore I had to do. Suddenly it was 9pm and we were starving. We called the local pizza shop and placed an order. Sam and I walked out to the driveway and got in his car. He turned on the headlights and started to pull out of the driveway.

In the glow from the headlights, I saw a cat in the front yard. At first I thought; "Oh shit, another feral cat." Then I realized it was BUDDY!!! I screamed at Sam to shut off the car and I jumped out the door calling after the cat. He disappeared into the dark. I ran to the guest room and saw a gaping hole in the screen window. Buddy had ripped it open and jumped out of the window!

I ran to the basement and into the room where I had fed and trapped the cats. I called and called, hoping Buddy would come to me, but there was no sign of him. I was hysterically crying and screaming about how stupid I was. There was no consoling me. I had no idea if Buddy had a broken leg, internal injuries or a head injury. After all that work, he was gone and I had a terrible feeling I would never see him again. Sam did his best to comfort me, but I sent him away to get our dinner and I sat down and called Monica.

I apologized to her husband, who picked up the phone. I was calling very late, but I had to talk to Monica. She got on the phone and I told her what happened and she did what my Mother probably would have done, she laughed. She told me that

Buddy must have REALLY wanted to be outside again and made a joke that I must be a "great" foster to have cats throwing themselves out the window. She told me I did nothing wrong that this actually HAPPENS. She told me a few stories about other foster homes where kittens and cats had jumped out of windows and escaped, only to be trapped a few weeks later. Monica promised that he would come back and that I should just go back to leaving food outside and that we'd start trying to trap him again in a few weeks. I was in such shock that I could only remember seeing his face, but once Sam got home, he told me he had seen Buddy walk away, not limping. He was probably fine and that he would come back some day.

The morning after he escaped, I checked the ground outside where he had to have jumped. I've watched so many forensic detective shows on TV, I figured I'd be able to find clues to how well he survived the jump/fall. I couldn't tell a thing. I'm a loser.

Sam and I had put together a feral cat shelter a few weeks before and this was a good time to set it up outside. We chose a level spot in a sheltered area of the front yard, so I could see it from my window. I hoped Buddy would find it and, at least, have a place out of the rain and chill of the night. I started putting out food again and watching for some sign it was being eaten by him.

That was almost two weeks ago. I haven't seen Buddy since and the food rarely is eaten. I don't know if it was even Buddy who ate the food.

Every day I call out for Buddy. Every time I drive my car down the street, I look for him. I have fantasies that Buddy had a family and he went home to them. Sure, they didn't get him neutered, but maybe he DID have a home? Maybe this was what Buddy wanted? Maybe he really hurt himself when he jumped and maybe he was dead. He was a sweet, homely cat. I wanted to do more for him. Maybe, in time, we'll try to trap him again.

Since Buddy was gone, I closed the window and opened the door to the dog crate and let the feral-girls out of their cage. I think they enjoyed getting out and being able to run around. Madison really enjoyed playing with the feather on a stick toy and the little Cat Dancer. She was wary of me, but she'd come over and eat off a spoon, then jerk back if I tried to pet her (with no glove!) while she ate. Once she really got into eating, she'd let me pet her, not caring what I was doing, as long as she got the food. Once she was done eating, she'd run off. Oh well.

Bronte no better. She would just hide, look down and try to disappear. I could pet her bare handed and she didn't care. She hated it, but she wouldn't try to hurt me, at least. I was becoming more and more aware that the work it would take to turn the cats around would be more like a year's worth of time and it would only get them to a point where they'd be "shy-timids" with most people.

Monica came over to deliver de-worming medicine, since the cats were both sick with them and offered to take Madison, saying seclusion was the only way to force the cats to bond with a human. "Cats are social creatures. They need companionship and will seek it out from humans, if they have no other option." I was sad to see Madison go, but I figure she'll be back in a few days. Monica's been through this before and is giving Madison four days to show signs of being socialized. If she doesn't, Madison will come back here and be released with her sister. If Bronte doesn't improve and I find it unlikely she will, she'll go back outdoors, too. At least the worst of the weather is over for now and they'll both have good food and water available to them for the rest of their lives.

I can see the sweetness in them and I can see their wildness runs deep. I'm not ready to be totally honest and let them go. I don't want to drive down the road one day and discover they've been hit by a car or find them, dead from an animal attack. I know that this is their fate, but at least they'll face it not having to struggle for food or worry about safe shelter. They may not know the kind hand of a loving human-companion or the easy life of sleeping on a comfy sun-drenched bed, but they won't be facing the gas chamber. Whatever days they have, will be days of dignity and freedom...if I can just let them go.

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Six Weeks Later

Buddy never came back, nor was there any sign of him. Monica said he only showed up for "some pussy" and ended up being neutered for his effort! I can't say I blame him for staying away. I will always keep an eye peeled for that sleek grey ghost.

I've come to the realization that Madison is not Bronte's sister, but her daughter. It makes sense. Thinking back on it, the Vet who did the spay surgeries thought one of them was a 18 months old and the other only about 12 months. I thought it was an error on their part, but I've seen them with each other late at night, Madison will jump into the window sill where Bronte lies, relaxing at a safe distance from me. They chirp and burble to each other, then Bronte will lick Madison's face as they both settle down to snuggle next to each other, face to face. Here is my proof that the must never be parted—even if Madison would probably come around one day.

Over the past weeks, plans have been put in motion. There's a room on the ground floor level of my home that has only screens for windows. It is mere steps from the woods, accessed by a small deck and short staircase. Sam and I have re-covered each opening with "pet proof" (we'll see about that) screens. Each one is 4 feet across by 6 feet tall. It would be easy enough for any cat to get out...or something bad, a coyote or fox, to get back in. It is my aim to create a holding room for the girls. They'll be confined to a much nicer space, surrounded by thickening oaks and the occasional deer walking past the windows. To protect the cats futher, we added a layer of hardware cloth across the opening of each window, from the floor upwards of three feet in height. This should keep any serious predators out of the room. I hope. I hope. I hope.

We've also removed the "essence" of a door that exited the house to the woods. This door-esque wouldn't keep a mouse in or out. We couldn't find a replacement without it being a custom job so we built our own door, with a window, handles and a lock. It looks like it was a cub scout project, but it's much sturdier than the other and shines from a fresh coat of varnish. The best part of the door is centered at the bottom panel—a small, transparent, locking cat door. The door to freedom.

For now, the door will be locked, but in time, the door will swing freely open to allow Madison and Bronte their long awaited

release to their old home in the woods...and more importantly give them access BACK into the room whenever they have need of it.

Today I was able to trap Bronte and transfer her to the big dog crate which is now set up in the new room. I hate having her separated from Madison, but Madison is too scared and has found a good place to hide. I need to move her soon. I need the room. It's kitten season and the rescue group I volunteer with needs foster homes badly. If I could only just talk to her and tell her what I have planned, I'm sure she would gladly and ever so sweetly walk into the cat carrier so I could bring her downstairs to reunite with her Mother.

...5 Minues later...

...I checked on Madison. She was hiding in a one-level kitty condo I tucked away into a corner of the guest room. It ocured to me not to try to move her from the hiding place, but instead just grab a nearby sheet and cover the opening while quickly turning the condo on it's side. Madison didn't move, feeling safe in the darkness and I hustled my black-stretchy-pants covered behind down two flights of stairs to the sliding door that entered into her new home.

The condo was a little too big and a little too heavy. As I decended the staircase, I began to imagine what would happen if this cat got out. Firstly, I'd never see her again. My basement is a disaster area of empty "must-save" boxes, tubs of marked (Yes, I can be somewhat organized) Holiday decorations and the nightmare that is Sam's workshop. There is barely a clear path from the bottom of the last step to the doorway to the screen room. If I dropped the condo...it would be at least bad and, at most, a disaster.

I shouted out to Sam to open the door.

"You're lucky I'm not gluing up right now." and I thought;  
"You're lucky I don't have PMS. Open the damn door!"

Ahhh...love.

I got the cat-filled condo into the room! As soon as I removed the sheet from the opening of the condo, I saw Madison's little black head poke out of the opening. I pointed her towards the back of the big metal dog crate, where her Mother was snuggled up at the bottom of HER kitty condo. In a flash, Madison was out of her hiding place, trying to stuff herself into the condo with her Mother already inside. I saw Madison frantically digging away, then some growling, then whoosh...Madison is out of the condo, looking frightened and forelorn that her own blood would kick her out. It's not like there was ANY room in there for two cats, but that's besides the point.

...Later that day...

...I visited some friends whom had just adopted two cats from our group. Yay! The stupid thing I did was to drink a diet bottled tea beverage, not realizing I was drinking it after 4pm (my own personal witching hour. If I have caffeine after that, I might as well forget about sleeping).

...2 am last night...

....I can't sleep! Not only am I wired from the tea, but I'm so afraid for the cats. They're in a screened in room, steps from the woods, in the pathway of any sort of predator who could probably break into the room and kill them both. I've already checked on them a few times. I left a light on in the basement that would give their room the glow of a nightlight—at least they'd see what was coming.

I knew they were locked into the dog crate, so if something did get in, it wouldn't be able to get at them and hopefully I'd hear them crying for help. It was hot, humid and I left the windows open and turned off the fan so all I'd have to worry about is hearing any trouble over the sound of Sam's snores. By 2am Sam was passed out. I was trying to read "Persuasion," by Jane Austen. I'd never heard of it before and once I found out about it, I realized I must read it.

Easier said than done. What the heck was she trying to say? Every sentence was longer than the last. What does retrenching mean? (\_\_\_\_insert other comment about the book). Here I am, shivering with fear that my ferals are about to become a late night snack and I can't even immerse myself into a book enough to calm down.

Then I heard it.

Off in the valley, about a mile away came the eerie shrill of a coyote. Within a moment it was joined by another and yet another. They were far enough away so that it only just chilled me, until I heard another, very close. Just in the perimeter of my yard. I woke Sam up. I jumped out of bed and ran down to the screen room. I turned all the outside lights on.

The howling stopped.

I don't know if they had killed a deer or some other poor creature, but they were done, for now, slinking through the moonlit woods, looking for another meal.

How was I EVER going to sleep?

The cats were fine, but alarmed and hunkered down in their crate. I carefully arranged the coverings on the crate to keep any interested eyes off them.

By 3AM I had passed out at last. My strange dreams, this time of dating a guy named Oliver, who I was not into at all..I don't even know anyone named Oliver, followed by a scene where I was getting a big hug from Tom Cruise, only the front of his hair

was shaved off for some movie roll. It was a great hug, even though I'm not a crazy-passionate Cruise fan. The dream morphs into machine gun fire, which is where I wake up to the sound of...machine gun fire..wait...it's a BIG woodpecker, nailing the side of the house right near our bedroom. #\*\$&\$#\*~! It's 6AM! I had to get up and chase the stupid Flicker off the house. Of course it came right back and rat-ta-tat-a-tatted into the new cedar shake (expensive!) siding, so I got up again..and again.

I give up!

It's a new day. I went to Target. That always makes me happy. I bought things for the kittens-to-be and for the feral-girls. They now have their own bug-detering-lightbulb-filled lamp that's set to a timer. Each night they'll have a little bit of light to find their way back here and to just see what's going on around them a bit better. I realized I need to remove their food at night, too. I'm sure that doesn't help keep the scary beasts away.

I just checked on the girls. They're both out of their crate, lounging near the screen windows, sniffing at the breeze. Madison walked over to her mom, then scratched lightly at the floor, stretching out her back. She slipped alongside her Mum and looked out the window. It's the first time in the three months I've had them that they really looked "just fine, thank you." I can relax, just a bit. They have what they need. Though I hate that they can't enjoy central air conditioning and the comfort of a lap to sleep in, they are still safe in their room. For the next two weeks, they'll stay confined and then I'll unlock the kitty-door and their new adventure will begin.

I hope hope hope they come back every day. If I was a cat, I sure would love the fact that I don't have to chase my food down and I could come and go as I please without a care in the world.

Damn. As much as I convince myself this is the best for them, the more I feel like I've let them down and am handing them into the jaws of their own death.

...2 weeks later...

I made my promise. With reluctance I unlocked and propped open the swinging cat door. I said my goodbyes and left the cats to decide what they would do next.

On the sly, I checked on them. Viewing them from a window in the darkened basement, I could see but not be seen. They stayed in the room! Yay! Maybe they wanted to stay? Maybe I shouldn't let them go, after all? Right?

Wrong.

Each night I locked up the cat door, to prevent unwanted visitors from entering the girl's room. On the second day, hours after propping the cat door open, Bronte was gone. I felt punched in the gut-sick. Well, she was the wilder of the two and I knew she was unhappy being confined. Madison remained. Perhaps she was warming up to me after all our play-times together?

Or, perhaps I was wrong?

One morning, a few days later, I saw Bronte trying to get back into the room. She wouldn't enter, even though the door was propped open. I called to her, but she ran off. Madison watched her with some curiosity, as if she couldn't understand why her Mother wouldn't come back to be with her.

The bond between them was not meant to be broken. A week after their freedom was first offered, Madison left, too.

I spent some time cleaning up the room, washing the towels and blankets that had protected them from the harsher weather. Cleaning out the big dog crate they would never hiss at me from. I was very sad to see them go.

and that was it...I didn't see them again.

.....

Summer in Connecticut has been unreliable in the past few years. It most often meant ozone warnings, heat and the sort of humidity that makes me feel like I'm living in a fat guy's jock strap. Okay, I don't know what that feels like, per se, but when I go through five pounds of talcum powder, just to keep my own bits from gluing to themselves, that means it's humid. I hate it.

This summer has seen tremendous downpours, raging storms and even the rare event of a small, short-lived, tornado just a mile from my house.

Normally, I just turn on the central air conditioning (God bless whoever invented that and my Mother for bailing me out when my furnace died. "Gee, Mother, I could add central air conditioning for such a small extra fee, would you mind? Then you can come over every time it's too hot at your house?" I'm so thoughtful! Whatever...she wrote the check. I am forever in her debt.)

Now I fret. Every time it rains I think of Bronte and Madison, out there somewhere. Are they getting soaked? Did a tree fall on them? Aren't they starving? Did they get hit by a car? Are they cheating on me and being fed by one of my neighbors?

I left the light on each night. I put the food out during the day. So far the only creature to figure out the cat door are the damn raccoons-who I thought were too big to squeeze through the opening. Now I have to bar the door shut. The best I can do is open the entire door during the day and leave the food out and wait for them to come back.

Three weeks later....

...I'm a sucker. I keep putting out fresh food and water and they don't show up.

Four weeks later...

...where the HELL are they??? They must be DEAD. I did it. I sent them to their death. They are flying to the Rainbow Bridge. I hate doing feral trap and release! I should spent the year to turn them around!

Five weeks later..

...Shelby calls. She's my best friend who's so different from me that I don't understand how the heck we love each other so much. I mean, really. She has NO cats. I'm not sure she even LIKES them! What sort of friend is that? If I were friend-matchmaking myself, I wouldn't have read Shelby's ad and chose her to be a friend. That said, you can't get a better "bud" than Shelb. Cats or no, she's a straight-shooter, keeps me grounded and reminds me not to take myself too seriously or seriously at all. She's the one I grow old with. Yeah, there's Sam, but guys' don't count. It's the chick-connection.

Oops. So...Shelb calls to complain about her job. She hates it. She's hated it for years. She expidites complicated shipping for trade show booths and such. The people she works with would be locked in remedial sexual harrassment courses if only they had an on-site HR department. If they aren't surfing for porn or taking 100 cigarette breaks, they complain to each other, about each other.

While Shelby complains, I'm restlessly doing little quiet chores, while I have my phone jammed between my shoulder and my ear.

I rinse off a dish, wipe the counter down, straighen up some mail, then head for the pantry to scoop up some sunflower seed to top off the bird feeders with. As Shelby is talking about a new employee, a Goth-esque chick with no boobs who never works, I look out the window into the back yard.

It's Madison!!!!!! I see her casually walking through the tall, never-mown grass, around the garage! I interrupt Shelb, hang up and run downstairs to the girl's old room. Sure enough, a lot of the food has been eaten. Madison came back! But...where was Bronte?

The next morning I got my answer. I got up extra early to leave out the food and there they were, sitting close to each other under some oak trees in my yard. They looked surprisingly good. Of course, they weren't so happy to see me and ran off. Turds! After all my worrying and they run off! Hmpf!

At least they made it this far.

...

Over the next few weeks there was little sign of the cats, but I did get a surprise—Buddy. I saw him once, stuffing his face with the girls' food. I was glad to see him again and have put extra food out in case he returns.

I took in two kittens, who were quickly adopted, followed by six more kittens from different litters who drove me insane. I only had to endure...I mean..enjoy their company for 5 LONG days. The day they were due to leave, I stood at the window of the guest room where the kittens were being fostered. I looked out to see if Monica was driving down the driveway yet to relieve me of my burden..I mean embarrassment of riches...when I saw Bronte and Madison weaving their way down the hillside that wraps around the front of my house. They looked fantastic. Maybe even a bit fat, but certainly not pregnant! Madison took the lead, then Bronte walked over to her and rubbed alongside her as they continued to walk side by side towards their old room. The scene lasted on a few seconds, but I knew then that the transition was done. They were living by their own rules and desires. Whatever fate has in store for them, I will never know.

I'll just leave the light on and the bowls full. The rest is up to them.

....

November

I haven't seen Buddy again. Bronte has all but vanished, too. The only one left, Madison, waits for me every morning to bring her some breakfast; for which I recieve a harmless hiss.

I bought her a heated pet bed, to stave off the harsh winter chill. Sam and I hung a roll of heavy plastic sheeting to cover the big screen windows to help keep her warm. She still comes and goes as she wishes, but I see her more often, even some evenings, curled up on her warm bed. I've baited her to come closer to me with yummy tuna treats. She'll cry and whimper, but she'll come closer to me for the food. I haven't touched her, but I want her to know she can trust me.

August 2008

The kitties continued to visit me and have their fresh water and food. Madison allowed me to pet her every morning when I fed her. I really thought she was going to turn around and become socialized. Maybe she did. Maybe she found a true home or maybe she fell to the fate so many ferals succome to-she was killed by a wild animal or a car strike or who knows what. I haven't seen Madison in three months. I rarely see Bronte or Buddy, but I know they're around.

I call Madison's name every morning when I put out the food, hoping she'll return to me, but every afternoon when I check the food, I often find the bowl untouched. It breaks my heart, but I knew that this was the best I could do for them. This was what I could offer. They never deserved to live like this in the first place. All we rescuers seem to do is try to make up for the cruel acts of other people. Some times we have success and other times, it's like today-our hearts sink and our knees feel weak. We don't want to keep facing this ugliness, but we must, for their sake and for the hope that one day, we won't have to do this any more.

