

The Stray Cat

I sat alone, in my empty house, with my empty yard, in this empty neighborhood full of homes belonging to empty people I did not know and would never come to learn. I was young, and I bought my first house because it's something you do. When you reach a certain point, you buy a house. It wasn't until I had moved into this house and heard the dust settle and the ceiling fan spin about, that I realized you usually buy the house to fill with toys, laughter, the smoke from barbeques, and Christmas mornings. I had worked hard to get to this point, to have my own corner of the universe, and I just now realized I had done it all wrong. I was alone and ready to be alive, but not quite sure when the living would start.

Months went by without these walls knowing another heartbeat. The mailman got close every now and then, and once a ball had been kicked into the backyard with an eager boy in tandem, hopping the fence to fetch it. Other than that, it was only the beat and pattern of my solitary song that my house ever knew.

One summer evening I had found myself on my back porch soaking in the temperature after spring had burst into summer when I found myself staring at a female cat that sat across my yard. She sat upon a tree stump and stared right back at me, unflinching. She was battered and scarred, intensely calico with her chin held high. She was beautiful. She had missing patches of fur, a notch taken out of her left ear, and a single cut that ran from her belly up onto her side and further up to the back of her neck. She stared at me like I stared at her, and it seemed for a moment that there were only us two. The sun had been down for a few minutes, and the world had begun to tilt into that dark and ominous kind of blue when she stood up and hopped away.

She may have hopped away, but it seemed she found her way into my mind. In the coming days she was all I found myself thinking of, especially when at the house. Would another

encounter be gifted unto me, or was that the only taste I'd be given? I didn't feel as trapped, or as singular as I had before. The anechoic chamber that had become my house made it so that little cat was all I focused on. Much to my delight I received more, and by more, I mean only glimpses of her. It was nothing like the first time, but I would often catch her gliding along my fence or perched upon my mailbox, just enough for me to take in that moment and watch her live.

Whenever I would find her slinking around, I feel I came to know her more. I learned more about this cat, more about her patterns and appearance. Her storied scars only intensified her allure. Something about her was so impressively appealing. She had a sort of blithe confidence, completely independent, and entirely alone. She believed in herself enough to get up and keep moving forward, to lick her wounds. Maybe it wasn't that she had wounds to lick, but that she wasn't afraid of gaining new ones. She did not fear the jabs and the uppercuts that life will undoubtedly dish you. It had nothing to do with a fear, or a lack of respect for death, but everything to do with the knowledge of her own fortitude. I decided to name this cat *Scout*.

Scout was a sleuth, a gymnast, and a chameleon. I would often find her tight roping the fence line that separated the neighbors' two incessantly barking dogs. She was unfazed. She was always unfazed, and she couldn't be bothered. In fact, it seemed she took her time riding from one corner of the yard to the other, 6 feet in the air. If she wasn't precariously perched on the edge of some roof, lounging in the sun, she would be on the corner of a fence, or high upon a tree branch. Sometimes on sweltering days, I'd find her lounging about next to the creek, enjoying the shade offered by the tickling willow tree. *Scout* slowly became a permanent fixture of my experience within this house. She was owned and operated by no one, within nobody's jurisdiction. A new part of my reality, that would come and go regardless of my desire.

As time went by, I had come to notice that *Scout* would grow and shrink as if she were inconsistently balancing back and forth on some kind of weight plan. When her health appeared more solid, her joints seemed to be well lubricated, her gymnastic abilities would continue to impress, and the frequency in which I would see her would lessen. When the ebb came back to the flow, she would grow rickety, frail, and thin, looking as if her bones had been rusted and her mind was a few seconds behind. In an effort to be nice and to maybe get to know this animal more, I figured I'd set out food at night on the off chance that there was a mouse shortage. I never gave much, in fact it was more of a pittance than an offering being only a tin of tuna and some milk, but it came wholly from my heart. I placed out the food every night, even if I found it untouched in the morning.

One morning, a few days later, I woke up to find her bouncing across the yard away from the house as if she had just been visiting. I quickly ran to my back door to find the tuna half empty and milk almost gone. I became entirely elated. I was thrilled that she had decided to share with me, even if I hadn't been there. She shared my house, my deck, and the food I put out for her. A new kind of motivation filled me up and I was determined to continue my efforts.

As the days grew into weeks, she seemingly became more accustomed to my presence. Apparently, there were no mice because she quickly began to eat and drink her fill. In the morning before the sun rose, I would wake and find the tuna and milk both empty. I would open the door and look across the yard to find her sitting on the old tree stump staring at me, almost paying me thanks. Her silhouette, a deep blue, almost purple in the emerging, ambient daylight. We would share this acknowledgment for just a moment before she would slowly turn away and hop over the fence, off and away to whatever adventure awaited her. The blue wash that covered the scenery at this time of day would become her shroud, keeping her hidden as she navigated

the neighborhood. I fought hard to keep my excitement from growing whenever this would happen as I knew it probably didn't mean much, but I couldn't help but feel like this cat saw me. I couldn't help but feel like she saw me as something different. Was I the first? Am I special, or am I one of many?

Scout became a regular. Every night before I went to bed, just as I had been, I would set out a fresh can of tuna and a little bowl of milk. Every morning when I woke, I eagerly rushed to find that the food had been consumed, and *Scout* would be on her tree stump, waiting to acknowledge me. As my streak of successful nights continued, so did her comfortability. Eventually, in the morning, I would find her waiting for me at the end of the deck, then she was a couple feet from the can and the bowl. I was giddy knowing that the cat that I had grown to love, this beautifully mesmerizing creature that was the embodiment of so many of the attributes I admired, was choosing me.

One morning, I will never forget. I arose and I was alert, wired. Swiftly I dressed and flew downstairs, ready to start my day with dessert. I flew to the back door and slowly opened it to reveal *Scout* sitting there right outside the back door, waiting for me to come greet her. I paused, nonplussed. She gently stood up, arched her back as if to yawn and say, "good morning, I've been waiting for you," and tiptoed herself over to my feet and began to snake around my legs.

She pressed her peppered, unkempt fur up against my calves, wrapping around and through my legs. I stood still, afraid of what to do. Had I won her over? She was finally at my feet, reveling in my humble presence. I wasn't special, I was just another guy. All I had to offer was tuna and milk. Who knew how many of me there had been, giving her the same treatment, receiving an embrace such as this. I did not care. I was too fulfilled to care about any of that.

Almost stunned, I let her be. I didn't reach down to pet her; I didn't try to take more from her than she was willing to give. I was careful not to be eager and let it spoil.

This same ritual and dance in the baby blue light of the morning went on for one more week before I worked up the courage to try and pet her. One morning as she slithered and coiled around my legs, I ever so slowly reached down my hand. She paused before she even saw it, sensing my approach. The sun hadn't even risen yet and while wearing boxers I was sweating. Ever so slowly, I held my hand down in front of her face. She stared at it, tilting her head, and after what seemed to be years, she moved forward pressing her head into the cup of my palm and moved her whole body through it.

For the next 15 minutes I stood there petting her. Just like a wave, she would arch her spine as she moved, working hard to press every bit of her into my hand. I kept my palm right where it was, needing not move it. Finally, it felt like home.

This serene part of my life only lasted 12 mornings. 12 divine, awakening mornings. What I wouldn't give to be able to return to any one of those 12 mornings. I had never been so full, I had never been so awake. I was alive, and I knew it. I knew it. My home, while still mostly empty, felt contented being mostly empty. Instead of lonely, it felt peaceful and healing.

Those 12 mornings came, and those 12 mornings went, and just like a phantom she was gone. Nothing had changed. I had kept to my regular schedule, and as far as I was aware the neighborhood was still the same. I still left out my offering, and I would change it out every night. I woke up earlier and earlier to see if I could catch even a glimpse of her stalking about. I even asked member of the neighborhood if they knew what had happened to a local calico cat. All my effort was for naught, as I never saw her again.

Now, I sit alone, in my empty house, with my empty yard, in this empty neighborhood full of homes belonging to empty people I do not know and will never come to learn. Very rarely I'll find a passive pawprint in the dirt, or I'll catch a cat's silhouette stalking in the dark, but that is all I am left with. I am back to square one. Although in this instance, it feels more like the come down off a wicked high. She had become my methamphetamine, and I am now experiencing my comedown, back to this empty house where I can hear the dust settle and the ceiling fan spin about.