

VILLAGE VIEW

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It was love at first sight. You may not believe such a thing is possible, but in this case it just happened that way. There wasn't anything either of us could do about it, nor did either of want to, anyhow.

The affair was launched the moment we met; it lasted as long as both of us were alive. One of us lives no longer and I, as you can see, am the survivor. But she lives on in my memory.

She was a compactly-built grey tabby cat with dark rings around her fluffy long tail, white paws and chest, and a tinge of marmalade on her belly. Her eyes were golden and flecked with both brown and green; their black pupils were usually vertical slits, except when she was frightened. Then the pupils dilated to jet saucers.

Sounds like an ordinary cat, doesn't she. I'm prejudiced, of course, as you'd expect; but I'll always believe she was unusual.

From the day I acquired her, she devoted herself to pleasing me in every way she possibly could. Only once in the eighteen years we lived together did we have an altercation.

And that was my fault. It was her habit, you see, to take part in whatever I was doing. On this afternoon I was preparing dinner and, as usual, she was perched on the kitchen stool, watching. She loved to do that. And because I was rushed and wanted to use the stool to reach a high shelf, I slapped at her instead of asking her to get down.

She was affronted. In a split-second she reared up on her haunches, both forefeet in the air, and spanked me. Her claws (like needles they were) were sheathed. It wasn't her intention to harm me, but to reprimand me. The velvet of her paws struck my outreached hand repeatedly as I paused in astonishment and remorse that I'd insulted my darling, my beloved.

Having delivered her rebuke, she jumped to the floor, fled the kitchen, and took refuge beneath the dining table. On hands and knees I followed, begging her forgiveness. It was soon given and she permitted herself to be petted, cuddled and returned to her perch. She not only forgave me, she forgot it had ever happened. But I did not. Never again did I raise a hand to her.

Participating was her joy. When I weeded, she sat in the garden a foot or so from my hands and watched. Occasionally she'd respond to the rustle of leaves or a tantalizing twitching of twigs and pounce at the motion.

When I mopped the floor, she chased the mop; when I bathed, she viewed the proceedings anxiously, obviously thinking me mad to immerse myself in water. While I ate, she took her place on the kitchen stool, drawn close to the table's

edge, fascinated by the manipulation of knives and forks. She never put a pawpad on the tabletop, but if there were an especially tempting morsel on my plate, her front feet would shift, signalling her hope for a tidbit.

When I walked to a neighbor's house, she followed. If I walked too far, beyond the territory she'd established as her own, she'd sit down in the road and wail. She wanted to come with me, but feared stretching her limits. If I turned back, she led the way home; if I continued on, she retreated to take up her vigil for my return.

When I went blueberrying, she'd come with me and snuggle down in the pine needles under the bush until I moved on to the next one. Then she'd move, too.

Not long after we met she began bringing me gifts. Almost any cat will bring home its trophies; but live ones? Her first live present was a blackbird. She appeared at the open bedroom window in the predawn light with the bird in her jaws, landed on the sill, dropped to the floor, and released her captive. It took off, unharmed, and flew circles around the room, close to the ceiling. Then with a swoop, it departed through the window she'd used to bring it home.

We talked together about that, for all I could think of, seeing her silhouetted against the daylight with a large black object clutched in her mouth, was, "She's bringing in a RAT!" It was a dreadful way to come awake.

She never quite understood I wasn't delighted with her offerings. When she brought me live mice, live chipmunks, live baby rabbits, other live birds, I simply wasn't as overjoyed as she expected me to be. As a rule I released them; she'd gaze at me with undisguised dismay. How, it was plain she wondered, could I be so clumsy as to allow them to escape?

The first baby rabbit arrived at our front door amid her usual noisy announcement of cat-bearing-gift. I admired it; it was adorable. Satisfied with my reaction, she disappeared and I put the tiny creature in a carton, planning to let it go when she'd lost interest.

In only a few minutes, she was back with a second one! "Where are you getting them?" I asked; and with a crook in the tip of her tail, she glanced at me over her shoulder, inviting me to come see. I placed the second one with his brother and took out into the woodland with her leading the way. At the mossy base of an oak tree, she showed me a small cavity between the tree roots. There, several inches below the surface of the ground, was a nest containing five more little bunnies.

"See!" she was saying, "There's a whole passel of those critters down there." With difficulty I persuaded her to leave them and come into the house; I returned the two captives to their nest where I hope their mother found them. Distracting the huntress took an hour or more; eventually I think she forgot them. The next time I checked the nest, no one lived there at all.

Among other things she was a "watch cat". While I slept, she curled on the bed. On night I waked to her growl. "Someone," she told me, "is outside our window." Quietly and carefully I rose and approached the open sash with her in my arms; from behind the side curtain we peeked cautiously out on the moonlit garden. There in plain view was a small, almost solidly white, skunk. A black stripe ran down the center of its back. Together we watched it bumble along and amble around the corner, out of sight. Then we went back to sleep.

Other creatures she growled about were pheasants. They were too large to suit her. And she growled whenever someone walked into the driveway. It was a low rumbling from the back of her throat, clearly indicating her concern. I grew to depend on it, especially since my own hearing was far from acute.

She was a remarkable cat, not only because she understood so much and not only because she knew exactly what was expected of her, but also because she tried to fulfill those expectations and succeeded so well. She never failed to come when I called; I could hear her leaping through the underbrush as she hurried to respond. She was mannerly and gentle, responsive and aware.

When she died, I lost a friend, a companion, a little grey cate most dear to me. Somewhere in Cat Heaven I hope she knows how often I think of her and how much I miss her.

Love at first sight, especially when it lasts a lifetime, is a precious experience. I'm thankful to have been so blessed.