

White Cat
By Linda Boroff

Like many wars, this one began with a simple miscalculation.

“Here, kitty kitty.” Evvie stepped outside onto the bristly brown welcome mat that said “Rental Sweet Rental.” In her right hand was a plate of fragrant Ocean Festival with Mackerel. Her left hand shielded her eyes from a sharp golden shaft of late afternoon sun. “Heeereekittykittykitty.”

But instead of Talleyrand, her marshmallowy tabby famed for his heroic hairballs, out from the bushes popped a small white cat, a stranger. The Pixie—she instantly named it—gazed up at her coolly, one dainty, lethal forepaw frozen aloft.

“Well, where on earth did you come from?” Evvie dropped to her knees and held as still as the cat itself, fighting giggles while it studied her with sloe eyes of antediluvian amber, cleft by the fathomless black wedge. The cat’s flat, milky flanks rose and fell rapidly. The tail was kinked, the coat sparse and dingy, with nubbles of spine poking up along the curved back. We’ll soon fix that, Evvie said to herself, extending the plate slowly.

What symmetry that a new friend would show up at this very time, just as Aaron’s departure was yellowing around the edges like old newspaper. Had it really been three months?

Her hair had smelled like lemon, Aaron said of the Other Woman to Evvie over the phone. Innocent, he had sat beside her on the flight to Cleveland, but the scent just kept wafting toward him, borne on the breeze of the overhead fan. And if only Evvie had accompanied him to his nephew’s Bar-Mitzvah in Shaker Heights, then she, Evvie, would have been sitting beside him that day, and so in a way it was Evvie’s own fault, and her rejection of her Jewishness that....

“Oh, blow a lemon out your butt,” Evvie shouted and slammed down the phone. Since then, she had done her best not to dwell on love’s essential unfairness; not to wonder if life from now on would contain plenty of cats but no more sleepy morning lovemaking, no Ramos fizzes on Sunday afternoons or twilight jazz at AlFresco’s or film noir festivals. All nullified: the confidences they had shared, the deepest fears and regrets about their respective divorces and grown children; the mutual support through biopsies and colonoscopies; the heady freedom to speak of the Beatles and Vietnam without encountering that polite remote look that screamed “fossil!” And this whole relationship, this loving edifice, no more solid after all than an osteoporotic shinbone.

Driven by the need to purge him from her life, Evvie had tossed out her lace underwear—failed lingerie now, droopy and sad. She bought at Sears a plastic package of three sensible, bucket-shaped cotton underpants, pink as Pepto Bismol. In the evenings, she and Talleyrand sat side by side on the sofa watching TV, aging companions built for comfort, not speed. The cat stood sentinel for Aaron’s return, tensing hopefully at outdoor noises.

Now, kneeling with plate extended, Evvie's knees began to ache from the hard gravel, and she groped for the doorknob to pull herself up, keeping her eyes on the white cat, lest it take flight. She flexed her thighs to bring back the circulation. So much for her once-ballerina legs—steel springs her teacher had called them. Gone, like her slinky waistline and Cleopatra-dark hair, dyed copper now, always silvering at the roots.

Still, the cat did not move. It must have come from the Stanford campus nearby, perhaps a pet that had wandered away. Anyone who imagined Palo Alto to be a gentrified little academic enclave knew nothing of merciless urban nature. How had this little creature suffered, what want endured?

Evvie sympathized keenly with *The Lost*; she the sister less loved, the wife cast aside. As she drove to work, she would murmur little prayers for the road kills, the tarry, feathered clumps and featureless gray fur patties on the gravel shoulder. Who cared for their pain—or hers? Last month, rushing to get dressed, she had kicked the leg of a chair and looked down to see her right pinky toe broken, bent at a ninety-degree angle like a red-tipped semaphore.

“It’s always something, Evelyn,” said her boss when she called in. And sure enough, later that week an officious little snot from Human Resources had summoned her into a bleak and glaring conference room for what turned out to be her exit interview. They sat at a long, blond table scuffed with dry erase highlighter and smudged with the sweat of countless palms. A rack of energy beverages and designer teas awaited the next meeting. The snot crossed her knockoff Manolo Blahniks, and Evvie hid her Payless size eleven black pumps under the table.

“We’re a process-driven department,” smiled the snot, who had been with the company four months to Evvie’s four years. “We just feel we need somebody who is more... methodical, you know?” She smiled as if expecting Evvie to commiserate, but Evvie only stared, wondering how the other woman got the eyeliner so close to her lashes.

Evvie’s daughter, Mia, was on a cruise to Alaska with her father, a college graduation gift. So, after spending a whole day weepily overeating, Evvie had finally swilled a glass of sherry and called Aaron in hope of a little irreverent comforting.

“Don’t worry.” He sounded preoccupied. “You’ll find something else.”

“I’m sick of high-tech marketing anyway,” Evvie said lightly. “I could just feel those cubicle walls closing in on me.”

“Gets that way.”

“Maybe my broken toe was a cry for help.” He had always teased her about needing therapy. “I think I’ll get myself shrunk. I might as well use up my health insurance because it runs out at the end of the month.”

“Mights well.”

“What if the shrink tells me I’m crazy?”

“They don’t do that.”

“Even going mad isn’t what it used to be,” Evvie chattered. “It used to have a little gravitas. Now you’re diagnosed with some acronym and they give you SSRIs and you gain eighty pounds.” Aaron gave a wimpy chuckle. “Did you read *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*?” Evvie said. “I was sixteen. It scared hell out of me.”

“It did everybody.”

“Whatever I say,” Evvie said, “you always tell me everyone else already did it or thought it.” She awaited his denial, her mouth almost watering for the spat. But he just made a little put-upon huff through his nostrils. When she finally said goodbye, he hung up so fast he must have had his finger on the button. Lemon Head was probably sitting there next to him, listening in and smirking.

What had frightened Evvie the most about that novel had been the flat, gray world of the schizophrenic girl. Evvie’s own memories of her Minneapolis childhood were just as leached of color—the dense, cold brownblack earth perduring beneath the illusory saffrons and russets of fall, the frail greens of spring; her parents’ bleak, wintry marital finale; school dances sat out on the periphery, watching couples moving past in the dark that was their warm matrix, her featureless void.

“Nice kitty,” Evvie murmured. “Niiiiice kitty.” The cat continued to preen, casting only a brief glance at Evvie’s slowly approaching palm. When her fingertips were nearly level with its head, she reached out and gently scratched behind the nicked ears.

Almost simultaneously, the cat embraced her wrist with its front paws, then swung its hind legs up to hang, hammock-like from her outstretched arm. Why it’s still a kitten, Evvie thought. It wants to play.

Then she felt the fangs.

The bite was not that of a kitten, but of a leopard. Evvie instantly comprehended the experience of every prey animal that had ever felt the fateful grip of a cat. The twin daggers plunged deep, easily slicing through the muscle between Evvie’s thumb and forefinger, locking on as blood drooled down her upraised forearm. She heard a scream, hers.

“Shoo! Goddammit!” Evvie lurched upright and shook her arm, but the cat only tightened its grasp. The whole body, front and rear, was now welded to her, as if the arm itself were prey. As the cat opened its jaws shockingly wide to bite again, she saw down into the dark killing maw with its reddened teeth and realized that it was reaching for her face. With a shriek, she flung the demon outward, and it flew off her arm to land lightly on its feet and to stand, chest smeared with her blood, looking up at her in faint surprise.

The sun had set behind the neighbors' garage, and she saw the cat clearly now, crouching for another lunge. Like a buffalo that has fended off the first lion attack, Evvie turned in a circle facing her predator. Backing up, she stumbled over the threshold into her house, nearly falling as she slammed the door. She cranked shut the casement window with her good left hand.

When she ran into the bathroom for a towel, her face in the mirror was haggard, gray with shock and with something else: mortality. Her eyes, dark-circled, were sunken, her lips retreating from her teeth like a downed zebra or wildebeest. She was prey; meat. How little she mattered.

Wrapping the towel around her hand, she ran to the phone and punched in 911, the keypad slippery with blood. Through her front window, she saw the cat, ruler of the turf, begin its bath in her driveway.

"I've been attacked b-by a cat," she stammered to the dispatcher. Suddenly embarrassed, she added, "a wild cat."

"A wildcat? Like a mountain lion?"

"No... a housecat. But wild."

"Oh. A feral cat. Yeah, they can be vicious."

"It... it grabbed my arm." Evvie could not convey the ferocity, the force. "It tried to kill me." She thought she heard a snicker.

"Shouldn't go touchin' a strange animal."

"I know that," Evvie said, tears brimming. And what had possessed her anyway, to reach out so heedlessly? Only the need to connect with another living thing for a moment of comfort, of closeness on a lonely, empty day. Well, she had gotten what she deserved. Like an inattentive antelope calf, she had been Selected Out.

"We have a unit on the way, Ma'am. Now you stay with me till they get there." Evvie's hand, swollen now to the size of a bear's paw, looked strangely childlike: her ropy veins and tendons had disappeared, and her knuckles were dimpled, the skin stretched tight. She could barely bend her fingers.

When she heard the siren, she tried to stroll out calmly, knees wobbly. "Hi there," she greeted the four young men who leaped from the red fire engine, comfortable in their brawn and masculine competence, hefty boots and gauntlets swinging. The neighbors began to gather. Cars slowed. Alarmed at last, the white cat moved under a pink rosebush and hunkered to watch.

"That monster... attacked me." She pointed to the cat, now cleansed of gore, gazing back innocently. The white guest towel around Evvie's arm was half red.

"Holy moley," said a fireman. He whistled.

“You need to get to the ER,” said another. They conferred; then approached the cat in formation. The cat hissed softly, raised its back and suddenly feinted toward them, yowling. The firemen broke and scattered.

“Run away, run away,” said one, grinning sheepishly.

“Just grab the son of a bitch,” said Evvie.

“Like you did?”

We’ll call animal services, and they’ll set a trap,” said the leader. “No sense risking another injury.”

“But it’s a dangerous animal. Deadly.”

“Did it just pounce on you out of nowhere?”

“No. I... tried to pet it.”

“Aha.”

“What do you mean ‘aha’?”

“Just... usually, you leave them alone, they leave you alone. Would you like a ride to the hospital?”

“No. I can drive myself.” Evvie was stinging from that universal “aha”, catching her out, all her life. Her mother finding the reefer in her sweater drawer. Her Latin teacher spotting the smuggled interlinear translation of Caesar’s Gallic Wars. The bank teller discovering her—always, always her—error.

The firemen got back into their truck and drove away without saying goodbye. Perhaps they were embarrassed at being routed by a kitty, that icon of femininity. And if Evvie had been young and nubile, would they have left her here alone, bleeding and helpless? Tears welled.

“You’re the third cat bite we’ve had today,” clucked the triage nurse at the Stanford ER. “Must be something going around.” The intern who treated her was only slightly older than Mia. Evvie watched glumly as she injected antibiotics directly into the wounds. “This is great practice for me,” said the intern.

The fangs had gone completely through her hand but apparently missed major tendons and arteries. Aside from severe bruising and a high risk of infection that could cost her arm, she should recover uneventfully. The doctor gave her a rabies shot that looked like grape kool-aid and six vicodin—only six? The nurses glanced at each other: drug seeking. Aha!

The next morning a lanky woman arrived in a van from Animal Control. Her gray hair was cropped close, her knees tanned and calves taut below navy blue bermuda shorts. The bare legs and unabashed boy cut made Evvie feel fleshy and incompetent, a colorized anachronism.

The cat was still lurking in the bushes.

“It’s hanging around to finish me off,” Evvie said.

The woman stooped to peer beneath the rose bush. “Looks like your own kitty has fallen in with bad companions.” Evvie looked too, and there was Talleyrand beside the white cat, both of them gazing back like teenage Goths.

“Bad company was always more fun, wasn’t it?” said Evvie. She was pleasantly full of English muffin with extra butter, mildly euphoric from the vicodin.

The woman laughed. “I’ll say!” There was something infinitely comforting about the hearty guffaw. Why, that was it! To laugh—in the face of attacks and breakups and terminations and the indifference of firemen. Ha ha to them all!

Evvie sniffed the clean morning air. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Thanks anyway, I’ve got about a dozen other places to visit.” The woman hauled out a large wire cage and baited it with cat food. Then she showed Evvie how to release the latch, which was fortunate, because the only cat the trap ever captured was Talleyrand, over and over again.

The next day, Evvie saw the white cat circle the trap, sneak halfway in, sniff the food, then back out with the precision of a bomb defuser. She went into the kitchen and took the chicken breast she cooked for her own lunch, wrenched it apart with angry fingers and baited the trap with half of it, then sat down to watch. The cat did not show up. After a while, Evvie realized that she had forgotten about her lunch and left her post to eat. When she returned, Talleyrand was in the trap. The white cat lay beside him, touching noses through the mesh. When Evvie approached to free Talleyrand, the white cat held its ground and hissed softly.

“That does it, my friend,” Evvie said. A spark of anger ignited deep in her gut and surged upward to lick at her collarbone and turn her face crimson. She marched to the broom closet, heart thudding, and took out a fresh new broom. Who gave a damn what the neighbors thought?

She opened her front door and extruded the broom to nudge the white cat on the flank. “Shoo.” The cat ignored the bobbing thing for a minute, then turned to see it touch her rear end. Suddenly, the air split with a noise midway between a shriek and a roar. The white cat exploded upward into a raging, yowling blur. It seized and shook the broom by its bristles, then mounted the handle and sank its teeth into the wood. Looking up, it spotted Evvie and advanced toward her along the stick. Evvie screamed, dropped the broom and slammed the door. When she ventured outside an hour later, she found the wooden handle bitten nearly in half, the bristles gnawed down to broken stubs.

“Turn a hose on her,” said the animal control woman over the phone. “Get her good and wet a couple of times. She won’t come back.”

“Oh, I can’t do that.”

“It won’t hurt her, I promise. It’s warm outside.”

In the apartment’s storage shed, Evvie found a stiff and filthy hose that had probably been there for decades. She could barely uncoil it with her good hand, but she dragged it down the driveway and attached it to a spigot at the side of the building.

Later that day, Evvie saw the white cat standing alone in the driveway. Trembling, she opened her front door, edged out and grabbed the hose. With her bandaged right hand, she turned on the outdoor spigot. Moments later, the nozzle emitted a feeble mist and dripped water onto her bandage.

“Dammit.” The cat watched calmly as Evvie held the hose in her teeth and twisted until it released a urinous stream. “Shoo shoo,” Evvie shouted, flinging the stream at the cat, who got up and moved a few feet away.

Evvie turned off the hose and retreated inside, slamming the front door. Her shoes and bandages were sodden. She found her Earthquake Preparedness Pak, pulled out its first aid kit and redressed her wounds. The next morning, the trap was gone, and she knew that she would not hear any more from Animal Services.

Now, each day when Evvie opened her door to let Talleyrand out, she saw the white cat sleeping in the bushes. It rose at the sight of her and stretched, watching calmly as she set out water, then finally, reluctantly, food. The two cats ate side by side, then cleaned themselves and sprawled luxuriantly in the sun on the driveway. Evvie had to wait until they meandered away before she could venture outside and run to her car.

Evvie expanded her online job searches to include rentals too. Her triplex had been built as indigent housing back in the 1930s. Each unit had a tiny kitchen, a bathroom with a capricious toilet, and a small, moldy bedroom. A hot water heater had been installed illegally in the kitchen, in a splintery wooden closet. Because this artifact of a dwelling was located near the Stanford campus, it rented for \$2000 per month—and the waiting list was long. Moving would empty Evvie’s savings account, but it seemed the only way to free herself from the white cat.

No experience is wasted—who said that? Watching the wound heal, Evvie became aware for the first time of the richly nuanced colors that her body was capable of producing. It was as if the wound acted as a prism, breaking her into the voluptuous hues that comprised her: purple-black bruising around the punctures, fading to indigo, vermilion, bluegreen, khaki and yellow at the periphery.

When the phone rang one evening, she was shocked to hear Aaron’s voice: “It’s been a while. What’s going on?”

Evvie hesitated. "I got bitten by a cat, so I've been getting rabies shots." He whistled. "Why didn't you call me?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I can't rival that for betrayal, but I might as well get this out of the way. That woman I was seeing..."

"Lemon head?"

"I'll never eat another lemon as long as I live. She borrowed ten thousand bucks from me and took off. I think she was using a fake name. I even hired a private detective. Go ahead and gloat."

"I'm not gloating."

"You wanna have lunch? We could lick each other's wounds."

"I don't feel like licking anything of yours, Aaron."

"Touche." A moment passed. "You sure?"

Evvie hesitated, picturing his curly, thinning hair, his paunch, his *New York Times* shedding pages in his wake: the business section in the bathroom, the crossword puzzle under the couch.

"I don't know. I have to eat with my left hand."

"So do millions of people. Look," said Aaron, "your attack cat is probably some kind of messenger."

"Really? What's the message?"

"I'll tell you at lunch."

The next day, Evvie dropped her keys in the driveway and noticed in an oil slick a fragile, luminous rainbow so vivid that she let out a little cry of wonder. When she returned home that afternoon, the white cat was gone.