

## The Feral Cat and The Once Feral Girl

The summer was long, languid, clinging. Evenings were enveloped in a concert of crickets, tree frogs, cicadas and such. I listened under the canopy until dusk turned dark. I eventually blew out the candle, toasting the musicians goodnight with a sip of wine.

The summer faced fall in denial. Ebbing and flowing. One cold night silenced the summer songs, then a sultry day gave them voice once more. A chill glazed the gold canopy along the edge by the fence. It was during this time, the time when clear, blue skies carried migrating birds, when crow family reminded me, cawing in syncopation, they'd appreciate what scraps I could muster. I glanced up to count them. All five of crow family patiently perched in the oak tree, three offspring and two parents. I recalled watching the young ones early in the season. They were so clumsy then, unsure how to balance properly on the branches while their parents looked on, sometimes taking scraps up to them, doting on them, as good parents do. But now they're all grown and know what to expect. Yet eons of time has taught them to remain cautious.

Today they know they can count on me to lay out something tasty. I always do. One makes eye contact. That yellow eye. He bows and turns his head slightly down, watching. I bring them a tray of cat food bits, torn dried bread, a few peanuts, scraps of meatloaf and potato left from last night's dinner. They seem to like the morsels, swooping down, taking turns and letting their friends know they found something to eat. I like that about birds, this family – their sharing. They caw loudly, announcing to everyone that understands their language there's something good here.

Suddenly the cawing stops. They glide back to their perches. remaining watchful. That's when I spied a pumpkin colored cat camouflaged in the fallen leaves. The interloper wants something too. I hadn't seen any stray cats before. How clever this cat knew my bird feeding habits to swoop in at the opportune moment. I gave him cat food a few yards away from the crows' feeding station and dubbed him "Peaches."

Throughout the long autumn days he comfortably hid under the car, mournfully meowing when I fell into view. Yes. He's trained me into a daily feeding routine in the driveway. I'd bow down to see where he was and coerce him to come out from under.

One rainy day I placed the food inside the garage doorway. He paced back and forth unsure, then assessed the new spot was safe as long as humans maintained a suitable distance. Within a few weeks I ventured to touch his whiskers while he ate. He startled and backed away. Food was less important than being safe, I surmised. I waited. Within days, I tried again and found him to be slightly more receptive. I could stroke his whiskers a little longer. Next, he let me touch the top of his head ever so gently as he nibbled. Oh! His fur is so pleasantly soft.

Now the winter digs down, scraping what's left of anything growing, pushing it all to one side under leaf debris and driveway gravel. I see Peaches no longer is just interested in food. He yowls as he paces back and forth. Unsettled. He's in need of shelter. I awake in the night and wonder, *What's to become of him?* Within a few days I plug in a warming mat atop folded furniture pads on shelving in the garage. The temperature plummets. I watch my breath swirl and disappear, inspiring me to do more. My dear husband set up heat lamps overhead, those typically used for pet reptiles or chicks. We both cheer watching kitty nestle down. Yes. I detect a Cheshire cat smile as he lays contentedly, allowing me to pet his flank as he pulls himself closer. He purrs for the first time.

Trust. How gratifying to put my hand under his chin as he buries his head into it. He swirls around, pushing down. His eyes close as he envelops his head into my two-handed caress. In that moment he seems in ecstasy. It just takes a little care, a little consideration. I can't imagine the suffering he would endure without some kindness, some protection. And how, in that brief moment, we're both content.

I can relate. I too, was once a little girl version of the feral cat. I grew wary, afraid, unsure how adults would react, what they would do. When they were drunk they were prone to act

erratically, sometimes violently. Like the cat, I sometimes grew weary looking for comfort, looking for a bite to eat, wandering the streets, unkempt, unprotected. After those first ten years I was placed in a safe haven of foster care. But some of those memories came along too and remnants of that feral life remain part of my nature. Just like this cat, my first reaction is to burst through a closed door preferring safe egress to confinement; like the cat I know when I'm accepted but keep on the lookout for signs when I'm not. And I gratefully acknowledge belonging. I find joy in the garden, an open meadow, among those living things that don't criticize or complain. I try to do all the right things, to be accepted.

I watch Peaches as he tucks his paws, winds his tail tightly to himself then turns his belly upward, trusting. He's so brave. He opens himself to me now without second guessing. And just as assuredly, I imagine if I didn't meet his expectations, he would not beg, he simply would go elsewhere. My brave heart feral kitty. *I will not betray your trust.* I know what that is like.