

The Fever

I was trapping cats at the time; I had become the person everyone called when they had any kind of an animal problem. I hadn't yet learned how to say "no", or to take the advice of my ex-mother-in-law, who had suggested to me to simply start acting just a little bit incompetent. Soon, she told me, people would either call someone else or deal with the problem themselves. That was what I was afraid of, though; "dealing with the problem themselves" usually meant either shooting or poisoning the animal in question. So I was trapping the feral cats who were homesteading on company property. I had managed to get and place them all, with the exception of a mother and her adolescent kitten. I was pleased when a woman from Building #2 called me one night at work to report that she had captured them both and had taken them home with her. That was the good news- the bad was that she wanted me to pick them both up on my way home. I reluctantly agreed, fearing I'd get stuck with them. I didn't know that I was about to meet one of the most amazing cats I've ever known.

I found her house easily, and of course she was still up and waiting for me. "They're both really nice cats" she told me as she led me to the room she had them stashed in. "Not wild at all." Well, good, I thought.

Maybe I could place them both. They were behind a sofa when we entered the room, but Mama came out immediately when she heard our voices and greeted us with leg rubs and noisy purring. Her youngster wasn't so sure and had to be pulled out by a hind leg. Boy! they *were* tame--no hissing, biting or clawing. The big kitten just lay limp on its back in my arms and began to purr and squeak to me. Something was strange about the cat's tail- it was only about half as long as it should have been. Injury? I felt the tail and was surprised to find it was as ziggy-zagged as a piece of rickrack. Birth defect? I turned him right side up to have a better look at the rest of him. He was still purring like a maniac, and squeaking replies to every word we said. Then I saw the ear. His left ear was deformed: inside out, underdeveloped and lying flat on his head. "You're the funniest looking cat I've ever seen" I said. He meowed in agreement, and purred even louder.

I called him Teddy Bear, because he was so friendly and hugable. It didn't take me very long to figure out that he was probably related to "D.J." (Diamond Jim), a cat I'd rescued last summer from the same area. They were both black and white and similarly marked. They also both had that strange "rag doll" personality that made them go limp and purr mindlessly when picked up. The clincher was the fact that the Mama cat and D.J. both had a decided kink at the end of their tails. D.J. was most likely Teddy's older brother, and maybe his daddy to boot. Teddy Bear, with his goofy personality and strange deformities was probably the product of a family tree with too few forks.

I tried to find Teddy a home, but no one was able to get past his tail- the people I showed him to didn't seem to mind the weird ear, but the feel of his kinky tail put them off; a few even screamed when they felt it through all his hair; a reaction that reminded me of why I sometimes preferred the company of nonhuman animals to that of my own species. It didn't matter if others were repelled by my little Quasimoto; I found that he fit

in my arms and heart as comfortably as a three month old baby; his non-stop purring was as soothing to me as a baby's steady breathing. I could have dressed him up in doll's clothes and he would never have objected the way the cats from my childhood had; luckily for both of us though, I had outgrown *that* hobby. He was agreeable to everything he came in contact with; nothing bothered him. It was not in his nature to war with other cats, or any animal, for that matter. He didn't know or care what territory was, or that cat's liked to fight over it. He saw no point in hunting; why go outside and work, when you could stay on the bed and grow fat on free food? And grow fat he did; so fat in fact that he was eventually given the surname of "Blivvet"; a blivvet being fifteen pounds of something in a ten pound sack.

But that was when we lived in Nevada. Soon my sweet and lovable Teddy Bear Blivvet would become known as Teddy Bear Bundy, mass murderer and serial killer.

The "fever" seemed to come directly from the grass, though of course the vector could have been some substance or creature living in the grass, but either way, several of my cats succumbed to it within days of arriving at our farm. In Ireland it's said that the Tinkers (Gypsies) believe that their fertility and large families come from the soft green grass they sleep on at night. The fever here, though, turned mild mannered, lazy cats, into avid hunters who had no consideration for ethics, conservation, or game management principles. Teddy was the first to discover all the various creatures that made their living in, under, around, and above the fantastic grass that spread like carpet as far as the eye could see, and even beyond.

At first it was only moles, and Teddy wasn't the only one who was turning them into an endangered species. There wasn't a day that would pass without the "mole patrol" bringing home the evidence of yet another search and destroy mission's success. Sometimes I would come home to the mangled corpses of up to five of the unfortunate little creatures. As time went on and the novelty wore off, the cats lost interest in bagging the few remaining moles. Our lives would have returned to our own form of normalcy had it not been for Teddy Bear. He had become a hunting fool, and moles, had any still lived here, no longer challenged him. He decided to branch out.

On the morning of my 46th birthday he brought me a big, fat, juicy rat. A *live* rat, about a nine inches long, not counting it's tail. The rat escaped under my antique dresser. I didn't have time to try to catch and relocate it before going to work, so I shut all the cats in a bedroom and set out a hav-a hart trap near the dresser. I doubted that the rat would even fit in the trap, but I didn't have time to devise a better plan. I arrived home to find that Teddy had busted open the door and caught up with the rat in my bedroom closet. Sorry, Rat.

Not long after that I came home from work to find all the cats lined up in their room, staring at Teddy Bear and Molly Dodd, who were arguing over the bottom half of the largest jack rabbit I'd ever seen. There was no doubt who had brought it home, because Teddy was covered in gore and blood up to his elbows and eyes, like some kind of a miniature Cujo, from the Stephen King book. There was blood splattered all over the

floor and two walls, but at first I didn't understand just what had happened. The part of the rabbit that was there was so huge that I was sure that Teddy had not caught and killed it; I thought he must have come across a roadkill rabbit and brought it home. He must have had to struggle to bring it in through the cat door, especially since he was so, well, rotund himself. Dragging in half a rabbit must have been something to see. There was no way he could have brought home the whole rabbit; for one thing, there would have been some evidence of that- an ear or two, bones, feet, fur- something, but there was only half a rabbit. And lots of blood. Could he have eaten all of the other half? I wondered. No way! There'd be something left of it- it would be impossible. No way. Still, for some reason I began to look around the room, for what, I didn't know. I was amazed at the amount of blood on the floor- almost like there had been quite a struggle... the tip of my toe bumped something and sent it rolling across the floor. I looked down and saw a lovely liquid brown eyeball of the rabbit still slowly rolling toward the far wall, and the mystery was solved. I was shocked and appalled that one cat could make a rabbit disappear like that, all by himself, and I went over to him. He and Molly were still growling at each other; he wouldn't relinquish his trophy, wouldn't even share. I bent over him and picked him up, just to see. He went limp and began to purr instantly; the fifteen pound cat now weighed about twenty-five. I dropped him in disgust and shut the door as I left the room.

Since then he's brought home many bunnies, both dead and alive. The lives ones are set free while Teddy takes a long "time out". The dead ones he consumes entirely, in five minutes or less. He came home with a flying squirrel one night; I didn't even know until then that there were flying squirrels in this part of the country. He catches and kills all sizes of birds imaginable; yet he respects the chickens. One evening at dusk he surprised me with a small reddish-brown bat (the Count), and I was glad that I had gotten him his Rabies vaccination. The bat appeared to be dead, but I was nervous about picking it up, so I put a towel over it and whacked it ("I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." with every blow) a few times before disposing of it. Poor thing.

Sometimes I envision Teddy Bear all dressed up in camouflage, as he lies low in the long grass and patiently waits for some hapless little creature to catch his eye. When I see him "fevered up" like that I usually intervene and bring him inside; he may be a cat and just doing what comes naturally, but what's natural for me is to sabotage him. The only animal I wouldn't begrudge him is the only animal he fears- the big blacksnakes that prey on my chickens. And though he continues to bring down mice, moles, voles, gophers, squirrels, birds and rabbits, I know that when he closes his eyes and sweetly sleeps he dreams of bowhunting Bambi, mounting mooseheads, chasing down caribou, bagging bighorn sheep and wrestling wild boar. Within the perimeters of this house he's still the mild mannered Teddy Bear I know and love, but when he steps outside he becomes the "other" Teddy. I blame it on the grass.