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SARA CULVER

“Snake!”

Over the years, my friends and family have suggested at various times that I cut a cat-door for our kitties, and that idea has always had its appeal for me, because I usually had at least one cat that was an early riser, or one that got into squabbles with neighbor cats at two a.m. and wanted rescuing, or one that needed to be let in for an early breakfast or out for an early morning walk. In the interests of a good night's sleep, I would have been happy to provide the cats with their own door. But in the country, I suspected we would have numerous other uninvited guests: anything naturally provided with locomotion and small enough to squeeze through a cat door. So we compromised — or we did — by leaving the screen in my mother's bedroom window open so a restless cat could wander in and out on warm nights.

On an evening of one such night my mother, my daughter, and I sat on our screen porch in the dusk and enjoyed the rose-glow in the west. . . all that remained of a broiling day in mid-July. We had cleaned the barn workshop, run errands, and finished a painting project. Even nine-year-old Beth was glad to lean her touseled head back against her lounge chair, stretch out her dusty, brown legs, and sip quietly at her iced orange juice.

Luwang, Beth's rather spoiled siamese, appeared at the porch door and commanded — in ringing tones — for it to be opened. Handsome and assured, he sauntered regally in and called for supper, which he ate near Beth's chair. While he proceeded with his after-dinner wash, we continued our conversation. —

“Can I sleep on the porch tonight, Gramma?”

“Why?”

“I can't stand to sleep in my room before the paint is dry.

“You can sleep with me in the big bed. You'll be right near the window and the smell won't bother you.”

“Ok.”

Luwang, finished with his wash, hopped up into Beth's lap for some affection. He purred with pleasure as she gently stroked his head and scratched his ears.

“He's such a nice cat,” said my mother, “He only hunts the birds I don't like: starlings.

He doesn't bother the swallows."

"He's just too lazy to bother," I laughed. "The starlings are so conveniently located — right in the attic — why should he go to the trouble of stalking something outside?"

"Luwang's not lazy!" Beth looked at me indignantly. "He goes way out in the field to hunt mice."

"That's another thing," chimed in mother, "He doesn't drag rats home! You remember Boots?"

"Of course," I said, "She was my cat. . ."

"She killed a mouse every morning and left it on the back steps. At first she tried to bring them into the kitchen, but I put a stop to that! Luwang. . ."

"Is the best cat in the world." Beth finished, snuggling her pet against her chest.

"You are, are you?" I glanced down at the complacent feline in my daughter's lap. He turned his profile for me to admire. The dark umber fur of his mask, ears, paws and tail lightened to a coppery buff along his sides and flanks and to a pale cream over his chest and underbelly. His back was a soft rich brown. Something in the yard caught his attention. He sat up in Beth's lap, then stepped onto the ledge that ran — waist-high — around the porch. He listened attentively for a moment, then dropped to the floor and announced that it was time for his evening hunt. As I held the screen open for him, he sniffed the evening air, his sapphire eyes narrowing with pleasure. After due consideration, he stepped deliberately and daintily down the back steps. As I watched him stroll down the path that led to our back pasture, I reflected that he was probably a terrifying apparition to the little creatures scuttling through the grass: a giant cougar wearing the mask and gloves of an assassin.

Dusk was fading into darkness. We finished our orange juice and made preparations for bed. I re-filled my glass with ice water before I braved the upstairs of the old farmhouse. Summer turned it into an oven. I stepped into mother's bedroom to give Beth a kiss good-night. Beth and my mother propped themselves up in bed to watch one of their favorite sit-coms.

"By the way, Mom," I said, "don't forget to leave the window open a crack for Luwang. He'll scream the house down if he can't get in."

"I really don't want to move a muscle," she said wearily, "but I'll do it before we go to sleep."

"Good-night, honey."

"Good-night, Mom."

Upstairs, I dragged the bed as close to the window as possible for whatever breeze I could get, or rather, imagine. I lay down, exhausted. Rest at last! But tired as I was, I could not fall asleep. The sheet was too warm. For a while I lay in a sticky, somno-

lent stupor. Finally I stopped trying to sleep. I propped myself up at one end of the bed and sipped my ice water. Outside, the stars shone through the leaves of the old maple, the scents of summer — alfalfa, pine, and warm earth — drifted in and mixed with the faint odor of resin and wallpaper that heat made breathe from the walls of the upstairs. The TV had been shut off. The night was still, save for a few stray insects pattering against the screen. From somewhere in the backyard there was a faint scratching sound: cat-claws on tree bark. Luwang was enjoying his prow. I began to feel drowsy. I lay down. The night settled over me. I dozed off.

A loud shriek jerked me bolt upright in bed. It wasn't the cat.

"Mother, come quick!" Beth's tone frightened me. Frantically, I groped in the dark for my tee-shirt and shorts. Terrible thumpings and bangings began below. I started down the narrow, slippery stairs, trying to pull on my shorts as I went. My toe caught in the waistband, I missed my footing at the turn, skidded painfully down the last few steps and landed on all fours. I scrambled to my feet and stumbled towards the sound of the commotion.

At the bedroom door I stopped and stood blinking in the light, amazed. My mother seemed to have gone mad. Her long hair had come loose and streamed behind her as she swirled around the bedroom, flailing the air with a broom she had got hold of. The mattress quivered as Beth jumped up and down shrieking "A snake! A snake! Luwang dropped a snake on the bed!"

Two heavy pictures of her ancestors crashed to the floor as mother laid about her vigorously with the broom. Shouting, "Get it! Get it!" she made a swing at Luwang, who was careening from the clothes hamper to the bed, from the bed to the bureau, skidding, scattering bottles and brushes, looking wildly for an exit.

"Kitty! Here Kitty!" He dashed towards me, whipped between my legs, and fled for the safety of the attic. Mother didn't pursue him. She walloped the floor near the end of the bed.

"There it goes! Get it!" She thrust under the bed with her broom and a brown-striped snake flopped out almost over my bare feet. I jumped back. "Don't just stand there! Get it!" The snake recoiled upon itself and slithered towards her. She quickly retreated, keeping it at broom's length. I could see it was only a garter snake, but I had never seen such a large one. It insinuated itself under the maple bureau, its tongue flickering at one end and its tail protruding at the other. I didn't like the scratchy, rustling sound its scales made scraping on the polished wood floor. I rubbed one foot against the other. What I really wanted was a pair of tall, heavy boots. I started fumbling in the closet for a pair of slippers.

"What are you doing!"

"I want to put something on my feet."

"Get that nasty thing before it goes in Beth's room! It's bleeding!" She brandished her broom at me and I moved reluctantly in the general direction of the snake. From the safety of the bed, Beth shouted encouragement.

"I see it, Mom! I see it! Grab its tail!" Bending cautiously down by the bureau, I made a perfunctory swipe at its tail, and the tail disappeared. Relieved, I stood up.

"I can't seem to reach it. Maybe we should leave it alone and let it find its own way out."

"Are you crazy? Don't even say such a thing!" She thrust viciously at the snake under the bureau, pushing it towards me. My feet prickled. I looked desperately around for a weapon. Mother kept a loaded shotgun under her bed, but that would make an awful mess, to say nothing of a hole in the floor. I lighted on Beth's toy bow standing in the corner. When the snake slithered out from under the bureau, I tried to lift him with the bow, but he slid rapidly off, like a piece of wet spaghetti. With sudden inspiration, I snatched a piece of kleenex from the box on the bureau and when the snake's head came within range, I pinned it down with the bow and seized him firmly behind the ears. The long, brown body contracted into writhing coils like a live spring.

"Open the bathroom window!" Mother dropped her broom and hurried to do so. I held the lashing, whipping, snake at arm's length, and hoping it wouldn't coil itself around my wrist, made a dash for the bathroom and dropped it out the window. I heard it swishing about in the lily-of-the-valley for a moment, and then it was gone.

I washed my hands, went to the refrigerator for a can of beer, selected a magazine from the pile beside the desk, and retired to the living room to read while I waited for my adrenaline to subside. I could hear my mother struggling to fit the screen snugly against the window. Beth was saying to her earnestly,

"Gramma, you don't have to do that. That snake won't come back tonight."

"I am not leaving this window open. That damn cat might come back down when we're asleep and who knows what he'll find to bring home next!"

However, Luwang did not come down until the next morning, and then he came cautiously.

Later that day I heard Beth on the phone with one of her friends.

"I saw Luwang coming up the cellar door with this stringy thing in his mouth. When he hopped on the window sill, I could see it was moving. He dropped it right on me. 'Gramma,' I said, 'There's a snake in the bed.' You know, she stood right up and jumped from the corner of the bed to the bathroom doorway without even touching the floor!"