

KATHERINE McCONNELL

Nabel and Her Cat

THE SAME THING happened the last time Nabel tried to poison her cat. She felt her collar grow thicker. Wool rose in her throat. Before she knew it, she just couldn't breathe. Dr. Singer had told her, written it down a couple times like a prescription but, all the same, Nabel couldn't remember the precise steps. She shuffled around her silent apartment stumbling over the limp brown body stretched in front of her television set. Her chair swiveled and buckled with her falling weight, flipping Yum-Yum's saucer and the last of its lethal milk across the carpet. Nabel began to panic, searched her mind faster for the doctor's steps. *deep breaths first, breathe Annabel, even if you can't breathe. Listen to the air going in and out and in and then follow it to the next sound and then to the next and when there's nothing left to hear just open your eyes—slowly—and look right through the wall, don't stop for anything until your eyes just fall back in place. Focus on the thing they stop on and then move onto the next thing and then the next until you're looking at your feet and up your legs into your belly and your hands resting on it. Look at your hands. Just look at your hands. There. Breathe. Easy.*

There. It wasn't exactly right, but she managed. Dr. Singer said if she kept getting better she'd be fine, good enough to go off the pills even. She hated them — like swallowing gummy cigarette butts right out of the ashtray.

Nabel quit smoking six years ago, right after Cleary's stroke. Aneurism, really. Right out of the clear blue and right in the middle of dinner. Chomping his pot roast, smearing gravy on the table beneath his ring finger and then on the cabinet door, stretching for his heart pills. He shook the stove in a queer sort of way, his knees tapping awkward beats, left right — right left and his face turned yellow under the hood lamp, then heated to a panicky orange before his arms reached for the hanging brass pan, then the stovetop, then the table as he lurched closer to Nabel. Finally Cleary was just grabbing for the carpet. By the time Nabel was standing over him, a limp baby carrot stabbed on the end of her Corningware fork halfway to her wondering mouth, Cleary was an awful shade of gray, and when Nabel pushed her old fingers into the soft spot behind his ear, Clarence Fosnaugh Brown wasn't breathing anymore.

Nabel was breathing fine again. The fingers on her left hand twitched and unclenched. Always came back to her a few seconds before the right, on account of her arthritis, she figured. She slumped in her La-Z-Boy, panting, her chin bent into her chest. Nabel forgot herself. Reaching her hands over the orange velvet arms, Nabel hoisted herself up, forearms quivering, until she was sitting sideways but upright in her chair. She pressed her sweaty forehead into the upholstery and enjoyed a few deep breaths before the thought slipped through her ear like the narrow iron of a nail file: *What if the cat's not dead yet?*

Her body tensed. She strained her ears. Nothing but the electronic hum of her muted television. Her eyes darted to the end of the table. The lamp, thanks heaven,

had stayed put during the panic. Nabel held out the same hope for her glasses. She saw the light reflected in their lenses, right on the *Tribune* daily crossword where she'd left them. She swiped at them and they skittered into her lap. Nabel fumbled the glasses onto her face, her jumpy fingers pressing the frames to her brow. She focused, her vision centered on the living room rug four feet in front of her.

Yum-Yum, posed with the tall dignity of a tomb-cat, turned his gaze straight on her. The Siamese held Nabel's eyes, their black shallows not half as deep as his blue marbled orbs, until he could smell the sweat rising in her palms again. Yum-Yum let his lids fall together and released the old woman with one prolonged, impatient blink.

The cat arched, neck craned until its dense body was bent nearly double, and licked the fur down along her telephone stand, pawing gingerly over the tangled cord before slipping into the black of Nabel's bedroom.

Nabel's locked knuckles pressed the glasses to her temples and she didn't blink until she heard his meaty pounce coil the springs of her single bed.

She didn't grab her ten-pound handbag or tie on her plastic rain cap, or stop to slip on her shoes. She just hefted herself out of the recliner and scooted down the short hallway out the door of her apartment. She hunched down the senior center hallway to the elevator. The doors closed, packing her inside with the smell of boiled ham, wet medical gauze, and pickled beets. Nabel wondered how much of the evening had gone by trying to take care of Yum-Yum. Had she set the VCR to tape her program? She thought she remembered programming it this afternoon, right after recording "Captain Blood" with Errol Flynn on channel 34, but she couldn't be sure. She reached for the emergency stop button, then jerked her hand back to her hip as if it had been slapped.

Nabel stepped off the elevator and out into the lobby's biting Lysol air. The linoleum breezeway always smelled sterile. She eyed the black rotary phone at the receptionist's window. Her son's telephone number ran across her mind, but barely paused as she hobbled past it, through the heavy swinging doors and out into the parking lot. She slowed her pace to a stop, her socks sticking to the April pavement like a cat's tongue as the rest of the evening's rain soaked through to her soles. She turned and looked back up at her apartment. *Tonite's special two-hour-long episode of "Murder, She Wrote,"* she thought one last time before she'd turned on heels and elbows and mall-walked down the senior center walkway.

IT WASN'T EVEN nine at night, but Nabel was alone on the corner of Walnut and Main, the town silent except for the distant peel of tires over wet asphalt. She brushed beads of rain from the bus stop bench and eased down. The majestic marble façade of the senior center rose up behind her, dwarfing her scant frame. Cleary had taken her there once when they were young, to celebrate their tenth anniversary. Back then it was the best hotel in town, with a cinema built right into the ground floor. She remembered how he gazed at her over their blueberry pancakes and scrambled eggs on the last day of their weekend stay, and whispered that he wished they could live there for good. They'd laughed about giving little Billy his own bedroom several floors down.

Bill had stepped right in to help Nabel sort things out after Cleary's funeral. Bill made his money in real estate. He moved in on homeowners whose mortgages were one step from foreclosure, bought them up for dimes on the dollar, hired undocumented Mexican teenagers to fix-up the property for four bucks an hour, then sold them at a two-hundred percent profit.

His parents' home was the most valuable property he'd ever gotten his hands on, and when he saw his chance to take it to market, he did.

After the service, Bill had ushered his mother up the stairs from the United Methodist basement, away from the smell of funeral casseroles and home-baked wake cookies. He hurried the petite old woman past the last few wrinkle-mouthed mourners and up to his silver Jetta. Bill hopped into the driver's seat and pushed the passenger door open for his mother. Nabel ducked and eased herself down into the leather seat. The back seat was full of Cleary's flowers, Nabel's new houseplants. The odor of condolence daisies and day-lilies made her head hurt. Her cheeks flushed.

"I found a buyer," Bill said, shifting into second and sipping away from the church. "Nice young couple, Mom. Great price. Plenty of money to move you into the new senior high-rise like Dad wanted. You're gonna like it Mom. I got you a nice unit with a balcony and cable and everything. There's a Buehler's right across the street. You just walk on over, pick up your groceries, and walk back home. You don't need to be driving Dad's big Olds. He always said it was too big for you anyway. Plenty of people calling about that, too."

"How will I get to Eastern Star if I don't have the car? And what about Muffy? She lives all the way out on Country Club Drive. We play bridge every Tuesday."

"Just call a cab, Mom. It's only ten bucks to anywhere in this town. Why can't Muffy come over to your place for card club?"

"She's got Pitterpat."

"She's got what?"

"Pitterpat, her poodle."

"So?"

"Well she can't just leave the poor thing."

"Muffy can't leave her dog alone in her house for a couple of hours to visit you?"

You girls are starting to worry me. Maybe I shouldn't give you your surprise."

"What are you talking about, Billy?"

"Jesus, Mom, I know this isn't easy, but wouldya try and pay attention? I'm talking about your new best friend, a roomie, some company for your new place. C'mon upstairs and I'll show you."

Bill pulled up in front of the old hotel, punched his hazards and left his Volkswagen to idle beside the unfed meter.

"This is it, Mom, your new home. Come check it out." He opened Nabel's door and pulled her up from the seat by her wrists.

Bill held his mother's arm, a broom handle wrapped in black knit dress sleeves and her good cloth raincoat. He led her through the double doors of the breezeway, which were terribly heavy considering the average upper-body strength of the majority of the building's tenants. Nabel followed her son into the elevator. The doors opened onto the fourth floor.

The interior of the building had lost all traces of the glamour Nabel recalled from her last visit. Instead of long strides across a tapestry of royal blue fleur-de-lis weaved in rich red pile, Nabel shuffled her shoes over smooth berber Stainguard, several feet spreading between them as she followed her son down the fluorescent beige hallway. It smelled like leftovers from a week's worth of geriatric dinners. Boiled chicken. Egg noodles. Baked cod. Bill stopped in front of 416, took out a set of keys and opened Nabel's new front door.

Nabel stood back from the door and watched her son walk straight in like he owned the place. He was shaved and efficient with his manicured sideburns and four-button blue suit. Nabel waited in the hallway. Her fingers picked at each other as if she were furiously knitting.

"Jesus, Mom, what are you doing out there? The movers'll be here in the morning and we have to decide where you want

everything."

Bill's voice sounded too nasal when he was impatient, almost like he had been raised in Minnesota rather than central Ohio. It irritated Nabel, but she followed his muffled echo and stood looking into the bare, narrow unit from the doorway. The round tips of her Easy Spirits toed the thin gold threshold. She could hear Bill shuffling around somewhere deeper in the apartment and her chest jumped when he strode from behind a corner into the living room. He was still talking, though Nabel hadn't picked up a word of it. The plastic case he was carrying bucked from end to end until he set it down on the standard-issue tan carpeting.

"Come on in here Mom and shut the door. Jesus. Just come on over and see what I bought for you."

Nabel listened to her son. The door was light and closed easily. It didn't sound sturdy and oaken like the old double doors at the house. She guessed she'd have to get used to that hollow sound and the unsatisfying weight of the doorknob in her palm. She shuffled into the room and stopped when she was standing over the case.

"What's in there?"

A delicate mew echoed inside the box's own bare walls.

"It's your very own cat, Mom. Siamese, purebred. So — what are you gonna call it?"

YUM-YUM WAS demanding to begin with. He allowed the old woman to touch his coat, but only when the air was dry and itchy, or before he settled into a nap. He had her trained within a month to deliver water, milk, and Fancy Feast at exactly eight in the morning, two in the afternoon, and eight o'clock at night. She'd resisted three servings at first, instead piling too much food into the dish to avoid the extra feeding. Yum-Yum wouldn't touch the mush once it had turned crisp and black at the

edges. He'd asked her politely at first — a series of protest meows — but she'd ignored him and let him sit staring at the dish of stale slop until his pride rose up his tight sandpaper throat. He only had to shred the old woman's sheer window dressings once — she wasn't dumb at all, just rude — before she'd obliged him with fresh afternoon servings.

Sometimes the old woman liked to leave in the evening, not often, just three or four times every new moon. Still, Yum-Yum was irritated with her distraction. In the evening, the cat was inclined to finish his dinner, bathe and let the woman brush him from ears to tail until he was dreaming. This routine pleased him, and her absence showed the utmost inconsideration, if not intentional neglect on her part. Yum-Yum's thoughts ticked as quick and regular as a clock without those long, calming brush strokes. If there was no old woman, there were no brush strokes and his mind wound tight and tighter behind the calm of his sleek face. The cat could not bear any suggestion of his dependence.

The last time she'd upset him so, he sat poised, boiling behind his metered blinking until the constant repetitive recognition of her insolence filled every atom of his compact body and he sprang from his stony pose into animated rage. His transformation from sculpture to flipping, hissing energy was so sudden as to be imperceptible. Yum-Yum left no newspaper unshredded, no collectible teacup unshattered, no cushion untainted by his cloying ammonia spray. The old woman had wept when she's returned that night. It was the last night she'd ever spent away from him.

THE MOVE HAD been a complete upheaval of Nabel's routine. Bill stayed home long enough to see his father in the ground and his mother taken care of. Her furniture arrived the day after Cleary's burial, and

Bill had sold their house within two weeks. After all the details had been settled, Bill headed back to his condo up north, leaving Nabel by herself. Alone except for the cat.

Nabel spent her widowed mornings fussing over coffee and medication. During the day she worked from her easy chair, scheduling her television programming as if she kept the trains running on time. She trekked over to Kroger's twice a week for VHS tapes. They came in packs of three, and she filled them all — hundreds — all catalogued and registered with the titles of familiar films from her childbearing years, gossipy biographies of resurrected silver-screen icons, and her favorite syndicated British mystery series. She talked to Muffy on the telephone three or four times a week, but she didn't get out to see her at all anymore, not since it upset the cat so much when she left him.

Muffy never visited Nabel, either. She had come to the apartment once. It was the day Nabel's new tape got stuck in the VCR and she had to jimmy it out in time to record a showing of "The Secret Cottage" on AMC. She was so focused on her task that she had forgotten Yum-Yum's afternoon feeding.

Yum-Yum waited next to his dish. He watched Nabel's rigid arthritic hands poke and shake the machine with no sign of progress. Once the cat's patience had wasted completely away, his posture melted into measured strides from his dish to her kneeling lap. Yum-Yum sat between Nabel and the entertainment system. As soon as she returned his stare, the cat pounced for her. He landed tightly on her right arm, her bad arm, and hugged her wrist between his paws. His claws sank into her palm, holding it steady for his head to hammer her hand like a cobra. Her rice-paper skin punctured with every rapid strike. The cat's needle-teeth became daggers as their pressure punctured every arthritic nerve. Even the shallowest of wounds ripped into her

brittle joints. Nabel whimpered and jerked her arm, shaking it as much as she could given the cat's weight. Yum-Yum held tighter with every attempt to buck him. The beast's fangs sank deep into the thickest flesh between Nabel's thumb and forefinger, stabbed almost completely through until the points touched and then stabbed again in the raw wound. Nabel screamed. The cat sprang from her outstretched arm, ending her high-pitched yelp. Yum-Yum scurried into the bedroom, whiskers tracing thin lines of Nabel's blood along the white wall as he whisked around the corner.

Nabel's arm was gloved in thin ruby gruel. She was panting, panicking. Her mouth let out "ohhhh, oh, ooooh" in low, forced breaths. She found the phone and dialed Muffy with her good hand.

Nabel had seventeen stitches put into her hand and wrist. Muff walked her up to the apartment after the hospital. When the elevator stopped, Nabel held the doors closed.

"Will you stay here with me Muffy?"

"Oh no, no I couldn't Nabel. I don't want to stay out too long. I've got to feed the doggy. Pitterpat gets so nervous when I don't come home. Wees all over the place if she can't go outside when she needs to."

"Don't leave me here alone with the cat. Please, Muffy."

The elevator opened. Nabel stepped out into the hallway. Muffy stayed hunched in the bright little box.

"Oh Nabel, I'm sorry but I just couldn't. You don't know how Pitterpat gets. I should have had her dinner ready an hour ago." Muffy's hands began to knit together. Her words were shaky and rushed.

"Nabel, I've just got to get home." The elevator doors slid together and Nabel was alone in the long hall full of closed doors. Each knocker was hung with some wreath or handicraft to distinguish one resident from the next. Nabel's door was still blank after six years. She twisted her key and let

the door fall shut behind her.

She hurried through the living room and bedroom to lock herself in the bathroom. She hadn't seen any sign of Yum-Yum. She peeled the bandages from her wounds. The gauze stuck to the dried blood and snagged on the loose strings of the sutures. The doctor, a tidy young Indian woman, had cleaned her wounds, but Nabel didn't trust peroxide and Neosporin. She opened the mirrored medicine cabinet above the sink and took out a thick glass bottle of iodine. Bits of its yellowed label flaked off where her fingers held the tiny jar. Nabel gripped the lid between her teeth and twisted. Orange rinds of dried antiseptic stuck to her lips. The tincture tasted cold and bitter on the tip of her tongue. She leaned over the sink and gulped water from her cupped palm. *Poison*. The word splashed over her brain cool and bitter like water from the rusted tap.

Yum-Yum scratched at the other side of the bathroom door for his dinner.

Nabel raised her head from the basin. "Poison," she whispered to her reflection.

NABEL HAD NEVER tried to kill anything before the night she mixed tincture of iodine into Yum-Yum's Fancy Feast. The brown mush didn't even change color as she mashed the reset of the bottle's contents into the plate. She tapped the fork on the porcelain, and set the dish down just as Yum-Yum prowled into the kitchen. The cat lowered his nose to the bowl, his neck as slim and graceful as a giraffe's. The nose twitched; the lips parted to take in the full scent of the food. Some sour note rolled over his palate and triggered several olfactory alarms. Yum-Yum rose to his full height, the slippery smell of iodine still breathing through his parted lips. The tongue pushed past the tiny fangs. The cat panted at her as Nabel looked down into his glare. She