

GATS NOT KIDS

TESS RAFFERTY



When we moved into our house, the old woman who we bought it from clasped my hand and said, “You will find that animals just find their way here.” It was like a gypsy curse. My boyfriend and I quickly noticed that we had a cat living in our backyard – a big Siamese with grey points. My boyfriend had had cats as a child but I’d never had a pet; my parents always told us that we couldn’t have one because we wouldn’t take care of it. I’m convinced this deliberate sabotage of my self-esteem is why I don’t have kids now, which is really the best revenge. At least I won’t continue the cycle of setting my children up to fail! But when we moved into the house I had been considering a pet, yet had zero interest in a cat. In fact, for years we had wanted a dog, and now that we had the house, we thought we could actually get one.

A few months later we tore down some old sheds out the back and the workers found three newborn kittens underneath – luckily still alive. They fitted in the palm of our hand, and while adorable and tempting, there was no way we could keep three newborn kittens. We didn’t even know how to feed them. We spent a frantic day calling around to different no-kill shelters, trying to find a home for them. This was our first lesson in how over-crowded and stretched thin these places are. We were frequently told it was “kitten season,” a term we had never heard before but now are all too familiar with.

The cat went on to have more kittens that we didn’t find in construction projects, so they lived and grew up in our backyard. Someone said we should trap them and get them spayed and neutered, so we went to a place to look into renting traps, but the whole process was overwhelming. It’s often a wait to get an appointment at the low cost or no cost spay and neutering clinics, and once you get one, you have to hope that you can catch a cat the night before. At this point we had several living in our backyard and the idea of trying to do this while juggling our jobs seemed completely overwhelming. It was too much for us to try and contemplate, so instead we did nothing.

A year went by and there is a steady stream of cats in and out of our backyard. New adult ones show up: this is clearly a problem that has been developing in our neigh-

bourhood for some time. We think that because we have the only yard without dogs that they gravitate towards us. That, or the old lady was a gypsy! One spring, two new Siamese kittens are born and one really likes me.

Frank was always different from the other cats. He was always very interested in people. While the other cats kept their distance and ran away the minute you stepped into the yard, Frank was curious. He stayed close.

One night when he was about 6-8 weeks old, I was out back having drinks with friends and he was about 10 feet away, looking at us, wondering what we were doing. We threw him pieces of the shrimp we were eating and he would chase them, eat them up. Later the same week, I was in the house and he came right up to the sliding glass door, staring at me. I called my boyfriend.

“Tell me not to feed this cat.”

“Do not feed the cat.” He was adamant that we not start, knowing what would happen if we did. But my mind was already made up, and I took Frank a plate of smoked salmon. When he ate

that immediately, I took him some more. This continued throughout the summer. One day we were grilling with friends and I took him a few scallops. I’ll never forget my friend looking at him, saying, “That cat is feral. You are never going to get him in the house.”

But Frank did come in the house. I like to think he just saw us and knew he wanted to live with us. But maybe it had something to do with the jumbo scallops from Whole Foods we were feeding him. We lived in our backyard all summer and – having no cats at the time – often left the sliding glass door wide open. One night we were in the back room, watching TV and Frank just walked in through the door. He looked up at us as if to say, “Hey, how ya’ doin’?” and just kept on walking through the rest of the house. We were lucky; he never once peed in it, and always seemed to know when it was time for us to go to bed and him to leave.

In the middle of all of this, Frank’s sibling got hit by a car outside my house. The sad image of the cat who looked so much like the one I was starting to consider my own was the wake up call I needed. I realized how crucial it was to do what I could to stop these cats from breeding and find them homes if I could.

Some afternoons, I would bring a blanket outside to lie



on while I read. Frank would sit on the far edge of the blanket. We still couldn't pet him, but slowly I was getting him used to our presence. One night as we were getting ready for bed, Frank was still sitting inside the house, not taking the social cue to leave. The boyfriend and I just shrugged; we figured once we shut the door, he would get scared and want to go out. But he didn't. Hoping he wouldn't poop anywhere, we went to bed. Frank came and got us up when he wanted to go out, as would become his ritual. He would tap me on the shoulder. If that didn't work, the "taps" became more aggressive. But that rarely happened, because I was all too ready to oblige an un-housebroken, feral cat who is telling me he wants to leave. Frank learned that to let him out the back door, I had to first walk to the front and dismantle the alarm, and he would walk me to the front door, wait for the alarm, and then herd me towards the back door, blocking the hallway so I wouldn't instead go back to bed.

By now it was Fall and Frank was spending every night in the house and parts of some days, too. We knew Frank was nearing 6 months of age and would need to be fixed. So, one morning we didn't let Frank leave. He knew something is up and jumps high onto a windowsill and runs around. Somehow we get him into the carrier and to the vet, where everyone fawns over how beautiful he is. He is a very handsome cat. He's a Siamese with sable points, and blue, sometimes crossed eyes. One of the techs asked if he's a Tonkinese. "What part of feral yard cat don't you understand?" I say in more polite words



"Does he act like a dog, fetch and herd?"

"Um, yeah?" I said, surprised. Frank, you have a pedigree.

We leave him there overnight, and when the doctor calls to say that he's made it through surgery and he has a big bowl of food in front of him and everyone is "loving up on him," I actually burst into tears.

We pick him up the next day, but now we have bigger problems. When we brought him in to get neutered, the doctor said we had to keep him in the house for seven days.

What part of feral yard cat are you people not getting here?

We explain that he's never used a litter box before and she says, "Well, how about for four days?"

Again, we try to explain our situation and she says, "Well, do you have a laundry room? Some place you could shut him up with the litter box until he learns to use it?"



Missing Something?

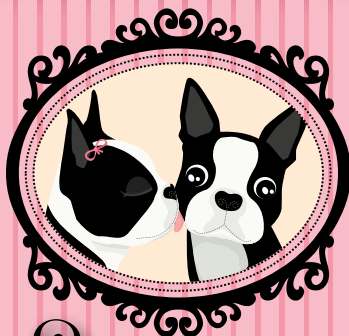
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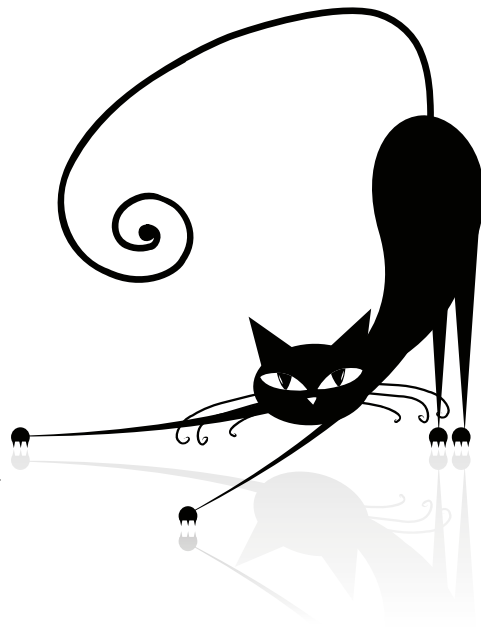
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No, we don't have a laundry room. We have a 60 year old, two-bedroom house that we bought at the height of the market!

The first thing Frank does when we let him out of the carrier is run to the back door and look out of it longingly. When he realizes that I am not going to open the door, he starts meowing, louder and louder until it is eventually a whimper. When he realizes that isn't going to work either, he runs into our 'guest room' and takes an angry, deliberate dump in the middle of the bed, looking right at me the whole time. Determined to remain calm, I clean it off and throw the spread immediately into the wash. When I come back, he has peed on the sheets. That was my fault. I should have assumed that was next. At least now I know he won't have to go for a while!

I pick Frank up and try to comfort him, holding him on my lap while I sit at the desk and try to type around him as he whimpers. The Boyfriend comes back with supplies from Petco: litter, a box, a scooper, and a cat leash. We have somehow gotten the idea that if all else fails, we can walk him around the yard when he has to go to the bathroom.

We try to get him interested in the box. We do all the things people tell us to do. Put his paws in it and make them dig around. We try throwing some dirt in the box and putting it near the back door. Frank has no interest. Finally we have to go to bed so we shut him up in the bathroom over night and he proceeds to raise Holy Hell.



He meows, he whimpers, he scratches the door, rips the stripping off the bottom of the door frame. At five am we can't take it anymore and we let him out of the bathroom. We're sitting on the sofa, exhausted and at our wits end. "If having a baby is worse than this, I don't want one," I remember thinking. Finally we decide to try the leash. I walk him about two feet outside before he breaks free of the harness and runs across the yard. I manage to pick him up just in time for him to pee all over me. This is like having a baby!

We have to go out that night, so we shut Frank up in the bathroom with the box and cross our fingers. It's only for three hours. We come back to a bathroom that has been torn up, but a box that has been used. We're so relieved we can't stop hugging Frank and congratulating him. It's not long before he's outside again, and he sometimes comes in the house to just use the box and then leave again. He likes having an indoor toilet!

We still have the problem of the other ferals, two of whom are now pregnant. I call up a couple of free clinics and throw myself on their mercy. I can't do this alone, I tell them. I will pay someone, make a donation, whatever it takes. A place called Fix Nation



takes pity on me and hooks me up with a volunteer who is phenomenal. She works with us and we are able to trap four adult cats and have them fixed and released. Only the two females have already

dropped their kittens and we've had no sight of them. They're out there and now they have to be taken care of, too.

A few weeks later it is an unseasonably hot day in mid-May. It's expected to reach about 110 degrees so we're fixing up the pool area for friends to swim. I'm cleaning the outdoor bar of last summer's debris when I pick up an empty box. At least it feels empty. But out of the corner of my eye I see a small, fuzzy ball. "Please don't let that be a dead kitten," I tell myself, "Please, don't let that be a dead kitten." I look inside and a tiny little Tabby with ears bigger than her head hisses back at me. Meet Knoxie.

We didn't mean to keep Knoxie. As the day got hotter we felt bad for the kitten and we brought her inside. But we knew which feral her mom was, so the plan was to re-release her at night when her mom came back around. Around ten o'clock that night we saw the cat, so we went inside; me to do dishes, my boyfriend to re-release the kitten. Only after about 20 minutes, he called to me:

"Go get my camera and take a picture of me with this kitten!"

Knoxie had crawled up his arm and was sitting on his shoulder. She's never been back outside since.

Over the next couple of weeks, we trapped the four remaining kittens from the spring litters, had them fixed and then tried to place them. It was a rough couple of weeks. They had fleas. They needed to be held in order to get them used to human contact. We had to keep them segregated from Frank and Knoxie, who were already having a hard enough time trying to adjust to each other. Frank was trying to groom Knoxie with an aggressiveness that scared us, and she wanted none of it. We called around trying to find places to take them, but shelters



were already full. We could have re-released them to the yard, but we felt that they were small and could have a chance at a better home. We finally managed to place all but one, a solid grey with a face pointed like a Siamese. She was beautiful, and while she would hiss at us during the day, she would cry from her crate in the spare room at night and wouldn't stop until one of us went in there to sleep, resting one hand on the cage. When the last prospective adoptive family came over to look at her and a debate ensued between the husband and wife on my doorstep, I had had enough. I got on my belly on the floor so I could look at her underneath the cabinet where she had gone to hide.

"You're a very beautiful cat. And I don't know why no one wants to take you. But this is your house now. So enjoy."

I called my boyfriend and told him that it was far less stressful for me to think I had three cats than it was to think I had two cats plus one that needed to be placed. I then took a glass of wine out to the backyard, leaving her and Knoxie to fight it out all night if they chose.

This entire experience has opened my eyes to so much. The need to rescue pets from shelters... The importance of educating communities about spaying and neutering... The dwindling resources available to shelters and low cost clinics. It's absolutely overwhelming and completely heartbreaking. But with all of the sad and frustrating realizations comes the uplifting ones, too, like the laughter and happiness my cats bring me every day. Knowing that I've found homes for six cats and fixed another six. And the knowledge that yes, I will take care of a pet.

Tess Rafferty is an American writer who has spent the last 12 years of her life in a relationship with one man and the last seven in a relationship with five. As the only female writer on the cult US comedy show, The Soup, she has skewered pop culture, parodied celebrities and helped her co-workers pick out gifts for their wives. She has frequently been seen on camera as herself; Posh Spice, a Succubus, a "Guidette" from the Jersey Shore, and perhaps most notably "The Dancing Maxi Pad."

Her first feature film Thicker Than Water is scheduled to begin filming in Spring 2012 and her first book, Recipes for Disaster, a memoir of food, wine and what went wrong, will be published in October 2012 by St. Martin's Press.

When she is not working 50 weeks a year writing jokes about the Kardashians, she performs stand up comedy around Los Angeles, speaks Italian, and holds herself to ridiculous standards at dinner parties.

She lives with her boyfriend and their three ungrateful cats. They are not married. And no, no plans to. But thank you for asking. It's not at all uncomfortable.

You can follow her on twitter at @TessRafferty 