

Aisle of Death

One tiny pill daily kept Winnie's blood from clotting normally. Bruises appeared mysteriously on her body. Her nose bled profusely with the slightest sneeze. Yet, as George reminded her, she was better off than the neighbor's elderly mother, suffering from dementia and sitting alone under a tree in the back yard with a tiger-striped cat, seemingly her only companion, on her lap.

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"Ready to go outside, Win? It's a lovely evening."

George poured wine, took Winnie's hand and, as they stepped onto the patio, an ugly but familiar scene greeted them. The neighbor's muscle-bound mutt slammed against the fence, barked unceasingly. Winnie touched her forehead. "I can't take this again."

Alone, George watched the dog bare its fangs, growl ferociously until a hand yanked at the collar. "Everything's OK, boy. Daddy's here."

"Everything is not OK, 'Daddy'," George screamed. "My wife had a stroke last year and can't even relax in her own yard because of your crazy mutt."

"He's a rescue dog," the neighbor yelled. "He can't help it."

"Can't help it? What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me. He's afraid of strangers."

"I'm not a stranger, you idiot. I live here."

"You're an intolerant asshole!"

Red-faced, George sputtered, "And you're the neighbor from hell."

The dog bared its teeth, snarled viciously.

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"You've got to avoid stress," the doctor told Winnie. "Find a soothing hobby."

Winnie took up bird watching, sat in the back yard with her binoculars and field guide. Her favorite was the California Quail, with their little hats the cutest birds in the world. They

scurried along the ground, babies trailing behind, taking refuge in the rockroses at the yard's edge.

So like today, with the dog inside and binoculars in hand, she relaxed in her lawn chair, breathed deeply, but her reverie was immediately truncated when she heard a cacophony of bird squawks. "Oh, no!" Her head jerked around to see that tiger-striped cat, belly close to the ground, head thrust forward, tail twitching, ID tag dangling.

Winnie bolted out of her chair, raised her arms, flapped her hands. "Sssssss. Go away."

The cat stayed in its attack mode.

Winnie heard a "gobble gobble gobble", saw two hens trailed by fluffy chicks enter the yard.

Winnie rushed toward the cat. "Get out of here. Sssssss. Get!"

The cat did not move, crouched lower.

Winnie picked up a rock and threw it. It missed, and brazen, the cat stayed put, tail twitching.

"Damn you." She thought about the billions of birds that cats slaughter each year, picked up another, bigger rock, took aim and flung it as hard as she could. The cat didn't make a sound when the rock clunked into its ribs right before it slipped to safety through the fence.

That evening, George remarked the cat was present every day, that he hadn't considered it a problem in comparison to the dog.

After Winnie gave him a long discourse about the killer nature of cats, she looked into the eyes of her husband. "If there hadn't been an altercation with the neighbor, I could appeal to him."

"You think he'd care about your birds?" George scoffed. "That jerk couldn't tell a sea gull from a blue jay." He lowered his voice. "But he could identify a dead cat."

"What are you saying?"

"It's outlawed now, but I've got some left over d-Con in the garage. All you have to do is mix it with cat food, and Bam! Cat's dead."

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The next day, Winnie scattered birdseed and watched the quail mom and dad with eleven chicks emerge from the rockroses. She focused her binoculars, instantly saw a flash of grey, heard the distinctive sounds of bird distress fill the air, watched the cat pounce into the

midst of the quail family. Winnie, heart pounding, chased after the cat only to see it, chick hanging limp in its jaws, drop the dead bird at the old woman's feet.

Now the sounds of distress came from Winnie.

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The Home Depot sales associate's nametag identified him, ironically she thought, as 'Tom Ferrell'.

"What do you have to kill a large rodent?" she asked.

"How large?"

"Well, like a raccoon." She held out her arms to show how big.

"Follow me to the Aisle of Death," Tom said. "We have lots of final solutions." He led her past the weed killers, traps for bees and gophers, and ant and bedbug poisons.

"These here are glue traps," he confided. "Rats step onto the surface and that's the last step they'll take. Feet stuck."

"Well, what then?" Winnie asked.

"It's up to you, Lady, what you do at that point."

Winnie winced. "What are my other options?"

"It would help," Tom said, "if I knew exactly what rodent it is you're wanting to kill."

Winnie hesitated before she said, quietly, "A fat, feral cat."

"Wild cats aren't usually fat, ma'am. And a cat's not exactly a raccoon, now is it?" He waited for a response he didn't get. "To answer your question about options, I'd suggest you buy a large trap like this here, capture the cat, and haul it off to the pound. That'd be about \$90 with tax."

"Ninety dollars! I don't have that kind of money to spend on a trap I'd use one time."

"Well, then, since money's a concern," Tom said. "we have your grandmother's old-fashioned, inexpensive rat traps. You put a little peanut butter on this spot right here, and thwack!, this part of the trap crashes down over the rat's head. Breaks its neck."

"But would that kill a cat?" Winnie asked.

“The traps are designed for rats, which are smaller than cats, aren’t they? So I can’t rightly say,” Tom answered.

Winnie stepped closer to him, spoke in a near whisper. “Do you know about d-Con?”

“It’s a pretty potent anti-coagulant, Lady.” He put his hands over his stomach, closed his eyes, tipped his head to one side before he went on. “Once a rat eats it, it’ll slowly bleed to death. Internally.” He opened his eyes, looked at Winnie. “A lot of the old d-Con products are outlawed for sale. Rats are now protected by the government.”

Winnie glanced at the dark blue bruises on her own hands, clasped them behind her back.

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Later Winnie pressed the microphone icon on her cell phone. “Siri. What’s the best way to kill a cat?”

“Let me check that. OK. I found this on the web,” Siri answered.

There was a website for the cage-like traps Tom Ferrell had mentioned. The downside to the cages, besides the expense, was, if left in the sun, the captured cat could fry, dehydrate, suffer terribly.

Another website pointed out that poisons don’t always work on larger animals. The best way to do away with a cat? Shoot it, in short.

Checking the website for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, she decided she couldn’t call SPCA because they’d surely contact the neighbor who would seek revenge on George.

A reviewer on one cat-killing website wrote, “Cats’ ancestors are lions and tigers, so naturally they kill. They keep the mice population down, so why not accept them as they’ve evolved?”

But Winnie could not accept that cats were thriving with the help of their humans while many bird species were declining precipitously.

The final article she read confirmed that Tom Ferrell was right. Some forms of d-Con were outlawed by the government with the support of her favorite wildlife organizations because anti-coagulants were found in 70 percent of dead wildlife tested.

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Winnie couldn't sleep. She imagined a hawk eating a d-Conned rat and suffering a slow, painful death itself. She hoped a poisoned cat would be too big to be nabbed by a hawk or an owl. But what if she was wrong?

She thought of the quail chick, hanging limp in the cat's jaws and realized her birds would never be safe as long as the irresponsible neighbor let his cat roam free, so it was either the cat or the birds.

She got up. On a paper plate, she carefully mixed more d-Con pellets than recommended with cat food. "Bam! Cat's dead," George promised. She placed the poison concoction by the back door. If she felt the same way in the morning, she'd set the plate by the rockroses.

Winnie took her own anti-coagulant pill. "d-Con for humans," she thought. Visions of unstoppable internal bleeding flitted through her mind when she returned to bed. She hoped the tiger-striped cat would die quickly, wouldn't suffer at her hands. She thought of the helpless turkey and quail chicks, the rapidly declining songbird population. She pictured in her mind the neighbor's elderly mother who nobody except the cat paid any attention to.

She could not sleep.