

As Cats Go

Three cups of coffee down and the light was beginning to form in the kitchen window. A sweat stain was already prevalent on the front of Avery's pearl snap shirt as he stepped around the baskets of vegetables he had harvested the day before. He flicked off the switch on the coffee maker where a half pot of the thick black liquid steamed. Bonnie had been gone almost a year and he was still making too much. Picking up two baskets of tomatoes, he kicked the door jamb of Willie's room with his scuffed roper.

"Rise up, son. I could use a hand here. We need to load out," he hollered. An audible grunt emanated from behind the door. Another kick, another grunt. A light come on through the glass transom. Moments later, a gangly young man stumbled out, his bright blue eyes half closed; blond hair sticking out from his head in a tangled mass of curls.

"I need a shower," Willie mumbled.

"Bullshit! You slept through your shower. You need to help me load out and then you need to hit the road. You can grab a taco when you stop for gas. If you're not in Broken Arrow and set up by nine o'clock you're going to piss Ian off and I don't want to hear it." Avery turned to carry the baskets out to the truck and Willie threw the dishtowel he had been using to hide his private parts, hitting his dad in the back of the shoulder. As Avery looked back, the bathroom door closed and he heard the shower come on.

"Shit ----!"

When he walked out the front door, Montana jumped up on the hood of the tractor by his food dish and started performing his song and dance. “What do you want, you senile old bastard? I just fed you thirty minutes ago.” The old cat continued to howl as Avery walked by shaking his head. Montana had come out from the city with them when they bought the place.

“You know, I didn’t give you a month when we brought you out here. I figured you would be a coyote snack pretty quick. Now look at you. What are you, fifteen, sixteen years old? I guess we got our money’s worth. Only damn five hundred dollar cat I’ve ever known.” Montana glared back at him but quit his howling.

Back in the city when Montana was not much more than a kitten, he'd been sick. Bonnie hauled him to the vet. Two days and five hundred dollars later he came home healed up and less of a male.

“Five hundred dollars for a cat!” Avery was livid. “He’s a cat for Christ’s sake! He has no purpose! Cats don’t cost shit! They’re free! Check the papers!”

“He has a purpose. He loves us.” Defiant tears welled up in Bonnie’s eyes. “I love him. How can you put a price on that? He would do the same for you.”

Avery almost grinned at that idea but thought better of it when the first drop of liquid dampened Bonnie’s cheek. “It’s alright, Baby. What’s done is done. We’ll be okay. I’m glad he’s back.”

Avery set the baskets down by the back of the old Chevy. Like Avery, the truck had a lot of miles for its years. He opened the tail gate with a loud bang, startling Elvis, making the old Redbone raise his head almost enough that his long ears cleared the cedar planks of the front porch deck.

“Looks like I’m going to have to do all the loading.” Avery said. He was still having trouble wrapping his head around the fact that his youngest child was an adult. Three months from now he was shipping off to Marine boot camp.

It had been a good year for gardening and the first week of July was going to be very profitable. By the time he finished loading the truck, the springs were sagging from the weight of all of the melons, tomatoes, cucumbers, greens and herbs. The smell and sight of all that produce set him smiling. He knew he had finally found his passion, gardening, farming actually, at the scale he was doing it now. He was content to be able to make a living at it.

Avery was dripping with sweat as he came back in the house. Willie was sitting at the table finishing off a huge bowl of ramen.

“Hell of a breakfast.” Avery said. “You shaved! You got a date later?”

“Just trying to keep up the company image, best foot forward, ain't that what you always say? You should come with me, Dad.” Willie coaxed half-heartedly.

“I’ve got that lady coming over for forty laying hens. I’m not passing up four hundred dollars to watch you flirt with that little English girl.”

“She’s Scottish, dad, like you didn’t know. Anyway, we’re just buds. You know I’m doing this for *you!*”

“So *we* can survive! While you're at it, ask her uncle if he would like to trade a lamb roast for some of our melons.”

“I better get going. Thanks to you, I have to set up by myself.” Willie glanced at the clock.

“Yeah, okay. If folks spend a lot be sure you throw in a bunch of carrots or radishes – maybe an onion or two.”

“I know, dad.”

“And don’t discount the eggs.”

“I know, dad.”

“And don’t be hot-rodding that truck. She’s tired and I can’t get another one right now.”

“I know, I’ve got this, Dad. Don’t worry.” He turned to leave.

“Willie, come straight home after market. I need to go see your mama.”

“Dad, you see her every day. She doesn’t even know us anymore.”

“She knows me! She may not remember my name, but she knows me.”

“Right.”

It was 7:15am when Willie made I-44 at Claremore. He had a sausage and egg taco in one hand and a Mountain Dew between his legs. He would have to push it to make the market by nine, good thing it was Saturday and the traffic was light.

Just over an hour later he was sliding into the parking lot of the market at Broken Arrow. Ian looked up from the book he was reading.

“Sorry I’m late. I had to stop for gas.” Willie panted as he ran toward the manager’s table.

“Where’s your dad?” Ian asked.

“Sellin’ chickens.”

“You have any help?”

“Nope. I’ve got it myself today.”

“We open in twenty minutes”

Willie pulled his truck behind the booth next to the Circle M Ranch and started unloading his tables and shelves. He was setting tomatoes in the little white baskets when he noticed the frame of John McClinton towering over him. As he looked up, John’s leather lined face broke into a grin.

“How’s Avery?” John asked.

“He’s fine. He just had to meet a lady about some livestock.”

“He should have talked to me. I would have made him a good deal.”

“Its chickens, John, and he’s selling them.” Willie laughed. John’s grin filled his face as he gave Willie an affectionate clap on the shoulder. His wife, Helena, sidled up and wrapped her slender arms around John’s bicep.

“How’s your mama?” she asked. A cloud passed over Willie’s face.

“Well she’s still walking and eating but she don’t know who we are. Dad thinks she’s better than she really is. He’s having a hard time with it. He keeps wanting to bring her home but the doctors think it’s a bad idea. I’m not sure we could handle her. She gets really pissed off when she’s confused.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. We always keep her in our prayers.”

“Thanks Mrs. McClinton. Say one for dad, too.”

“Sure will. How’re you holding up.”

“I’m OK. I aced my physical so I’ll be going into the Marines in November. We’re hoping to wrap up the season before I go.”

“What’s Avery going to do?”

“Play in the dirt, like always.”

“Five minutes!” Ian yelled from the other side of the vendor lot.

Willie jumped. “I’ve got to get my banner up.” He stretched the banner his mom had quilted across the back of the truck’s tailgate. It read:

Fertile Earth Farm

The Maddox Family

Salina, OK.

“Would you like a hand with your booth today?” Helena asked. “There’s three of us. I’m guessing Beth wouldn’t mind giving you a hand.”

Willie was well aware of the presence of John and Helena’s fire haired niece. He had been exchanging quick glances with her since he arrived. The thought of her sharing his booth made his heart beat a little quicker.

“I could sure use the help today. It’s a big load and I don’t want to take a bunch home.”

“No problem,” John winked. Willie smiled and turned around to get his change box from the truck.

“Go!” Ian yelled.

“Damn”, Willie thought, “I have no idea how much money is in the change drawer.” By the time he got back with the box there were at least twenty customers lined up at the table, several of whom were being assisted by a smiling red haired angel.

The first hour and a half of the market was insane. Willie and Beth barely had time to look at each other and the only words they exchanged were “sorry” and “scuse me” as they bumped and reached around each other while filling bags and making change.

Well into the second hour the crowd thinned and became more lookers than buyers. This was the part of the market Willie’s dad liked the most, chatting with the customers and exchanging recipes, philosophies, and stories. Willie was just glad to have a free minute to talk to Beth.

“Crazy day,” Willie said, “I didn’t think there was any way we would sell all this produce but it’s half gone and we have three hours left.”

Beth leaned against the back of the truck hooking her elbows over the tailgate. “I love these weekend markets. It’s about the only human contact I get other than John and Helena. We’re so far out in the leys, the nearest township is twelve miles away. They’re great, but I came to America to experience some culture and so far all I’ve seen is red dirt and sheep. We have that in Scotland.” Beth’s lilting accent made Willie smile.

“Don’t you drive?” Willie asked.

" I know how but I don’t have the papers here and everything is backwards." Beth’s green eyes sparkled, “What I need is a big strong American boy to show me the sights.”

“I know what you mean a about living in the sticks, It’s okay, but when my parents moved us to the boonies I thought my sister was going to go homicidal. I’m pretty sure she got married just to get back to civilization. We could go to Tulsa sometime. I lived there until I was fourteen. I know some cool spots.”

Beth’s expression turned conspiratorial. She hooked her thumb in the belt loop of Willie’s jeans. “How about today?”

“Aw, I can’t today. I’ve got to get my dad’s truck back to him, but I could drive you home. We can stop for lunch somewhere on the way?” Willie felt time stop while she slid her hand from his side.

“I’ll go tell Helena.”

Near time to pack up, Willie asked Helena if he could use her phone to call his dad. After four rings the machine picked up.

“Dad, I’m gonna take Beth for lunch and then I’ll be home. By the way we cleared 1700 bucks today. I think it was the busiest I have ever seen, but I handled it. See you in a few hours.” Willie hung up.

“Did you reach him?” Beth asked.

“Left a message, he never stays in the house.”

The city limit sign was in the rearview mirror when Beth unbuckled her seat belt, slid across the bench seat and pressed her cheek against Willie’s shoulder. Willie stiffened, not really having much experience in this sort of thing. “You might not want to do that. I’ve been sweating for hours.”

“Yeah, you smell like a goat but I find it, well, stimulating. I’m a little warm myself and hungry. You know of an air-conditioned place where we could eat?”

Willie thought a moment, “I’ve got an even better idea.”

“What?”

“Trust me, you’ll like this.”

A few miles later Willie exited the interstate and took a right down a paved county road. As the traffic faded behind them the terrain became hilly and trees became more prevalent.

“Well this is more like it,” Beth said and rested her hand on Willie’s knee, “I thought Oklahoma was nothing but red dirt prairie.”

“No, it’s a lot like this around our farm too. You’ll have to come check it out sometime.” Willie drove leisurely through the hills reveling in the unaccustomed feeling of Beth leaning into him.

Just around a curve Willie slowed the truck. Nailed to a fence post was a small sign:

PAULINE'S CANTINA
BEER - BARBEQUE - BURGERS - BAIT
PIER OPEN ALL NIGHT

An arrow pointed down a narrow road. In 100 yards it dead ended at a gravel parking lot graced by less than a half dozen vehicles. Tucked between two large oaks was a small barn-wood building with an outdoor brick pit billowing mesquite smoke. A screened in patio was attached, behind which a laconic river sparkled. As they entered, a bell tinkled and the screen door slammed behind them. A matronly woman with a red apron and a shiny black braid down the full length of her back rose smiling from her group of friends and asked, “What can I get for you kids?”

“I’ll have one of your brisket sandwiches, a side of fries and some sweet tea.” Willie said.

“How about you, little lady?” the woman asked.

“I’ll have the same.” Beth shot Willie a glance. “You don’t have any goat meat do you?”

“Not today darlin’.”

"It's alright, I got my own." Beth tapped Willie lightly in the ribs as his face flushed red.

"Here's a cup, tea's over there," said the woman. "Be about ten minutes on the food."

They took a seat on the patio overlooking the river. The only other person there was a skinny young man wearing a faded camo jacket and gimme cap. He glanced up as the pair walked by, his twitching eyes pouring over Beth. As Willie glanced over to greet him his eyes darted back to the sale paper he was reading.

"I can't believe my good fortune. I cleared over 1700 dollars at the market today. In cash, the way Dad likes it. But the best part," Willie continued, "was getting to spend time with you."

"And a silver tongued goat you are too." Beth's eyes sparkled.

"Order up" came a voice from the kitchen. The couple picked up their meals.

Back at their table, Willie looked around, "Looks like we have the patio to ourselves."

"Good, that guy was a little creepy. Besides now you can flirt with me all you want."

"A sandwich from heaven," Willie mumbled around a mouthful of brisket.

"Yeah, I had no idea how hungry I was," Beth said. "Shhh! Hear that?"

"What, your stomach growling?"

"No, listen."

There was a thumping coming from the parking lot then, the sound of glass shattering. They ran to the front of the patio.

“Look, that creepy guy is messing with your truck!” Beth screamed.

“Shit, Dad’s money box is right there on the floorboard!” Willie dashed toward the truck, Beth trailing close behind.

“Damn, he’s got the box. Hey, freak, drop it or I’m gonna kick your ass.”

The vandal broke into a run towards a brown coupe parked near the far end of the lot. He jumped in the little car and backed out. As Willie reached for the driver’s door handle, he dropped it in gear and punched it, knocking Willie to the ground and spraying him with gravel. Willie jumped up just as Beth reached him. His forehead was bleeding and his knuckles banged up.

“Are you okay?” Beth asked.

“I’ve got to catch that bastard,” Willie yelled, running for the truck. When he reached it he flipped the seat forward and pulled out his Remington 22.

Beth’s eyes widened, “You’ve got a gun?”

“It’s a rifle. Everybody out here has one.”

“Do you think this is a good idea?”

“I’ve got to get my dad’s money back. You can stay here if you want. I’ll pick you up when I’m done.” He jumped behind the wheel.

“I don’t think so, sir.” Beth’s eyes hardened.

“Good! Then you drive. Catch up to him.” Willie tossed her the keys.

“How?”

“This thing has a V8. That little rice burner is no match. Turn right at the pavement, the other way is a dead end.” He jumped into the bed of the truck.

Beth fired up the engine, dropped it in gear and spun out of the parking lot. She was not going to let Willie down. When she reached the pavement she punched it and felt the engine roar to life. Within seconds she was doing 70 down the little country road. “*Well,*” she thought, “*ask for adventure, be careful what you ask for.*”

As she rounded the next curve she saw the little car about a quarter mile ahead. Willie leaned around the door post. “You’ll have to get close. This rifle is accurate for short ranges. I want to shoot out his tires.” Beth pushed the throttle and watched the distance between the vehicles shrink. She looked down, she was doing 95. Fortunately the road was straight. “*Who do you pray to in a situation like this?*” she wondered. As she was almost close enough to read the license plate she heard the first crack from Willie’s rifle. They were coming up a slight hill and she didn’t know what was on the other side, she backed off.

“Punch it,” Willie yelled.

She floored it just as the little car crested the hill. As they followed, Willie saw a utility service truck coming towards them. He ducked behind the cab and knocked on the window and motioned Beth to back off. The car had gained some ground. As soon as the utility truck passed, Beth accelerated, pushing Willie back in the bed. “*I think I’m in love,*” he realized. The distance to the car diminished rapidly. Willie leaned against the top of the cab, steadying his left elbow

on the roof. He was an excellent marksman but he had never fired from a moving vehicle with a 90 mile per hour headwind. His second shot missed, though he thought he saw a chunk of pavement burst from just behind the car. They were coming into a banked right hand curve now and Beth had taken the opportunity to close the distance to about 50 yards. He brought the barrel up to compensate for the wind and fired. The rear windshield of the car exploded, a coarse mist of pellets. The car drifted to the right. As the wheels slipped off the pavement, the driver yanked the wheel to the left trying to regain control. The little coupe skidded sideways and shot across the left lane, launching from the banked curve.

Willie watched in horror as time slowed. The car cleared the ditch and a barbed wire fence. As the airborne ride tilted to the right a small tree caught the front bumper and pulled it toward the ground. The car nose dived into thick brush surrounding a grove of elm trees. It came to an abrupt stop with the grill only slightly in front of the windshield.

Beth skidded to a stop and pulled the pickup into the ditch. They both ran toward the carnage, faces drained of all color.

“Oh my God-my God-oh shit.” This wasn’t supposed to happen. Willie cleared the fence several paces ahead of Beth. He reached the car and after a couple of tries yanked the driver’s door open. He leaned in, spun back out and spewed his lunch all over the ground. “Get back,” he screamed, falling to his knees. “Stay back!”

“What is it, is he hurt?” Beth’s voice quivered.

“He’s dead. His head was crushed against the back rest by a tree branch. There’s blood everywhere.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know, let me think,” Willie went to the passenger side and pulled open the door. Pinched between the dash and shifter was his Dad’s cash box, twisted half open and covered with blood. He pulled the box loose and closed the door with his hip. He wiped the door handle with his shirt tail then, went around and did the same to the driver’s door although it would no longer latch. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Shouldn’t we report this?” Beth was shaking. Tears were forming in her eyes.

“Probably, but it’s not in our best interests.” He glanced around. “We need to leave---now!”

They ran back to the truck, got in, and pulled slowly out onto the road. No one spoke. Willie drove, staring straight ahead. Beth leaned against the passenger door looking out the shattered window at the passing scenery. She was cold and her shivering was echoing in the emptiness.

They reached Interstate 44 several minutes later. “I think we need to go somewhere, clean up and regroup, talk about what happened,” Willie said.

“Sure, whatever, I can’t go back to the ranch right now.” A long hour later they pulled into the parking lot of the Road Runner Inn in Claremore. Willie dug through the broken box until he found four clean 20 dollar bills. He handed them to Beth. “Go check us in.”

“Me?”

“Well, I’m covered in blood.”

“Right,” she sighed, “Okay.”

Avery was sitting on the cedar porch, staring down the long driveway that connected Fertile Earth Farm to the rest of the world. The fourth beer was the one that had stopped the constant pacing in and out of the door, looking at the phone, checking the clock. Shadows were beginning to lengthen. His son was about 5 hours late now. He had already called John McClinton, who refused to be concerned. “They’re not kids, let ‘em have some fun.”

“Yeah, just wondering if you’d heard.” Avery tried to sound nonchalant but he suspected John was just as worried.

An idea crossed his mind. He stood up, listing slightly, and tripped over the dog’s bowl. He caught himself on the door jamb, just preventing a fall. He stared at the phone a full minute then picked up and dialed. “Stonebridge Nursing Center, what can we do for you?” a voice asked.

“This is Avery Maddox. I’m sorry. I don’t recognize your voice.”

“This is Patty, I usually work the night shift but I’m covering for Lauren this weekend, can I help you?”

“I’m Bonnie’s husband, have you seen our son today?”

“I’m sorry I don’t think I know him.”

“Is my wife available. I’d like to talk to her.”

“She didn’t come to dinner, let me see if I can find her.”

Some annoying elevator music filled the earpiece for what seemed like an eternity. “Hello,” a cautious voice answered.

“Hi sweetie, it’s Avery, have you heard from Willie today?”

“Who?”

“Willie, our son.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Avery, your husband.”

“My husband? My husband’s name is Frank. Who are you?” Bonnie had been married to Frank for a couple of years in her late teens until she caught him riding bareback with her cousin in the back of a Bronco. That was long before Avery was in the picture.

“Hey Frank,” Bonnie whispered into the phone, “just between us, I know you're screwing around, asshole!” The phone went dead. It was getting more difficult for Avery to understand what was going on around him. He couldn't blame Bonnie for being out of the loop since she didn't even live at home anymore.

Avery stumbled over to the fridge and pulled out another beer. He plopped down on the couch and flicked on the news channel. As the TV came to life, Montana jumped up on the arm of the couch.

“Where’d you come from?” Avery glanced at the half open front door. “Oh what the hell.” He scratched the old orange tabby behind the ear and took a deep drink of his beer. “That boy! Sometimes he drives me nuts. I know he’s just out carousing with that little girl but he could at least call. He’s just like you. He don’t give a shit about nobody but he’ll keep coming around as long as I feed him.”

Avery took another long drink of his beer as Montana curled up in his lap. “I reckon you’re a pretty good cat as cat’s go.” He stroked the long tail.

Just as he was finishing his beer the phone rang. Avery jumped, spilling the old cat on the coffee table.

“Hello.”

“Dad?”

“You okay? Where are you?”

“We’re fine. We just lost track of time. We’re gonna stay in Claremore tonight. Beth has to go back to Scotland in a couple weeks.”

“Okay, well ya’ll be careful. Don’t forget your raincoat.”

“What? Aw, Dad! I told you we are just friends.”

“Right, well you kids have fun. You should tell Beth to call home.”

“She just did.”

“Hey, Willie.”

“What?”

“Thanks for calling.”

“Goodnight”

Avery grabbed his last beer out of the fridge and sat back down. On the TV some news anchor was droning on, “A 28 year old man was killed today in a one car accident on County Rd. 204, south of Claremore. He apparently lost control on a curve. Police say excess speed may have been a factor in the accident. Witnesses say he may have been racing with an older model pickup. Anyone with information is asked to contact your local law enforcement agency. Stay tuned for the forecast after the break.”

“Damn kids, think they’re bullet proof. Cat, you’re gonna have to go outside. It’s about my bedtime.” He picked Montana up, set him on the tractor’s hood and opened a can of cat food. “Don’t tell anyone you got an extra can.” Avery closed the door, turned off the lights, and set the unfinished beer on the table. He crawled into his empty bed as the cicadas sang him to sleep.

