

Home Defense

Mary Sue Gunterson was 87 years old, was the proud owner of six cats, and was in a wheelchair. The number of cats had begun incrementing from the first, nine years ago, with the death of her husband, Martin. The home that the two had shared together had seemed too large after their children moved out, and that vastness only magnified once Mary Sue became the sole occupant. So she filled the space, and much of her time, with cats. The wheelchair had entered her life only seven months before, when Mary Sue fell in the kitchen and broke her hip. She lay on the floor for almost twelve hours until a neighbor came by the next morning to check on her. That incident had been the beginning of a continuing insistence from her youngest daughter, Jeanette, that Mary Sue begin residency in a nursing home; an idea that Mary Sue found repulsive.

On this particular morning, approximately 7:20 A.M., June 23rd, Mary Sue set six separate food bowls on the kitchen floor in a straight line along the wall opposite the stove and uniformly filled each with her cats' favorite cat food— "Mr. Kibble's Kibbllets". She rang a tiny brass bell and in true Pavlovian fashion, all six cats scurried into the kitchen and hastily consumed their daily meal.

Three Weeks Earlier

It was Jeffery McElroy's fifth day at the Mr. Kibble's Factory, his second day on the assembly line unaccompanied. His job title was "Food Inspections Supervisor", which translated to sitting on a stool in a small, square room immediately in front of an assembly line where the raw mixture of ingredients that would soon become Kibbles passed directly in front of him in a flattened state, approximately an inch thick, which allowed the Food Inspections Supervisor to spot any suspect or foreign additives that had made its way into the mixture. At this point in the Kibble making process, the mixture should have a dull reddish color that some have described as a dusty pink, but no veteran Food Inspections Supervisor could possibly ever describe an ideal, or even acceptable, batch of Kibbles as a fiery neon green, which was the color of a flamboyant, roughly 14"x2" rectangular section of Kibbles on the belt that particular morning. The color contrast was so distinguishable that even a novice such as Jeffrey McElroy should have been able to identify the tainted segment, given that his attention was even halfway focused on the simplistic task at hand. Unfortunately for Mary Sue Gunterson and her six cats, it was at this precise moment when the tainted Kibbles passed by the booth, that Jeffrey McElroy took his first bite into his swelling, overpacked breakfast burrito, erupting forth hot beans and cheese from the opposite end onto and down his button down shirt that he had just one week before purchased for his new job, and in a rush to avoid staining, immediately reached for the nearest makeshift cleaning utensil, which happened to be a pamphlet entitled "Pregnant? Now What?", which he used to mop up the splatter of bean and sauce

collected on his shirt, therefore rendering himself utterly oblivious to the mobile safety hazard that passed undeterred and undetected into the next stage of the assembly process, where the mixture was molded into squares, separated, baked, separated again, packaged, and, ultimately, shipped to various distributors, including "Mega Save", which was where Mary Sue Gunterson purchased the forsaken bag of Kibblets approximately three weeks later.

Present Day

As the squadron of cats feasted, Mary Sue began culinary preparations for her daughter's midday visit. On today's menu: deviled eggs, ham sandwiches cut into quarters, pasta salad, and sweet tea. She removed a half dozen eggs from the refrigerator and placed them in a saucepan full of water on the stovetop. She turned the burner on high and went into the living room adjacent the kitchen, rolled herself to the vacuum cleaner waiting in the corner, and proceeded to vacuum the room: a small task for a room of its size, had it not been for the wheelchair.

It took Mary Sue roughly nine and a half minutes to make the circuit around the whole room: over double the time it would have taken her before the accident. Upon turning off the vacuum cleaner, she could hear the sound of the pan rumbling at a violent boil, and as quickly as she could, she made her way back into the kitchen. Boiling water spewed out of the top of the pan and onto the stove top and floor as she turned the burner off and moved the pan over. "Oh

heavens", she proclaimed. She had just begun mopping up the spilled water when a horrid noise of pure, animalistic pain emerged directly behind her, and the source of the noise now taking priority over the spilled water, she turned her head to see Caesar, her six and three quarters year old orange tabby, retching on the floor: his spine so convex it looked as if it would rip right through his fur; every bone in the poor creature's body tense and convulsing. Mary Sue wheeled over to Caesar, speaking soothingly to him, and, not knowing what else to do, extended a caring hand to the cat's back. Caesar immediately let out a blood curdling hiss, standing every hair on Mary Sue's neck straight up; he craned his neck around and bit into Mary Sue's hand with a strength the cat had never once exhibited.

Now it was her turn to let out a horrid cry of pain. She tried frantically to pull her hand from Caesar's mouth but he remained tightly latched on as a steady stream of blood began flowing down her arm. In a flash of frenzied desperation, Mary Sue reared her free arm back and struck the cat as hard as she could on the side of its head, sending him flying across the kitchen and directly into the lower cabinets with a loud thud and an equally loud, barbaric growl from the feline, who quickly reoriented himself onto four legs and retreated from the kitchen with its tail, quite literally, between its legs.

Mary Sue held her bleeding hand in her non-bleeding hand, staring blankly as she tried to come to terms with what had just occurred. She looked down at her hand: two deep punctures on the palm between her thumb and forefinger, stretched from the size of the cat's teeth

by the struggle to rid herself of him. Blood flowed freely from the wound, dripping onto the kitchen tile.

She eventually regained enough of her composure to slowly and painfully wheel herself over to the kitchen counter and retrieved an unused dish rag from the cabinet, which she wrapped tightly around the wound and tied off using the excess. As she looked around the kitchen, she realized none of her cats were anywhere to be seen; there were, however, multiple piles of neon green liquid vomit, splatters of blood gorily incorporated into the gut-wrenching cocktail, as well as an unusually large amount of hair scattered about the kitchen floor. Mary Sue became aware that there was not even the slightest noise in the house. She quickly cleaned up the vomit, blood, and hair from the kitchen floor with paper towels, then made her way across the floor to the hallway. She came to the first door, the bathroom, and slowly eased the door open, and making a thorough inspection, determined the room to be empty. She closed the door behind her and she moved onto the next room, the broom closet on the opposite side of the hallway, and performed the same inspection, once again determined this room to be clear and closed the door in the same fashion.

Next, she came to the guest bedroom, the door slightly ajar. She wheeled herself slowly into the deadly silent room and stopped in front of the foot of the double bed, patiently listening. After almost a full minute, she could faintly hear a clicking sound coming from under the bed. She wheeled over to the far side of the bed and there she viewed a trail of blood leading from the corner of the room to the bed. She inched her arm outward towards the bed spread, almost

making contact when a deep growl emanated from the treacherous depths of the underside of the bed. At this, Mary Sue re-evaluated, and in an act of good prudence, slowly and noiselessly, rolled away from the potential danger and back into the hallway, where she just as noiselessly pulled the door shut behind her.

It was precisely at the time she had closed the door when the sharp chime of the doorbell ripped through the otherwise silence of the home.

Jeanette shouldn't be here for another couple of hours. Who could this be?

She closed the remaining two doors (her bedroom and the doorway to the cellar, respectively) as quickly as possible, before turning back down the hallway, through the kitchen, and into the foyer where she unlocked and opened the front door.

Standing on the front porch was a tall man with a thick, black moustache and an almost bald head, wearing a bright orange shirt and blue jeans. He held a thick plastic clipboard by his side, resting against a tool belt on his waist.

"Good morning, ma'am," he said with a gentle southern accent and a nod of the head. "I work for the city and by the reading on your meter, I'd say you've got a busted pipe. Have you noticed any leaking water anywhere in the house?"

"No, I haven't had any leaks here."

"Sounds like it's under the house then. Do you have a basement?"

"Yes, I have a basement," she answered hesitantly, "But this really isn't a good time. Could you come back tomorrow?"

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Ma'am. I'm required by the city to inspect any suspect water leakages. It will only take a few minutes and then I'll be on my way."

Mary Sue became increasingly panicked and felt perspiration forming on her forehead. "Okay then. But I must ask you make it quick; I really am quite busy." She said, as she fully opened the front door.

He noticed her bandaged hand and a look of concern crossed over his face. "Is everything okay, ma'am? Your hand doesn't look so good."

She looked down to her hand, becoming aware of the throbbing pain and the blood soaking through the towel.

"Oh, yes," she replied with a forced reassurance, "I just cut myself while chopping vegetables. It's really not as bad as it looks."

"It looks pretty bad from here, ma'am. I would be happy to call you an ambulance."

"No!", she exclaimed, more intensely than intended. "No, that's quite all right. I'll show you to the basement."

She led the unsuspecting civil servant through her home, peering into each room before allowing his entrance, silently praying her beloved feline children would not make an unwelcome appearance. They made it to the door of the basement and Mary Sue slowly unlocked the door and pulled it open to reveal a stairway descending into complete darkness. She moved to the side so he could get through.

"Thank you, ma'am, I'll only be a few minutes", he said as he began his descent. Mary Sue watched intently, sure her heart would jump out of her chest, as he disappeared completely in the darkness.

"Is there a light switch down here?"

"Yes, to the right."

There was a pause, followed by the sound of the switch being thrown to no avail.

"Bulb must be burnt out. No cause of concern, I've got a flashlight." As he said this, he was briefly illuminated before he moved further into the basement and out of sight.

"Yep, there's a good amount of water down here," he said after a moment. "I'm going to look around for a valve to shut the water off."

The sound of boxes being gently pushed aside emanated from below, followed by rustling around the corner.

"Well, what do we have here?"

Mary Sue gulped: her throat dry, her hands trembling. "What is it?" she asked hesitantly.

"Is this your cat down here? He doesn't look too happy. I think we better bring him upstairs."

"Don't touch him!" she almost yelled. "Sir, it's time for you to leave. Please, please come back up here."

"It's alright little buddy, come on here."

A vicious hiss erupted, then a scream, then a crash, then a scream, then a cry for help, and lastly, a silence. The man's flashlight slowly rolled across the floor and settled near the base of the stairs, illuminating the first couple steps. Mary Sue, frozen in

horror, watched as Rutherford, her six-year-old Siamese, gracefully made his way into the light, tilted his head, and looked directly at her. His eyes: once kind, unassuming, soft; now hardened, had fallen slant: the eyes of a rabid beast looking at a piece of meat. After a moment, he let out a hiss and began ascending the stairs, moving fast, breaking Mary Sue from her daze. She grabbed the door and slammed it shut just in time. Rutherford crashed into the door and began scratching at the other side. At this time, a second, deeper hiss came from behind her. She whipped her head around to see Biscuit perched at the end of the hallway. Dried green vomit hung limp and crusty from the fur around his mouth; his eyes were manic. She turned around and wheeled herself into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her, followed by the sound of ferocious scratching on the other side. The door flexed as the weight of the animal pressed against it; every now and then, she could see paws swipe under the door.

Surely the door will hold. There is no way a cat of that size can break down this heavy door.

She told herself that over and over, never quite believing it and never letting her guard down. Mary Sue listened in horror for several minutes until the cat decided to move on.

Scared and exhausted, Mary Sue remained locked in the bedroom trying to process the events that had just occurred and just as she began to drift off to sleep, not from any sort of well-being but

merely from mental and physical fatigue, she heard a faint voice from somewhere in the house.

"Mary Sue? the voice said. "Mary Sue, are you home?" Mary Sue recognized the voice as that of her neighbor and longtime friend Betsy.

Did I leave the front door open? Maybe if I just stay quiet, she will leave. But what if she doesn't? What if she starts looking around? She could be in danger. And, if she does find anything, she'll call the police. They'll take me away and put me in a home. They'll say I'm unfit to live here. Unfit to be on my own. Jeanette will sell the house. Sell MY house. No, I can't let that happen.

And so, she opened the bedroom door and, after pulling the door shut behind her, wheeled herself to the foyer where she was met by the sight of Betsy standing just inside the front door, a box of vegetables in her hands and a developing look of concern working its way across her face, no doubt due to the sight of her dear friend drenched in sweat, her hand caked in dried blood and visibly throbbing, her veins bulging in her neck and forehead.

"Oh my god!" Betsy screamed. "Oh my god, Mary Sue, what has happened?"

"I'm fine really. It's not as bad as it looks, I just got a little cut," Mary Sue replied weakly.

"I'm calling an ambulance. You're not well."

"There's no need for that, really. I can wrap it up here and it will be fine," she pleaded.

"Absolutely not. We're getting you to the hospital. You're certainly running a fever. I'm going to get you some Tylenol then I'll call an ambulance."

And with that, before Mary Sue could respond, Betsy was out of the room and into the kitchen in search of the Tylenol.

What on earth am I going to do now? Maybe she's right. I do need medical treatment. But what will they say? They'll blame me. And that poor, innocent man in the basement. They'll say it's my fault. That I killed him.

The sound of cabinets opening and closing came from the kitchen, followed by the opening of the bathroom door.

"Biscuit, you're not looking too well, little guy."

Without delay, screaming and savage hissing followed. Mary Sue, also without delay, grabbed a wooden cane from the rack by the door and as quick as she possibly could, wheeled herself into the kitchen and down the hallway. Betsy fell out of the bathroom into the hallway, rolling around on the floor. Biscuit followed behind her and latched onto her face, clawing and scratching viciously. Mary Sue, fueled by adrenaline, continued to rush forward and upon reaching the carnage raised the cane above her head as high as she could and brought it down as hard as she could (which was surprisingly hard for a woman of her age), making contact directly in the center of the creature's spine. Biscuit cried out in anguish yet continued to claw at the face and neck of Betsy, who was almost unrecognizable under the gushing blood and dangling flesh. Mary Sue repeated the action, hitting Biscuit again in the back, and then again. She raised the

cane for another whack and as it was hurling down Biscuit made his escape down the hallway. With no Biscuit to absorb the blow, this duty fell to what was beneath him just a split second before: Betsy's face. The cane hit her in the center of her face, causing what was left of her nose to explode in a spray of blood and bones.

Shocked, Mary Sue dropped the cane and looked at her friend. A massive pool of blood had formed and was growing larger. Almost no skin was left on her face, a large laceration along her throat, where most of the blood was coming from, while Betsy continued making horrific, gurgling, choking noises. She stopped moving her body. Then the gurgling noises stopped.

Mary Sue desperately backed out of the room into the kitchen and vomited.

She poured herself a glass of sweet tea and slowly drank it down until the glass was empty, filled the glass again, took a small sip and set it down on the kitchen table while she tried to process the events of the last few hours.

She had gone through the house to contain and account for each of her cats. She was able to lure and trap Button and Biscuit in the basement, along with Rutherford who had been down there for some time, presumably feasting on the repair man. Randyll, her three-year-old brown short hair, she was able to lock in the spare bedroom. Caesar and Thelonious, her nine-year-old senior feline, were both nowhere to be seen or heard from. They had possibly made their way outside while the front door was ajar.

Once she had tabs on her formerly loving cats, she had turned her attention to her formerly living friend. Betsy's corpse was surrounded by a seemingly unrealistic amount of blood that was already beginning to dry. Mary Sue gathered all the dish towels she could find and tried to soak up the blood. Then she slowly, and with no ease whatsoever, dragged the corpse to the door of the basement, and after listening for any sound of movement on the other side, opened the door and shoved the mangled body down the stairs, almost going in head first after it, and hastily slammed the door. She then mopped the hallway, so that it was not quite obvious that a gut-wrenching blood feast had occurred there, but also not entirely spotless either.

Then she was alone: surrounded by silence, by stillness, by shame, guilt, terror, even, for what was to come. That was when the doorbell rang. The ring that Mary Sue had been preparing for the entire morning. The ring that would ultimately, as she had come to terms with, would one way or another, change the course of her life.

She rolled towards the front door with deliberation, more aware of her surroundings, and not only her surroundings, but her own body, her heartbeat, her breath, her throbbing hand, her sweat covered brow, her aching muscles, her racing thoughts, her pounding head. At least, she reached the front door, and with a long exhale, pulled it towards her.

"Mom? Mom, is everything okay?" The look on Jeanette's face was troubled to say the least, distorted in a state of terror to say the most. Mary Sue could feel her daughter's gaze scanning her from head

to toe, taking in the physical toll that she had experienced over the course of the morning, as well as the psychological trauma.

"Yes dear, everything is perfectly fine," she answered in the most level and calm voice that she could muster, which turned out to be neither level nor calm.

"Mom, you look terrible! Has something happened?"

"No dear, I'm fine, really. I'm just a little under the weather."

"You look so pale! What is that bandage on your hand? Did you hurt yourself?"

"I was chopping vegetables and the knife slipped. It was a small cut."

"It doesn't look small to me. Let me unwrap it and have a look," she said as she moved towards her mother and placed her hand on the wrist of the bandaged hand.

"No dear, that's okay. It needs to stay wrapped so it will heal. I was very careful in cleaning it. It just needs time to heal."

"Mother you really are getting too old to be living here alone. This is exactly the type of thing I'm always..."

"Jeanette," Mary Sue interrupted, "Please come in off the porch," as she rolled backwards to allow Jeanette to enter the doorway, which she did reluctantly. "Let's go to the living room and have some tea."

Mary Sue led the way into the kitchen, where she took two glasses from beside the sink, and trying her best to hide her trembling hands, poured tea from the pitcher as Jeanette looked around.

"What happened to this glass?" Jeanette asked from behind the kitchen counter.

"What glass?"

"There's a broken glass on the floor."

"Oh, I didn't know it was there. I suppose one of the cats must have knocked it over."

"It's dangerous to have broken glass all over the floor. I'll sweep it up for you," she said as she walked towards the hallway.

"It's no trouble, I can handle it."

"You know, mother, it's okay to ask for help every now and then." Mary Sue held her breath as Jeanette made it to the broom closet, flung the door open, and looked around. "I want to help. I really do just want what is best for you." She bent forwards into the broom closet, concealed from sight by the open door. "What is this?" She asked followed by a long pause. Mary Sue waited for the scream. But it didn't come. "Mom, this broom closet is a mess. It really needs to be reorganized." She closed the door, walked back into the kitchen, and began sweeping.

"Your tea is ready," Mary Sue was finally able to get out, just as Jeanette was emptying the broken glass into the trash can.

"I'll just put this back in the closet."

Jeanette stopped at the entrance of the bathroom and inspected the lower walls and floors, turning to look at both sides.

"What is this red splatter all over the wall?"

"I spilled a pitcher," Mary Sue answered swiftly.

"It almost looks like blood," she turned distrustfully to look at her mother. "What was it that you spilled?"

"Cranberry juice," Mary Sue croaked.

"Hmm," and after a long pause, "I'll clean that up as well."

"Before you leave, dear. Let's have our tea first. In the living room."

Jeanette took both teas in hand and followed her mother into the living room, taking a seat at the edge of the couch, as Mary Sue parked herself alongside the living room table.

"How are you, Jeanette?"

"I'm fine," she responded while crossing her legs, appearing to relax a little. "Troy and I visited Samantha and her family last weekend. Her girls are getting so big. You wouldn't believe how much Shelly has grown. She's going out for cheerleading this year and wants to play tennis in the spring. Such a talented, smart girl. Angel is getting ready for her second year at college. Her grades are great so she should have no problem getting into medical school. This last semester was tough on her, but she's got a good head on her shoulders. Just like her mother."

"That's great dear. I sure would like to see them."

"I know mom. I'm sure they would love to see you too. It's just such a long drive, it's hard for them to make the trip."

A long pause followed as each woman thought of what to say next.

"Troy and I have decided to go to Paris this winter," Jeanette said with some noticeable reserve.

"Paris? How nice. How long will you be staying?"

"Almost three weeks. We're really looking forward to it. I'm just worried about leaving you alone for that long. You know, just yesterday I ran into a woman at the bank, and we started talking and it turns out her mother is living at an assisted living home in Florida that sounds just lovely. It's such a beautiful area and there's..."

"I don't need assistance and I'm not going to a home," Mary Sue sternly interrupted.

"Mom, I really don't understand why you have to get so defensive, I just..."

"I'm capable of taking care of myself. I've lived in this house for 56 years and I plan on dying in this house. You are not going to force me to leave."

"I don't want to force you to do anything. I'm just worried. You're all alone here and if something were to happen..."

"I'm not alone. I have my cats."

Mary Sue instantly regretted saying this.

Looking around, Jeanette said, "Where are your cats? I haven't seen a single one since I've been here."

"They're sleeping. You know how cats are."

"Yes, but there's so many of them. Caesar at least will usually come to greet me. Are you sure the door wasn't left open?"

"I'm sure. Caesar is around here somewhere, just taking a little nap."

"Okay," Jeanette took a long pause. Her lips parted, a clear signal she was about to say something that she didn't want to say. "There's no easy way to bring this up..."

"You think I'm losing my mind, don't you?" She said, wearing a twisted half smile and a tilted head, sitting forward in her wheelchair, looking utterly insane.

"Of course not... I do think certain things... are slipping. Your memory isn't what it used to be. You're having trouble getting around. And I don't think it's safe for you to be living here all alone. And with Troy and I being so far away... it'd just be so much easier if you were close by. I know how you feel about the matter. But I've already begun to make some arrangements."

Mary Sue slowly leaned back in her wheelchair, her face a grimace, and in a grave, cold tone said, "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"A crash. Rutherford has been getting into the basement lately and making a mess of things. Would you mind going down there and bringing him back up?"

"Sure. Yes, sure mother. But when I get back, can we actually have a discussion about this?"

"Yes, we can discuss it."

"And we can be civil towards one another?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'll just be a moment."

Jeanette stood up and walked out of the living room to the basement door, where she stopped for a moment to listen. She heard

nothing. She tried the doorknob and noticed it was locked. She unlocked the door and pulled it open. The basement below was pitch black; however, the first few stairs were illuminated, revealing dark red puddles of liquid descending into the darkness. Careful not to step in the liquid, she made her descent slowly and deliberately. When she got about halfway down, she could no longer see the step she was stepping on. She looked back to the door at the top, her source of light and escape route: empty and well lit. She felt around with her shoes as she moved downwards, inching along, a sense of panic growing inside her with each step. Finally, her feet hit concrete and she knew she had reached the bottom. She inched forward and her toes hit something lying at the base of the stairs. She nudged it slightly with her shoe. It felt soft. Slowly, she bent her knees and reached one hand down towards the object, first feeling fabric, then moved her hand up, feeling a sticky liquid. She fought the urge to pull her hand away and continued feeling around, at last touching what she recognized as hair. She let out a gasp, jerked her hand away, and stood back up.

There was a noise from behind, prompting her to spin around. At the top of the stairs, she looked upon her mother: Mary Sue Gunterson, 87 years old, a blank stare across her hardened face, who, without saying a word, slowly closed the basement door.