

GOODNIGHT SALVATORI

Red lights of reeling cars reflecting down the wet road seemed suddenly more intense, a sign that night was nearing rapidly. The breeze picked up and I wondered if rain would fall all night. Wednesday would surely be cooler than Tuesday. I had become a weather Einstein in the past 8 months, but not a clothing genius because I should have brought my thicker hoodie when I set out. I thought that I would be back home before fall. “Home”. That is a small, lonely word.

I don't know what happened that Sunday night last March. I can only guess how the conversation went. It didn't involve me. It never did. Something had been set in motion on the Sabbath that ran over me early Monday morning. When I got home, or when I got back to 213 Windy Trail about 5:00 am, my stuff was piled in a few cardboard milk boxes that Mom had ME pick up at the grocery store on Friday and placed on the front porch. There was a note in Mom's writing (she got Dad to co-sign, like it was a contract) giving notice of my eviction from the house and, as it turned out, from the family.

I slept in an abandoned tree house for a week until an old man found a wrapper from a candy bar I had stolen for my dinner, and he waited for me one night with his dog. That mutt had his own house. I felt bad about stealing from the service station. Someday I would pay the money back.

Sometimes a friend's (dwindling supply of) mom would let me stay over, maybe grab a shower, but 5 nights out of 7 I'm on the street. I was hoping there were not a lot of crawly creatures in the nearby scruff through the night. Sometimes cats would scurry

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past me in my perch a hundred yards above the interstate. Wildcats I called them, but they were just undisciplined strays that nobody wanted anymore.

I only had pets once in my life and that was Fluff and Buff, the mother cat and her kitten. I wasn't very creative with names at age 9, but at 10 I blossomed and, privately, changed Fluff's name to Salvatori, just before she suddenly left us. I guess that was really a male name but Fluff didn't care. Buff became Cesare.

Each night scenes of my youth played in HD in my mind. Tonight I was screening that time 8 long years ago when the backdoor slammed and I turned to see my Mom standing at the top step of the back porch yelling "Where's the cat?", her apron stained with sausage grease reaching about to the bottom of her house coat. I don't know why women think that a house coat is a modest garment. It's still lingerie, like a nightgown, to a man's eye, or a boy of 10.

I knew for sure something was up when I saw Dad's car in the driveway at 8:00 o'clock. He was what they used to label a "creature of habit" and you could depend on him leaving for work at 7:00 am each morning after buttered toast and Coca Cola straight from the bottle for breakfast, unless he was sick as a dog, and then he left at 7:20.

In her tone of voice that allowed no back talk Mom said, "Go get THE CAT, and one of those cardboard milk boxes." A cat and a box. Not good.

When she said "the cat" I thought she had to mean Fluff, who had been with us for about two years. "I can bang on a can of cat food and she'll come running, Mom." Mom gave me a frown. Back talk. "Go...get...the...cat." I put my backpack on the

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ground and walked to the garage, where Fluff stretched on a flat piece of cardboard like it was a Sealy feather top.

When Mom told me to do something I didn't question it, out loud, but I wondered if Fluff was going to the vet. She had never had any shots. She was just a hungry stray when she stopped at our house. Buff/Cesare I did not see. Fluff rubbed against me and I took a moment to scratch her behind the ears, which she loved, but Mom called my name, so I grabbed The Cat and headed back to the house. I had Fluff tucked gently in my arms with her feet secured. She never liked to be transported with her legs dangling in the air like a hanged man.

As I came back across the yard I saw my Dad suddenly emerge from his shiny Buick. Last night he had spent a half-hour brushing dust mites off the seats and carpets with a small whisk brush. Now he was covering the back seat with a blanket.

"Go back and get the BOX, Ned," Mom ordered. "And where's the other one?" I didn't like the sound of that. The "other one." She knew their names, but now it was The Cat and The Other One. "I didn't see Buff. I'll find him." A feeling of sadness rolled through me but still no explanation for this early morning round-up.

Mom looked at Dad and put her hand to her forehead briefly like the ground had shifted. "Bang the cat food can, that will snag the little one." That's what I'd suggested earlier. I felt like one of those catchers on a chicken ranch.

"Where are we going?" I dared ask, fearing the answer but needing to know. I wished the question had never left my mouth. At 10 years old, if I didn't ask about something then it wasn't going to happen. It might just evaporate in the rising heat.

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Once you put it into words, it became real.

“Bang-on-the-can-Ned.” She almost spelled it out. “Your dad needs to get going.” Thinking of him now. She produced a can and a fork and played them like a mournful timpani. “They’ve already eaten,” I said quietly, hoping I would not see little Buff/Cesare as I went back to the garage for a milk box cage. He then appeared at the corner of the garage, a well-fed kitty looking at me curiously. “Get him!” my mom yelled, like an umpire calling strike three. “Your dad’s taking them to stay with a nice woman he knows who lives Raleigh.” She pronounced it RAW-lee, like a cheer. RAW-lee, RAW-lee. “She’ll take better care of them than we can.” Suddenly, with Dad giving her the “Hey, I’ve got to make a living” look she had spilled it.

A neighbor, Malcolm Mitchell, drove down the hill past our house and waved at mom. He used to be our mail man, but it took him too long to deliver so they let him go. Great social skills, slow afoot. He kept waving and smiling at Mom until he saw Dad sitting in the car, then his arm fell like a wounded duck.

Raw-lee was only 30 minutes away, but for our family that hardly ever went anywhere except to church and Wal-Mart it was like another country.

“Well....you mean live with her? Why can’t I keep them? I take good care of my cats.” Mom gave me the backtalk look.

I tried to call Cesare but my voice was weak now with fear. “Here...k...kitty”. I chattered to her in the baby talk familiar to her. Fluff/Salvatori and I had built up trust over the past 2 years with these kind, imploring words. We had a routine each night where I would arrange her pillow, sing a little song, say a short prayer, and scratch her behind the ears. She never laid down her head until she heard me say “Goodnight,

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Salvatori.” That was her cue that all was right.

While I hustled to follow orders, putting the placid and trusting mother cat in a fouled box used to carry milk, I dared to ask, “Who is this lady in Raleigh?”

Mom answered with complete confidence. “She’s worked for your dad in the Raleigh store for years. She has a big yard where the cats can play. They’ll like it much better than our cramped little yard.”

We only had a half acre and 1500 square feet of house. Two cats are always bumping into each other. And who takes two cats, unfixed, sight unseen? Not some lady who works at a furniture store.

Dad opened the car door and I gently placed the box inside. “Does she like cats?”

Dad made a goofy expression. “Does she ever?” That was my question.

Mom said, “Where’s the OTHER one, Ned? Where is that little rascal?” She had a touch of playfulness in her voice now that her plot was unfolding.

The high brick wall of the garage loomed before me, where I threw a rubber ball and practiced fielding with my glove. It seemed a silly, childish game now. I wondered if my sister, three years older, knew what was going on. She had spent the night with a friend. She would have told me if she knew anything was up, unless Mom threatened to take away her Saturday tv, in which case she would not have told me space aliens lived next door.

I saw little Buff peak out from behind the front tire of my mom’s Oldsmobile, then he scampered over when he saw that it was me, his trusted pal. “Get out of here,” I whispered fiercely. I pushed him away but he thought I was playing. Everyone always

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thought I was kidding, no matter what I said or did. “Cesare, go!”

How could that woman in Raw lee have a better home for cats than us? We had loved and raised these cats, my sister and I. Salvatori had shown up at our back door as a young stray when I was in the fourth grade. She didn’t choose our home out of all the cookie cutter cottages in Oakleigh because she was looking for a temporary shelter till winter was over. She wanted to be fed and cared for, in return for which she would provide us with cat loyalty for life. A year later she was sitting in a fouled cardboard box in the Buick, trying to peak out but getting pushed down by my dad’s firm hand. Then she sat quietly with her eyes closed.

“Can we visit next week?” I asked, placing a squirming Buff in the box too.

Mom shook her head. That’s too soon. We’ve got to give them time to settle in.” Sure. A hungry cat’s “settle in” time is about 12 seconds.

We had already lost one of her kittens, gray striped Duff. It wasn’t like we were overrun with cats. Duff had a sweet face and calm manner, which probably made it easy for someone to snatch him from under the crepe myrtle. I had gotten on my bike every day for a week and rode around looking for him. A year later my bike was stolen.

You lose things growing up. Last year my sister had lost a black onyx ring my granddad had given me. I should never have let her borrow it. I’m too generous. You lose things growing up if you are generous. Four months ago I found my clothes on the porch and lost my youth, but I did not gain adulthood.

I went into the house to get my school books and I started the Never Oaths, not for the first time. I would never trust Mom and Dad again. I would never ask them for help with anything. I would never go anywhere with them if I didn’t have to. When

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they went to Carolina Beach for the weekend I would stay with Aunt Jennie and her manicured poodles. When Dad tried to comfort me tonight by asking if I wanted to go for some fudge ripple ice cream I would say “no”, as if he would go hungry if I didn’t eat.

Of course all that didn’t last long. I needed to live. I was a growing and very hungry boy. I trusted them again and loved them, and even felt sympathy for their shortcomings, but I never totally forgave them. They would be surprised to know that I would never forget that day. Last year out of the clear blue Mom asked me, “Whatever happened to those cats you used to have?”

“You gave them away,” I told her, coldly.

“Oh no,” she said, “I would never have done that.”

Much of my anger came over me in a moment. “Well, I guess those cats are living in a mansion in Raleigh, sleeping on silk pillows and chasing fat, lazy mice.” She laughed (there I go kidding again).

I got into the car, the door was whumped shut, and off we went. The ride to Flint Elementary seemed quicker than usual that day. It was 8 blocks but I had found it to be a long walk after school on hot days. I wanted to say something to Fluff and Buff but even at such a moment a 10-year old does not want to sound stupid in front of his Dad, and besides when I tried to speak the words would not come out. My vocal cords went numb. When my Dad asked what radio station I wanted to listen to (a real gesture to me because he only listened to real life news, never a song or story) I could only respond with a windy noise like I was about to pass out. “Hoo...” Nothing.

“News ok?” “Hoo”.

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Then we were at the school, with impatient drivers behind us, dads and moms ready to get to work like they had never been to school themselves, and I jumped out. I looked back at the box in the rear seat with the lid half closed. I wanted to hug the cats, but it seemed already they were not mine any more. I didn't want to get their hopes up. When I stepped onto the sidewalk, after a wordless, unsmiling wave at my Dad, who sang "Later gator," I was thinking, "I don't want to go home again."

My last memory of Fluff was how she was hunkered down in that box back at the house, waiting, sensing that her life was in for a major and not-so-good change, but she sat there calmly, eyes closed, waiting. That is how I see her today. There so close by was her home, her food, her territory, everything she knew, but she sat there waiting, not looking for a way to escape. She had bowed to some instinct or authority. Her front legs tucked under her, eyes closed, not even looking at me (thank goodness) for help.

I always walked home after school, 6 blocks in the sun to Red & White Grocery, two more blocks chewing on an oatmeal cookie and working on my cavities. That day, Mom was waiting for me after school in the Oldsmobile. I thought she felt sorry for me and had come to give me a ride, but she told me it was time for my check-up at the dentist. Losing two cats and going to the dentist in the same day, perfect. We were probably having corned beef for dinner and oyster soup with the little crabs swimming around.

When Dad got home that night at 6:22 pm I was sitting on the swing out back, slowly twisting back and forth. I had thrown the hard rubber ball against the brick garage wall a few times but I didn't feel like playing my imaginary game of Cardinals vs.

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Giants, although I kind of enjoyed hearing the hard smack of ball on brick, a sickening sound of rubber cracking. I'm sure Dad must have realized that I was dying to hear what happened with my pets. How did the cats react to their new home with the big yard? How excited was their loving new owner? He went through his usual routine of sweeping moon dust off the tufted floor mats.

I wasn't going to ask him anything specifically but I had to get his attention. I walked over, pounding the ball into my glove. I knew he wanted an athlete for a son.

"Evening," he said, "how you percolating?" like usual. I couldn't help glancing into the back seat just in case. No box.

"So," I said, "you went to Raleigh today?" Subtle, respectful.

He thought for a moment, not looking at me. "Oh, yeh. It was a busy day." That was it. I walked away and sat back down on the swing. He hadn't gone to Raw Lee. He hadn't even remembered the story that he and Mom made up. Mom wouldn't like that. What if I told her, "Hey, Dad didn't go to Raleigh, did you know that?" She'd flip.

One thing sure, if the whole thing was Mom's idea Dad was not going to buck up to her about it. She had been known to throw her wedding ring across the room with accuracy and avoid the kitchen for days when they were having a spat. He was not going to give her any backtalk anymore than I was. He was going to say, "Well, I don't know, whatever you think, Martha. They aren't much trouble." And Mom would say, "Not to you they ain't (she used ain't when she was trying to make someone back down), you're always gone, working 6 days a week." Poor Dad seemed obsessed with making a living.

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He scared her bad one time. The tragedy was he didn't even realize it. There had been some disagreement about him loving his job more than he loved her (he made the mistake of going off to work with a smile on his face), and he had retreated to the bedroom with another threat of quitting his job and going to work as a stocker at Red & White. Mom and I were in the living room watching "I Love Lucy" reruns. We both thought he had gone on to bed. He usually turned in about 9:45-10:00 o'clock unless there was a ballgame on, but as Mom and I laughed along with Luci and Desi, Dad suddenly appeared in my peripheral vision, just behind Mom's chair, and he had in his hand some shiny metal object that he was trying to activate.

Mom and I both snapped our eyes toward him as he pulled back a sliding piece that made a sharp metallic click. Turns out he was only trying to eject a jammed staple from a large staple gun, but for a long moment there was a crack in the world. My eyes and Mom's met briefly after we realized what he was holding, then we both looked at the tv again without a word, but in that silent moment I saw a look of fear like I have never seen on anyone's face being replaced by deep relief. Like me, she'd had the brief thought that he had his gun (he kept an ugly, snub-nosed silver pistol in his sock drawer for years). I couldn't look directly at Mom again but I would ease a glance at her as we watched Lucy, and while the fear and horror drained out of her face it was replaced by another expression I never saw again. It was a pitiful look of resignation, as if she had expected that not only would he dispose of her some day but that she deserved it.

Dad never looked up. He just kept fiddling with the stapler and finally dislodged the bent staple. He said "Got it", triumphantly, but he didn't get it. He left the room never knowing the power of that moment, and Mom was just about back to her old self

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before the news at eleven. Maybe if he had seen that look on her face and understood what happened he would have gone for the real gun, or maybe he would have hugged her and reassured her that he would never harm her, and maybe she would have been a different person, and I would have seen Salvatori live to old age for cats.

I was sure my Dad had put the cats out somewhere on the highway. They were no doubt joyful to get out of the box and end the mysterious ride, but then they were plunked down in the tall weeds along Highway 70 smelling nothing familiar. Cesare had never been near a highway. He probably got run down within an hour. If not, he was probably rubbing against his Mom waiting for her to take off so he could follow.

Salvatori would be licking Cesare and taking care of his squirminess, then looking around. She wouldn't be thinking of her sleeping pad in the garage, or looking down the highway waiting for Dad's car to return. She would be looking for safety, then hunting food, moving on, not spending a moment pondering life's unfairness. She knew this was a permanent change. Wherever Dad put her out she was seeking for grub and security somewhere else and no looking back. It's hard to see where you are going when you're always looking back.

What did Salvatori do wrong that she and her offspring deserved this outcome? She wasn't staying out late and disrespectful, quite the opposite, but she would not have been pondering that paradox.

I hope at least he put her out near some houses so she would have a shot at getting taken in by a new family. Not so many people want a full grown female cat that hasn't been fixed. What if the cats took up at a new place, and the people kept Cesare but ran off Salvatori? She would move on, try another place. I know if she lived another 8

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years beyond the tragedy she would surely not be remembering it at all.

For me, 8 years later, I could still see her sitting in that box, her head down, eyes closed, breathing softly, waiting, waiting. While little Buff anxiously sniffed her and tried to climb out of the box Salvatori was curled up, accepting the whatever to come, accepting her fate, her master's decision, and I was part of the masters. She was hunkered down, conserving her strength, not pleading her case as if she had one.

For me tonight, or in the very early morning, after making sure I was alone on the brushy hill, I would hunker down against a big rock, quietly and resolutely waiting for the dawn and whatever it would bring. Each day might bring The Big Change: A friend, a job, a home, the end of the world, a girl, an end to it all.

I don't know what the conversation was that Sunday. It was about me but it didn't involve me. It never did. Something was set in motion on Sunday, soup and sandwich night, that ran over me on Monday morning.

The trees smell good at night. Mattress beds felt funny to me now, when I could find one.

Tomorrow I might be looking through dumpsters for fresh throw out, or selling my shoes, but tonight I was relaxing, hunkered down, waiting, waiting. I've learned to relax my muscles when it gets chilly, and roll up in a bundle to stay warm. I had my routine down by now: fluff my jacket-pillow, hum a little tune, say a prayer, think about tomorrow and scratch my chin.

Goodnight, Salvatori.