

# Thelma

Behind every shop window waits a strange and magical world, a world where half-defined shapes, busily engaged in mysterious transactions, seem to coalesce even as they pass from view. These unstable figures—customer, employee, and proprietor—are *important* people. They are not there to be rudely eyeballed, like so many fish in a bowl. Their business is theirs and theirs alone.

But old Thelma couldn't help staring, no matter how hard she tried, no matter how many times she was punished. Her head would be turning before she knew it, and sometimes, squinting against the mirrored sun, she would catch one of those murky shop-dwellers staring back importantly just as her hunched and gnarled reflection rolled by.

Thelma was crazy about people. Whether they pointed and whispered or rudely laughed out loud, she always smiled in their eyes, resisting with difficulty the urge to reach out and touch. And she loved bustle. People walked this way and that, jealously guarding their personal space, but they invariably parted when she rolled down the sidewalk, as if she were a queen being escorted through a sea of loving subjects.

The sidewalks were bustling now, and Thelma could barely contain her excitement. Her eyes devoured everything. When her chair finally came to a rest she found herself staring at a small box affixed to a pole. She'd seen this kind of fixture hundreds of times, and was mesmerized by the experience. The fixture poked out right at eye level, and bore a flat white plate with a wonderful little cryptogram of a funny black stick man hovering over a long black arrow. The stick man gave the impression of being in an awful hurry to discover the big secret that long black arrow was about to divulge. For some reason these fixtures always featured a

blunt metal button beneath the cryptogram.

Perhaps it was the fascinating way people now all burst off the curb as one. Or maybe it was the intoxicating combination of crisp air and golden sun. But suddenly Thelma just had to solve the mystery, just had to push that stubby little button.

A hand whacked her across the back of her head; not hard enough to really hurt, just hard enough to let her know she'd done wrong. Right behind the sound of the whack came Gary's voice:

"You ugly old witch. How many times do I have to tell you to keep your paws on the armrests?" The hand grabbed the white bun of her hair and twisted back her head. Gary's eyes were burning. "The next time you try that, retard, you're going to bed without dinner. You got me? You remember what it's like going to bed without dinner? You cried like a baby all night, didn't you? Well, that's what you get when you screw up, y'hear? So don't press your luck." He pushed her head back down, but not too hard. There were pedestrians everywhere.

Thelma craned her neck to look back remorsefully. "Pleezh no be madda me, Gehr. I be good."

Gary exhaled noisily. "My ass." He shoved the wheelchair across the intersection, rammed it against the curb, and kicked, shook, jerked, and heaved it onto the sidewalk, swearing up and down. But his demeanor changed abruptly as another old biddy, the widow Bender, came to a halt directly in their path.

"Ms. Bender! And how are you on this lovely fall day?"

"In the pink," the widow lied. She stooped to smile in Thelma's face. "Hi, Thelma dear! So...I see you and your nice young man are out enjoying the day. How's he been treating you? Just like the princess you are, I'll wager."

"Oh yesh," Thelma gushed. "Gehr gooda me. Gehr always gooda Telma."

“That...that’s wonderful!” the widow grimaced. “I—” she managed, “I’ve got to *go* now, dear,” for in her passion Thelma had allowed her arthritic old talon to grasp one of the widow’s hands. The widow extracted her hand with difficulty, smiled breezily at Gary and winked. “Well, you just make sure you give him a big long kiss for me, sweetheart.” She looked back down. “Bye now, Thelma!”

“That was rich,” Gary said as they continued down the sidewalk. He snickered. ““Gehr always gooda Telma’. You bet your ass I’m good to you, crone. Who else would put up with your damned baby talk. Who else would tolerate your senile stench all day long. You gnarly pig. You don’t know—you couldn’t possibly imagine—how many times I’ve dreamed of just walking off and leaving you and your stupid chair in rush hour traffic.”

Thelma looked back fearfully. “Oh no, Gehr! Pleezh no leave me, Gehr. Telma be good.”

“Oh-h-h—you don’t gotta worry about me leaving you, witch. I’ll be pushing your spastic ass around until the day you die. And you wanna know why? I’ll tell you why. Because you’re worth a hell of a lot more alive than dead, that’s why. The state pays good money to keep corpses like you going, and a nice piece of that pie goes into my pocket for taking care of you.” He laughed harshly. “I’m your guardian, you ugly old fool; I’m your goddamn guardian angel! I’m the one who feeds you and medicates you and makes sure you don’t slobber to death. You didn’t know that, did you—that I’m as close to God as you’ll ever get, that I’m the one who’s responsible for keeping you in one piece? Even though I’ve told you a thousand times...you don’t know *anything*, do you dimwit? So I’ll be around forever, even though you’re, what, a hundred and fifty years old? Even though you’re ugly as sin and smell like the dead...wait a minute! What am I saying? *Like* the dead? You *are* dead. You’re just a rotting old cadaver that some trick of fate keeps running. And you know what, you funky old skank? You’ll outlive us all! Great people, *important* people, will pass out of the picture naturally. But not stupid stinking Thelma. She’ll just hang in there, baby. Pissing and whining and waiting for good old Gary to do

*everything* for her. Whore! You're dirt, that's all you are. Just plain dirt."

"I do betta, Gehr," old Thelma moaned, despising herself. "I sho sharry, Gehr. I be betta, I promiss. Telma be good fum now on, Gehr. Telma be good."

Her apology was lost on Gary. He leaned forward to whisper in her ear, "And you wanna know *why* you don't deserve to be alive? Because you're worthless, y'hear? *Worthless!* You're not good for anything or anybody. You can't take care of yourself, you can't feed yourself, you can't do squat. When's the last time you did anything constructive, or had even one original thought? When's the last time you made the slightest effort to be of value to anything? I'll tell you when: *never!* 'Cause you're a sick old piece of crap who can't see past her goddamn wheelchair. A cockroach has more value than you. At least a cockroach can get around on its own."

Gary shoved and jerked the wheelchair to make his point. "Don't you understand, moron? Life is *good* to you. But what good are you to life? Where on this whole pointless planet is there a single life-form, not counting Yours Truly, that benefits from your being here? Name one thing. Can't do it? That's because you're *worthless!* But I'll clue you in on something. On the golden day you die, tramp, you're gonna make a whole lot of worms real happy. Then it'll be party time. *That's* when you're gonna contribute."

Gary abruptly turned the wheelchair to the left, steered it across the street and into the park. "Aw-w-w..." he concluded, "what's the use."

This was Thelma's favorite part of the day. Everyone in the park was always so happy, so full of vitality. Children squealed with delight, dogs chased Frisbees, lovers drifted between the elms. And around them all bumped the slowly rolling chair, pushed by the mumbling and incongruously sullen man, his head down.

"*Jesus*, here we go again! Everybody and his mother out having the time of their lives.

Every guy in town but me walking along with a hot young babe on his arm. Look what I'm stuck with. I'm the laughingstock of this neighborhood thanks to you."

Gary's mood continued to deteriorate, in stark contrast to the afternoon's waking loveliness. After wheeling her twice through the park he brought her chair to a halt next to a trash bin.

"Okay, Quasimodo. Have a last look around. I'm gonna go take a leak and be right back." He stuck a forefinger in her face. "Now don't you move! I'm warning you. You stay put just where you are. Don't you dare talk to anybody and don't you dare touch anything. I'll be right back." He gave her a hard look and ambled over to a public restroom.

Thelma sat absolutely still. She was determined to be good, but her mind was rocking back and forth, chanting: *Don't be bad, Thelma; don't make Gary mad. Don't be bad, Thelma, don't be bad!* This little mantra went round and round in her head until it ceased to make sense.

Thelma heard a rustling near her feet, but fought the impulse to look. Gary had told her not to move. If she could only once do what he said maybe he wouldn't be so unhappy all the time. Again came the rustling, followed by a tiny, frightened mewling. Thelma's hands gripped the armrests. The mewling grew in urgency until she could no longer resist the temptation to peek.

The tiny white kitten couldn't have been more than three or four weeks old. It had one brown ear and a large brown spot on its forehead. It was obviously abandoned and extremely hungry.

Thelma fell in love with it right away. Her rheumy old eyes went teary, and her wretched old hand reached down to caress it. The kitten recoiled at her touch, then rubbed against her thumb. Every cell in Thelma's body trembled. "Gitty," she said.

Gary now walked back, looking bored. "Okay, Frankenstein. Time to wheel your stupid ass home and—*hey!* What you got there?"

Thelma looked up at Gary's frowning face. Her cheeks were covered with tears. "Gitty," she bubbled.

Gary grimaced. "Leave it alone, damn you! What do you want with a cat, anyway? Don't I feed you enough? No! Out of the question." He looked around, picked up a wood slat and swatted at the kitten, trying to scare it away. All he got for his effort was a sizable splinter in his index finger. Gary howled as if he'd been gored, swore and dashed over to a drinking fountain to wash off the wound. In less than a minute he was back, but not before Thelma had managed to reach down, scoop up the kitten, and bundle it under her sweater.

"Damn you!" Gary spat. "Look what you caused, creep. Oh, *mama*, that hurts! I oughta knock your head off, you know that, you old bitch? You're good and goddamned lucky I need you alive."

Thelma withered under Gary's invective as he wheeled her home, occasionally bashing the chair against walls, pushing it hard off curbs. She had been bad again, but it didn't seem to matter. All that mattered was the tender little source of warmth shifting position on her lap. Each small movement jangled her nerves. Under her sweater she gently stroked the tiny creature. The warmth hummed in response. "Gitty," she whispered.

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Gary unlocked and kicked open the front door in one move. He shoved Thelma's chair in roughly. "Jesus, bitch, don't fight me! You know the routine. Sit still!" He kicked the door closed and heaved a sigh. After a moment he wordlessly pushed the chair to the ramp and up to the converted attic. The attic had been partitioned centrally to create a sunroom on one side and a small bedroom on the other. This was Thelma's room. "Here you are, fossil: back in your digs. Enjoy. I'll be downstairs in the real world. Do me a favor. If you need anything, call the

undertaker. Stay out of my face.” He turned and walked down the stairs abutting the ramp.

Thelma waited for the familiar sound of the downstairs television before carefully opening her sweater to reveal the kitten’s tiny crimped form. The poor thing was trembling in its sleep, and barely responded when Thelma tenderly cradled it in her arms. The old woman and kitten trembled together as the afternoon sun burnished the bedroom’s bare wood floor.

“Gitty,” Thelma crooned, rocking slowly in her chair. “Gitty, gitty, baby gitty.”

Now sunshine began to play upon a corner of the small card table that served as Thelma’s desk and dining table. She wheeled over and very gently lifted the kitten onto the warm spot. It wakened and struggled to stand while she supported it with one hand under its belly. Once it was upright it began urgently rubbing its cheeks against her other hand before attempting to suckle a finger. It was starving. Old Thelma kissed it, over and over. It was all she could do.

Without any warning Gary came barging into the room. When he saw the kitten on the table he stopped dead in his tracks. His mouth fell open as he stared from Thelma to the kitten and back. Finally he breathed, “You fu—what did I tell you? *What did I tell you?*” He took a great step forward and slapped Thelma hard across the face. “I told you ‘no cat’, didn’t I? *Didn’t I tell you that?*” He grabbed the animal, stepped to the window, screamed, “DIDN’T I TELL YOU NO CAT?” and threw the kitten out the window as if it was so much garbage. Thelma hugged herself, horrified. Gary stormed over and grabbed her by the hair. He began slapping her face back and forth, his passion ascending with each consecutive blow. At last he caught himself, almost hysterical, but still together enough to realize the stupidest thing he could do would be to leave marks. He stepped back.

“You’ve crossed me for the last time, slut.” He tore her mirror from the wall and smashed it on the floor. He pointed a shaking finger at the shards of glass. “You see that?” he spat,

indicating a piece. "That's you." He jabbed his finger at other pieces. "You see that? You see that? You see that? That's what's gonna happen to you next time you disobey me." He knocked a picture off the wall, moved to the closet and tore Thelma's clothes from their hangers. Then his anger seemed to abate.

He walked to the door and said coldly, almost calmly, "No more privileges. Period. No more trips to the park, no more listening to the radio. This door stays locked, and you stay in." He appeared about to elaborate, but his anger was catching up with him again. He stepped out, screamed, "Just die!" and slammed the door so hard it shook the walls.

The aftermath was worse than the explosion. Thelma sat in shock, wondering only how she could have been so bad. She wiped away her tears with a deformed and quivering hand. This was the unhappiest she'd ever made Gary, and the first time he'd ever locked her away from him. An exaggerated sense of lonesomeness weighed upon her. She loathed herself. Gary was right. She didn't deserve to live.

Little by little the numbness grew over her. Her thoughts slunk farther from meaningful analysis, and an almost palpable silence enveloped the room. It was in this oppressive silence that she thought she heard a familiar sound.

Thelma's attention refocused, her heart began to pound. There it was again. A tiny sound, frightened and lost, seeming to come from right outside the window. Entranced, old Thelma rolled her chair over.

She leaned out. The white kitten lay straddled over the rain gutter running above the eaves and just under her window, having hit a power line and fallen to its present position. If not for the line the animal, small as it was, would certainly have been killed or seriously injured by an impact with the cement drive below.

Thelma's brows ran oblique. The kitten was perched awkwardly on one of the wide steel clamps securing the rain gutter to the roof, a good seven or eight feet from the window's trim.



Thelma gripped the rain gutter and tried to shake it to get the kitten's attention. The gutter, solidly attached, didn't budge at all, but the kitten must have felt the vibrations, for it looked up and wailed pitifully.

"Gitty!" Thelma moaned. She rolled her chair back from the window, trying to think. But she had precious little experience in problem solving. The harder she thought the more confused she became. She must have nodded, must have dozed for an hour or more. The next thing she knew it was getting chilly, and there was the sound of a key in the lock.

Gary came in with a small blue plastic bowl in one hand and a plastic drinking glass half-full of water in the other.

"Here's your gruel, ghoul." He placed the bowl and glass on the card table. "That's right. All you get is formula. No meat, no vegetables, no sweets. It serves you right for being such a sneaky old hag. And that's *all* you're gonna get from now on, until I think you've learned your lesson." His face twisted with contempt. "You mangy rat. I'm being way too kind for the likes of you. If I had my druthers you'd starve to death up here. Oh, yeah! I'd crank up the T.V. and you could scream your ugly old head off for all I'd care." He crashed his fist on the dresser and swept off Thelma's little ceramic menagerie. "But I need you *alive*, pigface!" He took a deep breath. "There's enough nutrition in that slime to keep you going. But that's all. We'll see how tough you are after a few days of goop diet." He turned and walked to the door. Before he slammed it he said icily, "You'll live. But so help me, witch, I'll live to spit on your grave."

Thelma waited a minute before pushing herself over to the card table. She inspected the contents of the bowl. "Formula" was a vitamin-rich concoction mass-produced for the elderly, but lately Gary had been saving pennies by preparing his own version; basically a blend of milk, butter, and sugar.

Thelma anxiously looked around the pigsty of her room. There was trash and filth

everywhere. Not only had Gary never once lifted a finger to clean the room, he seemed to take a vicious delight in haphazardly storing junk more properly assigned to the garage or basement.

Now Thelma rooted through a pile next to her bed, looking for something that would extend her reach. After an exhausting search she settled on a grimy aluminum curtain hanger. It was the retracting kind: two nearly identical lightweight rods that fit one into the other for sliding adjustment. One end of each rod was crooked at a right angle for securing the device to a wall. Thelma found that by forcing the assembled hanger to its greatest length she had a good six feet of extension for her arm.

She had to rest. This had been a tremendous amount of effort for a crippled and sedentary nonagenarian. She was beginning to doze when the kitten's mewing renewed its tug on her heart. Thelma continued her rooting, and fished out a heavy rubber band. The band was an inch and a half wide, perhaps twice that in circumference. It was difficult to stretch.

Thelma wheeled back to the card table and placed these items before her. She was breathing hard. After a minute she drank the water from the plastic glass. The room seemed to revolve, steadied. Thelma forced the rubber band around the base of the glass, then moved it upward an inch at a time. The pressure of the band cracked the plastic in three places. Puffing and wheezing, old Thelma now pushed one end of the curtain hanger under the rubber band until the two parts were secure, making a six-foot-long handle for the glass. Outside, the kitten began to cry continuously.

Thelma lifted the bowl of formula and held it over the glass. Her hands were shaking so badly that this job—the simple act of pouring the contents of one vessel into another—was accomplished only with the greatest difficulty. A good deal of formula oozed out the cracks in the glass. Thelma wiped the bowl clean with her crooked old finger and smeared this residue around the rim of the glass. She balanced her little device on the wheelchair's armrests and rolled to the window.

Thelma thrust out her head. The white kitten was still straddling the clamp over the rain gutter. When it saw her it began to wail and move its legs ineffectually.

“No, gitty, no,” Thelma cooed. “Gitty stay.” She maneuvered her contraption out the window so that the base of the glass rested on the floor of the rain gutter. She pushed it slowly toward the kitten. A lot of formula was lost in the process.

All this activity was hard on the old woman, and by the time the glass had reached the kitten Thelma’s arms were shaking. Very little formula remained in the glass, but the kitten attacked the nourishment ravenously, licking the inside of the glass clean and lapping up the inch of liquid on the bottom. With the last of her strength, Thelma dragged the device back inside and let her head fall on the sill.

The kitten was still hanging on the clamp, still straining to lap up the spilled drops.

Thelma watched it listlessly, unable to lift her head. An absolutely novel feeling began to grow in the old woman’s heart; a sense of worthiness, of responsibility. Something small and vulnerable . . . something *unimportant*—but something very much alive—depended on *her*. Life desperately needed her, contemptible as she surely was, and Thelma found herself weeping uncontrollably while her heavy head lolled on the sill and the afternoon sun gently washed her face.

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The next day Thelma slept very late. When at last she rose she became dizzy and weak from the act of sitting upright. The normal procedure of working her misshapen body into the wheelchair was a grueling task.

She struggled over to the window. The kitten was sprawled exactly as she’d seen it last, and her heart skipped a beat. She passionately shook the rain gutter. When the animal finally

lifted its head and sluggishly cried out she was so relieved she had to cling to the sill.

All day long she remained at the window, talking as much to herself as to the kitten, her mind slipping in and out of reality.

Gary came in late in the day. He glared and refused to say a word, plopped down the bowl of formula and glass of water. He scowled and slowly shook his head. Thelma was too weak to acknowledge him, so he walked back out and locked the door.

After a few minutes Thelma retrieved her device from under the bed, patiently slopped formula from bowl to glass, and forced her chair to the window.

As soon as the glass reached the kitten it came to life. It attacked the mixture eagerly, lapping up even those drops trapped in the cracks. Old Thelma was so exhausted she fell asleep with her head and arms out the window, and didn't wake until it was fully dark and quite chilly. It took a supreme effort to make it back to bed.

That night she came to her senses alternately shivering and sweating. Her room seemed unfamiliar. Thelma pulled a heavy sweater over her flimsy nightdress, covered herself snugly, and let herself drift.

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On the third day she remained in bed, her hands and feet freezing. Gary waited until near sunset to bring in her formula. Thelma feigned sleep to avoid him, then woozily fought her way through the steps of boarding her wheelchair, filling the glass, and making her way to the window.

The kitten cried frantically when it saw her. Thelma pushed the glass, which seemed a dead weight, to where the kitten could just reach it. Her arms began to shake terribly, but she managed to keep the glass in place until the kitten had finished.

All sensation passed from her left arm.

Thelma gasped. Her upper body jerked. The glass and curtain hanger flipped over the rain gutter and dropped into a hedge below the window.

Thelma's hand reflexively pushed her away from the window, the wheelchair rolling her back a few feet. There she sat quietly, wondering at the lack of feeling in the arm. It might have been made of wood. She lifted the wooden arm with her good hand, placed the arm neatly on its rest, and used the good hand to push those rigid fingers one by one into a semblance of grip.

She watched the day expire, saw the full splendor of its passing face for the final time, while shadows crept along the walls and floor, steadily dabbing up random pools of light.

The sky caught fire. Within the window's frame stray plumes ignited, slowly lost their intensity and glory, and smoldered with a dull and bloody glow. As the fire subsided these plumes turned to smoke in the deepening blue, became vagabond ghosts in the dark, lost their way in the night, and were no more.

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Death treads gently on gentle souls.

The end came for Thelma not with abruptness or horror, nor did it bring her any pain. It mirrored twilight's subtle diminuendo; measure by measure muting voice, shading tone.

It was almost an elegant thing.

Night stepped through the window not as a burglar but as a suitor, drawing its endless shroud about her, round and round, claiming her pulse one revolution per beat. It worked its way up her arms, her neck, her face.

Thelma watched the stars writhing prettily above the horizon, burning out their hearts for no one and nothing. She watched them shimmer, languidly, until a breath of cold blew out the

light in her eyes.

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In the wee hours there came a tiny scuffling at the window. A brown ear appeared, then a white ear, and finally two round eyes peered liquidly into the room. The kitten mewed nervously for a few seconds. It half-jumped, half-fell to the floor.

It froze where it landed, questing with its senses. In a minute it hunched and crept to where the two orthopedic shoes stood on the footrest. It climbed awkwardly over the rest and onto a shoe. There it paused to look up uncertainly. It clawed with difficulty up Thelma's leg and thence onto her lap. The old woman was cold as stone. The little white kitten threw back its head and wailed. It cried on and on and on in the darkness, rocking side to side, rhythmically digging its claws left and right into her cheap cotton nightdress. When it stopped, the room was quiet as a tomb. Slowly the kitten pushed its way under her sweater until it was all but buried. It curled up tightly, began to hum. It closed its eyes and was almost immediately asleep.