

Girl with a Secret Comes Home

by Laura B. Kaufman

The vet looked perplexed. “Would you please hold out your cat, tummy up, like this?” she gestured. She did a quick exam, then kept looking the cat over from stem to stern. She still appeared puzzled. “Hold your kitty out again, please,” she said, and I did. My anxiety grew. Kitty stayed remarkably grounded.

What was ailing my silver-haired buddy, my giant Maine Coon beauty, best friend of my son? She had been with us for nearly eight years, and was always as healthy as a very small, fluffy horse. But today, she didn't feel like herself. I didn't feel too great, either.

Since the day we met, this animal had been an indispensable member of our family. We adopted Sterling right after I bought her a place to live – when we moved from our downtown apartment to a condo in the tall pines, a few miles away.

It was love at first sight at the Pet Grocery store on cat adoption day. This was a momentous occasion – my son was a third-grader and we had been pet-less for a couple of years since the divorce. My parents got custody of our first two adored cats, who happily relocated to Seattle. There, they got to go outside, eat bugs, and throw them up again.

So, this was a fresh beginning. I even brought my camera in case we had a “first meeting” photo for the album.

And we did. Looking at the beautiful kittens in the cages from Community Concern for Cats, we were mesmerized. I was almost afraid to bond with any of the little faces peering out from their wire cubes because I knew I could be won over. But this was to be Teddy's cat.

Watching us ponder, the gregarious owner of the place held forth on the virtues of a kitten vs. a grown cat. But then he said, "now, for a great pet, that one up there, that would be a great housecat." He pointed to the other side of the store, where all the carpeted cat trees were growing like a beige, maroon and silver-blue forest. On the tallest one was a proud gray longhaired tiger, uncaged, with a studded red leather collar, presiding over the store. He called her, wiggling his fingers, and inviting, "Sterling!" Come on down." Apparently, it was Sterling's forest.

My son's head rotated to the cat trees and froze.

She leaped down, with an agile downhill grace, and sauntered over. They locked eyes. Cat flopped over on her side to be petted by third grader. I got this on film, and the skateboard logo on my son's T-shirt sleeve blazed in the light of the flash as he reached out to touch her.

Sterling's thick, soft coat was about a dozen shades of frosted silver, with faint stripes, and felt like warm silk. Her green eyes were wide and intelligent, and she clearly had a sense of humor. She regarded Teddy approvingly. She was so cool.

You guessed it. "Can we really have this one, mom?" asked Teddy, in that kind of voice that strains with monumental importance.

I was surprised that this cat was adoptable, figuring she was on the store payroll, and probably had work to finish in the back. And though I had planned to take home a kitten, I could see that the decision was out of my hands.

Yes, the big fluffy gray girl could come home with us. We looked at her paperwork: spayed female, approx. two years old, feral, from Martinez. Has shots. I signed a check, and the excitement that followed was enhanced by choosing cat dishes, the litter box, just the right food for a two-year-old, and a couple of sparkly toys that even I found attractive. The three of us were on our way.

I felt as if an important foundation was being laid in our family – not one that would make up for the divorce, but one that was full of promise, excitement, and the potential for a bond that would make coming home from school such fun for my son. Perhaps this cat would absorb some secrets, and maybe some tears.

Being a cat person already, I knew Sterling would also provide moving sculpture in our new place, probably an ample dose of humor, and definitely some comfort.

Sterling was soon the “it” factor in our house, doing interesting things and creating mysteries all the time. What would she eat? Where did she hide? Where would she choose to sleep? She investigated all of the brown U-Haul moving boxes, and sought the top floor of any stack. She helped find stuff in closets, and shot toy mice under the old avocado-green fridge. She liked workmen and visitors, especially the UPS guy.

She liked to be wherever I was working. I bought her a wicker in-box for my desk so her tail wouldn't drape over my keyboard. We began what would be years of a great collegial relationship. This has endured even since our second kitty arrived, with her own veil of mystery and elegance, punctuated by hairballs.

Seven contented years went slowly by, and the third-grader entered middle school, and then high school. Sterling was still his baby. I have a series of photos that show how he grew while she

looked remarkably the same. Now, she can sit on his lap, instead of overflowing his little-boy legs in a chair.

So when the day arrived recently that Sterling didn't feel well, it was a shock. She circled around and mewed, and would lie down, then get up, then lie down again. She clearly didn't know what to do with herself.

I decided it was time to get a new vet, and chose a group nearby. Loading Sterling into the blue plastic and wire travel cage upset us both, but we made it and were welcomed by an earnest-faced Dr. Lee, a sweet and professional vet in a white coat. Dr. Lee explained that she liked to take a long time examining each new animal, and she handled Sterling expertly, running her hands over her neck, chest, under her ribs, feeling her abdomen, and checking the cat's temperature from the south end, producing a shocked expression.

After I held the cat out upside down for the second time came an unexpected diagnosis.

“Laura, your cat...

Is...

a boy.”

I had to sit down. My first thought was that this probably wasn't fatal. Then I couldn't help enjoying the hilarious shock, and disbelief that followed. “You know, sometimes, volunteer cat agencies don't get it right,” she said gently. But Sterling was wearing her favorite collar, turquoise with yellow daisies! She had long eyelashes! She couldn't be a boy, not after seven years of being a girl. Could I have a transsexual cat? Sterling beamed at me.

“Yep, I can faintly see where he had surgery, long ago. He’s definitely a boy, neutered,” she said. She suspected he had some crystals in his bladder, causing his recent distress. “It happens a lot to male cats, and can be serious,” Dr. Lee said. The plot had thickened, now we had boy cat issues. Sterling was whisked off for an X-ray, which indeed showed crystals. This was a lot to absorb in an afternoon.

I got prescription food and other instructions, and drove home slowly, with my new cat. How could he have changed his stripes, all of a sudden? The good news was that his name could go either way. I felt uncomfortable about how I had raised him, immediately thinking of the expectations and assumptions I had made about her. Er, him. How beautiful he was, and how loving, and how smart, and how we had thought he was a bit aggressive as a female, sort of an Amazon, really. Hmm.

I called Teddy when school was out. “Ted,” I said. “Sterling went to the vet.” “Yeah? What does she have?” he asked in his deep, teenager voice.

“Well -- she’s a boy.” Complete silence from the other end. “Whuut?” He thought I was kidding. “Yep. He’s got crystals in his urine, and he’s going to be OK. But he needs special food. And a new collar.” Ted tried to take in the news, and I’m sure a few amusing text messages circled the campus. When I picked him up, we went directly to the pet store. He chose a black nylon collar with studly iron crosses on it.

It took about three weeks to stop calling Sterling “she” and switch to “he.” We were amazed at how much difference it didn’t make -- *at all*. Everything was the same. The cat didn’t have a complex, and we didn’t change our treatment of him. When you think about it, we put a lot of silly assumptions on our pets, which they don’t care a fig about.

Several months later, it's no big deal. Sterling is now sitting out on top of the patio fence, checking out the cul-de-sac for any news, and exchanging cool recognition glances with other cats on our block. He knows exactly who he is.

So much for this cat's secret. And that's why I said Sterling had a sense of humor. But I am never changing vets again. Not sure I can handle any more news.

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