

I Heard the White Cat Purr

The Story of the Hoarder Cats

Introduction

This is a true story. To avoid any possible complications I have not used the names of any persons or institutions.

I volunteer at my city animal shelter as a cat socializer. Sometime near the beginning of September, 2018, we (the volunteers) heard that we should expect not to see as many staff people around as usual for a while, they were busy in the back of the shelter dealing with “the hoarder cats.” Apparently, there had been a woman who had some large number of cats in her house, animal control had confiscated them, and they were going to be housed at the city shelter.

Time went on, and we continued our regular socializing of the adoptable cats. But over the next few months we occasionally heard that the hoarder cats were still there, in the back area of the shelter. The legal case was dragging on and the cats had to stay in their little cages. The rumors were that the conditions back there were sometimes pretty bad, that days would go by without the cages being cleaned. The shelter was often under-staffed in the best of times they certainly had not been prepared for a sudden need to house and care for fifty cats on a long-term basis.

Suggestions were made by the volunteers that we be allowed to go into the back and socialize the cats, who by then had spent months in little cages 24 hours a day. But there was reluctance on the part of the staff to allow that, possibly for legal reasons.

Socialization Begins

Finally, in the middle of December, the shelter management decided to allow a few of the experienced, reliable volunteers to visit the hoarder cats. I was one of them.

The back area of the shelter was designed for temporary housing of cats while they waited to be examined or treated. There were several small rooms typically containing fifteen cages along one wall. Each cage was about three feet by two feet.

There were over forty hoarder cats (originally there had been fifty) occupying four of the rooms. The first time I went back there it was pretty sad. Most of the cats were starving for human attention. Walk into a room and they would come to the front of their cage, rub against the bars, meow and meow, stick their paws through the bars desperately trying to reach you. It was overwhelming, standing there, seeing ten or twelve cats all wanting attention.

Well, almost all. Some of the cats were either feral or had reverted or just withdrawn. Most of these had a “feral den” which is an enclosed box about one foot by a foot and a half and maybe a foot tall with a clear plastic removable panel at the front. They wanted nothing to do with people, staying as far back in their dens as they could, hissing and swatting when I tried to reach for them. One in particular, known around the shelter as “The White Cat”, was extremely aggressive; hissing, spitting, swatting, and lunging whenever anyone got close. More on her later.

At first we weren't supposed to take the cats out of their cages, so the socialization was just petting and scratching the cat while it stood there or sometimes tried to walk back and forth in the confined space. Between a small litter box, food and water bowls, a towel to lay on, and sometimes the feral den, there wasn't much room for walking.

We had to wear latex gloves to minimize the chance of spreading disease. Petting a cat while wearing gloves takes a lot of the pleasure out of it; I couldn't say if it feels the same to the cat.

It was hard, physically and emotionally. Standing, sometimes on a stool to reach the top cages, squatting or sitting on the hard floor for the bottom cages. A lot of the cats were just beside themselves when given attention, leaning their head so hard into my hand that I could barely move my fingers to scratch. Some would pace back and forth as best they could in the tiny space. Some would try to climb onto my shoulder. Some got over-stimulated and started nipping at my fingers. And then after a scant ten or fifteen minutes it was time to close the cage door and move on to the next cat.

Some of the cats were shy, or scared, or feral, cowering at the back of their feral den. I got swatted many times, sometimes painfully, as I learned which cats were scared but wanted attention, and which were aggressive.

In any case, the cats benefited noticeably. Over the next few weeks, they calmed down, they weren't quite so desperate when I walked into the room, and a few of the staff people who clean the cages or provide the vet care for the cats remarked that they could see that the cats were improving.

We gave them toys; a little plastic ball or a stuffed mouse or other fabric toy. It was bittersweet to see some of them start to play. Have you ever seen a cat play with a ball? They bat it with their paw, it goes rolling across the room, the cat runs after it, bats it again in a different direction, or pounces on it. But here there was so little space. Bat the toy and it immediately bounced off the cage wall, so there was no chasing. If the cat was quick it might be able to bat it again or pounce on it. But often the toy landed in the little box or the water bowl.

The shelter was still under-staffed, and it was not uncommon to arrive and find that one or more rooms hadn't been cleaned. And so I and the other volunteer who came in regularly would spend most or all of the day cleaning. At first I would do it the "right way", which was to take the cat out of the cage, put it in a carrier box, then clean the cage, then put the cat back. But after a while I started short cutting and cleaning the cage around the cat. This was not only easier on my back, but it gave some chance to combine cleaning and socializing: I would take out the bowls and the litter box, pet the cat a little, try to pull the newspaper (used to line the bottom of the cages) from under the cat, slide new newspaper under the cat, watch the cat play with the newspaper. For the cats it was kind of a game and for us it made the cleaning a bit less tedious.

After a few weeks, we managed to get a folding chair in each room so that we could take a cat out of its cage and sit with it in our laps. Each room had a window, and some cats liked the chance to look outside, others just wanted a lap and lots of petting.

Notes and Names

I would go in typically three or four days a week and stay for five or six hours. Even that wasn't enough to spend time with every cat every day. The four rooms were labeled KC, KD, KF, and KJ. It just kind of worked out that I would usually go to the KC room first, and then either the KD or KF room; one of the other volunteers usually took the KJ room and KF if there was time.

I got to know those cats. Like all cats they had different personalities. But with so many of them I couldn't always remember who was who. At first I tried keeping notes on my phone about which ones were super-friendly, which were aggressive and swatted, which were just scared, etc. But it was cumbersome to pull out my phone and scroll through the list, so I started putting sticky notes on each cat's cage with short reminders to myself; "Sweetheart" for the ones that were very friendly and just wanted to be petted and scratched; "Friendly" for

cats who were not at all aggressive but were more reserved when it came to human attention. For some I wrote “scared but doesn’t swat”; a few got “will swat if you get too close”.

I didn’t write a note for The White Cat, but one day a note appeared on her cage that said, “Caution, will strike without warning!”. One of the other volunteers put it up after getting swatted and scratched so badly that he needed to be taken to urgent care.

The notes were supposed to be just for me, but I heard later that the staff people who cleaned the cats’ cages appreciated them, especially when it came to the swatting cats.

Every cat that comes into the shelter gets a name. Owner-surrendered cats usually keep their existing name, strays are given a name by the staff.

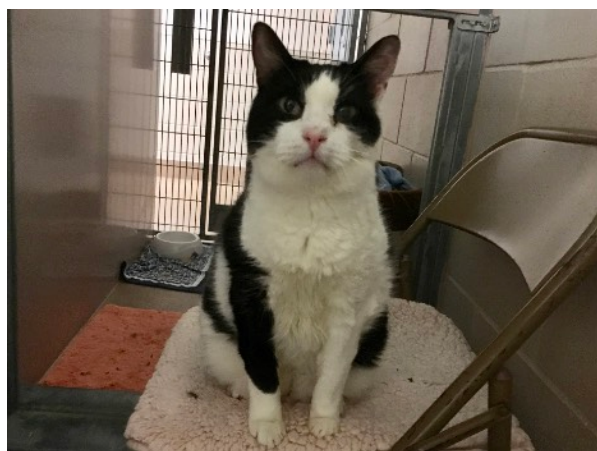
But not the hoarder cats. No names, just an ID number.

I admit that i talk to cats, especially these cats. But I could not call them by number. Walking into the room and saying, “Hi number 32! How are you feeling today, 43?” was something I just couldn’t bring myself to do.

One little gray tabby made the cutest little “mew” sound repeatedly when she wanted attention, so after a while I found myself calling her “Mew” when I talked to her. Another gray tabby had a water bowl that said “Princess” on it, and so I called her that. And then ball was rolling and I started naming them all. At first I picked names that would be easy to remember, based on some characteristic of the cat. The angry white cat was Stryker, because she struck out all the time. The poor one-eyed guy was Captain, after Captain Jack the one-eyed pirate. The orange female cat who slept most of the time was Winkle, as in Rip Van Winkle (later changed to Winnie because Winkle just sounded too silly). Stonewall, after Stonewall Jackson, was a black cat who almost never moved. Nessie, after Elliott Ness, because she was untouchable. Nibbles, a very friendly black cat who liked to take little “love bites” at my hand. Barney after Barney Fife because he was very timid (later changed to Bonbon because he was actually a she, and got over being afraid). Two tuxedo cats who were mirror images — one with a white left front paw and black right front paw, the other with a black left and white right — I called Harley and Quinn (from harlequin). Callie was the only calico cat. Silver, Fluffy, Polly the



Mew



Harley



Quinn

polydactyl cat, Dunkirk who always retreated into her den, Stripe who was a black cat with a prominent white stripe down one back paw, Alger who hissed a lot (does anyone remember Alger Hiss?), Pepper whose coat looked kind of like pepper.

Other names just kind of came to me. Charlie, a wonderful old light tan guy who just wanted to sit in my lap and purr. Tin Tin a sweet, tiny girl. Belle, Oliver, Thomas, Tigger, Tiger, Fawn, Onyx, Obsidian, Saffron, Sage.

Favorites

Of course, I developed some favorites. Princess was a skinny little gray tabby. When I came into the room she would watch me and meow for attention, climb up onto her den and stick her paws as far as she could through the bars trying to reach me. When I opened the cage door she would immediately put her front paws on my chest, then climb up onto my shoulder. I'd walk over and sit down in the chair right under the window, then she'd walk across the back of my shoulders, sometimes try to walk along the two-inch wide window sill. Finally she'd climb down into my lap, turn around, put her front paws against my arm and start kneading and purring while I petted her. Sometimes she'd stand up in my lap, reach one of her front paws up to gently touch my face, all the while looking into my eyes. It was so endearing. Then she'd move her face toward mine and take a nip at my jaw. That was annoying, but still also endearing.



Princess

Charlie was a cream point; light tan color, dark ears, dark face and tail. He was very old and had a more or less permanent squint. I'd move the chair in front of his cage, sit down, open the door, and he'd just climb right down into my lap. He'd walk back and forth, as much as he could in my lap, then lay down one way, get up, lay down another way, clearly trying to get comfortable. Soon he'd settle into a spot, start kneading my arm and purring. I knew he had some medical issues with his eyes, and a vet later told me that his gums were very inflamed and probably painful. But when he fell asleep in my lap he was so peaceful and looked so content it was easy to forget that, forget all the problems. I like to flatter myself and think that maybe during those times he was able to ignore his pain, at least a little. I could have spent hours with him sleeping in my lap, but eventually I'd force myself to wake him, gently put him back into his cage and move on to give another cat some time.



Charlie

Mouse would squeak at me from her cage, that's where the name came from. She was a very pretty cat with unusual coloring. She was mostly tabby, but not the fairly common grey tabby, or even brown. Her fur was a light cream and a light gray, but also with a lot of light brown on



Mouse



Fluffy

her very cute, almost kitten-like face. And she had the most piercing blue eyes. She would often lay on her side in her cage and stick her paws through the bars.

Fluffy was that rarity, an orange female cat (about 80% of orange cats are male). There were actually three orange females among the hoarder cats, one of them doubly rare was also polydactyl, having six toes on each front paw. Fluffy was anything but a lap cat, she liked to play and play. The first time I gave her a little ball toy, the sounds in the little room were almost deafening as she batted it against the metal sides of her cage again and again.

Play Rooms

More weeks went by. More staff people were assigned and so it was a rare day that the cages hadn't been cleaned by the time the volunteers got there. We could focus on socializing. There were four of us who came in regularly, two or three days a week. So between us every cat got some attention at least every other day. Still, it wasn't enough.

One of the other volunteers noticed an unused room and convinced the shelter staff to move the cages out and let us use it. It became a play room where the cats had space to walk, almost run, explore, jump, play with toys. It was great for the cats, but pretty arduous for us. Get the cat's

carrier box down from the top of the cages, take the cat out of the cage (not always easy), put it in the box, open the heavy door to the room, walk down the hall, open another heavy door, take your shoes off (to minimize bringing contaminants into the room), let the cat out of the carrier and finally have 15 or 20 minutes to sit and pet or play with the cat. Then reverse that whole process to put the cat back in its cage, and do it again with the next cat.

We put two large dog crates into that room for the aggressive cats, the ones that no one would risk trying to pick up. They all had a feral den, so it was just a matter of coaxing it into the den if it wasn't already there (most of them spent most of their time huddled in their den), closing the den door, carrying the den down the hall, putting it into the crate, and finally opening the den



Tigger

door. Most of them stayed in their den but they almost always showed some interest in their new surroundings, watching the other cats, looking out the window. A few of them would come out and walk around in the crate, finally having a chance to “stretch their legs.”

Soon we were given a second play room, and one of the other volunteers began taking more than one cat at a time into the room. Normally at the shelter we weren't allowed to let two cats interact, but this wasn't a normal situation. These cats had, presumably, all lived together in one way or another at the hoarder house, and after so many months in the little cages having some time with other cats could be viewed as part of their re-socialization. And it could only help them be more adoptable, whenever the day might come that they were released from their captivity.

There were three male cats in the “KI” room, one orange and two light brown, that the other volunteer brought into the play room together, and they all got along really well. Somewhere along the way we started to call them The Three Amigos. They complemented each other well; one was a dedicated lap cat, one loved to play, the other would hang out and watch.



The Three Amigos

Losses

One day I went in and one of the cages was empty. A cat that I hadn't gotten around to naming was gone, euthanized. I remembered that she was cute and liked head scratches. I guess she had also been old. I wished that I had spent more time with her.

A few weeks later I went in and Henry and Grace were both gone, euthanized. I knew they had been old, but I wasn't ready for this. Henry had been one of my favorites. He would climb onto my shoulder the way Princess did, hang out there for a while enjoying the view, then climb into my lap. He was a big, all-black cat, fairly short fur but badly matted when I first met him. I spent the first few minutes of every visit brushing him and pulling out mats until he let me know that he was done with that and just wanted to curl up and sleep.

Grace, I could tell, was very, very old yet she still got up when I came into the room and moved to the front of her cage for attention.

Sometime later it was Elizabeth, named for the queen, because she was truly a regal, elegant cat with a most wonderful purr that came on almost instantly when she was petted. As old as she was, she always stood up when I came into the room and moved to the front of her cage.

A difficult one for me to handle was Tin Tin. Such a tiny little cat, but so sweet and gentle. During the few weeks before she was euthanized it was clear she was going downhill. She didn't eat much, she slept a lot, and she had a shakiness in her walk. Near the end she was almost a literal example of skin and bones, her backbone was very prominent. I admit, and regret, that I had not given her much attention in the first few weeks, focusing on Princess and Charlie and Stryker and Mew, somehow neglecting poor Tin Tin. But some of the other volunteers spent time with her, and I had some quality time with her in her last few days; I hope she felt loved then. The last day that I saw her, I went home feeling like she wouldn't be with us much longer. I thought about sending an email to the other volunteers, asking them to make sure to give her some attention, but I didn't. Two days later I went back to the shelter and she was gone. I wish I had sent that email.

The Dog Kennels

More weeks went by, the legal case dragged on, and the cats suffered for it. They had now been in their little cages for almost seven months. I heard bits and pieces from a staff person here, an animal control officer there. Apparently the hoarder woman was fighting the case, and the court date kept getting postponed. I guess the prosecutor had far more important cases to focus on than one involving some silly cats.

The shelter manager tried see if he could put these cats into foster care. The prosecutor denied that request. Cats, after all, are considered just property by the law. Heaven forbid letting this property — important “evidence” — get out of a proper chain of custody. If I’m charitable I can say that perhaps the prosecutor’s hands were tied, that since the cats are property he had no legal leeway to let them out of the shelter’s possession.



Belle

But what irony. The reason that the cats were at the shelter in the first place was because the law saw their living conditions as cruel. And yet their conditions at the shelter — while certainly better — were not exactly humane. And yet the law is what kept them there. Living creatures — not a confiscated car — who did nothing wrong, who were the absolute quintessential innocent parties, locked into these tiny cages for months. Not starving for food, but starving for simple human contact. Some regressing to their feral natures, possibly irrecoverably.

But then an odd bit of good news, at least possibly. Near the beginning of March we heard a rumor that someone had floated the idea of putting the cats into some of the unused dog kennels. A dog kennel at this shelter was almost ten feet long by four feet wide with a divider in the middle that could be raised or lowered. Even a half kennel was pretty spacious compared to the little cages! But surely, we thought, this idea would never fly. Most of the dog kennels were open at the top; some had top bars but they were spaced far enough apart that a medium-sized cat could easily slip through. Three sides of the kennels were smooth walls, but the fronts had bars that a determined cat could easily climb.

The rumor was that they’d be putting more than one cat in each dog kennel, and further that they were actually going to ask us, the volunteers, to recommend which cats could go together. For the next few days we worked on finding cats that got along, taking more cats together into the play rooms. I sometimes had four or five at once.

But then I had an unexpected chance to briefly talk with the shelter manager about this idea. It sounded like it definitely was going to happen, and soon, but there would be only two cats per dog kennel. The good news was that he was turning over two dog rooms, eight kennels per room, to the cats.



Polly

He wanted us to come up with sixteen pairs. There were too many possible combinations for us to try. Some of the cats didn't get along with anyone, hissing repeatedly at every cat we tried them with. And, of course, the really aggressive cats we dared not even try testing because it would require getting them out of their dens and then somehow getting them back in.

In the end we came up with a list of nine pairs. Unfortunately, six cats, including some in our suggested pairs, were undergoing medical treatment and the vet staff didn't want them in the kennels. Instead, the six were moved to a cage room closer to the vet area of the shelter, called the IC room. They were still better off than they were before, the cages in that room had openings in the sides; three of the cats got a "double-wide" cage, the other three actually each got three connected cages. Sadly for me, several of my favorites were among the six. Princess, Mew, Charlie, and Winnie; another one that I hadn't gotten to know or name, and then poor Captain, the one-eyed swatty cat.



Thomas and Oliver, sharing a kennel

The day that I walked in to find the cats (some of them) had been moved into the kennels, I cried. It was SO much better than the little cages! The cliché "night and day" doesn't do it justice. Seven of our suggested pairs were lounging in their spacious new housing. Some had their dens, some of the kennels also had "nesting" boxes — four sides but no top, the kind that many cats just like to lay in. A couple had a scratching post or a cat tree (and a lot more would be on the way). After I got over my crying, a staff person asked me to help move the rest of the cats. There was another dog kennel room, not yet occupied. In that room, though, each cat was by itself in one half of a dog kennel. These were for the cats who had shown that they didn't get along with other cats, or the ones who were too human-aggressive to test.

The Three Amigos got to stay together, in one of the play rooms.

It was only a few days later that two of the IC cats, Winnie and the one I hadn't named, got moved out of the IC room and into kennels.

A few days after that, Princess and Mew got moved into the other play room. This left just Captain and Charlie in cages in the IC room.

Seeing Princess and Mew together, I hadn't realized how much they looked alike. They might be sisters, or mother and daughter. They got along well together right away. I would go in, sit in a chair, Princess would get right into my lap, just like in the cage room, wanting pets. Mew would walk around on the floor or stand on a platform of a nearby cat tree. After a while she'd jump into my lap and there I'd be with these two cats standing on me, jockeying for position for pets and head scratches. Only very rarely would Princess get a bit annoyed and take a small swat at Mew, never anything serious.



Stripe, showing off her kennel

The shelter ordered more cat trees, and then a couple of people put out a call on Facebook saying that the shelter needed cat trees for a group of cats that were in “long term housing.” Someone brought in a bunch of cat house cubes, there were dog beds and cat beds and scratching posts, someone else brought in some home-made elevated cat beds. It was almost an embarrassment of riches, some of the kennels had so much furniture there was barely room to walk around.

And More Losses

And then we lost the Captain. He was a one-eyed cat, having had some surgery to remove the left one. I was told that he came in that way. He was, unfortunately, not very friendly. I could get my hand within inches of him, but then he'd hiss and swat it. I wanted to pet him, wanted to tell him that he'd be all right, but I was never able to. He must have been pretty old, he slept more than most cats. When I brought him into the crate in the play room and then left for a few minutes, I'd come back to find him out of his den. But as soon as he saw me he would retreat back into it.

And in his cage he would purr. Alone in his little den, he would lay there and purr. Usually a cat purrs because it's happy and content, but a cat will also purr when it's in pain. The purring is thought to be at a frequency that helps the healing process. I can't say for sure which it was for Captain, but I don't think he was happy. I tried to work with him, offering him treats which he sometimes ate after I moved my hand away, talking to him softly, trying to get him to accept me. But he never did.

Charlie was now alone in the IC room, and I still went there every day that I was at the shelter. I'd take him out of his cage, sit in a chair and put him in my lap. He would fidget a lot, sitting and looking at me with his squinty eyes, then laying down with his head on my left arm, getting up, turning, laying down with his head on my right arm, trying to get comfortable.

On one otherwise ordinary day, I walked down the hall as usual, got to the room, opened the door.

And Charlie's cage was empty. I put my head down and sobbed. I knew he was gone. But still there was that little irrational hope that maybe he had just been moved or something. So I dried my tears, went to the vet's area and waited until one of the vet techs that I knew saw me. I asked her and she confirmed that Charlie had been euthanized just that morning, a few hours before I got there.

I went back to the empty IC room, sat on a step stool and cried and cried. Poor Charlie. He was old, he was FIV positive, the vet had told me that his gums were inflamed and he had trouble eating. But he had such spirit! I know I'm terribly biased, but you'd be hard pressed to find a more loving cat.

One of the women who worked at the front desk had been very fond of Charlie, she would sometimes visit the hoarder cats. When the rumor was going around that they might be able to go to foster care, she told me that she wanted to take Charlie. Just a few days earlier, she had stopped into the IC room while i was there and we'd chatted about him. Now, I selfishly hoped that i wouldn't see her because I didn't want to be the one to tell her the bad news. After a few minutes I stopped crying, composed myself, and started walking down the hall to the cats' kennels. Of course there she was, walking toward me.

She asked me how things were going. I looked at her and for a moment my thought was to just say, “Fine” and keep walking. But then quick visions of how she might find out; walking into the empty room like i did, or hearing it from a vet tech. So I just said, “We lost him.” Of course, she knew immediately who I was talking about.

For a few seconds there was only silence. Then she said, “No.” and then, “How?”

“He was euthanized,” I got out, trying desperately not to break down crying again.

“No,” she said again. “Why? I would have taken him home. I would have taken him home.” There was such sadness in those words. They still echo in my mind when i think of Charlie. “I would have taken him home.”

I don’t blame the shelter vets for the decision; Charlie died because of a failure in the legal system. A legal system that considers animals nothing more than property and has the bizarre contradiction of taking these cats away from the hoarder woman for their welfare but then having no provision for their welfare after that.

Even if everyone had agreed to let the staff person take him, the law didn’t allow these cats to leave the confines of the shelter. And so the vets made the only humane choice open to them. Charlie was very old and in pain. I still miss him.



Charlie. I miss you, buddy!

The White Cat

When I first started going in to work with these cats, I was warned about The White Cat. I was told that when she first got there she was nice enough, but had gotten extremely aggressive over time. She had a feral den in her cage with a clear plastic front that was very scratched up. When I first saw her, she was in her den, hard to see through the scratched plastic. I approached the cage and she hissed. I moved a little closer and she spat at me. Have you ever seen a cat spit? It’s not a gentle thing, it’s meant to be very aggressive and threatening. And it’s scary, especially coming from this cat. Then she lunged forward, throwing herself against that not-really-clear plastic so hard I thought surely she had hurt herself. I have never been one to anthropomorphize animals, but I swear the look in her eyes said that she wanted to rip the flesh off my face.



The White Cat

She was in the room that also had Princess, Charlie, Mew, Tigger, Tin Tin, and some others. Every day that I went in there, I would spend at least a few minutes “with” The White Cat, where “with” means safely on the other side of the bars. i’d look at her, talk to her, make slow blinks at her. Usually she would be inside her den, but sometimes she would be laying on top of it. Still, she almost always hissed and spat and lunged.

But I did say *almost* always. Sometimes she seemed calm. And after a while I would occasionally get what I interpreted as a slow blink in return. I would sometimes try petting her with a wand, a long stick of plastic used to touch feral cats. Usually she would hiss and swat at it, but sometimes I could scratch her head with it, at least for a few seconds.

I named her Stryker, and to me it was not derogatory, it was a badge of honor. She was a proud cat, she did not like being in the little cage, and she was striking out at her perceived captors the only way she knew how. She was angry, and had a right to be.

When we began taking her into the crate in the play room, there was a startling change. She softened, visibly. I would take the cloudy front off of her den and she would lay there, looking out the window, or watching the other cats in the room. One day, she got up and walked out of the den. She explored the crate and she even used the littler box. For readers who may not know, a cat is pretty vulnerable when it's using the litter box. For her to use it in front of me was a sign that she felt somewhat at ease.

We had some thick leather gloves for use in handling aggressive cats. I tried giving her some treats from a gloved hand. She didn't swat, but she ignored the treats. As I was pulling my hand away she swatted, fiercely, and if I hadn't been wearing the glove I would have been dripping blood.

It was one of the other volunteers who was first brave enough to try scratching her head while wearing a leather glove. I wasn't there to witness it but of course we all heard about it. The next time I was in, I had to try it. Sure enough, Stryker let me scratch her head. She was visibly on guard, she looked unsure, I felt like she might strike out at any second, but she lay there and accepted the touch.

At the end of each day, we had to put her back in her little cage where she again became the angry cat, hissing and swatting. She rarely spat or lunged, though, so that was progress.

After a few days of seeing her transformation in the play room, it was time for the next step. I scratched her head with the leather glove. She was calm. I pulled my hand away and took off the glove. I still wore the latex glove, but of course it offered no protection against cat claws. I slowly moved my unprotected hand to her head and gently scratched. She still had that unsure look in her eyes, still a bit tense, but there was no hissing, no swatting. Slowly and carefully I moved my hand down to pet her body with the back of my fingers. Still no swatting. I turned my hand over to pet her in the more normal manner, with the front of my fingers along her side. Up until now, she had always laid upright, with her paws underneath her in the "loaf" position. Now, for the first time, she turned slowly onto her side, visibly relaxing and stretching out her paws.

And then, almost miraculously, she started kneading. Also known as "making biscuits", this is when the cat slowly extends her front claws then retracts them, while gently moving the paws forward and back. It's said to be a kind of reversion to kittenhood when she would knead her mother's belly to stimulate the flow of milk. It's definitely a sign that the cat is relaxed. It was incredible to see that from this formerly angry cat.

I slowly pulled my hand away and, despite the rules, took off the latex glove. I just had to feel the fur of this cat who had not known human touch for so many months. I wanted to be able to say that I had petted her with my bare hand. It wasn't that her fur was anything special, it wasn't ultra soft or anything, but to be touching a cat that a few weeks ago would spit and lunge when anyone got near just felt wonderful.

Soon after came the move into the dog kennels. Stryker got her own half kennel, and she clearly relaxed even more. On one of the days when I had not gone in, one of the other volunteers texted me that she was sitting with Stryker in her lap, petting her while she kneaded. The volunteer had actually been brave enough to pick Stryker up. That was when we all agreed

that she needed a new name. One of the other volunteers suggested Skyler, and so Stryker was no more.

A few days later, I heard The White Cat purr.

When I first met that spitting, lunging, scary cat, the idea of her purring never entered my mind. But then came her amazing softening in the play room and then she magically became pettable. It was wonderful to see, but I knew her transformation to adoptable cat wouldn't be complete until the day came that she purred.

On this day, when I got to her kennel, she was laying on her pink towel next to her den, not inside it; a good sign. She looked up at me with gentle eyes and meowed softly. I sat down next to her and put my hand out for her to sniff; honestly, I still didn't really trust her. Tentatively I started scratching the top of her head, which she clearly liked. Then I moved to scratch the side of her jaw, and she pressed her head against my hand.

I thought I heard purring, but couldn't really believe it. I leaned closer to her but I still wasn't sure. So, summoning my courage, I moved a finger to her throat, half expecting her to swat me for that invasion of a vulnerable place. Her throat was vibrating, she was definitely purring! And then a few minutes later, I distinctly heard it, if only briefly. She had a very quiet purr, but at that moment it was one of the most special sounds I'd ever heard!

But two steps forward, one step back. On my next visit she was back in her den. This was the more typical pattern. I'd walk into her kennel, she would look up at me with soft, almost sad eyes. She would mew a quiet little mew that also sounded sad. I could still pet her and scratch her head and neck. But sometimes when I'd start to move my hand away she'd suddenly hiss and swat me. Cat experts call this "over stimulated", and say that it's pretty common. And I've had similar experiences with other cats, even my own. But with Skyler it still somehow seemed to me that there was some anger behind the swat, and if she continued to be like that, even occasionally, would she ever be adoptable?

Several weeks later, in the middle of April, the volunteer that had first had Skyler in her lap told me that I needed to get her into my lap. I was, honestly, still afraid to try to pick her up. So the other volunteer took a chair into the kennel, scooped the cat up, sat down, and put her in her lap. I was impressed. Skyler didn't even protest. After a few minutes she stood up, still holding Skyler, I sat in the chair and she set the cat in my lap. Again, Skyler didn't protest. Tentatively, I petted her head.

Normally, sitting with a cat in my lap is no big deal. The majority of these cats would jump at the chance — literally — to sit in a lap. But this was special. This was The White Cat, the spitter! And yet here she was, laying in my lap, just like any ordinary cat. She was happy, relaxed, gently kneading the air with her front paws.

The next day I was by myself and tried to get Skyler into my lap, but apparently I didn't have the right touch. I started to lift her, she struggled, jumped back down, and hissed at me. After a while I was able to pet her head and get at least partially forgiven.

The day after that I didn't even try to pick her up, just scratched her head and neck. I could feel her throat vibrating, but couldn't hear the purring. I wanted to get close



Skyler, in my lap

enough to hear it so I got up off the chair, folded it, and leaned it against the wall in order to have space to sit on the floor, all while Skyler eyed me very suspiciously. I sat down and leaned in to try to hear that little purr.

And she spat at me. She didn't hurt me, but it was a disappointing surprise to be reminded that Stryker was still in there.

A few days later I found her sitting on the top of her little cat stand. I knew that I needed to try again picking her up, and this was the perfect opportunity. I carefully set the chair next her and sat down. Gently I scratched her head. Then I quickly scooped her up and set her in my lap. No problems. I petted her and she relaxed, just like before. And I let her knead against my hand with claws that a few weeks ago would have been used to shred my skin.

Over the next couple of weeks I had her in my lap many times. If I came in and she was on her stand I would pick her up and set her in my lap and she was fine. But often she'd be in her den. I'd sit down and gently scratch the top of her head. And she'd hiss. A couple of times I picked up her den and slid her into my lap, and she was fine. Then the next day she'd again hiss when I touched her head. One day I finally got up the courage to ignore the hissing and just pick her up out of her den. And she was fine.

Once in my lap, She would stay of her own volition for 20 or 30 minutes letting me pet her, usually kneading with her front paws, purring so softly that I could only tell by feeling her throat.

The over-stimulated swatting seemed to be gone. If I ignored the occasional odd hiss, she was a normal cat, totally adoptable. Still, I remembered that spit that came out of nowhere; if she was going to get adopted it had to be by a person who could handle the occasional Stryker moment.

Nessie the Untouchable

Meanwhile, there was Nessie the untouchable. She was a "tuxedo" cat, black and white. She was not aggressive the way Stryker was. When you reached for her she would watch your hand until it got too close, then she would pull away or duck into her den. If she couldn't move away she would, when your hand got very close, take a quick swat at it, just to say "get away." It was a warning, not an intent to hurt.

Like Stryker, Nessie seemed to get better when given some time in the crate in the play room. One day while I was in there, one of the other volunteers tried petting her side instead of reaching for her head. For a brief second Nessie looked like she was going to swat, but then she allowed the touch. Apparently, unlike almost all cats, she just didn't like her head being touched, but her side was ok. She actually visibly relaxed and clearly enjoyed the petting.



Nessie

The next day I tried petting her in her cage. I slowly reached for her side, trying to keep my hand low and away from her head. She had a very apprehensive look on her face and as I got within inches, she swatted me. I waited a few seconds and then tried again. This time she let me pet her. And as I continued, she rolled onto her side and started kneading. Clearly, she wanted — needed, even — human touch, but she was very untrusting. Sometimes after a few

minutes of side petting had relaxed her, I would move my hand toward her head and she would grudgingly allow me to scratch her, but I don't think she ever really liked it. And any approach directly towards her head would cause her to pull away.

The first day that I visited Nessie in her dog kennel she still had her feral den but the door was off. I sat down on the floor and after just a couple of minutes she came out and let me pet her side as she walked back and forth and rubbed against the corner of her den box. They had put a nice soft cat bed next to it and after a while she laid down on the bed and kneaded while I petted her some more. And she purred.

The next time I visited her she had gotten a new covered bed, a cube with a small opening in one side. She didn't come out of it, but I could reach in and pet her, as long as I avoided her head. She was like that, sometimes she'd come out for me to pet her, other times she wouldn't. But at least she seemed to be over the hissing and swatting.

Over the next couple of weeks, when I came in she was always in her covered bed. I would come in, sit on the floor and talk to her. Usually after a few minutes she would move to the opening and stick her head out, rub her neck against the edge as if she wanted to be scratched. But if I reached for her she'd immediately pull back inside. I could reach in and pet her side, but she wouldn't come out.

Until one day when I found her laying on the top platform of her tree. I had never seen her up there and expected that when I walked in she would jump down and duck into her bed. But she didn't. I carefully reached for her side and started petting her. She rolled onto her side and started kneading. And purring. For a good twenty minutes I petted her and she loved it.

Next time she was back in her little cat house. But with a little coaxing she came out, walked around, and let me pet her side. After a few minutes she ducked back inside and wouldn't budge.

Soon we got to a point where she would come out for me pretty consistently. I'd sit on the floor, look at her in her little house, talk to her, then she'd walk out and want to be petted. Sometimes I could scratch her head and she wouldn't mind. Sometimes she'd even lean her head against my hand. I tried picking her up and setting her in my lap, and she didn't protest. But other volunteers said that when they went into her kennel, Nessie just stayed in her house.

Stonewall

An all black cat, I named him after Stonewall Jackson because he never moved. He just laid at the back of his den. At first I thought he was just very old. I put a note on his cage that said, "Friendly just low energy." He never showed any aggressive tendencies, at least to me, but a little later an addendum showed up on his note, written by one of the people that clean the cages. It said, "Hissed when scruffed." Well, gee, I might get a little annoyed if you tried to scruff me, too. a few days later another addendum, "May swat at strangers." I had never seen him swat. I could reach into his den, scratch his head, scratch his jaw, pet him, and the most reaction that I ever got is that he usually closed his eyes.



Stonewall

One day I took him (in his den) into the play room, sat on the floor, and tried to get him to come out. Failing that, I reached in and pulled him out. He did not like that, he struggled, he grabbed onto any edge that he could. It was difficult, but I finally got him out and set him in my lap. He tried to run back into his den but I held him. During all of that, he never scratched me or bit me. I held him and petted him and tried to get him to relax, but it was to no avail. After a few minutes I lifted my hands off of him. He actually stayed there for maybe 30 seconds or so before dashing into his den.

As with all of the difficult cats, I hoped that being in the dog kennel, having more space, would relax him, bring him out of his shell, something. But he still stayed rigid in his den. Sometimes he'd give a little hiss when I looked in on him, sometimes he'd sit in there and growl at me, but I could still reach in and scratch him and pet him and there was no aggression.

There were little signs of hope. One day one of the other volunteers texted me that Stonewall was on *top* of his den! I had never seen him anywhere but inside it, even though he must have been coming out at night to eat and use the litter box. But within a few minutes she texted that he was back inside, and that was where he was the next time I came in.

I brought some chicken cold cuts, gave it to him a small piece at a time and he really liked that. I reached into his den and set a piece near him. He eyed it for a while and then moved forward to grab it. I set another piece further out of his reach, and another piece on the edge of his den doorway, then a piece just outside the den. After some time of contemplation he moved forward to take each piece in turn. I was careful to sit absolutely still while he ate them, give him no reason to fear. Of course, after he got the last piece he went right back to the farthest reaches of his den.

I did that for several days, hoping that I could make some progress with him, that he might stop cowering quite so much, but it was always the same. Well, not quite always the same; there was one day when he'd eaten a few pieces of chicken and I was putting another one out for him and he swatted me. First time this cat had ever swatted me and it was when I was giving him food?

A few days later it happened again, he swatted me while I was giving him chicken. There were a number of possibilities; maybe in his cat brain I was taking the food away instead of giving it. More likely is that it hurt him to eat; the vet later told me that he had few teeth and very inflamed gums. When a cat is in pain it is natural to lash out at whatever is around him, he doesn't know that my hand is not what's causing his pain. So I stopped giving him the chicken.

In Court

I went to the preliminary examination, where the judge hears from both sides to determine if there is enough merit to the case to go to trial. I was told that the judge would also rule on whether the defendant had any legal right to the cats. If the judge ruled against that, then the shelter would be free to put them up for adoption.

So now I saw "the hoarder woman" for the first time. Elderly, grey hair pulled into a tight pony tail, multiple layers of clothing, with a strong and determined face.



Dunkirk

Three veterinarians testified about this woman coming to them with a sick cat — a different cat in each case — at various times over the course of a year or so. Each time the woman just wanted a blood test that she said she would read and interpret herself. The vets could usually tell, even from a cursory examination, that the cat needed extensive treatment. In some cases the woman was told that without treatment the cat would likely be dead in less than 48 hours. She always declined any treatment, always said that she couldn't afford it. Each time it was said that she was treating the cat herself, usually with subcutaneous fluids. Each time the vet testified that such treatment was ineffective for a cat in that condition.



Nibbles

The animal control officer who handled the case testified about going to her house, the terrible conditions, cats in small enclosures in the yard, cats all over the inside of the house, few litter boxes and almost no food. I will spare you any more details, but know that even just the verbal description was pretty horrific. There were pictures which, probably for the best, I could not see.

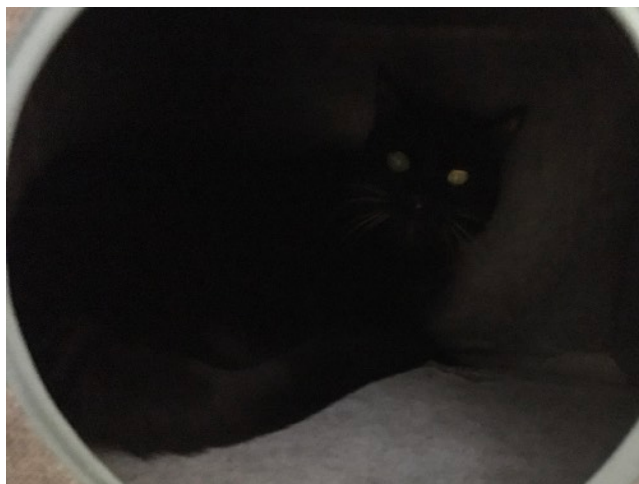
The animal control officer also testified that if an owner surrenders their pet to the shelter, the shelter vets could then perform the needed surgeries or give the needed treatments. Under the defense lawyer's questioning it was made clear that the pet could only get treatment at the shelter if the owner gave up ownership, which his client did not want to do.

The vet from the shelter testified about examining all fifty of the cats when they were confiscated, how unhealthily thin they all were, covered in fleas, infested with ear mites sometimes to the point of having damaged their ears scratching. Again, I will spare the details, just know that the cats were all in very bad condition, their health and well-being having been neglected for months, possibly years.

The defense lawyer kept asking the vets about the costs, and whether they had offered the woman a payment plan or some kind of credit. As someone outside of the courtroom so aptly summed it up: Blame the vets and the shelter for not offering free care.

In his closing arguments, the defense lawyer focused on the 12 cats that had been euthanized at the shelter since being confiscated. He had the audacity to claim that had they not been taken away from his client, they likely would still be alive. Fortunately, the judge chose to focus on the 38 that were still alive.

I sat there wishing that I could say something, tell them how healthy and happy those cats were. Being kept in dog kennels is not exactly what I would call a great life for a cat, but compared to the conditions at this woman's house, it was paradise. Even being in the little cages was better, at least they were medically cared



Erin

for properly. But of course, I could say nothing.

The judge, though, surprised me by not taking the defense lawyer's bizarre arguments silently. After a bit she pushed back, coming right out at one point and saying that the cats had suffered while in his client's home.

The judge easily ruled that there was enough evidence to have a trial. However, she postponed ruling on whether the cats could be released by the shelter, calling it a very emotional issue.

From the beginning, I had hated "the hoarder woman." Even before the testimony at the hearing, I'd heard enough to know that she had kept the cats in pretty bad conditions. She was the cause of their suffering. And more than one person told me she was the reason that the cats had to be kept at the shelter for so long, that she could have voluntarily given up any claim on them and then the shelter would be free to get them adopted. She was the cause of their continued suffering.

I never spoke to her, and at the hearing she never said a word. But I ended up having sympathy for her. She wasn't a bad person, and it was clear that she loved those cats, she wanted to help them and I truly believe that she had their best interests at heart. But she didn't have the financial means to properly take care of them. And she had somehow lost the ability to see the reality of how the cats were suffering in her charge. She was misguided; she didn't believe in using "chemicals" to treat things like fleas and ear mites, so somehow she just didn't see what those pests were doing to her cats. She honestly — though wrongly — believed that giving the cats to the shelter would mean that they would get euthanized.

As I drove away from the courthouse, I saw her walking down the sidewalk, alone. I'm pretty sure she was crying.



Callie

The Resiliency of Cats

Hearing about the former conditions that those cats endured made me appreciate their resiliency. It was amazing. Most of them were doing so well. If someone who knew nothing about their history walked into those rooms and looked at and interacted with those cats, they would never suspect that a few months ago they had been emaciated, flea covered, ear mite infested, starving, dehydrated, and in many cases near death.

They had spent I don't know how long — years, possibly — living in terrible conditions. Then they were moved to the shelter where they were fed and watered



Barney / Bonbon

well, got rid of the fleas and ear mites, and were treated for their various diseases. But they still spent months in tiny cages 24 hours a day with very little human contact.

But now, in the dog kennels, they were just like any normal cats. They were happy and well-adjusted. They slept, they ate, they peed and pooped. Some of them loved to play and chase toys, as much as was possible in the small space. Most of them, with a few unfortunate exceptions, enjoyed human attention; I had no doubt that they would make good pets, if given the chance.

The only thing that someone might pick up on that hinted of their past was that a lot of them were very needy. They meowed for attention when someone came into the room, stuck their paws through the bars trying to reach you. When you went into the kennel some became a bit frantic, rubbing against your ankles, and would jump into your lap as soon as you sat down. But then, some people like that in a cat so, hopefully, it will help get them adopted.

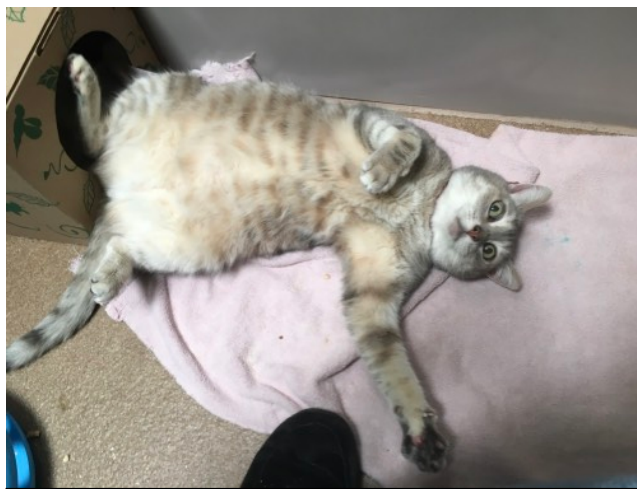


Tiger

And The White Cat! My wonderfully odd, scary Stryker. When I first met her she was angry, vicious, and untouchable. She scratched someone badly enough to send them to the hospital. Now she was a gentle, purring lap cat. I suppose I shouldn't be so amazed at her transformation, she must have started out as a nice cat and only became mean because of her confinement. A cat who has been truly feral into adulthood and has the kind of distrust of humans that Stryker appeared to have in the beginning is unlikely to ever get over it. With Skyler, all it took was giving her some space (literally), a little time, a little patience, and some love.

The Wait

For months I had said that when the day came that the cats could be put up for adoption, I'd celebrate. But now that the decision would come in a few days, I was conflicted. I wanted them all to get good, normal homes, but I was going to miss them terribly. And some of them I desperately worried about. What would become of Nessie? And Skyler? Would they be able to find adopters who would understand them, give them the space and time they needed, not return them at the first swat? What about Stonewall? Who would want a cat that just hides and is never social? And what about the really old cats, Winnie, Thomas, and Nibbles? Very few people want to take a cat into their home who may only have a few years left. Then there were the ones who were still pretty human-aggressive. Probably their only hope was to be barn or garden cats.



Silver

The Ruling

And just like that, the judge ruled that the “petition of forfeiture” was granted. The cats were free!

Well, not quite. The defense attorney surprised me by actually saying that he was not arguing that the cats should be returned to the woman. But he did argue that she should have a say in where they go. The prosecutor said that the shelter already had eight rescue groups lined up to take them, but the defense would not back down and argued that they should have time to go over that list and approve the groups.



Fawn

The judge — who, in my opinion, frequently bent way over backwards in order to accommodate the defense — granted this request, ordering that the cats be kept at the shelter for another two weeks so that the defense could scrutinize the rescue groups. But she made it clear that she only wanted to hear objections from a legal basis, for example that a rescue was not licensed, and not objections from any moral grounds like whether a group was kill vs. no kill.

Needless to say, I was very happy! I could not have asked for a better outcome. I had a couple of weeks to say goodbye to the cats. And I could rest easy knowing that the rescue groups would take good care of them and would see to it that they all eventually went to good homes.

The Day Came . . .

. . . and there was no fanfare, no cheering, and no rush of rescue groups to take them all away. We had been thinking about this day for months, and when we imagined it the image was of several people from different rescue groups coming in at once, looking over the cats, deciding which they wanted to take. With that in mind, one of the other volunteers had had the excellent idea that we should expand on the little sticky notes and make a writeup for each cat about its personality, playfulness, independent or lap cat, if it needed to be approached carefully, needed a cat-savvy adopter, etc. This would help the rescue people decide which cats to take and would be useful to potential adopters later on. This volunteer even went so far as to print up a sheet for each cat with each cat’s basic information and then space for our notes. So we spent the next few weeks carefully writing down what we thought would be useful. It turned out to be largely a waste of time since there never was the envisioned crowd of rescue people.



Stripe

The shelter vet staff needed to get each cat up-to-date on vaccinations and medications. The less friendly cats had to be anesthetized for this and they were put back into their kennels before the anesthesia had fully worn off, in a state where they couldn’t walk or even stand. It

was scary to see, at least for me. I watched Obsidian flail around, stumble, bang his head against the metal water bowl and then against the hard wall of the kennel and the edge of his den. I wanted to go in, pick him up and hold him, but he was a feral who hid from people and swatted if cornered. In this state he might really hurt himself trying to get away from me.

So instead I told the vet and she had someone come back and get him into his den and then take him back to the vet area to be watched. The next day, of course, he was fine.

Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and still no rescues came to take any of the cats away.



Obsidian

Then Wednesday, eleven cats were taken away. Originally this rescue had ten on their list, but one of them was Mew who was maybe not quite bonded with Saffron but they often huddled together in a cardboard box or the very small cubby of a cat tree. So I talked to the rescue woman and she was fine with taking Saffron too. I hoped the two of them would feel better having each other.

But still, so many were left.

More days went by. A rescue took two cats. Then I heard that some of the ones with more severe medical needs might get euthanized. That's when I learned that Princess had kidney disease. I talked to the vet about her. The vet said she probably had nine months to a year.

One of the local rescues is run by a veterinarian and it specializes in cats with medical needs. The shelter manager talked to them and they agreed to take the four worst cases, including Princess. I was happy to see them get out of the shelter and out from under a possible death sentence, but I worried about them going back into the small cages at the rescue and about how long they'd have to spend waiting to be adopted or fostered.



Saffron

One of the hard lessons you learn at an animal shelter is that you can't save them all. I wanted to take Princess home. But I already had four cats. And if I took Princess I'd want to take Winnie. And if I took Winnie I'd want to take Nessie. And Stonewall. And Stripe. And Silver. And Callie. And . . . then I'd be a hoarder. It was hard, wanting to save them all, but having to stop myself. I had even more sympathy for the woman who started this. I could no longer call her "the hoarder woman." She wanted to save them all, too.

The Fate of the Cats

If I was writing this as fiction, I'd end it here with the happy stories of all the cats being adopted, settling into their new homes with loving families. But this is real life, never so neat and tidy. I know what happened to some of the cats, but for some their fates will forever be unknown to me.

A lot of them were taken by rescue groups. A few were put up for adoption at the shelter. Back into little cages, but at least they were in the public area where they had sunlight, people walking by, and regular visits from the cat socializer volunteers. I'm very happy to say that all of them have been adopted.

Sadly, Stonewall didn't make it. He had several bouts of severe diarrhea. Then his food went untouched, his litter box unused. It was one of the other volunteers who finally got me to see the unfortunate reality. She pointed out several times how skinny he was getting, that he just didn't have any quality of life, he was probably hurting. I still didn't want to give up on him. I tried one more time giving him some chicken. He wouldn't eat it until I left. And when I came back he growled and hissed at me. It was clear that it hurt him terribly to eat. As the other volunteer said, this was a case where it really was more humane to let him go. So we recommended that he be euthanized.

Princess is living with me. I can't save them all, but Princess, because of her kidney disease, only has a little time left and I just couldn't let her live her last months alone in a little cage. She is the world's most annoying cat, being very persistent about laying with her face inches from my face, purring constantly. Sometimes she is less clingy and my vision of seeing her peacefully laying in the sun, happy and relaxed, has come true.

Nessie went to a rescue, but I don't know if she's been adopted or not.

And what of The White Cat? She was taken by an excellent rescue organization where she shares an outdoor enclosure with Pepper. She has space. I go to visit her every so often. She's happy and friendly. Sometimes she sits in my lap and purrs. Sometimes she hisses a bit, but she's never swatted at me. We all want to see her get adopted; she's a sweet, special cat who will make a good pet. We believe that Stryker was a result of being confined with so little human contact for so long. But still, to be safe, she needs an adopter who will not only love her but understand her and react calmly if there is the occasional hissing or swatting.



Pepper and Sage



Francie

Originally, Skyler was with Francie, Pepper and Sage. Sage turned out to be fickle, she left Pepper's side and became close with Francie. Soon after that, a very nice family adopted Francie and Sage as garden cats and they are living happily in a yard with a truly impressive two-story cat house to lounge in.

The Trial

The woman had a trial, had her day in court. I won't go into much detail because this story is about the cats and the trial covered much the same ground as the hearing. She testified on her own behalf. She mostly came across as confident, knowledgeable, and having done her best to take care of the cats. She got quite rattled and upset under some of the prosecutor's questioning. In the end, the jury found her guilty on all counts of animal neglect. She was not sentenced to any jail time, but she was forbidden from ever again owning or caring for cats. Sadly, that is undoubtedly a worse punishment for her.



Willa

Final Words

I was not there when the cats were first brought into the shelter, but I heard from and talked with the people who were there, including the veterinarian who examined them all. For almost six months I spent many hours a day almost every other day with those cats. There is not one shred of doubt in my mind that all of the cats were far better off at the shelter than at the woman's home. I was there when several of them unfortunately had to be euthanized. There is no doubt in my mind that many more of them would now be gone had they not been confiscated. There is no doubt that those left alive would still be suffering had they not been brought to the shelter.



Alger

There is no doubt that the tireless efforts of all the dedicated volunteers, spending countless hours, day after day, giving those cats much needed human contact, helped the cats during that time and helped them to be adoptable later on. Skyler shows what we accomplished, starting with a spitting, violent, untouchable cat, patiently working with her, getting her to trust people again, and ending up with a gentle, purring lap cat. For the cats that didn't make it we take solace in knowing that they did not have to spend their last days in lonely isolation.

I have nothing but praise for the animal control officers who have a tough and often thankless job. They had the dedication to pursue this case and see that the cats got rescued from those tragic living conditions. It couldn't have been easy to see them like that.

I have praise for the shelter staff who had to deal with the sudden influx of fifty cats. They did their best to take care of them, gave them needed medical treatments, and in some cases brought them back from the brink of death.

I have sympathy for the former hoarder woman. She is a good-hearted person, she had the best of intentions. She wasn't cruel, she loved these cats, she just got in over her head. She wanted to save them all.

There is no villain in this story. It's a tragic failure in the legal system. Confiscated animals cannot be looked at the same as confiscated property; a shelter must be allowed the leeway to do what's best for the animals, get them out of isolated confinement and into foster care, even while their ownership is in legal limbo.

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If you have been moved at all by this story, please consider making a donation to your local animal shelter or to a local animal rescue group. Just search for "animal rescue near me".



Onyx



Winnie