

Meeting Helen

By J A Williams

Stu and I sat under the awning of our fifth Wheel in companionable silence. While he dozed, I was on the Internet with my laptop looking to see what interesting places I might find to go to, or things to do in the area. It was our first holiday in the new trailer, though we are veterans. We had headed straight south from Canada looking for warm spring weather and a few miles south of Medford Oregon the weather turned and surprised us. We found ourselves in a patch of warm, sunny autumn weather. We decided to stay. That was the first time we saw Helen.

She entered our campsite intrigued by the sign I always put out warning unwary dog owners of Stu's presence.

"Hi," she said her voice cheerful, "I must know if the sign is real or is a joke."

Her cheerfulness was infectious and I smiled as I looked up from my computer and told her,

"Yes, it's for real; Stu does not like dogs, and if a dog invades his territory it is considered fair game. I'm not too concerned for Stu," I continued, "he has never been hurt, but nor do I care to see a dog come to harm because of a careless owner."

"May I see this legend?" She asked mocking me.

"Of course," I answered. "He's on the chair beside me." I pointed.

That Stu was in the chair was not evident at a glance, the kaki chair was so close to the colour of his fur that even knowing he was there did not make him visible without careful observation. A few moments passed as she looked at the chair trying to distinguish his shape from that of the folding chair itself.

She gasped, "he's enormous!"

Indeed, Stu is the largest Siamese cat I have ever seen, in fact he is the largest domestic cat I know of. He is thirty inches long, weighs in at thirty-two pounds, and has not an ounce of fat anywhere on his body. Helen asked if she could pat him, I explained she was asking the wrong person.

"But even if he swats you he will not stick out his claws, they are reserved for dogs."

I failed to mention that his swift swat could bruise. She stroked him and he ignored her, which was in all probability, better than the alternative.

"So you two are friends."

It was a statement not a question.

“We are I agreed.” I liked her; I could see she did not subscribe to the ideology that we owned pets, rather we co-exist with them, and they are our friends and part of the family.

Helen did not seem inclined to leave so I asked her if she would like to sit down, she accepted so I gave her my chair and went for another. She asked where we were from, how long we were staying, and other things one might ask a stranger one has met moments ago at a campground. She discovered I have been divorced for five years, which by no coincidence is Stu’s exact age, that I own a small business in Vancouver Canada, am 55, and as of this week, semi-retired. She also discovered that my son is a lay-about and I am lucky to have a daughter who verges on being a workaholic. She is at present raising two daughters of her own and one male child (her husband), also running my business and doing a bang up job of it.

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Like most men, I enjoy talking about myself and she was doing a good job of drawing me out. It occurred to me after a short time that I would like to know a little about her and to soften her up I offered her a beer, which she accepted. I still had a full case from my favourite microbrewery in the Okanagan with several in the fridge and frosted glasses in the freezer. That is all I keep in it. As she commented to me about the quality of the beer, another camper walked by with his dog. It was a German shepherd, it caught the scent of cat and began to bark, and pull at its leash.

Stu lifted his head, took a casual look around, and then curled himself back up with his tail over his nose continuing with his nap. At about that time, the ignorant doggy daddy saw the sign I posted in warning. The idiot let the dog loose.

Stu went from an apparent comatose state, to one of vigorous activity faster than I could hit the enter button on my laptop. He jumped straight up into the air and landed on top of his glorified scratching post, which sat beside his chair and stood over six feet high. I’d had it custom made for when we camped. He is on a leash, you must understand and that could put him at dire disadvantage if he got into a dogfight. This was his equalizer. From past experience the sisal covered post was anchored and had a small platform at the top. The Shepherd was large and could get his snout to within two inches of the bottom of the platform when he jumped. I yelled at the dog’s dad to control his pet, he laughed and pointed to the sign. One thing was certain; I was not going to take the dog in hand lest I lose one.

Stu sat looking down over the edge of his platform and groomed himself. The dog jumped one more time and his snout came within inches of the large Siamese. Stu could no longer resist the temptation and swiped the nose from just below the eye to the soft wet tip of the snout. He left four deep scratches and a terrified and sore dog.

The only good thing to occur during this whole unhappy incident happened next. The terrified and pain-racked Shepherd, took off like the proverbial bat out of hell, something I have never seen but believe this to have been a close approximation. In his agony and perhaps with blood in his eyes and dread in his heart he did not notice his dad lay in his path. The man, I dare not say gentleman, had his feet taken out from beneath him like a receiver who has jumped to catch the football and is tackled in mid air. It looked from where I stood, that he did a 360-degree flip but I am sure that was wishful thinking on my part.

Stu looked at me and said “rrraowww”, jumped to the ground, with amazing grace, scratched on his sisal-covered post, then hopped back up into his chair and returned to his nap.

I went over to help the breathless young man up (anyone under thirty-five looks young to me), and said I would pay any reasonable veterinary bills if he promised not to let his dog loose on Stu again. This I offered hoping the poor German shepherd would at least receive good medical attention. After all it was not his fault his dad was an idiot and an ass.

The sign had been disturbed in all the kerfuffle. I went and got a hammer and pounded the steel stake back into the ground. The sign had been with us for over three years now and I seldom read it anymore but this evening Helen came and stood beside me as I remained mesmerized, not so much by the sign as by the memories it brought back.

“DOG OWNERS PLEASE BEWARE!” She read it out loud, “A LARGE NASTY CAT LIVES HERE.”

“Of course,” I explained to her, “he’s not nasty, but he does hate dogs.”

To give lie to my assertions, a young girl of no more than eleven walked by at that moment with a Toy Poodle. Stu was out of his chair in an instant straining against his well-anchored line, meowing his Siamese meow, calling to the poodle. I spoke to the girl and told her Stu would like an introduction. She looked at me as if I were insane, with which some might agree, but started to come toward us then stopped when she saw the sign.

“It’s all right,” I explained, “he likes Toy Poodles.”

She was wary but intrigued and in the true fashion of small dogs, this one was fearless. She pulled at her leash to close the distance between her and Stu. Noses touched; Stu licked the poodle on the nose

with a rough tongue, the poodle sneezed.

“This is Stu,” I introduced him.

“This is Scarlet,” the girl told Stu.

The leashes kept getting tangled as the new friends played. The young girl, brighter by far than the adult with the German shepherd, asked if she could let Scarlet off her leash. I knew the poodle would be safe in the paws of Stu, in spite of the fact he was three times her weight.

I said, “of course.”

The two played until they were tired and the girl put Scarlet back on her leash, said good-bye and returned to her campsite.

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Stu and I were getting hungry and there was as yet no sign Helen was going to leave without us asking her. Truth be told I was enjoying her company and Stu was in her lap purring and contented. He might take offence if I asked her to go.

Stu has good taste in people, so I decided to ask her to stay for dinner. I had purchased a large fillet of halibut and thought it enough to binge on and still have lots for Stu, who adored it. We would both have to sacrifice to feed Helen it seemed. In spite of the warm sunny weather, it was autumn and was getting cold outside as the sun began to fade. In addition, Helen had not brought a sweater or jacket as it had been warm and she had not planned to be away from her camper after the sun set. We therefore adjourned to the indoors and of course she got the grand tour.

That does not take long in a fifth wheel and I was cooking dinner before ten minutes had passed. Helen offered to help but space is scarce in the kitchen of a fifth wheel. I told her it was best if she not move until Stu’s fish was cooked as he might take exception if removed from the comfort of her lap, or prove stubborn.

I turned the rice off to sit awhile, saw the roasted vegetables were on the verge of being done and that the halibut was ready so I removed it from the oven. Two pieces were done with lemon and herbs; the third, plain fillet was for Stu. I put his in the freezer with the frosted glasses to cool and served our dinner. Before I sat to eat, I checked on Stu’s fillet and found it cooled enough for him to eat. I told him it was ready, he did not move until his bowl touched the floor. He then flew from Helen’s lap like an eagle diving for its prey. Helen was startled then laughed and laughed. She was wiping tears from her eyes with

the back of her hand so I offered her a tissue, which she accepted.

When her fit of laughter was over and she was able to speak, she said,

“You are both crazy and fun to be with, I live only forty miles from here and know the area, let me show you around.”

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After two days, the weather patterns returned to normal, that is it rained, was cool, foggy, and was what Stu and I were escaping from. We persevered for another six days however, until Helen’s vacation was over. Then we headed for warmer climes. We were to stop by and visit her on our return, park the fifth wheel in her driveway and stay for a few days... at least.

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