

Nannie's Cat

By Vivian Rinaldo

Cat was in the garden. She called him Cat because that's what he was. She didn't hold with giving animals people-names. Nannie could hear him squalling at the birds who so deftly avoided his clawless front paws. Chuckling softly, Nannie tied an apron around her ample waist and began setting out the ingredients to make a stack cake. She guarded the recipe jealously; it had been her grandmother's and not an easy one to replicate. She had kept it only in her memory until her memory started to go, then she wrote it down and put it in her coffee canister. She prayed every night she wouldn't forget where she'd hidden it. She looked around her sunny yellow kitchen and breathed a prayer of thanks that she could still find it when she needed it.

Her children, scattered out over the state, didn't like her living alone now, and they strenuously objected to her cooking; they were afraid she'd forget the stove was on and burn the house down around her. She got one meal a day from Meals on Wheels, but the rest of the time they wanted her to eat cereal for breakfast every morning, and a sandwich of some kind each evening for supper. She was not willing to give up cooking for herself, but she taped up notes all over the kitchen saying, "Check the stove" to pacify them.

Nannie sighed and began mixing the ingredients for the stack cake. Her son had disconnected the gas stove, so she wasn't able to cook with it anymore. He said he was scared she'd turn it on, forget to light it (it was very old, and she had to light each burner with a match), and die from gas. Nannie was indignant, but she knew arguing that issue was a battle she could never win, and she was terrified her children would have her ruled incompetent and send her to an old age home, so she held her tongue. She wondered how long it would be before they refused to let her cook at all. For the time being they were willing to let her continue to use the toaster oven. It had a timer, so even if she burned something, it would eventually shut itself off.

She couldn't drive; had never learned, and she was at the mercy of her daughter who lived in a small town just west of her own. She hated having to ask Darcy to drive her to the Piggly Wiggly every Saturday; Darcy always made her call and ask, saying she didn't want to waste a trip if Nannie didn't really need anything that week. Nannie thought her daughter just enjoyed being in control of everything. Darcy was the only child who lived close enough to Nannie to help her, so Nannie didn't dare antagonize her. Quietly,

while the cake was baking, she made her grocery list. Milk, eggs, Arm & Hammer baking soda, yeast, baking powder, Eagle brand condensed milk, some ripe bananas, vanilla wafers. For a moment she considered what other items she might need that she'd forgotten. Finally, she rose and went to the pantry.

Opening the door, she saw rows of gleaming Mason jars filled with the vegetables and fruits she had canned the summer before. She dusted them regularly and enjoyed some nearly every day. She was careful not to use them up too quickly because there would be no more. With no stove to cook on, she could no longer can anything, and the few things she still raised in her small garden had to be eaten quickly before they rotted on the ground. She'd used to give away cans of food to her neighbors, but the neighborhood had changed, and she didn't really know anyone there anymore.

When the timer on the toaster oven went off, Nannie took the cake out and placed it on a rack to cool. Back to the list: new potatoes, salt substitute (which she thought tasted like tin foil, but was forced to buy because her children worried about her blood pressure), oleo (she preferred real butter, but Darcy insisted on the fake kind with less cholesterol and fat), Crisco, and vanilla pudding. Putting the list down on the table, she went back to the cooling rack, took the cake and began slicing it crosswise into half-inch layers. Once this was done, she pulled out a jar of apple butter (one of the few things she could not make for herself), and began layering cake slices with apple butter between them. When she had all the layers stacked neatly and had spread the final layer of apple butter on top for garnish, she stepped back to see her handiwork. Beautiful, she thought, licking a smear of apple butter off her thumb. She got out the waxed paper and wrapped it carefully around the sides and bottom of the cake. She left the top uncovered for the "frosting" to get solid.

She didn't have many visitors, except for the Meals-On-Wheels lady, who had so many deliveries to make she didn't have much time to chat. The preacher came by a couple of times a month to see her; she appreciated that more, because she lived so far out in the county he had to drive a good while to come. His visits usually only lasted an hour, but he always called to let her know he was coming, and she always had boiled coffee and cake or muffins for him when he arrived.

The preacher was getting on in years now, too, and the congregation had voted to retire him. They had already brought in a new younger preacher who was getting to know the church and its members, and they had given the old preacher six months to prepare for his retirement. She was afraid that after he was gone, she'd really be alone. She didn't much cotton to the new preacher; she'd met him once, and he seemed to be in a great hurry. During the one visit he'd made to her, when he was sitting in her parlor, his movements told her that it was a mere courtesy call, and that he would much rather be somewhere else.

Her phone rang, but she ignored it. It was one of those cell phones with the great big numbers, and she still wasn't too comfortable with a phone that didn't have a cord. Mostly she figured it was somebody trying to sell her something or ask her research questions or some other tripe, and she just didn't have time for that. She still had to clean up her kitchen and do her Bible reading. Everything seemed to take her so much longer lately; she tired easily and had to sit down often, even when she was just standing at the sink washing dishes. Sometimes her heart pained her a bit, but she didn't tell the children that. She knew if she did, they'd pack her off to the old age home right away.

Now she sat down at her kitchen table for a rest, and while she was resting, it occurred to her that the preacher might have told her he'd visit today. She wasn't sure she was remembering that right, and it worried her. But she had the stack cake ready, and she could make some instant coffee if he came by. She did need to change clothes, though; she had flour and baking powder all over her apron and some on her housedress. She got up to head toward the bedroom; suddenly, she felt weak and dizzy and was afraid she might faint. She sat back down abruptly and was surprised when she broke out in a cold sweat. "Why, the Lord have mercy... what on earth is wrong with me?" When the symptoms gradually went away, she relaxed and breathed a sigh of relief. "Well..." she said out loud. "Whatever it was, it's gone now." She rose from the chair, started toward the door to the hall and her bedroom, but she suddenly found herself short of breath and so tired....so tired. As she slid down the wall to the floor, she thought she might've gotten up out of the chair too quickly; after all, she wasn't young anymore. She sat there on the linoleum for a few minutes; as she waited for the weakness and dizziness to pass, she saw a paw reach through the kitty door and feel around, flexing nonexistent claws, a head and then a large ginger-colored body slinked through the opening.

Once all of him was in the house, the cat stood still staring at Nannie sitting on the floor, and if cats could have an expression, Nannie felt sure his was one of surprise. He eased along the wall to his food and water dishes, keeping her in sight, but not making direct eye contact. As he lowered his head to nibble delicately on his dry food, she was sure she was still present in his peripheral vision. He finished his snack and lapped up a bit of water to cleanse his palate; the ritual of cleaning his face with licked paws began, and he studiously avoided looking at her, but she was sure she was keeping an eye on her.

"Oh, Cat, if only you could dial a phone. I think I'm in a mess of trouble here." Nannie sighed and eased herself down into a prone position on the floor, pressing her hot face against the cool linoleum. She knew she was trembling, and she was disgusted at her weakness. "For heaven's sake, snap out of it, old woman. The preacher'll be here in a while, and he'll see to you." It frustrated and frightened her that she

wasn't sure if he was really coming that day or not. She flattened herself out on her back and folded her arms under her head for a cushion. The shortness of breath and weakness were just as real, but the dizziness had abated a little. "I'll just rest here for a minute, and I'll be fine. I just overdid, cooking in this hot kitchen." The kitchen wasn't especially hot, and she was shaking with cold, but she refused to pay attention to that.

"Maybe I just need to rest a bit. I did scrub the bathroom this morning." She looked at the cat for reassurance, but he had decided that his toilet was finished, and she saw the stub of his tail exiting through the kitty door. "Yes, that's it; that is it, isn't it, Lord?" she asked, looking up toward the ceiling. She often talked to God out loud; that was one of the nice things about living alone, not having someone think you're off your rocker if you think out loud. "I'm not ready to go yet; I feel like you have more work for me to do here, but if you're ready for me, just let me know. The ladies Sunday School class will just have to get along without me." She chuckled to herself, knowing that the minute she was gone, her best friend and sometime bitterest rival, Carol, would jump into the role of teacher that had been Nannie's at the Church of the Most High God for thirty-five years. Carol had just been waiting for an opportunity to show Nannie up. "That's not a very Christian attitude, old woman," she scolded herself. "Carol will make a fine Sunday School teacher. She has that big, booming voice," she chuckled. "No one'll fall asleep in her class, I can tell you."

The laughter in her voice died away, and she became reflective. She remembered when she'd moved into this old house – it was 1950, and she had just married her husband. She sighed, "Oh, Harv was fine, Lord. He was handsome and kind – kinda quiet, but strong, and he loved me good. Oh, yes, he did." She remembered with yearning holding him in her arms. "I loved that old man till the day he passed. He was ever'thing to me. He was a good daddy to our children, and a man of faith and constancy." Nannie felt tears trickle down her face and find their way into her ears. "I'll be glad to see him if you're ready for me to, Lord. Let him know I'm coming, will you? He startles kinda easy," she laughed. The laughter was choked; she felt a little strangled, like she'd sipped hot coffee, and it'd gone down the wrong way.

The phone on the counter began to ring again. She relaxed a little; if her children were calling, they would know she was in trouble because she hardly ever let her phone ring without answering it. They would come and check on her. It rang and rang and rang; she had never let her children install the answering machine they had argued about with her for years. She didn't understand how it worked, and she always felt it wasn't polite to make people talk to a box when they wanted to talk to you. So the phone rang on.

“Well, for heaven’s sake,” she grunted and tried to get up, but her head was swimmy, and she just couldn’t do it. She managed to drag herself back to her chair, but the chair was an old cane-bottomed one she’d had for years, and it was a little wobbly in the joints. “Just like me,” she laughed, and again, her muscles went weak. She was able to get back against the wall, and she began to grow calmer, but no less annoyed at the continued ringing of the phone.

Eventually, the ringing stopped, and she thought, ‘It must have been a sales call. No one I know would let the phone ring that long, even if they thought I was on the commode!’ Then she was glad she couldn’t get to it; she hated sales calls. Southern courtesy demanded that she listen to the spiel they delivered and turn it down politely, and that aggravated her. She hated being forced to speak to people she didn’t know, and she hated even worse not being able to help people. Her children thought she was ridiculous for listening to the telemarketers, and they encouraged her to just hang up on them, but she just couldn’t bring herself to do it. She always thought they might have children to support, and that the least she could do is listen, even if she couldn’t afford to buy anything they were selling.

The smell of the stack cake tantalized her, and she thought if she could just get up off the floor, maybe she’d have just a smidge of it until the preacher came. There was a pressure in her stomach, and she thought maybe she’d forgotten to eat that day. Since it was a Saturday, the Meals on Wheels didn’t run, and she usually just made herself some instant oatmeal for lunch. Frustrated, she really couldn’t remember. “That’s why I feel so puny. I didn’t eat!”

The paw reappeared through the cat door, swatting the rubber piece aside and the long ginger body followed the paw. This time the cat sniffed at the few pieces of dry cat food in his dish, ignored the water entirely, and walked calmly over to Nannie, still seated on the floor. He pushed his head against her hip, insisting on a petting. When she didn’t respond, he looked indignantly at her and pushed again, this time against her leg, then turned, flipped his tail so she could see his rosebud, and settled down beside her, purring loudly and grunting with the effort.

Nannie reached down and stroked his bristly fur. He didn’t shed too bad, but every time she swept the kitchen, it seemed she swept up more ginger-colored fur than anything else. She had considered trying to use the fur for something; may to make a nest for the hummingbirds that frequent the feeder she’d hung for them from a nail on the eave of the house. She’d hung it high enough so the cat couldn’t reach it, and had used fishing line to keep the ants off the sugar-water-filled bowl.

The phone began to ring again, and Nannie thought she really ought to try to answer it. It was all the way across the kitchen on the far counter, and she wasn’t sure she could get there. She didn’t want to

crawl there – it would be terrible if the preacher looked in the back door and saw her dragging her bottom across her kitchen floor – but she was sure she couldn't get back up again...at least until she could rest some more. The feeling of fullness in her chest was starting to subside a little, and she thought maybe she could get into a chair and just scoot it across the floor. She knew that would damage the linoleum, and Darcy would give her heck about it, but what was she supposed to do? The phone kept on and on and it was starting to make her head hurt.

With great effort, much groaning and puffing, she managed to drag herself up into a kitchen chair. Resting, she thought if she could get close enough to the counter, she could maybe scoot the chair close enough to the phone to reach it. She swept some loose grey hairs behind her ears and tried to rise from the chair, leaning on the sink. Her limbs were weak, but she was able to rest on her forearms and elbows enough to reach out to the phone. By the time she had mastered this movement, the cursed thing had stopped ringing. Letting out an aggravated puff of air, she collapsed back into the chair, leaning forward to cool her hot cheek against the stainless steel of the sink.

She rested there a good while, thinking about what might happen if she were going to meet the Lord. She was fairly certain the children would sell her house, probably before the first clump of dirt had hit the top of her coffin. They had never liked it, said it was too small for visitors – she always chuckled a bit at that – and that they didn't understand why, if she liked such a small space, she didn't just move into an assisted living apartment like her friend Carol. The truth was, since her old man had died, Nannie had grown used to being alone, and she liked it. Except for Darcy's Saturday obligation and the preacher's visits, she enjoyed the silence of her own company. When she needed someone to talk to, she just conversed with the cat. He was a very good listener.

A dull ache started in Nannie's jaw and throat and spread down her arm. She began to be afraid. She knew the symptoms of a heart attack – her own father had died at the table after complaining of indigestion and gas from the greasy pork chops her momma had fixed him for supper. She was afraid – oh, not so much of dying, but of laying here till someone bothered to come check on her. She didn't want the preacher to be the one to find her. Not in her dusty housedress and flour-covered apron. "Lord," she croaked out, "Lord, don't let me go like this. I ain't in no shape to meet you and my old man." She knew she was right with her Maker; she'd been washed in the blood of the Lamb most of her life. She just didn't want to meet him right now. Not with the kitchen a mess, her clothes a mess, and a stack cake that needed to be covered and put in the Fridgedaire.

The phone began to ring again, and this time she felt hope with each ring. She struggled to reach to

her left and finally was able to touch, and then move the phone near enough to grasp it in her one good hand. The other had gone strangely cold. She flipped it open and in a near-whisper said, “Yep?”

“Momma, how many times have I told you it’s rude to answer the phone like that,” Darcy grumbled. “What if it was somebody important calling you? They’d think you were some kind of white trash. Oh, never mind,” she hurried on, “the real reason I called you is ‘cause I can’t carry you to the Piggly Wiggly today. I’ve got a meeting with my ladies from the Junior League, and I clean forgot about it. You can wait till tomorrow to go to the store, can’t you?”

Nannie took a breath to speak, but managed only a strangled sound.

“Oh, Momma, for heaven’s sake, it’s only one day,” Darcy grouched. “Besides, you know you hate to go anyhow, and you can’t be out of everything already. I’ll be there tomorrow around noon, and we can go then. All right?” Without waiting for a response, Darcy pressed on. “Okay, then, well, I’ll see you tomorrow. I have to go. Bye, momma.” She hung up while Nannie was still trying to marshal her thoughts into a cry for help.

Nannie dropped the phone and slumped back into the chair. The cat leapt onto the counter and rubbed his muzzle against Nannie’s hand. She petted him absently. She guessed that it wasn’t in the Lord’s plan for her to be able to ask Darcy for help. Likely she’d have thought Nannie was exaggerating anyhow; she paid little attention to her mother’s complaints of ailments. Darcy was of the opinion that human frailties to be should be dealt with as mind over matter, and she had very little patience with what she considered her mother’s weaknesses.

“Well, Cat,” Nannie said softly, rubbing his velvety-soft ears, “I guess the time has come. I know you won’t understand this, but you been pretty good company for me, and I hate to leave you. You have plenty of food and water, but please don’t mess around my stack cake. I reckon the mourners will want that.” Once again, she laid her cheek on the cool counter and closed her eyes. The pain had subsided a little, but the numbness in her hand and the ache in her jaw were constant.

“Miz Miller?” the young, handsomely dressed preacher called through the screen door. “Hello? Miz Miller? Are you there, ma’am?” He glanced at his watch, only an hour till the UFC title bout on Channel 76 – his only guilty pleasure – and he was only making this visit because the old preacher was feeling ill. “Miz Miller?” he called once again, then turned to go. As he stepped down off the porch, he thought, ‘I’m sure

as heck not gonna miss my show to visit with some old biddy who doesn't even like me.' He climbed back into his dark-blue SUV and drove away.

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