

Felis Catus: Harbinger

by Hannah Willis

It begins, and ends, and begins again as few things do: with one.

There is a pile of concrete in my backyard. It sits, cold and forbidden and almost certainly teeming with creepy-crawlies. I give it a wide berth. It reminds me of a castle, abandoned, decaying, a relic of a by-gone age. Rocks pressed into the cement make for jagged parapets, and I can imagine the echo of wind through its roughhewn halls. Alfalfa sprouts up through gaping holes. Within a few months of us moving into our new home, it's overtaken by the wild.

The first time we see her slinking her way out of the concrete pile is in late November. We've been taunted for weeks by little paw prints in frosted-over grass, zig-zagging across our scraggly lawn with strange purpose. My mother, intrigued by the thought of an unknown tenant, places some cat food in an old enamel bowl and settles in to wait.

My mother waits long into the night, her insomnia keeping her awake. In the morning she tells me, excited grin on her face, of how she waited and waited and waited. Tells me of how she waited and waited until there was the flash of eyes in the dark. Tells me of the eyes in the dark, of the skittish cat that carefully picked its way from the pile to the bowl. Tells me of the way it hugged the ground, belly swollen, clearly pregnant in its half-starved state.

I bob my head along with her story, eyes drawn to the concrete pile, silent and dark. With great difficulty, I tear myself away and pack my bag for school.

The cat—petite, white and gray, long-furred, and green-eyed—grows accustomed to us and our strange food. She's given a name, which varies depending on whom you ask: my mother and sister will tell you it's Mama Kitty, my father will insist it's Echidna, Mother of All Monsters. We idly wonder when she disappears for a few days and then returns, suspiciously skinny. She eats with gusto, mangy pelt beginning to smooth out, dull fur giving way to a lustrous sheen.

Weeks pass, and one night she brings her kittens with her, crawling from the alfalfa-spewing holes in the concrete pile. I press my face to the glass of the back door, eager for my first good look at the strange little family coming from their ramshackle stone castle. There are four kittens, one black, three white, a tiny mismatched quartet that looks at us with watery, luminous eyes. I stare back, eyes wide and round and full of wonder.

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There is a sign next to what feels like the busiest street in town. It stands in a field of reeds and rushes. The afternoon sun catches on pools of water, light sparkling prettily off ripples caused by ducks, seagulls, ibis, pelicans, those that visit for a much-needed rest on their long migrations. They stand as shards of alabaster and pearl atop a mirror. When I look across this field, the air is strangely still and silent, despite the cars blazing across the molten asphalt road mere feet away. Dust motes hang in the air, pieces of glitter suspended in time. The sun sinks lower. The reeds turn to sticks of gold.

The sign proudly declares *WETLAND MITIGATION*.

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I come home to wire cages filled with newspaper and covered with towels, a bathroom door firmly closed with a note proclaiming *DO NOT OPEN*. Our cats slink around, tails down, shoulders high. I crack the door open. Eyes flash, green-yellow and phosphorescent, and I'm hit with the unmistakable smell of *cat*.

TNR, my parents call it. Catch and release, with a stop at the animal shelter for a quick desexing and snip to the ear to designate their neutered status. It lets us maintain a stable population, they say. It's more humane than trap-and-kill. We're doing our part, they tell me.

The cats stay in the bathroom, out of harm's way, as they fight off the drugs and stress and settle quickly into their own skittish fear of the strangers that coo at them from a crack in the door. My father protests this coddling, my mother puts her foot down. Our cats slink around the house.

Only two cats are sequestered away in the bathroom, huddling together behind the sink and toilet: two tabby-splotched white kittens, one with distinctive black patches around his eyes, creating hollows of empty shadow. My sister lovingly names him Ghost. Mama Kitty and her two daughters elude my parents' attempts to capture them. Later I will learn that a female cat can be impregnated days after giving birth. They visit nightly for the cheap cat food my mother places strategically around the patio, but they never fall for our increasingly clever traps.

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Utah Lake is a modern-day tragedy. Once a haven for migratory birds and endemic fishes, it's now locally viewed as little more than a puddle of mud. I blame the carp. They're bottom feeders, scavengers that trawl the lakebed with hardly a care, stirring up mud and debris, clouding the lake's shallow waters and inhibiting the growth of native flora and fauna.

It's not their fault they're there. It's not even their fault that the lake is the way it is. They were introduced in 1883 to lessen the strain that commercial fishing placed on native fish. No one could have foreseen how well this one species would take to the lake, how they would easily outcompete the June suckers and other native fishes. They didn't "kill" the lake, as my family and I are fond of saying, but merely exacerbated the problems caused by the nearby cities dumping raw sewage into the waters of the lake whose banks they nestled upon. They didn't kill the lake, they merely keep it in its death throes.

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"It seems odd that biologists would have urban legends, but we do," Mark says from where he stands next to the crooked projector screen. I lean my chin on my hand and settle in for the story. It goes like this:

In 1894, a lonesome lighthouse keeper lived on Stephens Island, fifty-five miles off the coast of New Zealand. Stephens Island was remote, treacherous, and teeming with life the likes of which humans could only dream of. The lighthouse keeper, David Lyall, was fascinated with this vibrant, strange life that surrounded him and set out to document it as well as an amateur scientist could.

Being a lonesome man on a lonesome island, Lyall brought along his cat for company. Lyall craved intellectual stimulation and turned to an odd hobby: the preservation of the gifts his beloved, pregnant cat gave him. She brought him tasty morsels, frequently sampling them herself. Her gifts were small rodential songbirds, wings seemingly underdeveloped and pitifully broken. Lyall stuffed the better carcasses and sent them to notable ornithologists worldwide.

The ornithologists arrived in a flurry of activity and excitement—the likes of this bird had never been seen or documented. They planned expeditions into the forests, hypothesized about its behavior and diet, dreamed of the sound of its voice. Once in the forest, all they heard was silence.

A year later, the bird was declared to no longer exist on Stephens Island. A single cat and her kittens, invasive species on this island paradise, had hunted a flightless bird to extinction.

I slowly turn my mouth into my palm as I listen, trying to cover the brewing horror and guilt I am sure are plain on my face. I feel sick, throat tight and tongue heavy in my mouth. There's a pit in my stomach, a hole in the center of my chest. My breath seems to rattle around in my lungs. All that destruction, all of it attributed to a single pregnant cat. My lab's PI begins to wax poetic on the virtues of trap-and-kill, and all I can think of is Mama Kitty and her kittens, plump and happy, sustained on cheap cat food and songbirds.

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In the height of summer, I ride my bike through a soccer park, barreling past carcasses that litter the trailside. Their fishy stench rises in the thin, shimmering air. Do fish bloat? I try not to look at the gaping mouths and vacant eyes that are as intelligent in death as they were in life. The fishermen that pulled these fish from the waters of Utah Lake didn't want

them. The birds don't either. They lay there in piles, cooking from the inside out. I should be thankful: carp *are* a catch-and-kill fish, and their high mercury concentrations make them unsafe to eat more than once a month. The fishermen are doing their civic duty, they've removed 25 million pounds of carp from the lake. They're hauling out the infection that tears up the lakebed, turns Utah Lake into a toxic algal bloom, and prevents the healing of an open sore.

I should be thankful. Yet, when confronted with these monuments of death, my mind skitters away from the topic like a cockroach running from harsh light. The carp stare at me, judgement and hatred in their heavy gaze and I am at war: I believe all life is precious. Death is required for life to continue. Some lives are more important than others. It weighs on me. The lives of the carp or the life of the lake? The lives of the cats or the lives of the birds and mammals and reptiles they hunt to extinction?

I hold my breath and pedal harder, weaving between twin towers of rotting fish. Dead eyes stick in my mind, following me.

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Mama Kitty is pregnant. Firsty and Minnie are pregnant. The orange tom that struts around our yard belongs to my neighbors. They swear that he's fixed. He's the only male around.

The three have their kittens. The kittens grow. Cats are sexually mature at four months old. There are between 30 and 80 million unowned cats that wander the US. Somehow, despite our best efforts, that number has increased by twenty-five. Any given night, at least ten pairs of eyes catch the kitchen light and reflect their unblinking stares back at us. In the light of day, the cats flick their ears: one whole, one trimmed at the top, little banners that twitch in the breeze and give us some sort of hope that we're making progress. Hasa is pregnant. It's not enough.

We began with one. Mother of all monsters, indeed.

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The sign along what is certainly the busiest road in town no longer reads *WETLAND MITIGATION*. It is tri-fold, advertising to any who pass by: *FOR SALE*.

The shallow pools have dried up, been drained, and become neglected. I can no longer smell the rot-sweet scent of the mud that once stuck to the spindly legs of pelicans and herons. The earth is cracked, dried, flaky, the dead and desiccated skin on a dying woman's elbow. Reeds have been replaced with cheatgrass, an undulating ever-yellow sea of heavy and ripe seed heads. Broken phragmite stems are shot through the sea, impaling the ground. A single, small meadowlark clings to the shaft of one such spear, the only bird to be seen in this abandoned rest stop. Its cheerful song is lost to the rush of wind and blare of car horns.

Looking across, I bite my lip and curse the people who think they can claim the land and tear up the earth that's been here eons before us. I curse my ancestors who overfished and introduced carp to the lake that they poisoned. I curse the lonely people who brought their pretty, pregnant, domesticated cats across the ocean to where they do not belong.

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The tension that makes the air of my home feel thick and dark seems to seep away when Hasa and her four kittens—Least, Medium, Most, and Stripey—are caught. She's the last one. We've caught Mama Kitty, Minnie, Firsty, Fluffy Girl, Pretty Girl, Bandit, Bandito, Ghost, Glitter, Patches, Many Toes, Mac, George and countless others that looked too much alike to name and have long since disappeared. When we go to release this latest batch, trimmed ears still scabby, my father hesitates and declares we're going to put the kittens up for adoption. "We have too many cats," he grouses, and that's that.

We haven't seen a kitten in nearly a year, and that is cause for a sigh of relief. It's stopped, we caught up. Ghost died a few weeks ago. My sister sobbed, but I can't quite seem to care. Domestic cats have aided in the extinction of thirty-three animal species, and all I can think is that there's one less out there, hunting and killing. Sometimes, when I watch them pour from the shadows at the edges of our porch light, I think that if we really cared, we'd put them all down. Ghost died peacefully enough, curled up in one of the hay-filled shelters we built under our porch.

We haven't seen a kitten in nearly a year, and their numbers are dwindling. I let myself lean against the glass door and waggle my finger at Firsty, who

waits patiently outside. My sister walks up next to me, crunching on a piece of toast. She pauses.

“Who’s that cat?” she asks, panic clear in her voice. I look up. A kitten squats underneath a patio chair, scarfing down day-old cat food. It casts a wary glance at us, eyes still the watery blue of youth. Its ears twitch and swivel, both tips complete, intact, whole. That pit in my stomach reopens, a gaping, cavernous hole.

It begins again.