

A Well Loved Cat

Note to parents: This is not a children's story. This is the story of a real cat named Nikki. There are really two cats named Nikki. One is a fictional cat who exists in the stories I told my children and which I sometimes wrote down on paper. That cat never grew old, although she could magically change from being a kitten to being a full-grown cat and then back to being a kitten again, depending on the story. That cat will live forever. The other Nikki was a real, flesh-and-blood ball of fur who loved my children and who will live forever in their memories. That cat died today, after gracing our household with her presence for nearly twenty years.

Cats first came to the Hawaiian islands in the 1700's, as "auxiliary crewmen" on sailing ships. Some of them chose to jump ship (cats pay very little attention to the rules of men) and cats have lived on the islands ever since. The warm tropical climate and abundant prey are very hospitable to cats, and even today domestic cats sometimes choose to leave their homes and join their wild brethren. Nikki's heritage lies somewhere within this rich mixture of cats. All we know is that in September 1992 an Air Force sergeant who was making preparations for the fast approaching Hurricane Iniki heard a kitten plaintively mewling underneath his tool shed. He took the kitten into his house to protect it from the hurricane, and after the storm had passed he gave it to me. I was stationed on Hawaii at the time, and I had a five-year old son and a two-year old daughter who were overjoyed when I brought a kitten home from the office. My daughter's earliest memory is of me walking in the front door with a mottled brown ball of fluff in my hands. (I had, of course, obtained their mother's approval beforehand. I may have been an Air Force warrior, but I wasn't suicidal.)

Nikki was a bundle of energy in Hawaii. She would suddenly tear through the house for no apparent reason, scrabbling across the hardwood floors outside our bedrooms and then bounding down the stairs. My wife named these frenetic outbursts "Thunderpaws." My son loved to play with Tinker Toys, and Nikki soon

decided that the little white plastic connectors were her favorite toy in the entire world. She would bat these down the hallway, bouncing them off walls and doors, until inevitably they would tumble down the stairs. Then she would scramble down the stairs after them, pick them up in her mouth, and carry them back up the stairs where she would start the game all over again. Sometimes when she did this at night she would make so much noise that my wife couldn't sleep. Then I would have to get up to put an end to the game. (Why is it that when wives can't sleep, their husbands are the ones who have to get up?) I would snatch the white Tinker Toy as it hurtled down the hall and deposit it in the most convenient drawer, generally in a desk or an end table. Then I'd go back to bed and hope my wife could fall asleep before Nikki found another Tinker Toy. Even today, after twenty years and several household moves, I still occasionally find white Tinker Toy pieces in a drawer.

Nikki's love of play almost cut her life short in Hawaii. We bought her a carpet covered scratching post and cat condo at the BX. Sticking out of the top of this was a long, whip-like rod that supported a string tied to a catnip toy. Nikki would leap up to bat the toy and then chase it as it bounced crazily around the scratching post. One day my wife was sitting in the lanai (porch) working on some quilting while Nikki was batting at the toy. My wife suddenly realized the room had grown quiet. She looked up and saw Nikki hanging limply from the rod, with the string wrapped tightly around her neck. My wife rushed to the toy and rescued Nikki, who fortunately was unharmed. The toy on the string, however, made a quick trip to our trash can.

I always enjoyed reading bedtime stories to my children. Occasionally my son grew tired of hearing stories he already knew, and we'd hunt for a new book. One night when we couldn't find a new book I decided to make up a story. My son thought that was great, and soon he began requesting "pretend stories" on a regular basis. When Nikki entered our life it was only natural that she worked her way into these stories, and soon she became the principle character in many of them. The stories themselves had no consistent theme. Sometimes they involved kings and queens who lived in a castle

with a boy and a cat. Sometimes they involved a boy who in Hawaii, and who happened to have a cat named Nikki. Sometimes there was a single cat in the story, and sometimes there were twelve other cats. Sometimes the Nikki in the story behaved a lot like the real Nikki. Sometimes she acquired talents like turning doorknobs, which just happened to come from other cats we knew. Sometimes the stories were a complete fantasy. Every night it was a new story with a new plot, a handful of which I wrote down years later.

Being in the Air Force we moved frequently, and Nikki moved with us. She was part of our family, and a source of security for my son in particular. Just as many kids can't fall asleep without a favorite toy or a special blanket, my son wouldn't dream of going to bed without Nikki. He would pet her and snuggle her during his bedtime story, and then literally hold her in a headlock when I turned out the lights. Nikki was always very patient about this. She knew that sooner or later he would fall asleep and she would be free. In one house my son slept in the top level of a bunk bed, and we could always tell when he fell asleep because we'd hear a "thump" as Nikki jumped out of bed. We sometimes marveled at the way Nikki put up with this, especially because if we looked in on our son before he'd fallen asleep she'd look up at us with pleading eyes that seemed to say "help me!" The next night, however, she'd sit near his door at bedtime. She knew her boy needed her.

The Nikki in the "pretend stories" may have frolicked with twelve other cats, but the real Nikki only tolerated other cats. From the day my son began sleeping with Nikki, it was only a matter of time until my daughter would say "Where's my cat?" Nikki was undoubtedly a member of our family, loved and catered to by all, but she was also unquestionably my son's cat. Shortly after we left Hawaii, a neighbor gave my daughter a cat. That cat attracted another cat, a litter of kittens was born, and soon we were awash in cats. Nikki was always polite, but she kept her distance from these intruders. Sometimes she would look at me reproachfully, as if saying "Why do you need these other cats? You have me."

When our youngest daughter was born, Nikki often slept under her crib. She was just keeping an eye on things. Sometimes we'd see her stand up on her hind legs with her front paws against the mattress, looking at the baby to make certain she was OK. If the baby started fussing and we didn't immediately rush into the room to take care of her, Nikki would march into our room and start meowing to let us know we weren't doing our job.

Children grow up and leave home. A cat just grows old. When my son left for college he couldn't have a cat in his apartment, so Nikki stayed with us. As the years passed she spent less and less time exploring the woods behind our house. She was content to sit in a chair and watch the activity around her. She always wanted to be near her people, though. At one point we worried about her getting enough to eat amid a crowd of younger and more agile cats, so we tried to make a home for her in the basement. She would have nothing to do with that. She made it quite clear that she could hold her own against the other cats. She wanted to be upstairs, preferably in the kitchen since that was the hub of all family activity.

Last fall she suffered a stroke and went blind. Life became confusing and difficult for her, but she soldiered on. We noticed she often huddled under a lamp for warmth, so we fixed up a special heated nest for her. She began to lose weight, despite the special cat foods we bought for her. (And for which the other cats clamored noisily.) Her favorite activity seemed to be to sit in my lap as I watched television. I changed my schedule so we could do that almost every night. When the hour grew late and it was time for both of us to go to bed, I would gently place her in her nest and tell her "You're a well-loved cat." I also prayed that when her allotted days were up, she would go peacefully and painlessly, surrounded by the people she loved.

This morning when I took her breakfast, she failed to stand up. She stared up at me with sightless eyes that, for the first time, were tired and troubled. The vet couldn't see her immediately, so she sat in my lap as the hours ticked by until that fateful appointment. Soon the rest of the family joined us. My daughter went with me to

the vet's office. We petted her and gently rubbed her cheeks as the vet made her preparations. I leaned over and whispered in Nikki's ear "You're a well-loved cat." She died peacefully and painlessly, surrounded by the people she loved.