

Nikki and the Caterwaul

Once upon a time, there was a boy named TJ. He lived in a big house with his mother and father, his little sister Tracy, and his cat Nikki. TJ's mom often said the neighborhood they lived in was "just right." The houses were far enough apart that the kids had lots of room to play, but close enough so they could walk to their friends' houses to find someone to play with. TJ's back yard led to a deep woods, and there was an open field less than two blocks away. Nikki thought the neighborhood was just right, too. She regarded it as her "kingdom," although she grudgingly shared it with a few other cats. She liked them well enough, and sometimes she'd stop and catch up on the latest gossip when she met them, but most of the time she preferred to be by herself. She was a mighty hunter! Well, she was a mighty stalker anyway. When she saw a mouse or a bird she would instantly stop and crouch low to the ground while she assessed the situation. With her eyes fixed on the prey she'd plot out the best way to sneak up on it, always staying downwind so it wouldn't catch her scent. Her tail twitched nervously as she planned her attack. Then with exquisite care she would creep to the best spot to begin her approach. If possible, she would stay in the shadows as she slowly crept closer to her target. She scarcely dared to breathe as she moved, as the slightest sound would give her away. Finally, when she didn't dare creep any closer because her prey would hear her for certain, she pounced. One! Two bounds at most and she was on top of it! Well, usually she was *almost* on top of it. She didn't want to hurt it. She got lots of good food at home. Tasty food, that didn't have feathers that tickled your nose or fur that got stuck between your teeth. So she planned her pounces so she'd land just behind the other animal, or just beside it. Then she'd laugh as the startled bird zoomed into the air, or the terrified mouse ran squeaking into the woods. She felt it was her job to let them know who was queen of the woods, just so they wouldn't get too cocky. Besides, it was good practice in case she ever really needed to hunt.

One misty spring morning an impudent blue jay was perched on a fallen tree limb, loudly proclaiming to all the world that this was *his* territory. His raucous screeches were frightening all the other birds in the area, but they didn't scare Nikki. Nikki knew the woods weren't *his* territory, they were *her* territory. He was so focused on telling the other birds to stay out of *his*

trees that he didn't think about the fact that he wasn't in a tree. He was about six inches off the ground – perfect for pouncing! And he was facing into the wind, and into the morning sunlight. Nikki could stay in the shadows and creep up behind him. Even if he turned and looked her way he wouldn't see a thing because his eyes were used to the bright sunlight. Nikki was within two steps of pouncing when another animal came crashing through the underbrush behind her. “Yooo Hooo! Nikki!” it called out.

The startled Jay zoomed into the air and landed in a tree. Then it began screeching insults at Nikki and the cat that had walked up behind her, challenging them to “fly up here and get me.”

Nikki whipped around to face the other cat. Her anger immediately softened when she saw it was little more than a kitten. It was Misty, one of Trixie's kittens.

“Hello Misty,” Nikki said as calmly as possible. “What brings you out on this cold, damp morning?”

“Mom asked me make certain the Grundleson's dog hasn't slipped its leash again. Billy's got a stomach ache because he got into the McMuddle's trash can last night. She wants to take him down by the creek so he can chew on some peppermint leaves. Only last time she went there the Grundleson's dog was loose and it chased her up a tree. Billy's not very good at climbing trees, even when he hasn't got a stomach ache. Mom said it's OK for me to check because I can run fast and I'm a good tree climber.” Nikki could hear the pride in Misty's voice when she spoke the last sentence.

“I haven't seen the dog this morning” Nikki said, “but that doesn't mean it hasn't gotten loose. You'd better check it like your mom told you to.”

“OK” Misty said, although she made no motion to leave. Nikki thought she looked a little uncomfortable, like she had something to say but didn't know how to say it. Finally Misty spoke again. “Are you going to the Caterwaul Saturday night?”

“I should say not!” Nikki said in an offended voice. “A bunch of cats yowling in the middle

of the night. That's not my idea of having fun."

"Mine either" Misty said quickly. "Or at least, I don't think it is. I've never actually been to one before. Billy heard about it and he thought it sounded like a lot of fun. Of course, boys like silly things sometimes. They don't mature as fast as we girls do. Anyway, I was sure Mom would never let him stay out that late. And she didn't. But she did say he could go to it if I went with him. I guess she knows I'm more mature than he is. I've never been out that late before. This will be the latest I've ever stayed out. And Billy says there will be lots of cats there. And sometimes some of them bring food. And. . ." Nikki could see Misty's eyes shining with excitement as she described the Caterwaul. Then Misty remembered that Nikki wasn't going so she quickly added "but of course I don't expect it to be fun. I'm just going to keep Billy out of mischief."

"Well I've never actually been to one" Nikki said, trying not to sound so negative. "It might be fun. You never know. You've got to keep an open mind about these things."

"That's what Mom says" Misty said knowingly. "You've got to keep an open mind." She stood next to Nikki, looking uncomfortable once again.

"Was there something else you wanted to say?" Nikki asked gently.

"Well. . . uh. . . Miss Nikki? Could you teach me to hunt? Mom says you're the best hunter she knows. I really want to learn how, but Mom's so busy taking care of us that she doesn't have time to teach me. I thought if I could bring home some food now and then it would really help Mom out."

Nikki was surprised to hear that Trixie thought she was a good hunter, and she was touched by Misty's request. "Well, I suppose I could" she said. "You're still pretty young for hunting, but I think I could teach you a few tricks."

"Oh, would you?!!" Misty asked excitedly. "That would be way cool!" Suddenly she remembered what her mom had asked her to do. "Uh-oh. Mom will be worrying about me. I

need to check on the Grundleson's dog and get home right away!"

"Why don't you meet me here tomorrow morning and we can start your hunting lessons." Nikki suggested.

"OK" Misty called over her shoulder as she ran off. "See you tomorrow."

After Misty ran off Nikki realized she had no idea how to teach someone to hunt. That was just something she did. She'd never thought about how she did it. Were there special "rules" or techniques she used when she hunted? Were there exercises she should have Misty do to develop the skills she needed? Nikki tried to practice creeping up on a bush so she could remember what she did when approaching prey, but it wasn't the same as approaching a real mouse or a real bird. For that matter, she wasn't really certain that she approached mice the same way she approached birds. It was too late to find anything livelier than the bush, so she decided to practice some special moves she hadn't used for a while.

One of the things Nikki always prided herself on was the way she could use a fallen log to hide her approach. Nikki had invented this technique herself. She would drop down low to the ground and slowly creep forward. Every now and then she'd slowly stand up and stretch her head just high enough to see her target and make certain it hadn't moved, then she'd slowly lower her head back down. She had to lower it slowly, because if she ducked down the sudden movement would frighten the prey and it would run away before Nikki was within range. Then she'd creep forward some more until she was almost within a single bound of the log. She'd run a few steps to build up her momentum and then leap over the log, seemingly coming out of nowhere as far as the prey was concerned.

There was a log nearby so Nikki began creeping toward it. Every few steps she'd raise up, look at an imaginary mouse, and then she'd creep forward some more. Finally she was close enough to spring. She took three running strides and then leapt into the air. Just as she was leaping the face of a large black cat appeared above the log, shouted "Boo!" and ducked down again. Startled, Nikki jerked her head back. Her bottom went down when she did this, and her back paws slammed into the log. That sent her cartwheeling through the air until she landed flat

on her back where the imaginary mouse had been. The black cat stood up and looked at her with a grin. "I thought cats were supposed to land on their feet" he said.

"You!" Nikki hissed as she scrambled to her feet. "You, you. . . Ed?" Nikki was surprised to recognize her friend. Ed was a black and white tomcat who lived on the other side of the woods. "What on earth were you doing hiding behind that log? And why did you startle me like that?"

"Me?" Ed asked with a lopsided grin. Nikki usually found this grin charming, but she was in no mood to be charmed now. Ed continued. "What were you doing sneaking up on me and trying to pounce on my head? I was just taking a nap when I heard something crashing into a bush on the other side of the log. I looked, and saw you stalking the shrubbery? Were you afraid it was going to run away?"

"Well, no. I was. . . that is. . ." Nikki didn't want to tell Ed that she was practicing her hunting skills by stalking a bush. That was something a little kitten would do. It seemed embarrassing for a grown cat to do that. "What I was doing is none of your business!" she snapped.

"OK. OK. I was just curious. Don't have a hissy fit."

"I am not having a hissy fit!" Nikki hissed.

"I'm sorry" Ed said apologetically. "I didn't mean to insult you. And I shouldn't have said 'Boo!' like that when you were getting ready to jump. I was just trying to surprise you. I didn't mean to make you crash."

"I could have sprained my tail" Nikki said. She wasn't quite so angry now.

"I sprained my tail once" Ed replied. "It was no fun at all. And then a big Siamese bit it because he thought I was raiding his trash can. I've still got the scar. You want to see it?" He looked at her expectantly.

“I certainly do not want to spend a beautiful morning like this looking at your tail” Nikki said indignantly.

“Oh. Yeah. It is a beautiful morning.” Ed sounded crestfallen. There was an awkward silence as they both looked at the grass and the trees, being careful not to look at each other. Finally Ed spoke. “You doing anything Saturday night?”

Nikki was confused by this question. “Why, I’m always doing something” she said. “I can’t remember ever doing nothing. But I can’t think of anything in particular I’ll be doing Saturday night. Probably just eating and sleeping, like I do every night. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. I just thought, well, I don’t know. Saturday night I usually hang out with my friends.”

“From what?” Nikki asked, totally mystified.

“From what?” Now it was Ed’s turn to be mystified.

“What do you and your friends hang from?” Nikki explained.

“Oh, no. We don’t hang from anything. We just hang out. You know. Together.”

“Oh. I see.” But Nikki didn’t see. She had been on her own for so long that it never occurred to her that other cats might like to do things together. She met cats now and then as she patrolled the woods, but she never went out of her way to be with them.

“Anyway, I was thinking, well, never mind.” Ed seemed at a loss for words.

“What were you thinking?” Nikki was confused by this whole conversation, and she hoped maybe Ed could explain it.

“I was just thinking, you know, that maybe you’d like to hang out with us. That’s all.”

“And why would I like to do that?” Nikki was still very confused.

“Oh. Well, of course. You wouldn’t. I’m sorry I even asked.” Ed sounded hurt.

Nikki knew that somehow she had hurt Ed’s feelings and she felt bad about that, but she really didn’t understand why he was hurt. “No! I’m sorry. I just, well, I was just asking what you were going to do? You know. What was it that I would enjoy?”

“We don’t really do anything much. We were talking about maybe singing together on Saturday night. Nothing much. I just thought maybe you’d enjoy it.” There was a slight note of hope in Ed’s voice.

“I’m not much of a singer, but if you like I will hang up with your friends.” Nikki replied.

“You will?” Ed’s whole face brightened up, and he had that lopsided grin again. “Great! I’ll meet you in your back yard Saturday night. Just about the time it gets dark.”

“OK. I will see you then.” Nikki began to walk back to her house, while Ed bounded off into the woods. It wasn’t until that night that Nikki realized Ed was probably talking about the Caterwaul. Suddenly, she felt panicky. She told Misty there was no way she was going to go to the Caterwaul, and not five minutes later she promised Ed she’d go with him. Misty was going to be at the Caterwaul. She was taking her brother Billy there. What would she think when she saw Nikki there? Would she think that Nikki didn’t like her? That Nikki was willing to go to the Caterwaul, but not with her? If she went to the Caterwaul she’d hurt Misty’s feelings. Maybe she shouldn’t go at all. But that might hurt Ed’s feelings. He seemed so happy when Nikki said she’d go with him. What would he think if she suddenly told him “no?” It took Nikki a long time to fall asleep that night.

Nikki was up at the crack of dawn, waiting for Misty at the clearing in the woods. Misty didn’t show up until the sun was high in the sky and the morning was almost shot. Nikki was in a foul mood by then. She wasn’t in a good mood anyway because she hadn’t slept well, and then Misty wasn’t there as early as Nikki expected. There were few things Nikki hated more than being kept waiting.

“Where have you been?” she demanded when Misty finally arrived.

Misty was surprised at Nikki’s attitude. “I was getting ready” she protested. “Mom needed help with the other kittens, and then I had to eat my breakfast, and it was my turn to clean the den. Besides, I thought we could see to hunt better after the sun was up.”

“Oh we can see better, all right” Nikki hissed in reply. “But so can the birds and the mice, and anything else you might want to hunt. They’ll see you coming a mile away. They’ll also see that hawk circling overhead. No mouse with an ounce of common sense is going to come out while he’s around. If you’d been here at dawn like I was there would have been lots of things to hunt.”

“I’m sorry” Misty said. “I didn’t know you wanted me here that early.”

Misty’s apology calmed Nikki a bit. “That’s all right.” She said. “I didn’t tell you what time to be here. This first lesson is going to be about technique, anyway. We probably won’t have time to do any real hunting.”

Nikki worked with Misty until late afternoon, trying to show her how to hunt. She taught Misty how to stay downwind, how to work with the shadows, and how to keep her tail down while creeping. They practiced the approach, the gallop, and the pounce. Misty was an eager pupil and paid close attention to everything Nikki said. When they finished for the day they agreed to meet at dawn the next morning so Misty could put her training into practice. Nikki was so focused on training Misty that she totally forgot about the Caterwaul until she got back home. Then she started worrying again. She wrestled with the same questions over and over again, and never seemed to make any progress. Should she go to the Caterwaul and hurt Misty’s feelings? Should she not go, and hurt Ed’s feeling? She spent another fitful night worrying about what she was going to do on Saturday night.

The next morning Nikki couldn’t stop worrying about it. Misty was already at the field when Nikki arrived. After a quick “Good Morning” Nikki brought up the subject.

“Misty, remember how you asked me if I wanted to go to the Caterwaul and I said I absolutely was not interested in it?” Nikki asked. Misty nodded in reply. “Well, later on a friend invited me to meet with him that night, and I think he’s going to take me to the Caterwaul.”

“That’s nice” Misty said, eager to start hunting.

“I didn’t know he was asking me to go to the Caterwaul when he asked me.” Nikki explained. “When I realized what he was planning, I was afraid I’d hurt your feelings if I went.”

“Why that hurt my feelings?” Misty asked in surprise.

“Because when you asked me I said I didn’t want to go, but then I said yes to someone else. It’s not because I didn’t want to go with you. I didn’t realize he was asking me to the same thing. Can you forgive me?”

“Forgive you for what?” Misty replied. “Because you changed your mind? I change my mind a dozen times a day. Momma says it’s one of the privileges of being a girl.”

“Your mother is very wise” said Nikki with relief. She felt a little foolish. For two days she had worried herself into a tizzy over something that turned out not to be a problem at all. She realized that it was important to plan ahead and think about things before you make decisions, but there was no point in worrying about things you couldn’t change. ‘I never worry about the right things anyway’ she thought. Then she turned to Misty and said “Let’s go hunting!”

It didn’t take them long to spot a sparrow pecking at some seeds on the ground. Misty crept a few steps and then got excited and started to gallop. It was almost too painful to watch. The sparrow looked at her in disbelief, shook his head, and then lazily spread his wings and flew up into a tree long before Misty got near him. Next they spotted a chipmunk, but Misty forgot to check the wind and approach from the right direction. The chipmunk quickly picked up her scent and ran into the woods. Nikki helped Misty plan her next attack, but as Misty crept through the tall grass Nikki was dismayed to see that her tail was straight up in the air, waving like a warning flag above the grass. As if that wasn’t enough, Misty stepped on a twig that

crunched loudly. The squirrel she was stalking scampered safely up a tree.

Misty was frustrated. “I know what I’m supposed to do” she told Nikki. But as soon as I see a target I get excited and forget everything you told me. I’m never going to be a good hunter!”

The morning was getting late. It was getting harder and harder to spot prey. Soon the hawk would begin circling and their hunt would be over. Finally they spotted a field mouse nibbling on some grass seed. “You stay here” Nikki told Misty. “I’m going to try a trick I heard about once. I’m going to go up on that little hill and let the mouse see me. I’ll be far enough away that I don’t think he’ll run, but he’ll keep his attention focused on me to make certain I don’t come closer. That will distract him, so you can sneak up from behind.”

Nikki slipped through the tall grass until she got to the hill. Then she stood upright, with her tail held high, while she deliberately did not turn her head toward the mouse. Of course, she made certain she could still see him out of the corner of her eye. For a moment he stood absolutely still, staring straight at her. Then he tentatively began to nibble on another seed while keeping his eyes fixed on Nikki. Nikki had to admire the way Misty made her approach. From her vantage point on the hill she could see Misty creeping up behind the mouse, but there was no way the mouse could have seen that. Finally, with two quick bounds she pounced on the mouse! Then she leaped straight up into the air while the mouse scurried off into some bushes. Misty was still quivering when Nikki ran up to her.

“He, he was wiggling!” Misty panted.

“Well yes, dear. What did you expect?” Nikki asked gently.

“I don’t know” Misty said miserably. “But I didn’t expect that. He was alive! I didn’t want to hurt him. I just wanted to catch him.” Misty looked up at Nikki with a tear in her eye.

“There, there” Nikki said soothingly. “You’re awfully young to go hunting.”

“I’ll never be a good hunter” Misty sobbed.

“Maybe you will, and maybe you won’t” Nikki answered. “Some cats don’t like to hunt. That doesn’t make them a bad cat. “You’ll just have to see how things work out for you.”

Misty held her head down dejectedly. “I told all the other kittens I was going to bring home a special treat” she said.

“Oh,” said Nikki. “Maybe we can do something about that. Follow me.”

Nikki led Misty to a little hollow on the edge of the woods. She pushed aside some dried leaves and pulled out a foil pouch of soft cat food. “I thought maybe something like this might happen” she said. “So I hid this yesterday morning, before you got here. Take this back to your den and tear it open with your claws. I guarantee it will taste better than a mouse would have.”

Nikki watched Misty trot happily across the grass, holding the pouch in her mouth. Nikki hadn’t realized just how little Misty still was. Misty held her head as high as she could, but still the pouch still dragged on the ground and Misty occasionally stumbled over it. That didn’t seem to bother Misty, though. She held her prize proudly as she disappeared into the woods. Nikki turned toward home.

And the Caterwaul? Nikki was surprised at how much fun it was. Ed was there, of course, with two of his friends. Misty and Billy were there, too. Their voices blended beautifully as they sang some old favorites, and a couple of new songs too. They sat on top of a woodpile and serenaded the Twitchell family. Mr. Twitchell even threw them some presents to them, but it was obvious he didn’t know much about cats. He threw presents that were more appropriate for a dog. Old shoes and a ragged tennis ball - things that dogs like to chew on. Still, it was nice to know their singing was appreciated.