

Rusty

Rusty had never trusted the cat. There was something furtive about him. He moved too quietly. Always slinking from one room to another, sliding in noiselessly so no one knew he was there. He seemed to be watching the family. Studying where they went, noting their habits and their schedules. Undoubtedly he was plotting something nefarious. Often he would climb to a high vantage point. He would sit for hours, perched on top of the piano or behind the finials on top of the secretary, carefully memorizing the household routine. Sometimes he would descend and guilefully endear himself to members of the family, purring as he rubbed against their leg or sat in their lap and let them stroke his neck. He would close his eyes as they did this and appear to be in utter ecstasy. Then he would open his eyes and give Rusty a soul-piercing stare. That look spoke volumes. "You just wait" he seemed to be saying. "Soon all will be ready. Then I'll make my move, and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

Rusty was the sentry. Ever vigilant, it was his sacred duty to protect the pack. The cat clearly did not belong in the pack. Rusty was suspicious when the cat first arrived, but he was just a kitten then. He was so small and seemed so helpless that Rusty's protective instincts almost got the better of his judgment. The family called the kitten "Mr. Pibbs." He was a tiny little ball of gray fur, bounding from one room to another. He would play for hours with a piece of string or a paper bag and then curl up on the blue chair and sleep peacefully. At night he slept on one of the children's beds, or he'd climb up on the Master's bed and snuggle between the Master and the Mistress. Rusty had never dreamed of doing such a thing, but they seemed perfectly fine with the idea of Mr. Pibbs doing it. So one night Rusty tried it. They were not fine with that. They shouted, and the Master ordered Rusty out of the room. That's when Rusty began to suspect that the cat was up to no good. Obviously the Master and the Mistress couldn't possibly love the cat more than they loved Rusty, the trusty sentry who served them faithfully ever hour of the day and night. The only reason the cat could get away with it was that he was too small and weighed too little for them to notice. He was deliberately doing something the Master and the Mistress wouldn't approve of. Rusty would never dream of such a thing. After that Rusty began to watch the cat more closely. He discovered that even at this young age the cat was practicing stealth, learning to hide behind sofas and chairs and pounce at passing ankles. That's when Rusty realized the cat was up to no good.

Rusty had been watching the cat for several years now. No longer a kitten, Mr. Pibbs had put on considerable weight. He no longer bounded from one place to another, and he sneered at a paper bag, but he still padded noiselessly in and out of a room. Rusty judged him to be a dangerous foe. They had never really fought, but they had skirmished a few times over table

scraps or sunny sleeping spots. Rusty discovered that, despite his portly appearance, the cat could move with amazing speed. He had bared his needle-like fangs at Rusty and swiped Rusty's sensitive nose with his razor claws. Rusty was pretty sure he could overpower the cat when the inevitable showdown came, but he knew it wasn't going to be easy.

For his part, the cat regarded Rusty with the same indifference a shark feels toward a pilot fish. An irritating creature that occasionally passes through your field of vision, but of no real consequence. That cat would have been amused by Rusty's concept of "the Master," at least to the extent that anything that passed through that feeble canine brain could have amused him. Clearly the cat was the master of all creatures. The cat was aware that the humans called him "Mr. Pibbs" and it occasionally suited his purpose to respond to that name, but in truth he had no name. He had no need for one. He was the cat, and everyone else was there to serve him.

The night of Rusty's disgrace began like any other night. The Master and the Mistress had gone to bed, and Rusty curled up on the throw rug on the Mistress's side of the bed. Around midnight the cat padded noiselessly into the room. Even though he made no sound, Rusty's keen sense of smell detected his presence. Rusty opened his eyes and regarded the cat warily. The cat hopped onto the bed and curled up between the two sleeping humans. Rusty sat up and watched him for a while to make certain he wasn't doing anything suspicious, and when the desire for sleep overwhelmed him he reluctantly lay back down.

In the wee hours of the morning the cat decided it was too warm to sleep between the humans. When he was a kitten, he often slept on the window ledge over the bed, lying against the cool pane of glass. That sounded like a good idea tonight, so Mr. Pibbs hopped onto the ledge. It was considerably narrower than he remembered, but by lying on his back he was still able to stretch out and enjoy the coolness of the glass. In no time at all he fell asleep, and although he would have stoutly denied it, he began snoring softly.

The night passed peaceably enough until the first gray streaks of dawn appeared in the sky. That's when Mr. Pibbs rolled over. There was insufficient room on the window ledge for this maneuver and he soon found himself falling through space. This is an unpleasant way for any creature to awaken, and Mr. Pibbs immediately tried to check his fall by extending his claws and flailing wildly with his paws. The first thing they struck was the Master's face. This elicited a loud cry from the sleeping human. The cry immediately woke Rusty, who saw his worst nightmare being played out before him. The cat was attacking the Master! With a loud growl he leaped to his Master's defense. Unfortunately, the cry had also awakened the Mistress and she sat up to see what why her husband was shouting. This action brought her directly into Rusty's trajectory, and all 65 pounds of his houndly body collided with the Mistress. She

topped onto the Master and the cat, and all four bodies rolled off the bed. They hit the floor amid a cacophony of yelling, caterwauling, and barking. The cat fairly flew out the bedroom door with Rusty hot on his heels. In his excitement to launch himself at the cat, Rusty kicked both the Master and the Mistress in the face. The cat vanished behind the furniture as soon as they reached the main floor and Rusty ran madly through the house, barking wildly as he searched for a glimpse of the marauding cat.

As is often the case, nobody had a complete picture of what had just happened. Everyone had a piece of the puzzle and viewed it through their own perspective. The can felt itself to be a victim. Someone or something had hurled it into the air, and when it landed it was immediately attacked by the people and the dog. Rusty thought he was the hero, having just saved the Master from a vicious cat attack. The fact that he had knocked the Master and the Mistress onto the floor and kicked them in the face was an unfortunate case of collateral damage. The Master and the Mistress looked at the available evidence and decided Rusty had chased the cat into the bedroom and followed the cat across the bed. It was all Rusty's fault, they declared.

The Mistress announced that Rusty would have to sleep outdoors, chained to a doghouse. That's where her family's dog had slept when she was growing up. She softened to the pleas of the children, though, especially as she remembered making the same entreaties to her father. In the end, she compromised and accepted her husband's suggestion of installing an expandable gate at the foot of the stairs. Rusty was not allowed anywhere near the upstairs bedrooms.

This was so unfair! Rusty grieved over the gate. He was the hero, the one who had saved the pack, and now he was being kept away from them! To make matters worse, the cat hopped over the gate with ease. Rusty knew that he could hop over the gate too, but the Master had made it clear that he was not supposed to do that. The first night he sat by the gate and whined all night, his mourning interrupted only by an occasional oath or slipper hurled in his direction. On subsequent nights he curled up at the foot of the stairs, next to the gate, and dreamed of the catastrophes that could threaten his pack and give him a chance to save them. Fires, floods, burglars, giant squirrels – all these were vanquished in his dreams.

As it turned out, the affair that led to Rusty's redemption wasn't nearly as dramatic as his imagination. It didn't happen at night, either. It was broad daylight. The Mistress was upstairs, sitting in a chair by the bedroom window, reading about the Black Plague. The Mistress was a disaster junkie. There are many such people in the world. They spend their free time reading about earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanoes, plagues, and other disasters. They also spend time

thinking about how to prepare for such an event. They organize volunteer fire departments, work with the Red Cross, and stuff their car trunks with warm blankets and bottled water. We need such people.

Rusty was curled up at the foot of the stairs, and Mr. Pibbs was sitting very quietly in the Mistress's walk-in closet. His eyes were riveted on a small gap between two shoes, a gap where he was sure he had caught a glimpse of a mouse. He waited patiently, and eventually a tiny nose and whiskers appeared between the shoes. In a little while, two shiny black eyes appeared beneath a pair of large round ears. Still Mr. Pibbs bided his time. Slowly the mouse inched its way out from between the shoes, sniffing the air and looking nervously about. Finally Mr. Pibbs judged that the mouse was too far out to scamper back into his hole and he pounced. The mouse caught a glimpse of movement just in time and ran into the bedroom with the cat in hot pursuit. The Mistress looked up to see what was causing the commotion. Her mind was still on the plagues of Europe, and what she saw running straight toward her was a giant rat, covered with plague-infested fleas. She screamed and leaped onto the bed. Her scream startled Mr. Pibbs, who for once assumed that a creature other than itself was capable of rational behavior. She had looked in his direction and screamed, which meant there must be some horrible creature even bigger than the Mistress right behind him. He abandoned the mouse and raced out the door. On his way down the stairs he passed Rusty, who had knocked down the gate and was running to his Mistress's defense.

The terrified mouse stood frozen in the center of the room. The screams, the sudden departure of the cat, the barking, and the thundering dog paws on the stairs overwhelmed its senses and it didn't know which way to turn. Rusty burst into the room, looking wildly about for some threat to the Mistress. He didn't even notice the tiny mouse as he galloped over it and ran back and forth from one side of the bed to the other, barking madly. The mouse recovered from its shock and ran back into its hole in the closet wall. The Mistress jumped down from the bed and hugged Rusty, praising him for being such a brave dog.

Once again, nobody knew exactly what had just happened. The cat was convinced it had narrowly escaped being eaten or worse by a giant, unseen creature. The Mistress was convinced Rusty had saved her from a plague-ridden rat, and it was weeks before a series of exterminators called to the house were able to convince her that there were no signs of rats in their house, only mice. Rusty was confused. He had rushed to save his Mistress from a horrible fate, yet had seen nothing out of the ordinary. He was extremely happy, however, because he was finally being recognized as a hero. He didn't know what he had done to deserve it, but he felt it was his due just the same. One of the children even made a yellow star with the word

“Hero” on it and taped it to Rusty’s collar. He was a little surprised that his reward consisted of being bundled off to the vet’s, along with the cat, so they could both be given a flea bath, but the hated gate came down so he was happy.

Although Rusty didn’t know it, his fame for saving his Mistress was short-lived. When she finally accepted the fact that she had seen a mouse rather than a rat she stopped telling everyone how the dog had saved her. That didn’t affect Rusty in the slightest. He still strutted around the house, secure in the knowledge that he was the hero of the pack. He no longer worried about what the cat was plotting, as he was sure he could handle it. The dreaded gate was never used again and Rusty spent his nights with the pack, where he belonged.

If Rusty’s fame was short-lived, the cat’s ignominy was not. For the rest of his life, and in family lore for generations after that, he was known as the cat who ran away from a mouse. Fortunately, the cat didn’t give a fig what other people thought of him.