

Flo's House

by John Garcia

The other week when I followed a dirt path in an industrial area of Kansas City, Missouri known as the West Bottoms, I found a kitten. Or, I should say, it found me. The trail twisted around trees and over rusted train tracks and past a camp of homeless army veterans. I was a reporter writing a story about federal budget cuts in programs for homeless veterans for *The Kansas City Star*. I wanted to ask them what they thought of the reductions.

Just as I was looking for a place to sit, I felt something claw into the back of my right thigh. I jerked around and looked over my shoulder while swatting at my leg. Whatever it was, dug in deeper, and I turned faster and faster, cursing, and finally grabbed it but I lost my balance and fell. One of the vets stepped over me, bent down and picked up whatever it was that had been squirming in my hand. He looked down at me, the trees behind him towering above us blocking the sun.

“Cat,” he said.

He dropped it and I caught it and sat up holding a gray kitten.

The vet helped me to my feet. After the interview, I searched my pockets for my cell phone and called my partner, Flo.

“I found a kitten,” I told her.

“A kitten?” Flo said. “Where?”

I heard her ten-year-old daughter, Molly, shout, “A kitten! Bring it home. Let him bring it home, Mom!”

“Well, it’s too late for me to say no now,” Flo said, sounding more flustered than annoyed.

“I want it!” Molly shouted.

“You hear that?” Flo said.

“Flo,” I said, pausing to emphasize my point, “the kitten is mine.”

My father had felt the same way about a Newfoundland we had when I was growing up as I did about the kitten. The dog, he said, belonged to him. For years, we had owned Great Danes. They always died at an early age, however, from painful stomach disorders common to their breed, and my mother and father grew tired of the heartbreak.

When our veterinarian euthanized our third Great Dane just five years after we brought it home, my parents said, That’s it. No more Danes. A few years passed when we didn’t have a dog at all. Then my mother persuaded my father to buy a black Standard Poodle, a decidedly feminine dog in his estimation. The poodle accompanied my mother when she shopped, sat with her when she read the newspaper, and slept at the foot of her side of the bed. It was her dog, as much as my two older brothers and I were her children. She made our breakfasts, lunches, and dinners; bought our clothes, took us to doctor appointments, tucked us in at night. My father would come home from work, read the newspaper, and listen to the news. He became increasingly distant as our hormones raced and we grew into contrary teenagers.

My father never warmed to the poodle. Two years after he gave it to my mother, he bought a second dog; a black Newfoundland, a much heftier breed than a poodle.

“This is my dog,” he announced proudly, holding the fat, four-month-old, distressed-looking puppy in his arms.

However, Gus, the name he gave it, was no more his dog than the poodle. My father was not home during the day as my mother was. He did not house train Gus, feed him, walk him and take him to the veterinarian. Gus followed my mother around the house when my father was home as much as the poodle did because, in the end, Gus was her dog, too.

Twelve years later, I drove with my father to Becker Animal Hospital to have Gus euthanized. His hair was falling out in clumps and he could no longer walk. My father wept as Dr. Becker inserted a needle into Gus’s foreleg and pushed the plunger of the syringe. Standing over Gus, my father felt keenly the loss of an animal he knew had never loved him as it had my mother.

I was twenty-two when Gus died and had just graduated from Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I was bouncing from state to state working temp jobs without a clue to a career. My father said I'd turned into a bum. He thought I should work at a bank or in retail and establish myself.

Despite his criticism, however, he never stopped asking me about my travels. He traced my routes on a map. I have never visited that part of the country, he would say, poking at one place and then another. I always wanted to. What was it like? Did you like it? I'll have to go there someday.

I remember sitting on my father's lap as a boy. He would hold my arms, spread his legs and I'd drop through the gap almost hitting the floor before he pulled me back up and I would laugh, eager for more.

I remember walking beside him trying to keep up with his long stride. We would play catch together in the backyard. I felt the hard smack of the ball when he hurled it into my hands.

I remember when I spilled a glass of milk at the dinner table. I was about five or six. My father threatened to beat me with his shoe. I can still see the glass slipping from my grasp, the milk gushing out in slow motion as my father's face blossomed with fury.

I inherited his temper. When I was nine years old, my childhood friend Tom and his parents were late picking me up for a Chicago Cubs' game. I thought we'd miss the first inning. I stomped back and forth in the kitchen and kicked the breakfast nook table.

"Where are they?" I snapped.

"You're acting just like your father," my mother scolded.

Her words stopped me cold. I sat down. I took deep breaths, letting each one out slowly, until I calmed down. I would not be my father.

Flo had been divorced for five years when we met in 2002. She had read a story of mine in *The Kansas City Star* about a puppy I had rescued from a dog fight in Kabul that year. In an email, she praised me for saving the dog. She also said she liked a

photo of me that accompanied the story and suggested we get together. Intrigued by how direct she was, and flattered, I agreed.

We met at Khaldi's, a coffee shop in Kansas City's Country Club Plaza, on a Saturday in mid-March. Flo wore a snug white blouse and blue jeans and I liked how her clothes hugged her body and the way her blond hair fell down her back. We soon realized we had several things in common. Flo was a social worker in a high school in Shawnee, Kansas, a suburb of Kansas City. I told her about my work with the homeless in San Francisco. She had lived in Columbia, Missouri. I had too when I was traipsing across the country in my twenties. We were both vegetarians.

At the time, I still lived on Summit. Flo owned a two-story home in Overland Park, Kansas. Molly and Flo's two teenage sons, Barry and Danny, lived with her. Barry was about to graduate high school.

Flo and I spent two hours together in the Plaza. I asked her out for dinner a few days later. We dated for more than a year before I moved in.

Few things in Flo's house belonged to me. If I put something away where it hadn't gone before she would call me on it. Not because it didn't make sense but because I was breaking an established order. Molly treated me like the younger sibling she never had, a cross between friendship and total disregard. Barry and Danny were deep into their teenage worlds and had little use for me.

Flo and I referred to her house as "our house." However, I wasn't fooling myself. The house remained very much hers. In stressful moments, she talked as if she still lived alone. She complained, "My grass needs to be cut," or, "My bedroom is a mess," or, "My kitchen is too small." At these moments, I was reminded who the house belonged to and I felt like a tenant who was sleeping with the landlady. I lived inside Flo's house but outside it, too, an observer one step removed from the activity around me. Our life together took on the feel of another reporting assignment that would end.

Week days Flo and I would wake up about six and get ready for work. Molly would catch a bus to school about seven-thirty. At night, Flo cooked dinner. Afterward,

she went over Molly's homework and then we read or watched television together. In no time at all, it seems, it was time for bed.

On weekends, I still got up early. Flo slept in. I made coffee and waited for her to come downstairs. Then we'd eat breakfast, clean the house and take Molly to a movie. Before I knew it, we were having dinner and then kissing one another good night, long kisses sometimes that put the night on hold before it raced ahead again towards dawn. Hours later, I rose to the surface of a deep sleep awake to another day in Flo's house.

Shortly after I moved in, we discussed buying a house that would be truly "ours" but neither one of us had the money and we didn't want to go into debt. After some consideration, we arrived at an alternative plan. We decided to replace the tiled floors in the kitchen, living room, and front hall of Flo's house with hardwood. Altering the interior, we thought, would make the house mine as much as hers.

The morning I found the kitten, the house was in upheaval. Carpenters had been in the previous day and had begun work on the floors. Piles of shorn tile took up corners. Living room rugs had been heaped on top of chairs. End tables appeared to have been thrown without regard to any out of the way place.

"Look what they've done to my house," Flo said greeting me at the door.

Kitten in tow, I had parked on the street outside Flo's house. She kept her car in the garage. She got home from work before I did and felt that entitled her to the space.

I didn't argue. It made sense, I supposed. What I did know was that I left my car on the street. It meant I locked the doors every night. It meant my car was exposed. It meant I hoped some kid didn't vandalize it. Sometimes, such little patterns of our life ignited and I wanted to explode and leave Flo.

Then I would recall when we got together at Khaldi's Coffee. Her blond hair, the sparkle in her eyes. The way she said good-bye with a cock of her head and twist of her hips. Remembering these moments, I felt the same rush of warm feelings as I had when we first met. I was sure I would miss Flo, even the moments when she upset me, because these moments are part of her companionship, part of what fills me and makes me not alone.

Still a little annoyed, I'd return to the house after my walk and not say anything. My father would have stormed back inside and let rip a hurricane of fury. I, instead, engaged in silence and retreated to the study and turned on the computer and cut myself off from Flo, from Molly, from everyone, allowing the flame of my anger to smolder and sputter out.

"You Okay," Flo asked.

"I'm fine," I told her.

I carried the kitten inside and Molly met me at the door and lifted the kitten from my arms.

"Can I keep her in my room?" she asked Flo.

"I don't see why not."

"Wait," I said. "We don't even know if it's litter trained. We'll put it in our bathroom tonight and see how it does."

"We'll put it in the bathroom now and if it's OK in a couple of hours, I don't see why she can't have it in her room," Flo answers.

She looked at me with a what-do-you-want-me-to-do expression. I gave her my don't-give-your-daughter-everything-she-wants look.

What? Flo said with her eyes. What are you saying? "Nothing," I said.
"Nothing."

"This is a big step," Flo said when I decided to move in with her.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course."

Until then we had a routine: I'd spend several nights a week with her and then return to my apartment. Sofa, chair, futon bed, television, bare walls. I met friends after work at bars, or, I drove home and watched television. A day or two later, I'd stay with Flo again. Something was missing. I felt alive only when I traveled abroad as a reporter, invigorated by the impermanence and uncertainties of the journey. I had nothing to to

look forward to in Kansas City until I met Flo. I thought moving in with her would be the start of our lives together. I thought I'd feel settled. I thought I'd be content.

"Of course," I said again. "I have to do something."

"We have to," she corrected.

That night, I thought of my parents. My father was thirty-two and my mother twenty-nine when they married, old by the standards of their World War II generation. They had to do something. I don't think, however, that they were desperate.

A black and white photo of my parents shows them sitting in a restaurant. I don't know where. They are at a table filled with other people. Baskets of flowers hang above their heads. My mother wears a light-colored dress, my father a suit and tie. They are smiling at one another. Their eyes dance with mischief. I imagine them reaching beneath the table toward one another in this room crowded with other couples oblivious to their desire.

I understood just how much my parents loved one another not long ago when my mother tripped walking into the kitchen from the living room and fell against a wall. She slid to the floor bleeding from her forehead.

My father helped her back up and then grabbed her coat. He insisted on taking her to the emergency room no matter her objections. I was home visiting. I drove and he directed me although I knew the way. I kept quiet and let him take charge in the only way he could since his failing eyesight prevented him from driving.

Seated on a gurney waiting to be examined, my mother muttered about how she hated hospitals. My father, she said, was making a fuss over nothing. He laughed. He patted her knee and she reached over and covered his hand with hers.

My mother did not stop complaining until the doctors released her. My father kept smiling and laughing and holding her hand. Her fingers entwined with his and he put his other hand over hers and for a moment they looked at one another as if I wasn't there.

I blushed. I could not recall ever having seen them kiss, let alone hold hands.

When I moved in with Flo, I stored my sofa, chair and futon in her basement and covered them with a plastic sheet. A room upstairs had been cleared for me to use as a study. I had suggested putting my futon there and use it as a couch, but Flo said it did

not go with the pink carpet. The study was just off the front door and would be the first room a visitor would see entering the house. She wanted me to get new furniture. I bought two wicker chairs with red cushions. She liked the chairs at first but when I brought them home she thought they were uncomfortable and she hated the Southwestern design of the cushions.

“You didn’t want the futon and now you don’t like the chairs,” I said.

We ignored each other the rest of the day. The following afternoon, I dropped by her work and brought her roses. She cried. We had lunch and stitched our life back together.

We called the kitten Zoey. Molly decided on the name. When she went to bed, Molly took it into her room. Flo and I would stay up and watch television. Then Flo went to bed. If I wasn’t tired, I’d go into the kitchen and pour a glass of red wine. Then I’d open a can of cat food and wait. In seconds, Zoey ran downstairs. I took satisfaction watching her eat. When she finished, I walked into the living room and considered the disaster the carpenters had made.

Moving through the clutter, I began to organize things. I pushed the sofa against the wall and placed the end tables on either side of it. I lay the rugs over the exposed sub-floor and plugged in a lamp and set up some chairs. It didn’t look much better but now it was my mess.

I carried Zoey downstairs to the basement and sat on my futon. The plastic sheet crinkled beneath me. It had the same smell as a new car. My father used to tell me stories about his first job as a salesman with a Baltimore canning company before he later went to work for his father. He’d drive to Omaha, Denver, Santa Fe. Rolling past farm fields and silent houses. No radio. Cocooned in his car floating in the silence of early morning. He enjoyed talking about it and drifted off for seconds with his eyes closed before he turned to me, opened his eyes and waited for the present to reassert itself.

I continued feeding Zoey at night and she stopped sleeping with Molly. Now, she follows me around until I’m ready for bed. She wants to sleep with me but her loud purr

keeps Flo awake. I lock Zoey out of the room but some nights she scratches at the door waking us both.

“We need to put Zoey in the basement at night,” Flo told me last night before dinner.

We faced one another in the kitchen. I poured two glasses of wine.

“If you ignore her, she’ll stop,” I said.

“I can’t keep taking sleeping pills every night.”

“She won’t understand what you’re doing if you lock her in the basement.”

“Listen to you. She’s a cat.”

“Well, it’s your house, isn’t it? Do what you want.”

“I don’t even know what you mean by that.”

I stepped back into a corner, gripping my wine glass. I stared at the floor and fought back my temper. Flo crossed her arms and looked away. I waited, feeling we were at a defining moment in our relationship, that when we spoke again we would either cobble together an acceptable agreement, or, we would not and that would be it. Or, the start of being it.

Flo turned away from me and began emptying the dishwasher. A dessert plate slipped from her hand. I watched it fall, watched it shatter near my feet.

“I’m sorry,” Flo said, her voice breaking.

I nudged pieces of glass with my shoe. I now felt calm, almost serene. The noise of the broken plate had dispersed my anger into the silence that followed. I felt a calm so total I didn’t need to say one word. I just stood there and reset, holding my wine glass and listening to Flo cry.

The two young men installing the floor, Craig and Dennis, look about the same age I was when I worked on a construction crew one summer during college in Cedar Rapids. We were building a hotel. The morning they started work, I helped them unload boxes of nails and glue from their truck. They appeared uncomfortable with my assistance but not quite sure what to do about it. I told them stories about my summer in Cedar Rapids; the incompetence of the supervisor, the sweltering heat, the twelve-to-fifteen-hour days. That day, I kept pace with Craig and Dennis until we finished working.

When we finished, I invited them into the kitchen and made coffee and offered them donuts. I told more stories. They stopped calling me, Mr. Garcia. They said if I wanted to, I could work with them the next day.

When I look back on that college summer, I remember a wheelbarrow filled with cement and the weight of its wood handles in my hands as I lift it and I feel the muscles in my arms tense when I push forward and just when it seems the wheelbarrow will not budge it begins to roll, carried by the weight of the cement, and I push it up a wobbly board, nothing below me but a trench of gravel and mud, and onto the second floor of the hotel and tip it, dumping the cement into a trough, and then let go of the handles and the wheelbarrow stands for a moment and then falls sideways and I pace back and forth catching my breath free of its weight, sweating, my arms inflated from the strain, and I look out at Cedar Rapids and the flat roofs and the splashes of green between houses and the long roads like tentacles that ensnare neighborhoods as well as lead out of them, and I see my father on one of those roads thinking that if my pounding heart does not slow down I will walk on air, by God, walk on air right over everything and follow him out of town.

One morning, Craig told me we had a problem. He had removed the toilet to lay the floor in the second-floor bathroom and found that the mount for the toilet had rotted.

“You need a plumber to take care of this,” he said.

“I need my bathroom,” Flo said.

“I don’t do plumbing.”

“But. . .,” I began.

“Dude,” Craig said. “I don’t do this kind of work.”

He walked downstairs. Shadows dappled his body and it appeared for an instant he was descending into water. He stopped at a plate of donuts and popped the last one in his mouth. The camaraderie was over. He didn’t care about my summer in Cedar Rapids. I had worked beside him and Dennis and they were the ones getting paid. He was probably laughing at me.

“Where’re you going?” I said.

“Truck.” He opened the door and Zoey darted outside.

“Oh, Christ,” I said.

Zoey dashed across the yard to some trees. I ran after her. She took off again bounding further away. I kept running. Flo shouted after me. I ran faster and faster disconnected from a lonely desire to hold her one last time until I heard nothing but my feet cutting through the damp grass, and I passed trees and more trees and continued running towards what I don't know, Zoey crying below the sound of my father calling me back yet urging me on.

(Author's note: Some names have been changed to protect privacy.)

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