

## IV

# Animals

If total commitment to family was my mother's most characteristic trait, her love of animals was not far behind, though curiously this was a passion she was unable to fully indulge in until after her marriage, since her own mother professed to dislike both cats and dogs as pets and would not allow them in the house. Indeed, she would not even allow plants in the house, because – or so my mother claimed – she believed that they used up the oxygen in the air! As a teenager I found this very odd behavior for a woman who had been raised on a farm. However, my aunt Kathy has since provided a plausible explanation for my grandmother's peculiar behavior. According to her, my grandfather – who had a temper – was very demanding when it came to monopolizing my grandmother's attention, requiring that meals be served on time and certain household chores be completed according to a predetermined schedule. This, when added to the constant moves from apartment to apartment and the demands of raising five children, meant that she was unwilling to further complicate her life by having to take care of pets or water plants on top of everything else. When she did not want to do something, she was also rather creative when it came to inventing imaginative reasons why, including the fantastic claim about plants and oxygen, though, in her defense, the fact that she had no education beyond grade school in a one-room country school house, may have meant that she was truly ignorant of the facts of photosynthesis.

There are several surviving snapshots (figure 4.1) of my mother as a young child playing with a large white, molded paper maché rabbit. This was presumably purchased for Easter and most probably came from her grandmother Tracy's house. I have always imagined

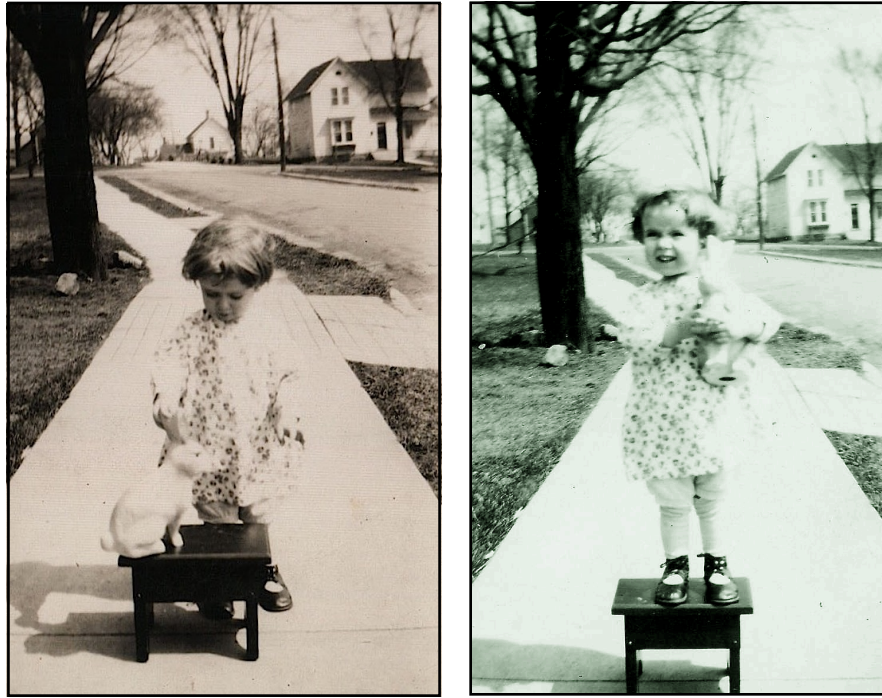


Figure 4.1. Circa 1930. My mother at age two playing with her “pet” paper maché rabbit. Perhaps the memory of this rabbit inspired her 4th grade drawing of the “Whimsical Easter Bunny” (recall figure 1.10).

that it was in some sense symbolic and that it represented her childish substitute for the real pets she was denied as a child.

### **Animals and the Realities of Farm Life**

There was, however, an important exception to the ban on pets and that was when the family lived in the log house on the Matthews farm, as well as in later years during prolonged summer visits there. The farm featured a large collection of barn cats and several snapshots have survived showing my mother clutching one of them with a look of utter ecstasy on her face (figure 4.2).

But the farm also had its dark side when it came to animals. The farms in Grant county were sufficiently isolated that the barn cats, for



Figure 4.2. Circa 1934. My mother at age 6 sans several teeth. She is clutching one of the barn cats from her grandfather's farm. On the left is my uncle Montie (age 4) and on the right my uncle Larry (age 2). The cat is obviously not half as thrilled as my mother.

lack of any alternative, ended up interbreeding among themselves. Consequently, after a few generations, various birth defects would begin to appear – perhaps an extra toe or leg or, more rarely, an extra head. When this occurred, my mother's grandfather and uncles would round up all of the cats and kill them and then repopulate the barn with a fresh batch, only to repeat the cycle once more. The simple fact is that on most farms – as my mother gradually learned – the animals are an economic commodity rather than cuddly pets and one of her most vivid memories was when they would slaughter the pigs for market. This was done by stabbing them in a neck vein, after which they would run around the pen screaming at the top of their lungs until they bled to death. My mother vividly remembered hiding in the upstairs bedroom with the blankets over her head and her hands



Figure 4.3. Circa 1927. Great-aunt Kitty's pet dog "Pink Rose" sitting on the trunk of my grandfather's 1924 "Highboy" Ford coupe. This particular example was apparently Pink Rose II.

pressed over her ears in a futile attempt to block out the sound of those screaming pigs.

There were also dogs on the farm, though these never seemed to have attracted my mother's attention to the same extent as the cats. Among these was a succession of small rat terriers belonging to my mother's youngest aunt, Kitty, who was only nine years her senior and still living at home. The only thing exceptional about this string of pet dogs was Kitty's insistence that they all be given the same name of "Pink Rose" (figure 4.3). My mother's grandfather and uncles also kept a succession of hounds that were used for hunting (figure 4.4) and my mother could recall a warm summer's evening at the farm,



Figure 4.4. Circa 1920. My mother's grandfather, William Matthews, and her uncle, Clyde Matthews, holding a fresh litter of coonhound puppies as the mother dog watches fretfully from the barn door.

when her family, grandparents, and aunts and uncles had all sought relief from the heat by sitting outside in the grass of the backyard in order to enjoy the cool night air, where they were also joined by one of her uncles' hounds by the name of Old Drum. They were joking and telling stories when her uncle Oscar, who was a great prankster, pulled out a flash light, turned it on, and placed it under his chin in order to make a series of frightening faces for the entertainment of the children. The moment he did this, Old Drum, who up to this point had been lying calmly on the grass, gave him a startled look, let out a yelp, and ran off howling into the night.

In an even earlier incident, my uncle Larry, who was about two at the time, was given a piece of bread and jam by his grandmother. But rather than eating it in the kitchen, he insisted on taking it outside. He was barely out the door when Old Drum knocked him down, stood over him, and began to calmly eat the bread and jam despite the fact



Figure 4.6 March 1947. My father (age 20) on the sidewalk outside my paternal grandparents' home holding Fuzzy (right) and Buzzy (left)

that Larry refused to let go of it and began screaming and kicking at the dog's underside. When finished, the still unperturbed dog walked calmly away as if nothing had happened.

### **Buzzy and the Seat of My Pants**

As already noted, it was not until after her marriage and the purchase of the house on Fourth Street that my mother acquired her first official pets. About a year and a half earlier my father was given two puppies



Figure 4.6. A period advertisement for Black and White Scotch Whiskey.

by a man he was working for – one black and one white (figure 4.5). I think he was intrigued by the fact that they resembled the black and white scotties used for many years to advertise a brand of whiskey known as Black and White Scotch (figure 4.6), though the puppies in question were not true scotties but rather some form of mongrel. Indeed, so different were they in appearance that, despite coming from the same litter, they almost certainly had different fathers. The black puppy was given to my paternal grandmother and named Fuzzy, whereas the white puppy, though initially also under the care of my grandmother, was later taken home as a pet for me after the purchase of the house on fourth street and named Buzzy. I was only one at the time and have no memory of this dog, though my mother later told me that the two of us did not hit it off. According to her, I spent most of my time trying to drag it around the backyard by its tail, after which it would reciprocate by attempting to drag me around the yard by my

diaper. At some point the dog was given away, probably because of the birth of my brother Stephen the next year.

In contrast, Fuzzy led a long and comfortable life at my grandmother Jensen's house, though relentlessly tormented by me and my brother whenever we visited. He would attempt to hide by crawling behind the living room couch, where we would trap him, my brother at one end and myself at the other. In our defense, there was little else for us to do during these visits, since, in the absence of visiting cousins, there was no one to play with and my grandparents kept no toys or games with which to entertain us – a mistake my mother would not make with respect to her own grandchildren.

Curiously, though I do not remember Buzzy, I do remember that my mother also kept two cats, one black and the other grey, and that at some point both of them had large litters of kittens. My uncle Clyde, who was eleven at the time, was present when one of these cats gave birth. Having never seen such a thing before and unsure of just what was happening, he remembers going into the kitchen and reporting to my mother that one of her cats was sick and pooping out something on the porch. These cats and their offspring were not allowed in the house proper but were instead confined to the enclosed back porch, again probably because of the recent birth of my brother and the widespread superstition that a cat could smother a new born by sleeping on its face. I have no idea what happened to them after my parents separated and the house was sold, though the fact that I selectively remember them rather than the dog strongly suggests that I have inherited my mother's preference for felines over canines.

### **Brief Encounters**

In keeping with my maternal grandmother's policy, there were no pets during the year my parents were separated and my mother, brother and I lived with my grandparents. Consequently, the next animal to come



our way did not appear until after my parents had reconciled and moved to the house on St. Joseph Street. This took the form of a yellow parakeet that mysteriously showed up at the door one day. It had obviously been someone's pet as it was quite tame and could talk. Having no cage, my mother kept it for several weeks in the bathroom until its original owners showed up and reclaimed it. It would sit on her finger and the two would talk to one another in front of the bathroom mirror.

Following this brief avian flirtation, there were no further pets until our move to Roeder's in 1957. By then I was old enough to own a bike and was therefore able to extend my range of possible playmates by many city blocks. Among these was a boy named Bradley Shannon who lived on 12th Avenue, which, at the time, formed the westernmost edge of Wausau. This meant that his backyard merged with an almost unlimited expanse of undeveloped empty fields in which we would play war games. Since this activity involved crawling in the grass and digging various trenches and dugouts, I soon encountered a range of small wild animals, including baby ground squirrels and garter snakes, all of which I promptly took home to my mother. Thus began a new chapter in the saga of my mother's interactions with animals dominated by whatever examples her children dragged home and abandoned to her care. Unhappily the ground squirrels did not fare well. We tried feeding them milk using a miniature baby bottle belonging to one of my sister's dolls, but they could not digest it and soon died. The same fate befell a group of baby robins whose nest had blown out of a nearby tree and whom my aunt Kathy, who was living with us at the time, tried to save. As for the snakes, I doubt we had any idea of what to feed them and they were presumably released into the garden.

The fate of the ground squirrels and baby robins was positively humane compared to that of a fish bowl full of guppies. Though I have no doubt that these came from the Kreskey dime store on 3rd Street, I



Figure 4.7. My brother (age 9) and myself (age 11) holding Spotsy. We are sitting in the living room at Roeder's, circa 1959.

have no idea who brought them home. As the oldest child I was the most likely suspect, but I have no recollection of ever being interested in fish of any sort, whether as pets or otherwise. In any case, they arrived during the summer and my mother, desperate for some place convenient to set the bowl, kept it on the kitchen steam radiator. Indeed, this proved to be so convenient that she forgot to move it once winter set in and the heat was turned on. And thus it was that we arose one morning to find a bowl full of boiled fish.

### **Spotsy**

It was while we were living at Roeder's that my brother brought home a small black and white male rat terrier puppy that he had acquired from one of the neighbor kids (figures 4.7 and 4.8). He named it



Figure 4.8. An oil painting of my brother's rat terrier Spotsy which my bother did free-hand in 1960 at age ten.

“Spotsy” and it was initially confined to the kitchen using a child’s gate so it wouldn’t poop on the living room rug. However, it spent most of its time jumping up and down in an attempt to see over the gate, all the while incessantly barking. This soon attracted the attention of the landlord, who lived in the upstairs apartment, and we were told in no uncertain terms that either we or the dog had to go. This was one of the motivations for our move to Laffines, a mere two houses further up the block. But here the problem repeated itself as once again the landlord lived upstairs and we were told that no dogs were allowed. Luckily my aunt Kathy, who had been living with us previous to her marriage in the spring of 1958 and who was now living in the town of Gresham, about 45 miles east of Wausau, agreed to take Spotsy, and he remained her companion for many years. Since my brother usually spent his summers staying with her, he was also able to enjoy his dog for at least part of the year.

Later Kathy moved from the tiny stucco house she inhabited near the community school in Gresham into a much larger ramshackle

apartment located over an auto repair shop in the nearby village of Lyndhurst. This building was old, made of wood, and unquestionably a fire trap. However, at some point someone had added a single-story cinderblock extension to the backend, the roof of which could be accessed from my aunt's second-floor apartment for purposes of hanging out washing to dry. Spotsy would usually accompany her when she did this but one day forgot that he was on a roof rather than on the ground and walked off the edge. He broke one of his front legs and was fitted with a plaster cast by the local veterinarian. To prevent him from walking on the leg while it healed, the cast was designed to hold it in a raised position pointing straight forward and Spotsy had to hobble around on just three legs for a month or more. He received so much sympathy and pampering during his convalescence that, for many years after the cast was removed, he would hold up his front leg whenever he was yelled at for misbehavior in order to remind us of his former status as a victim of gravity. The only problem was that, as time passed, he gradually forgot which leg had been broken and would hold up the wrong one.

After she moved to her current house and became pregnant with her second child, my aunt felt that the dog was too much to deal with and gave him to her mother-in-law, "Ma Hoffman," who lived on a farm just a short distance further down the road. Even before his "transfer," Spotsy had become a great favorite with Ma Hoffman, who was beginning to suffer from a bad case of empty nest syndrome and was more than delighted to have his company. However, she was very lax in keeping track of him and he was allowed to freely wander the countryside on his own. It was in the winter, during one of these forays back to his old stomping grounds in Lyndhurst, that he was hit and killed by the county snow plow while walking along the connecting county road. The impact flung the body into the roadside ditch where the plow promptly buried it under a thick layer of snow. It wasn't until after the spring thaw that my aunt and I were able to

locate it and give it a proper burial.

### **Mr. Jinks**

As already noted, after our move further up the block to Laffines in 1959, the ban on pets continued, since once again the landlord lived in the upstairs apartment. However, that summer a young male tabby cat began appearing at regular intervals at our kitchen door and, though he was not allowed in the house, we began feeding and playing with him. We also named him Mr. Jinks after the cartoon cat (“I hate meeces to pieces”) on the Huckleberry Hound Show, which we watched each afternoon at five.

Following our move the next year to the Tracy house, where there was no resident landlord to monitor our infractions, my brother and I decided we missed the cat and so we returned to the old neighborhood on our bikes and kidnapped him. About a week later a boy from the old neighborhood showed up on our doorstep and demanded that we give his cat back! We, on the other hand, had always assumed that Mr. Jinks was a stray in search of a proper home and, on those flimsy “legal” grounds, we refused to return him. Though the boy threatened us with vague visions of some future retaliation, nothing further came of it, and so Mr. Jinks became our first true pet and a permanent family fixture for the next decade.

When Jinks was young, we could play with him just like with a dog. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, one of the features of the downstairs floor plan for the Tracy house was that there was a circular route that led from the living room through the dining room to the kitchen and from there back again to the living room via a narrow hallway that also served as a closet. We would chase Jinks around and around this route until, at some point, he would decide to break the chase by hiding among the boots in the closet. Here he would lie in wait until one of us passed through, whereupon he would jump out

and grab us around the leg with his paws, following which the chase would begin once more, but now in reverse with Jinks in pursuit. Later my brother discovered that, if he sat on the floor with his legs stretched out and an old red sock on one foot, Jinks would chase the sock as my brother scissored his leg back and forth, often tripping over the rapidly moving leg and growling with delight as he attempted to bite the sock.

After my brother acquired an old Victrola and we discovered an old 78 record featuring dozens of canaries singing to a rather insipid violin accompaniment, we were able to refine our technique. We would attach a piece of red cloth to a string and hang it from the end of an old bamboo fishing pole. We would then play the record of the singing canaries while one of us stood on the couch with the fishing pole and swung the red cloth back and forth about four feet off the floor. Jinks would begin jumping at it and, by gradually increasing the elevation, we were soon able to work him into a veritable frenzy as he leapt from the desk to the piano to the book case in pursuit of our ersatz bird. Whenever he spotted a real bird outside, his whiskers would twitch and he would make a stuttering sound. This was how we discovered that he had dreams during his all too frequent catnaps, since, from time to time, he would display the identical twitching and stuttering while sleeping and his feet would move, suggesting that he was dreaming of stalking and chasing a bird.

Jinks was also tolerant – albeit barely so – of being dressed up. In the early days we would often attach the small bow tie, belonging to my Jerry Mahone ventriloquist dummy, to his collar so that he would more closely resemble his cartoon namesake (figure 4.9). Indeed, on several occasions my sister actually succeeded in dressing him in doll clothes, complete with a bonnet, and was able to successfully wheel him, dressed in this manner and partially covered with a blanket, down the street in a baby carriage. She was even able to get him to sleep with her at night, not at the foot of the bed like a normal cat, but



Figure 4.9 Circa 1961. Mr. Jinks sporting a bow tie like his cartoon namesake.

next to her with his lower body under the covers just like a small human being.

Over the course of time he also displayed some interesting food preferences. For example, he loved to lick the fish oil glue found on the old-fashioned paper tape used to seal boxes, and was also partial to cheese and peanut butter, though he always had trouble with these because they would become stuck to the roof of his mouth and it was quite entertaining to watch him shake his head and maneuver his tongue in an attempt to dislodge them. On those few occasions when he was able to escape from the house over night, he would drag himself home in the morning all beat up and bleeding from cat fights, whereupon my mother would offer plenty of sympathy and pamper him by feeding him a special treat of ground chicken giblets she had prepared ahead of time for just such an occasion, after which he would park himself in one of the living room chairs for the afternoon

in order to lick his wounds. There he would sit on his backend with his hind legs stretched out in front of him and one front leg resting on an arm of the chair as though he himself actually had arms and elbows.

In some regards Jinks could be very clever and in others not so bright. Thus, when we first presented him with a mirror, instead of hissing at the image, he calmly walked to the edge of the mirror and looked behind it. When he found no cat there, he walked away and never paid attention to mirrors again. On the other hand, whenever he ran up a tree in pursuit of a bird or squirrel, he could never figure out how to get down again and we would have to get a ladder and rescue him. He also had trouble with regard to empty grocery bags. If one was laying on the floor, he could never resist sticking his head inside, but since his legs were still outside the bag and thus did not hold the bag in place when he tried to back out again, once in the bag, he could never successfully extricate himself. Instead he would end up, bag on head, blindly bumping into table legs and base boards in his frantic effort to escape his self-imposed captivity. This was so amusing to watch that I must confess we were never in a great rush to come to his aid.

This curious inability to reverse his course also applied to the roof of the house. The backside of the house contained a single central dormer at the end of the upstairs hallway and this dormer had a combination window-door that allowed one to step out onto a small balcony located on the roof of the enclosed back porch for purposes of shaking out a dust mop. The slanting roof of the house to the right of this dormer came down to within a foot of the floor of the balcony and we would use this route to clamber up to the peak in order to watch the fourth of July fireworks at nearby Marathon Park. When Jinks occasionally snuck past us as we climbed in or out of the balcony door, he would immediately use this same route to zoom up the roof, over the top, and down the other side. But, as with the climbing of trees and the occasional grocery bag, he could never figure out how to reverse this procedure. Instead we would find him yowling on the roof



outside the dormer to the front bedroom and we would have to rescue him by opening one of the bedroom windows.

On some occasions he was capable of learning from his mistakes and on others he just repeated them over and over. As an example of the first situation, there was the incident of the screen door. This was mounted in front of the actual solid door that served as the front door for the house, but was lacking its screen insert for most of the first year we lived there. That summer my mother insisted that the latter door be kept open during the day so that the sunlight could illuminate the rather gloomy entrance way and any passing breezes could cool the living room. One day I observed Jinks sitting in the square of sunlight illuminating the floor of the entrance and contemplating the large empty opening in the screen door. After cocking his head to one side in a quizzical manner and evaluating his options, he leapt, in one mighty bound, through the opening in the unscreened door and ran under the front porch. After he repeated this performance several times, my mother finally got the point and requested that I replace the missing screen, which I did using a very fine mesh plastic screen from the local hardware store. The next day I saw Jinks sitting, as usual, in the square of sunlight and contemplating both his incredible good luck and his, by now, routine escape route. Apparently, however, he was unable to see the fine mesh of the new screen and, when he made his usual leap, he hit it square on and bounced back onto the floor. Initially stunned, he shook his head a few times, after which he walked away in disgust and never attempted to escape via the screen door opening again.

As an example of the second situation, there was his ongoing battle with the squirrels in the backyard. Our neighbor to the south was an elderly, second generation, German-American woman named Mrs. Baumann, whose husband worked at the iron works at the end of the block. Raised on a large farm near Marathon City, she had a typical German-Wisconsin accent, was a devout Catholic, and was

very opinionated, but kept the tiny bungalow that served as their home neat and tidy, made the most delicious prune and cherry kolaczkis each Xmas, and acted as a substitute grandmother for us kids and as a substitute mother for our mother. She also kept a beautiful garden, resplendent with bird houses and a bird bath, and was consequently very unhappy about the fact that we had a cat. To placate her, my mother bought a harness for Jinks. This buckled around both his neck and his midriff and was attached by a long rope to a loop that ran along the clothesline, so he pretty much had the run of our backyard but was denied access to Mrs. Baumann's garden.

This backyard also had three enormous white pines that were part of the original Wisconsin forest – remnants of which were still to be found in nearby Marathon Park – along with a substantial population of grey squirrels. They would come, head first, about a third of the way down the trunk of one of the pines, where they would stop and begin taunting Jinks until they had worked him into such a lather that he would run furiously up the tree in pursuit, only to be yanked back to the ground at the last minute by his harness. Somehow the squirrels managed to fine tune this act so that he would get within about a foot of them before running out of rope. They would repeat this scenario over and over for sheer amusement and poor Jinks never managed to catch on. I should, however, add that under certain circumstances Jinks could get out of his harness, though not as a conscious act. If someone startled or frightened him while tied, we would see a blur of whirring cat fur and he would be off, leaving the empty harness behind still fully buckled! It was an escape act that would have amazed even Houdini.

From time to time, these same squirrels would get into the attic crawl space of the house. I would be in bed late at night reading a book of ghost stories by the light of a small bed lamp with Jinks sleeping at my feet, when, all of a sudden, he would sit up and begin staring intently at an empty corner of the ceiling, his whiskers

twitching and his throat emitting a low growl. Though I would rationalize that he must have heard a squirrel in the attic, it made no difference, since, with my head full of tales of ghosts and hauntings, I always found his behavior very unnerving.

Of course Jinks often escaped from the house sans harness because of our constant coming and going, though, once out, he would frequently change his mind and yowl to be let back in again – a form of indecision that, in my experience, is endemic to all cats. Occasionally, during one of his escapes, he would succeed in catching a bird or a rabbit which he would dutifully bring home to my mother under the mistaken impression that she would praise him for his hunting skills. It was only later, when we had to rebuild the front steps, that we discovered that Jinks also kept a private trophy room. As already mentioned, Jink's favorite hiding place, whenever he escaped from the house, was under the front porch. This crawl space was enclosed and ran the the entire length of the front of the house. Many a time I had to crawl in on my hands and knees, via the small opening on the south end, to fetch him. It was dark and musty due to piles of dried leaves but I never had to venture as far as the underside of the front steps since Jinks never attempted to hide there. However, according to my sister, when they removed the old front steps, they found about a half dozen dead bird bodies neatly lined up in a row. For obvious reasons, we did not tell Mrs. Baumann of our discovery.

I can still recall a typical Saturday at home. I was sitting in the sunlight on the steps of the back porch reading, when Jinks came tearing around the corner of the house with a squawking baby bird in his mouth, followed in rapid succession by a flock of dive-bombing adult birds, by a group of screaming little girls led by my sister, and by my brother with his hands clapped over his ears yelling "owie, owie, owie." It seems that he and his friend Billy Hackbarth were on the front porch disassembling a shot-gun shell they had found and had decided to see what would happen if they hit the primer with a nail



Figure 4.10. *Left:* Jinks posing with my sister Linda, circa 1964. *Right:* My brother Stephen in his high school graduation robes posing with Jinks, circa 1968.

and hammer. The resulting bang was a good deal louder than my brother had expected, though he survived it and soon got his hearing back.

Jinks quickly became such an integral part of our family that we three children insisted that he be included in family portraits (recall figure 3.xx and figure 4.10) and also taken along on family trips. One of the most memorable and atypical of these was the week we spent during the summer of 1960 in a cabin on the shore of Lake Manistique in upper Michigan. Normally we never took family vacations and this exception was even more unusual because it was shared with another family – that of a local policeman named Don Simonson, whom my father had met through their mutual involvement in Boy Scouts. Unfortunately for my father, Jinks suffered from motion sickness and, during the entire drive to the lake (about 260 miles), he insisted on lying across the back of the driver’s seat, just behind my father’s neck,

where he alternated between yowling in protest in my father's ear and attempting to hack up a hair ball.

However, once we arrived, Jinks had a wonderful time exploring the woods surrounding the cabin and, though I was worried that he would wander off and never come back, he always did. Perhaps the most exciting incident was the day we decided to take him out on the lake in a row boat. As we got further and further from shore, he became increasingly panic stricken. He finally succeeded in wiggling out of my arms and leaping out of the boat. Now I don't know if Jesus really walked on water, but I can testify that our family cat sure did, and that he made the 20 feet to shore with nothing more than a set of damp paws.

About a decade after Jinks came to live with us, he began to develop signs of kidney stones. He had more and more trouble urinating, often producing only a small stream after ten or more minutes of straining, and, after his urine dried, we could see sparkling crystals of calcium oxalate. This meant that he began to opportunistically urinate whenever he could, even if it wasn't in the cat box. The most spectacular example of this was the day my father lifted him up by his front leg pits with the rest of his body dangling down. This posture apparently relieved some sort of bladder pressure and the cat let loose an enormous stream of urine down the front of my father's shirt. Naturally my father was furious, but the poor cat had such a look of grateful relief on its face that it was difficult to remain angry with him.

It gradually became apparent that Jinks would have to be put down, but my mother could not bear to do this. She had already been present, as we will see below, when other animals were put down by the vet and knew that they always displayed great distress, as if sensing what was about to happen. Thinking it might be easier on Jinks if this was done under familiar surroundings at home, my brother and I volunteered to do it ourselves. We got a clean trash can and placed Jinks in the bottom and the lid on top. We then lifted the

lid a bit and sprayed in a fair amount of diethyl ether using a can of starter fluid that was sold at the time for use in car carburetors to jump start them on damp winter days. The theory was that Jinks would peacefully fall into a terminal sleep. We waited for about five minutes, but just as we were about to peek inside to see how he was doing, the lid of the can suddenly shot about five feet into the air with Jinks in hot pursuit, after which he rapidly ran around the house three or four times. Far from putting him to sleep, we had apparently rejuvenated him! Admittedly the can of ether had been labelled “Starter Fluid” but we had naively assumed that this applied to starting up cars rather than family cats. At this point we gave up in despair and I somehow came up with the money for my mother to have it done professionally. My mother brought the body home afterwards and I buried him under the front porch, which was his favorite hiding place whenever he managed to escape from the house.

### **Fluffy and Control of the Bathroom**

If Jinks wasn't enough, my mother's life soon became even more complicated when my sister, who was still in grade school, brought home a young grey female tabby cat she had found abandoned among the huge snow plows that the Wausau Iron Works manufactured and stockpiled in an empty lot at the north end of the block. She named this cat “Fluffy.” Jinks never liked Fluffy and I had to agree with him. She lived only to reproduce and, when not pregnant, seemed to be perpetually in heat. When in the latter state, she would crawl backwards through the house yowling, with her head down and her rear end and tail elevated, apparently in the vain expectation of backing into an interested male.

Like Jinks, she was often able to escape out the door and, predictably, soon became pregnant. During her first pregnancy she went into a crisis the evening before Thanksgiving and had to be

rushed to the vet, where an X-ray revealed a single large deformed kitten that was born dead. For her second pregnancy she gave birth to a black kitten, that was also born dead, and to a large ginger male tabby that was crippled and could neither stand nor walk. Unhappily this sparked my mother's inherent sympathy for the lame and halt so, instead of having it put down, she kept it in a box under the kitchen table, where she would groom it, feed it, and clean it whenever it messed itself. It soon became totally fixated on her and would begin loudly purring whenever she came near it. On at least one occasion she even took it along on a family visit to her aunts in Southern Wisconsin, where, much to my father's disgust, she kept and cared for it in the backseat of the car because no one wanted it in the house. It took nearly two years for my mother to finally face reality and to agree to have this poor cat put down, by which time it was quite large and difficult to deal with.

Interestingly, Fluffy displayed no interest in this crippled kitten, or at least not until she became pregnant a third time and suddenly very maternal. My sister still recalls how startled the crippled cat – who was by then larger than its mother – became when Fluffy, all aglow with expectant motherhood, attempted to climb into his box in order to wash him with her tongue. By now you would think that Fluffy would have been thoroughly use to birthing kittens, but this was not the case. When she was ready to deliver for the third time, she became hysterical and began running through the house squeezing out the kittens as she went, with my mother and sister in hot pursuit. She deposited one under the ironing board my mother was using in the living room, one under the dining room table, and one in the kitchen. This time all three kittens (figure 4.11) – one grey male tabby, one ginger male tabby, and one grey female tabby – survived and my mother, faced with a fresh crop of cats to care for, finally agreed to have Fluffy spayed.

But my sister was far from finished. A few years after rescuing



Figure 4.11. An out-of-focus snap shot of Fluffy's last litter of kittens playing beneath the Xmas tree, circa 1969.

Fluffy, she brought home an abandoned female calico kitten she had found in the parking lot of Holy Name Church on South 9th Avenue, and a few years after that a black kitten that she had rescued from the Humane Society. However, both cats were ill when rescued and died shortly after being brought home. It may seem that I am putting too much blame for creating these problems on my sister's weakness for abandoned cats, but I must now fess up and plead guilty to having created what was perhaps my mother's greatest animal challenge by far, when I brought home an abandoned squirrel monkey complete with its enormous metal cage.

I had been visiting my fellow amateur chemist, Raymond Fraederichs, and we had gone as usual into his basement to work at his laboratory bench, when I spied a large object covered with a blanket sitting on the old wood cook stove that Raymond's mother used to do the fall canning. On lifting one corner of the blanket, I discovered a rather sickly and listless red squirrel monkey inside a large circular metal cage. Raymond explained that this belonged to some of his cousins, but their home along the Rib River had flooded



during the recent spring rains and they were forced to evacuate for several days, leaving the monkey behind in the flooded house. They had only gone back to rescue the monkey that very day, but finding it sick had decided to have it put down, and it was being temporarily stored in Raymond's basement until they found the time to take it to a vet. That was all I had to hear and so, of course, I immediately asked if I could have it instead and promptly took it home to my mother.

The only place my mother could find to put a cage that size was in the upstairs bathroom, under the bathroom window. Jinks, as usual, ignored this new addition to our menagerie but Fluffy was fascinated by it and got close enough on several occasions for the monkey to deprive her of several of her whiskers. She also took to sitting on top of the cage during the day so that she could see out the bathroom window and, while thus absorbed, she would unconsciously allow her tail to drop down inside of the cage, or at least until the monkey took notice and began yanking on it.

However, the biggest problem created by this arrangement was not Fluffy's gradual loss of her whiskers, but my father's complaint that he could not use the toilet with "that God damn monkey staring at me." And so my mother had to place a blanket next to the cage so that my father could cover it whenever he used the facilities. Eventually, by putting an ad in the newspaper, my mother was able to place the monkey with an elderly couple. By then it was partially paralyzed in its back legs, no doubt as a result of whatever it had caught during its ordeal in the flooded house. However, this proved to be an advantage, since it prevented it from running wildly through the house and climbing on furniture and curtains whenever it was let out of its cage. Instead it would sit calmly at the dinner table and eat its meals with the elderly couple, who treated it like a small child. Indeed, I believe they exchanged Xmas cards with my mother for years afterwards, always updating her on the monkey's latest shenanigans.

By 1974 all three of us children had married and left home, my

father had passed away, Jinks was long dead, the monkey had been placed in a new home, and Fluffy – suffering from kidney stones like Jinks before her – had been put down. This left my mother alone in the Tracy house with the three kittens from Fluffy’s last pregnancy. Though initially charming, as all kittens are, on maturing they soon become a perfect example of Ogden Nash’s famous quip that “The trouble with a kitten is that it eventually becomes a cat.” As the two males reached puberty, they began fighting with one another and vying for the privilege of inbreeding with their sister, so my mother had to separate them. As a consequence, one male was kept in the front bedroom and the other in the bathroom, where he soon created problems by learning how to turn on the faucets in the bathtub. In recognition of his newly acquired mastery of hydraulic engineering, my mother named this particular cat “Professor.” Unhappily, no one can remember for certain what she named the other two (though I believe the orange tabby was called “Sociable”)

Professor also began seeking attention from house guests whenever they needed to use the facilities. This upset some, whereas others were indifferent. Among the latter was a member of the Wausau Branch named Grandma Thornberry, who was the elderly mother of Ester Waite. My mother would occasionally invite her to spend Sunday afternoons at the house, in part for the company and in part to give Ester a respite from having to care for her, since, alas, Grandma Thornberry was suffering from senility and required continuous monitoring. This meant that whenever she had to use the upstairs bathroom she would get lost and, unable to find her way back downstairs, would wander through the hallway and bedrooms in a confused mental fog. If she ever took notice of the large cat sitting in the bathtub, she never mentioned it. My aunt Kathy was a different matter altogether. I can recall her observing, on coming downstairs after using the bathroom, that you don’t know what intimidation is until you have a ten-pound cat jump on your lap while you are sitting

on the toilet, put a paw on each of your shoulders, stare you directly in the face, and demand attention.

### **Mr. Belvedere**

After the move to Lincoln Avenue in 1975 these three cats disappeared. Incredibly no one can remember what my mother did with them, though I do remember why she gave them up. The house on Lincoln was located just one house over from the house in which my wife grew up. Judy had been raised by an elderly aunt and uncle (Ester and Paul Otto) who still lived there, and Judy and I would drive up from Madison, where I was finishing graduate school, to Wausau nearly every weekend so she could help her increasingly frail aunt with the house work. Living so close, my mother wanted Judy, who was violently allergic to cats, to be able to go back and forth between the aunt's house and her apartment – whence the departure of the three cats.

However, after the death of the aunt and uncle and our move to Rochester, New York, in 1983, and subsequently to Cincinnati in 1986, the duration and frequency of our trips to Wausau dropped to a single visit of three or four days each year, and my mother's resolve to go cat-free began to weaken. After all, such brief visits did not seem to justify having to forego for the rest of the year the pleasures of the animal companionship that had become such an integral part of my mother's lifestyle and, in any case, for such short visits Judy and I could always stay in a motel. Thus it was that, after a brief period of indecision, my mother finally adopted a long-haired male tortoiseshell cat that my nephew Jason had found hanging around my brother's farm (figure 4.12). He was named Mr. Belvedere, though I am uncertain whether this name was selected by my mother based on the original 1948 movie starring Clifton Webb, which was one of her favorites, or by her grandchildren based on the later TV series of the same name.



Figure 4.12. *Left:* I meet Mr. Belvedere for the first time during a visit to Wausau in 1987. He had just come from my brother's farm and was very lean but would fluff out substantially after a year as a house cat. *Right:* One of the few snapshots of Belvedere where his eyes are not lit up like two burning coals due to reflections from my mother's camera flash. He is being held on the lap of my nephew Patrick Jensen.

Belvedere was a wonderful cat. He had a laid-back, low maintenance personality similar to that of Mr. Jinks. Whenever I visited Wausau on my own and spent the night on the fold-out couch in the upstairs living room, he would join me and sleep at my feet, just as though I was an old pal from way back, rather than a stranger who only appeared every year or so. My mother had him for about a decade and, based on her estimate of his age when she acquired him, he was around age 69 in cat years when she was finally forced to put him down, by which time he had become blind in both eyes due to glaucoma and had lost several teeth due to gum disease. Nevertheless my mother was traumatized by the event and consoled herself by

composing an eulogy to his memory in her journal under the date of 13 January 1997:

*Linda accompanied me to the vet for Belvedere's euthanasia. It broke my heart to destroy him. He was a clean, kind, playful, patient, loving animal. He understood my requests and those of Mom. Even though she wouldn't allow him on her bed and lap he always walked with her and stayed near her. After her death he came back on the bed as he had before she came to live with me. When he could see, he loved to play tag with me, initiating it by grabbing my ankle with his front paws. He would run behind a chair in the living room, under the captain bed, down the steps and up again whenever I would chase him. He loved having a tennis ball rolled to him and never missed it. Even after his sight was mostly gone he could hit the ball. When I was house-bound with the broken leg and the sacrament was brought to me he would recline in a chair and purr peacefully. He was a laid-back trusting creature.*

*Many times he has comforted me. When Arnold was away he would lie under the covers with his head on my arm, put his feet against me and purr. He had white front feet (shoes) and white boots on the back. His face had a nice white area, including his nose. His glaucoma, loss of teeth due to gum disease, and his week-long hospitalization for dehydration were all borne patiently by him. The glaucoma was unrelenting and a good medication was no longer available for him. Since I married in December of 1990, he had also endured a total of 25½ months of being alone in the apartment with no attention other than food, water and a cat box. I owned him for 10 years and he may have been at least three years old when I brought him home. His belongings consisted of food and water dishes and a dish pan for his litter. His large furry, warm, body fit gracefully wherever he reclined. The lack of his chirp when speaking to me, his*

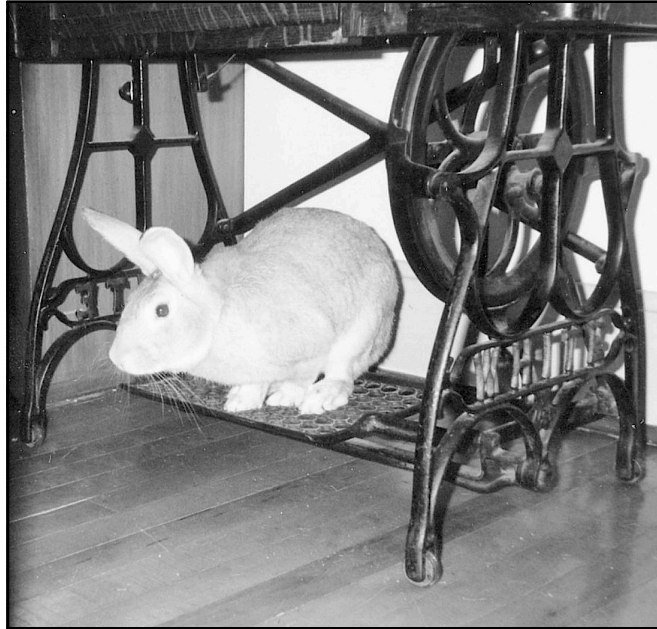


Figure 4.13. Tracy's rabbit posing on the foot pedal beneath the antique sewing machine on which its cage was kept.

*comforting purr and his non-judgmental love will be sorely missed by me.*

*Children loved him. He was always refined and people-oriented. If he walked around the block with us, people came to see him. He never wore a leash. If he went outside by himself, neighbors sometimes took him into their homes or brought him home. The neighbor children would always come to ask to play with him. One taxi driver would always hold him and talk baby talk to him whenever he drove us to an appointment at the vet. Several people asked to adopt him right after I brought him to Wausau. He was found in a field and survived by eating with Steve's dog who was living in the barn after suffering a stroke and incontinence.*

During this same period my mother also briefly owned a rabbit that my niece Tracy had won as a prize at the annual county fair in

Marathon Park. As far as I know, she never named it and instead always referred to it as “Tracy’s rabbit.” However, I do know that it was kept in a wire cage that sat on top of the antique pedal-driven “White” sewing machine in the upstairs dining room (figure 4.13). Unfortunately it was male and became rather vicious after it reached maturity, thus dispelling the myth that all rabbits are automatically cute and cuddly. Once again I have no idea what eventually became of it.

### **The Cats Who Came to Dinner**

The final wave of cats came after my mother’s second marriage to Arnold Branham in 1990 and her move in 1997 to the downstairs apartment on Lincoln. The elderly lady who lived in the house across the alley had taken to feeding stray cats and they, in turn, had taken over her unused ramshackle garage. As their numbers progressively increased, my mother began to feed them as well by placing food under the front porch by the side steps and eventually in a small shelter or cat “feeding station,” as she called it, that she had built in the backyard. This vicarious care of the stray neighborhood cats seemed to satisfy her feline cravings for several years after the death of Belvedere, or at least until early December of 2003, when her journal records that a neighbor, knowing her weakness for cats, brought her a stray male Siamese she had found near her home.

Initially my mother tried to resist temptation and to place the cat elsewhere. Since it was well groomed and comfortable with people, she soon came to believe that it had belonged to someone and she even placed ads in the local newspaper in an attempt to locate its previous owner, but to no avail. As recorded in her journals, the new comer quickly wormed his way into her heart and, after a few months, became a permanent resident who would be lying by her side when she died during an afternoon nap 12 years later:

*09 December 2003*

*Beth Dickinson came with a beautiful friendly Siamese. I still haven't found his owner as of last night. I think Beth's sister Teri will take him if I have no luck. Wish I could keep him ... The cat and I had a pleasant night. He stayed on the bed with me.*

*10 December 2003*

*The cat is a most pleasant companion. Tonight Beth brought her brother and family to see him. The brother will need to be convinced as he feels another cat will not be accepted by their old one. I hope he changes his mind as that would be a good home for this fine creature. I enjoy him so much.*

*15 December 2003*

*Beth D. and Craig took the cat to their house. He fought with their cat who then developed diarrhea and they had to return him to my house.*

*21 December 2003*

*The cat is a wonderful companion and so very pretty. I'd love to keep him.*

*11 January 2004*

*Two people called about missing cats due to my ad. Unfortunately their cats were not this one.*

Like all Siamese, this cat did not meow in the conventional sense but rather emitted a rather grating, off-key yowl, which it used to



signal everything – when it wanted out of the house, when it wanted in again, when it wanted to be fed, when it wanted attention, when it was unhappy etc. In honor of this, my mother initially named him “Yowl-Lee” at the suggestion of my uncle Clyde, who had met the cat for the first time during his annual Xmas visit. However this name proved to be as irritating as the yowl it was intended to commemorate and my mother soon reverted back to calling him either “cat” or “kitty” in her journal, which now contained almost daily entries about how much she loved the comfort of his companionship.

Come February my mother was once again confronted by the problem that had marred so many of her years with Belvedere – what to do with her cat during her annual visit to Utah, where she and Arnold stayed with Arnold’s sister, Myrtle, who, like my wife, was violently allergic to cats. Luckily my nephew Pat had recently purchased his own farm and agreed to take the cat for the duration. For the drive out west, my brother’s wife, Gene, lent my mother a recording of Lilian Jackson Braun’s mystery novel, *The Cat Who Played Post Office*, which featured a pair of Siamese cats named Ko-Ko and Yum-Yum after the principal characters in Gilbert and Sullivan’s famous operetta, *The Mikado*. She was soon hooked, and on her arrival in Utah she checked out several more of Braun’s cat mysteries from the local library (she would eventually read or listen to all 29 in the series). Not surprisingly, after her return to Wausau in the spring, “Yowl-Lee” suddenly became “Ko-Ko,” in honor of the male cat in Braun’s novels, and so he remained for the rest of her life.

My mother eventually came to believe that Ko-Ko was actually a mix of Siamese and Burmese. In any case, he was a very typical male cat, who in his early years insisted on his right to roam at night. When he came into a room, he seemed to stomp rather than walk, the loose layer of fat and fur on his back and shoulders rippling back and forth like the mane of a male lion. In short, he could be rather intimidating, though in fact he was really a big softy. Quite early on my mother



Figure 4.14. Ko-Ko confronting one of his annual birthday balloons, circa 2009.

discovered that his favorite game was to butt a balloon around the floor with his head – a quirk which she accidentally discovered while decorating her dining room for a birthday party for one of her grandchildren (figure 4.14). As recorded in her journal for 15 January 2004:

*I hung balloons from the chandelier. I made one for Yowl Lee and he has spent the day bunting it with his head. I do love that cat.*

If the balloon became wedged in furniture, Ko-Ko would grab the string with his mouth and drag it back to the center of the room, where he would once more begin his butting act.

He would sleep next to my mother at night and when she took naps during the day, though his favorite location for his own, all too frequent, catnaps was the center of the living room carpet, where he would sleep on his back with all four paws pointing in the air, literally daring the passerby to stroke his tummy fur (figure 4.15). In the winter he would frequently take catnaps in the kitchen next to the wood stove, which Arnold kept stoked with fresh wood, since, as noted



Figure 4.15. Not dead but merely napping. Ko-Ko's favorite position when sleeping in the center of the living room rug. Circa 2009.

earlier, my mother could never get warm enough during the winter months. Here he would lie stretched out on the floor with his head resting on the edge of the brick platform on which the wood stove was placed.

As he got older, he began to mellow, a process that was aided by my mother eventually having him neutered. He also became larger and heavier. In later years, his favorite pastime, when outside during the day, was to walk to the very end of the driveway next to the sidewalk, where he would lay down so that passersby could admire him. He attracted many compliments which my mother could overhear in the house, as well as several offers to buy him. A small girl and her brother, who lived in the house my wife was raised in, would often come to play with him, and my mother could overhear them planning to steal him. But he would go limp whenever the little girl tried to lift him and was so heavy that their kidnapping plans never came to fruition. On at least one occasion, however, my mother was certain that someone had indeed run off with him, as he disappeared for nearly a week and a half, but he eventually showed up at the back door acting as if nothing had happened.

Around 2006 the city finally decided to crack down on the stray cat situation created by my mother and her neighbor and began trapping and disposing of the strays. Over the previous two years my mother had noticed a petite, long-hair, female tabby, who would visit the cat feeder regularly with her annual brood of kittens. This cat had often asked to come into the house only to be chased away by Ko-Ko, who was fiercely defensive of his domain. Unable to bear the thought of her being destroyed by the city, my mother finally trapped her current litter of five kittens and gave them to the Humane Society's "Do Not Destroy" facility while allowing the mother cat onto the enclosed front porch. From there she gradually worked her way into the house, where, much to my mother's surprise, she was now tolerated by Ko-Ko, though on occasion he would give her an unprovoked whack with his front paw just to remind her who was boss. She, on the other hand, largely ignored him and soon established her own domain on the very top of the upper kitchen cupboards above the microwave, where she took her catnaps, confident that Ko-Ko was much too fat to jump up there, let alone make it as far as the lower countertop.

Known as "Mama Kitty," in recognition of her life in the wild, my mother immediately had her fixed by the vet to prevent any further accidental recurrence of her previous fate. She was soon joined by an orange, male tabby named "Tigger," who, though much larger than her, was apparently one of her kittens from an earlier litter. As a second male, he had to constantly avoid Ko-Ko and, as a result, was very nervous and skittish for his first couple years as a house cat. However, sometime around 2013 he had some sort of epiphany and suddenly became very affection starved. Unhappily, he preferred sitting on your lap, where, once he began purring, he also began kneading with his claws, thus making it an agonizing ordeal to give him the attention he so craved. Eventually all three cats took to sharing the task of sleeping on the bed with my mother at night and



Figure 4.16. My mother posing with Gork in my brother's apple orchard.

during her daytime naps, and all three were by her side when she passed away.

### **The Imagined Death of Gork**

According to my sister, and excluding both a dime-store turtle and a finch, the above list of animals should also include two dogs – one acquired while still living at Tracy's and the other after the move to Lincoln Avenue. Obtained via newspaper ads, both were taken on a trial basis and soon returned to their original owners, since I suspect that my mother quickly discovered that dogs were not as independent as cats and required walking several times a day on a fairly regular schedule. But alas, inflexible regularity never loomed large on the list

of my mother's virtues. Nevertheless she did become attached to a dog (figure 4.16) belonging to my brother and would bring it treats whenever she visited her grandchildren. A collie mix of indeterminate age, Steve and Gene had obtained this dog as a family pet from a local woman of German background whose accent was so thick that they could not make out the name she had given the dog. As Gene later told me, "We thought it sounded like Gork so that's what we called him."

As Gork aged, he developed severe rheumatism and it was this, rather than the stroke (from which he rapidly recovered) mentioned in my mother's journal, that led to his eventual exile to my brother's barn. This had become so severe that the poor dog was no longer able to climb or descend the back steps of my brother's house. This meant that he was unable to do his business outside and so began doing it in the house instead. Despite this unacceptable situation, my brother's children were unable to bear the thought of putting him down and so, as a compromise, my brother built him a shelter of hay bales out in the barn. However, Gork was an intensely sociable dog who loved being around people and the decrease in human companionship resulting from this necessary exile was obviously hard on him. Needless to say, the pathos of this situation was not lost on my mother, who began spending time with him out in the barn whenever she visited.

I can recall a typical example. I was visiting Wausau and had driven my mother out to Gresham for the afternoon. After catching up on family events, my mother asked how Gork was doing. On being told that he was in a bad way and that he had been tied out behind the barn for the afternoon so he could get some sun and fresh air, she immediately disappeared to visit him. When she failed to reappear after more than an hour, I went out to see what was going on. Though it was early spring and there was still some snow scattered about, I found her behind the barn sitting on the cold ground cradling the poor elderly dog's head in her lap and comforting it. It took almost a half

hour of negotiation before I could finally get her to come back into the house.

If ever there was an incident that personified my mother and what she was all about, this was it, and so it has always remained in my memory. Indeed, so emotionally intense has this image become with the passage of time that I eventually distorted it into a belief that the poor dog had literally died with its head in my mother's lap, though Gene has since told me that he actually lived until the following July, when he managed to die during one of the hottest days of the year – a date she is certain of since she can remember her and my brother trying to keep him cool during his final hours by spraying him lightly with water. As with humans, death comes in many forms and whether a favorite pet is killed suddenly and violently, as in the case of Spotsy; is put down medically, as in the case of Jinks and Belvedere; or is allowed to die of natural causes, as in the case of Gork, it is almost always a messy and unhappy affair.