

Kitty

by Gary Moshimer

One winter day, walking home from work because his old Honda Civic refused to start out of sheer laziness, Martin found the cat in the alley behind his apartment building. It was terribly thin, with a swollen belly. It twirled around his legs, pleading with big grey eyes. A geezer shuffling by said, "One of those knocked-up strays." Martin brought her up to his attic apartment where the radiators sizzled and gave her warm milk—which she lapped quickly—and folded a soft blanket next to a radiator. He was a lonely young man, clumsy with girls and a bit of a recluse, and the cat was an unexpected gift. She tipped onto her side and studied him. He worried. He decided to take her to the vet two blocks down. He bundled her in the blanket. The waiting room was empty. The woman at the desk was unpleasant. She said the office was closing early because of the snow, but when Martin revealed the cat she sighed and softened to at least a frown and said, "Fine. Wait here."

While the doctor examined the kitty, Martin found his gaze drawn through the open door. There was something about this woman. He thought she wasn't as old as she looked. She seemed worn and sad. Then she opened her coat and he saw her belly—just like the cat's. When she took Martin's check he saw her hand was raw and covered with scratches. She looked at his address and said she lived in his building, in the basement room. "Kate," she said. He walked her home. The snow was coming down again, and Kitty stuck her nose from a hole in the cardboard carrier and licked. Kate carried the bag of special cat food and vitamins. The vet had asked Martin if he was willing to commit.

In front of the building she said, "Would you mind if I came up later?" She was a head taller than Martin, her baby inching towards his chest. Her hair was stringy black. She was perfection lashed

with imperfections: clear green eyes with bags beneath them; fine white skin with nicks and scars and tiny bruises and abandoned piercings; straight teeth with a front one cracked. And of course the dome, somehow off center. Her coat was tattered and too small and around her wrists were tattoos like bruises. "Okay," Martin stammered. "Just give me a while to clean up."

He tried picking up the mountain of clothes from his floor, but that was where Kitty wanted to be. He lifted her but she purred loudly and squirmed free and burrowed into the sleeve of a sweatshirt, probably a good place to have babies.

Kate hunched to avoid hitting her head because Martin's apartment huddled beneath the roof. The last tenant had painted the walls daffodil and the ceilings flamingo. "I looked at this apartment," she said. Her pupils grew. "It's crazy, isn't it?" She checked out the four rooms, supporting and exploring her great belly beneath her gray sweatshirt. In the bathroom she remarked on the claw-foot bathtub. She was jealous—she had only a tiny fiberglass shower stall. "Where's the kitty?" She looked down at the bowls on the warped kitchen floor.

"The bedroom? I put a box with blankets in there. It's the warmest room."

Kate glanced into Martin's cluttered room just as Kitty poked her head from one of the open dresser drawers. "She likes that better." She repeated her restless wandering. Martin followed, wondering if she was casing the joint and if he would regret letting her in. She looked at his cheap new furniture, the embarrassing stuff he sold, blocky and bright and way too big for this apartment. "I can get you a good price," he laughed. But she ignored him. Finally she said, "Did you forget cat litter?"

Martin felt relief. "I guess I did." He laughed again.

Her face was serious. He supposed it went with working for the vet. Maybe she was an inspector, seeing if he had a suitable environment for the cat. His heart sank a bit. "I know where to get some," she

said.

Martin looked out at the blizzard. "I'm not sure we can get anywhere."

"It's nearby. I know some nice people." But a corner of her mouth turned down when she said it.

No boots: they had matching black high-tops. Martin tentatively held her elbow, a gallant gesture, as they trudged through the snow. The buttons of her coat were ready to burst. He looked at her and saw tangles of ice in her lashes, and thought she was beautiful.

A car slid from nowhere, lights flashing on, skidding down the middle of the unplowed street. Kate pulled him behind one of the giant oaks. She held on until the sound of spinning tires had disappeared.

"Who was that?" Martin said.

"Can't trust these crazy drivers."

They turned onto Briarwood, where the houses grew larger and older. Martin's sleazy boss lived here behind one of these iron fences. Kate stopped at a gate held between stone pillars. "Here we are." She pressed the doorbell. A camera swiveled and the gate opened. Beyond the gate was a whole different world, where the snow was already cleared from the drive and Martin swore he felt heat rising from the rose-tinted concrete. Snow swirled through intersecting spotlights, but none of it seemed to land. Every window of the huge house was lit, with slim cat silhouettes in several of them. Martin could see a winding staircase inside, and he pictured elegant women gliding down the banister in flowing gowns.

"Are these relatives of yours?" he asked. The narrow windows adjacent to the front door were suddenly filled with the triangular heads of Siamese cats.

"Sort of. They have lots of cat supplies. Lots of everything. Almost. They'll take your kittens, if you can't handle them."

A well-dressed, middle-aged woman opened the door and took a step back, as if they emanated something more dangerous than the cold.

Her smile and the skin of her face were tight, her pale blonde hair yanked back. Her teeth were like tiny pearls against her winter tan. Her body was tiny and flat, and in the satiny green dress which flared at her knees she looked two dimensional, like a movie poster. "Katherine." Her voice was also dimensionless. "You shouldn't be out in this." She looked Martin up and down, not in a welcoming way. "This is Martin," said Kate, leaning over with difficulty to scratch some curious cat heads. "A client of mine. He has a new cat and needs some stuff." It sounded sinister, and Martin felt a thrill in his chest, similar to a time he'd been on a funhouse ride in the pitch dark, unable to anticipate which way the little car would be tugged and what might brush against him next. "Be my guest." The woman gestured to the large walk-in pantry. "Thanks, Mrs. O. You're a peach." Kate tilted her head and formed a tight little smile herself. As they rummaged, Mrs. O. asked questions from afar. "So you've been feeling well? No contractions? Nothing unusual?" "Couldn't be better. We're right on course." Kate handed Martin a tremendous bag of litter and a plastic pan. His arms trembled. She nodded to the woman and said, "See ya." Outside Martin said, "She looks scared. What do you have on her?" Kate shrugged. "They're getting my baby." She walked ahead of him. "Wow," he said, mainly to himself. He caught up with her. "But that woman seems cold." "It's uncomfortable for her. A strange situation." "You seem comfortable with it." Kate stopped and turned on him, staring down at his face which was caught and vulnerable in the spotlight. She breathed angrily. "Don't you judge me until you know my story." She shivered and walked quickly away. Martin followed sheepishly, the weight of litter on his shoulders. Snow turned to needles of ice on his neck. "I'm sorry," he said to the night.

They filled the box as Kitty waited nearby. As soon as they were done she stepped in and peed a gallon while watching them. Her sides quivered.

Kate made herself at home on the ugly red futon. She put her feet on the varnished 'country-hick line' wooden crate Martin used as a coffee table. She rubbed her belly. "I can't wait to drink and smoke again." She looked at the ceiling, inches from her head. Martin was lost for words. He'd never dealt with any problems but his own, and usually ignored them as well. He wanted to have her here but be alone at the same time. He felt a sudden irrational fear about giving up kittens and couldn't imagine what Kate was going through. He paced the room, trying to catch his breath, wanting to disappear. She watched him.

"I tried killing the father," she said finally. "He was bad news. Beat me and threw me down stairs and all that good stuff. He wanted me to have an abortion, but I wasn't doing that again. One night I poked a steak knife in his belly when he was dead drunk. I was just thinking about it at first, playing it in my head, but something made me press a little too hard. Then there was no stopping." She clutched herself and winced. "Ooh. Kick." She looked at Martin. "I would have gotten off with self-defense, if he wasn't sleeping at the time."

Martin felt a twinge in his own mid-section. His bowels clenched with fear. "Um . . . so where is he now?" His voice came out hoarse and weirdly high-pitched.

"Around. But he's not allowed near me, don't worry."

Martin thought of the swerving car, of heavy boots that might clomp up his stairs at any moment, knowing where she was and who she was with, a hunting knife concealed for revenge. As usual, he felt like curling into a ball and calling his sister, who was a nurse in Boston and had her shit together. He placed his fingertips on the cold black window and felt the ticking of sleet.

"The arrangements are made. I'm not fit to be a mother."

"I wish they weren't." Martin knew he had no business, knew nothing of her or of arrangements or of grown-up life in general. An

unfamiliar passion flared beneath his ribs, some vague protective instinct for the abused of the world. He felt suddenly bold, walked over and took her cold hand, tracing the raised marks. Her hand was unresponsive, her eyes empty. "I try convincing myself."

She called him from the tub. He stood outside the bathroom door pacing as she splashed and moaned. "Something's happening," she said, her voice panicked. "Come in here."

"What?"

"Come in."

"I . . ." At his feet, Kitty meowed forcefully.

She'd lit some left-behind candles, and when Martin entered she stood in the tub and the bubbles shimmered gold, falling and floating and bursting from her. Martin looked away. "There's no time for that," she said, annoyed. "It's starting. It's not supposed to go like this. It's too fast. I think it knows I'm giving it away." She bent and did the breathing.

"What should I do?" He breathed along with her, almost passing out.

"Help me out."

Her arms and legs were thinner than expected, but slippery and strong and desperate, using him for leverage. In her grasp he felt one of the strong contractions straight through to his backbone. It even made him groan along. He dried her off as she puffed through pursed lips. Her nails dug into his shoulders. Her still-present yellow bruises were like maps for hand placement.

"For whatever reason," she said, "it's coming."

"Now?"

"I'm sorry. Get me to the hospital."

He helped her dress, slipping on the same sweat pants and old shirt which smelled like wet dog. Then he got angry, outraged. Couldn't these rich people get her some nice maternity clothes, seeing as they were getting the kid? Cheap fuckers. He thought of his boss and hated users like him, the ones who got everything, who could

buy even a tiny new life, who could purchase a bit of pain to hold over someone forever. He reversed what he'd done and found one of his clean over-sized tee shirts. No pants, just in case. Although he didn't want to go there.

He helped her to the futon. Kitty was right there in the action. "I'll start the car." He doubted but prayed the Honda would turn over and get them the few hazardous blocks to the hospital.

He cursed whoever was supposed to plow the alley, kicked at the dilapidated wooden door hiding the Honda, wrenched the hood and tossed the latest mouse nest and spun the nut on the air filter and cocked the choke plate. Fumes filled the stall as the motor popped. But it breathed. It breathed like her. He matched its rhythm with a chant: having a baby, having a baby . . . He put it in gear, lurched forward into six inches of snow, leaped from the coughing idle and up the stairs. He had her down in one minute, wrapped in one of the cat blankets.

Snow raged horizontally against his one good headlight, but at least they were moving. He couldn't tell if he was on the street or the sidewalk, but he kept between hedges and stop signs and hydrants. Then they spun into some groove and the motor fainted from Kate's scream. "It's here!"

"That can't be." Martin fiddled the key and slammed the gas pedal and rapidly jerked the wheel, things that couldn't work even with luck. The key snapped, and that was that.

Kate grasped his hair violently and pushed his head down on her. She ripped up blanket and shirt. "Do you see it?"

He flicked his tiny keychain flashlight and saw a waterfall followed by slimy black hair and head shaped like a cone. Good god. On his phone he punched speed dial 1, his sister.

"Sis, there's a baby coming in my car. I see his head!"

"Who is this?"

"I'm not kidding. It's happening."

"Marty, are you crazy? Are you on something?"

"Sis, I'm in my car with a girl and it just died, and her baby's head is sticking out."

"Good god, Marty. Call 911, before anything else."

His hands shook violently as he did that. Kate had stopped moving and was panting shallowly. "Hurry," he told the operator, and she responded, "Sir, we have your location." He thought of a commercial. ("Sorry, you can't get that service with your fucking piece of shit car") He hung up on her and called Sis back.

"Clear off the baby's nose and mouth," she said, calm as can be. He wiped the edge of the blanket over the face. The head was floppy, dead, bluish-gray.

"Marty, she needs to push. Get her to push."

"She's passed out, I think."

"Don't let her do that!"

He grabbed Kate's legs and swung them across the gear-shift and onto his seat. He spread her knees. He opened his door and stood outside. He removed his coat and draped it over his shoulders, thinking of the guys who work up on the poles with protective tarps over their little important worlds. Snow still managed to swirl in, and he imagined keeping the baby and naming it 'Storm.' It would have special powers. He kneeled on his seat and slapped Kate's cheeks. "You have to push! Push it out! You can do it! Breathe!" She moaned.

"Marty," Sis said, "get your hands in and find the shoulders."

For some reason he formed his hands to catch a ball, moving them hesitantly. The dome light flickered. At that moment both Kate and the baby gasped and screamed. Kate clenched her teeth and the baby shot into Martin's hands. It was gooey and slipped through his fingers, tethered by the ropy cord, bounced off the seat, hit its head on the gearshift, and screamed louder. He heard Sis shouting over the phone, which he'd put on the dash, "That's good! I hear that! Dry it off, wrap it up! Is the ambulance coming?"

Martin saw that it was a girl. He laughed nervously, drying her with part of the blanket and then cocooning her in his coat. Kate's eyes were squeezed shut, and Martin wasn't sure if it was from discomfort or not wanting to know. What he knew was that when the baby opened her eyes briefly and looked into his face, he would

never be the same.

When the red lights pulsed around them Storm closed her eyes and her tiny forehead scowled. Next came big flashlights and thick navy-blue coat sleeves, rustling and cold but bearing towels that radiated warmth. Some of the arms placed Martin politely but firmly outside the car. Others unwrapped the baby and rubbed her more vigorously. A female paramedic explained to Kate, "Since we're close to the hospital we'll leave the cord intact and place her on your chest." Her. Why did she have to say it? Kate kept her eyes closed but when the baby was against her under the blanket she held it instinctively.

They were loaded into the ambulance and Martin was invited to ride. There was concern about Kate's pressure—she was losing some blood. Someone asked Martin if he was the father and he told the truth: he was just a neighbor bringing her to the hospital. You did a good job, someone else said.

He sat in the waiting room. His hands were sticky and smelled like clay. He was forgotten, and fell asleep on a cushioned bench. It was Storm's first day of kindergarten, and he had to come pick her up early. She was doing, well, stuff. She got mad at some other girls and stared at them until they stopped moving and were coated with a fine layer of ice. Then they cracked open, screaming, their skin fiery red.

In the morning the smell of coffee woke him. A security guard poked him and he jumped up, shivering uncontrollably. "Are you okay?" "Frostbite," said Martin, looking down and away.

"You should get new sneakers."

Martin approached a woman at the desk and asked if he could visit Kate. But he didn't even know her last name. "She just had a baby," he said.

The woman leafed through some papers. "Are you immediate family?"

He shook his head.

She stopped at one page and examined a pink note attached with paper clip. "Sorry," she said. "Definitely not. Not for a day or two."

He left the hospital without his coat, realizing it was probably still in his car. The snow had stopped and the sun was bright. Snowplows were everywhere. He entered the Brandywine Diner and ordered eggs and potatoes and coffee. He was starving. He knew he wasn't going back to work. While he sipped his coffee he called Sis. She was at work and couldn't talk long. He quickly told her his predicament. "I'm going to go back to school," he said. "I'm quitting my job. I'm tired of the users in the world." He asked her if people could really just get a baby without the mother ever seeing it, and she said it would depend on the agreement, but yes, she imagined it happened every day.

He walked from the diner to where he thought his car might be, and found it on the median of Parkwood, plowed under a ton of snow. He wouldn't be getting his coat. He wanted to get home to check on Kitty, but his feet had a different idea, taking him to the warehouse, where he swiped his badge and unhooked the keys to a delivery truck. He backed wildly through a mound of snow to the loading dock. He loaded a box labeled: Baby Crib Super-Deluxe. He waved at the surveillance camera. He ground the truck gears badly and swung all over the streets: he'd never delivered before. He smiled to think of how in one day he'd delivered his first baby and first piece of furniture. His eyes started to droop, dreaming, and he ran over a stop sign which pushed the front right fender into the air. He kept going. On the corner of his street he side-swiped a mailbox, and laughed maniacally.

The truck barely scraped into his stall, tearing off old swallow nests and crushing the light bulb. He wrestled the heavy box up the stairs, slipping and grunting, and the old woman on the second floor cracked her door to stare. If she asked what he was doing he would have no answer; he didn't know himself. This would surely put her on high alert, though, and any cat sounds would be reported to the landlord.

Kitty met him at the door. Martin was relieved to see she was still pregnant, still walking around. She watched him slice the box open and spread the parts on the kitchen floor. The Super-Deluxe crib was

crap, as he knew it would be, bits of fiber-board flaking off before he even touched it. He wouldn't be surprised if it was made of guano and lead paint. He was greatly satisfied that at least eight of the screws were missing. There were two extra part 'B's, and several holes were mismatched. "Piece of shit, Kitty. Better off with a box, huh?" He carried it piece by piece to the dumpster in the alley. He smiled, thinking of his criminal record now, his face on the camera, the stolen and smashed truck in the garage. How he and Kate would have something in common.

Three days later, Martin was lying on his floor stroking Kitty's belly, which was tightening and quivering. She was on her side, purring away. Someone knocked on his door. He expected the police, but it was Kate, bundled in a brand new cape, touched up with make-up and lipstick, her hair clean and fragrant and wound around her head like a sleeping snake. He wondered if the nurses in the hospital had done this, to boost her self-esteem and ease her loss. She reached for him, like something familiar and soothing, maybe the only thing she had.

"I'm sorry I didn't come see you," Martin said, surprised by his sudden intensity of emotion. "I felt weird about it. Are you okay?" He wouldn't let go of her.

She pressed him to arm's length. "It was a little scary. Something went wrong in there. They said it might have been from being punched or kicked in the gut."

Kitty rubbed around their legs. Kate picked her up. "Wow, I think she's about ready."

They lay in Martin's narrow bed, both exhausted. Neither of them mentioned the baby, but during the night Kate kept waking up and calling out, looking around. He supposed this was a clock set into her, programmed to feed the baby every couple hours. She was confused, and Martin got cool washcloths for her head. Sometimes she didn't know who he was, and the worst was when she shot up, her hands covered with slime and blood, screaming that she'd done

it again, no, no, no . . . please forgive her . . .

Martin held the tattoos of her thrashing wrists. It took half an hour to convince her there was no knife, that what she felt was the gooey and squirmy gift which Kitty had given them—five new babies that no one could take away.

