A CANTICLE

I HAD A FRIEND... AND HIS NAME WAS ROADCAT. He was young when I was young and old when I was middle-aged. Still, our lives overlapped for a while, and I am grateful for that.

He was more than a friend, really. Friend and colleague is perhaps a better image. In fact, I sometimes introduced him to strangers as my research associate. We worked together on cold, gray afternoons, poring over books and papers, while the wood stove quietly crackled its way through another Iowa winter.

Sometimes he lay upon my lap and served as a round and honest book rest. He purred and occasionally reached out to turn pages for me, randomly and with a keen appreciation of the virtues surrounding leisurely scholarship. In the spring, as the days warmed, he moved to the desk, clearing a place for himself by pushing to the floor paper, pens, staplers, and other implements of a writer's trade.

He came from a field of long grass behind our house in Columbus, Ohio. Just a few inches in length, he walked along the cement of one of those smarmy subdivisions that make your teeth curl.

A neighbor's child abused him. He fought back, as any of us would, and the child's mother screamed something about rabid cats. My wife observed that the child deserved something more than he got and brought the kitten home for the customary saucer of milk.

I set him on my lap and said, "This is going to be a fine-looking cat." But we were on the move in those times and had already promised our daughter one of the kittens from a litter down the street. So the migrant was fed and sent along.

I sat down to read the paper, glanced up, and he had reappeared on the opposite side of the house at the patio screen door. He looked in at me, and I looked back.

He coughed continuously and badly, tried to cry, but the effort was soundless. I picked him up, looked him over with a modest expertise gained from years of living around animals, and said I was taking him to the veterinarian's office.

The examination was lengthy. He had worms, ear mites, fleas, and a serious case of bronchitis. I asked the vet, "Is this a road cat?" The doctor smiled, "This is your genuine road cat."

We drove home together, he and I and, of course, four kinds of medicine in a brown paper bag. He sat on the car seat, small and uncomplaining, watching me, bright face hopeful. The nursery opened. Roadcat had come to stay.

And it is here, before going on, that I must deal with the issue of sentimentality.

BY ROBERT JAMES WALLER
FOR ROADCAT
If we do not come to grips with that, you might dismiss the rest of what I have to say as mawkish and lacking sound perspective. Humans have an arrogant manner of rationalizing their life, as if some sort of hierarchy of existence were fact instead of intellectual artifice. God by various names is way up there, of course, in the first religion. A little further down, just a little, lies humankind. Below that, and far below, according to common belief, rests a great squishy level of everything else. Here, we find plants and animals. Maybe even rivers and mountains.

All right, let’s admit that some transcendent presence roams above us. Some call it God by various names. A little further down, just a little, lies humankind. Below that, and far below, according to common belief, rests a great squishy level of everything else. Here, we find plants and animals. Maybe even rivers and mountains.

I try to live alongside rather than above the plane but I know your view is only a one-way, and that is down. As such, you miss the grand vistas, the shuddering sense of wonderment that comes from looking out across all of creation, all of life, all of time, all of space together on Edgington’s great arrow of time. And so it was with my friend Roadcat.

Riding along on the arrow, we turned the days and marked the pages together. We grinned at each other over sunny afternoons on the deck, and, while he rested in the shadow of my folded arm, we lifted our furry heads and stared high and hard at the light of space just before dawn. Green eyes looking. Blue eyes looking. Wondering about each other’s eyes. We came to a position of agreement. His world through green eyes of great intensity, my world through blue eyes looking. What did that mean to us, or to those others out there looking back?

We did that for twelve years plus a month or so. And we came to care, and cared deeply, one for the other. He clearly saw, and I often realized, that he had some of that same intelligence that we had. And that our thinking was not part of the reflections from each other’s eyes. We came to a position of trust, and, in his wisdom and elegance, that was all he asked.

I violated that trust only once. I must take time to tell you about the time I gave Roadcat a coin through the printer of a hard lesson. Roadcat represented all the classic definitions of beauty and good taste. The long soft pelage on his back and sides was predominantly black and gray. His chin was an off-white that flowed into creamy tan along his chest and belly. Symmetrically perfect were his markings, and he watched the world through green eyes of great intensity and color. His face was expressive, his conformation perfect.

Given that, it becomes understandable why we fell into the snare of seeing him as an animal. When the local cat fanciers association announced a show limited to animals of something called pet quality, we could not resist.

So Roadcat was put into a wire cage and carried off to the show held as part of the Cattle Congress festivities in Waterloo. Along with the sheep, swine, horses and cattle and hogs, the pet-quality cats would have their day in the ring. He was terrified and paralysed by the crowds past the ferris wheel and midway bankers, past Willie Nelson’s tour bus. Roadcat’s world was the forest, the warm place under the wood stove, and a canvas deck chair in the summer. He was content with himself and required no conspicuous recognition to prove his worth. His colleagues apparently did require it. My wife, my daughter, and I were content I had made up for the occasion that said “Roadcat” in bold, black letters across the front.

I watched him closely in the great hall where the judging was held. He was restless in the cage. Finally, he simply lay down and stared directly at me, straight in the eyes. I could see he was disappointed with me, for he was ashamed at having so ruthlessly shattered our mutual respect. Since a time when I was quite young, I have been angered by the fact that those public competitions form called beauty contests, and here I was subjecting my friend to exactly that. What was the point of the whole event? I felt internally temperate and reserved around strangers, yet tore at the paper lining his cage on the judging floor. What was the point of all of this? He raced through the metal top of his containment, tore at the paper lining his cage on the judging floor. His heart was racing, he was racing, but he ran out at the comat. He became “The Retailer” on those occasions. He was “The Champion” and what he wanted to be on all his shows. He never saw him intentionally kill anything. He could not resist that. Turned round around, I would find him sitting by the glass, licking a milk-covered paw.

Not even the night crawlers he brought to me after heavy rains. He plumped them down on a small throw rug, flipped it over to hamper their escape, and seemed pleased with himself. The shipwreck was very much alive in the summer of 1986 when Roadie strolled through the front door and dropped it. The little guy hit the carpet running, dropped through a pile of old magazines, and disappeared into the general vicinity of the fireplace.

Judging that the chipper would not eat much, I was content to let him stay. The first time the family, as usual, thought I was deranged. So, after four days of moving furniture, we flushed the poor fellow. The male dog nailed him to the floor in one of those wild scenes that seem to occur only at our house in the woods. Roadie watched the entire battle with detached interest. Revenge was the point of being desirable, but he liked the little female kitty that came along some years after he joined the craziness that is ours. He smiled tolerantly when she tried to nurse him and, through the years, gently washed her with a pink and tireless tongue.

Roadcat asked for little other than constant attention. He never had any desire to be the center of attention. He preferred to remain under the wood stove, and a canvas deck chair in the summer. He was content I had made up for the occasion that said “Roadcat” in bold, black letters across the front.

The undergrowth and woodland trails were so thick and dense, it was an easy leap. In the American cat shows of the late 1980s, Roadcat could race thirty feet up a tree in a single bound, slide down the trunk, and land on all fours, with a sigh. And after the judge put him on a table for measuring, we never saw him intentionally kill anything. He could not resist that. Turned round around, I would find him sitting by the glass, licking a milk-covered paw.

That was his only sin, and I reached a compromise with him on the matter of his veneration. He was allowed to visit occasionally with a little milk in an old jelly glass decorated with etchings of Cole Porter. When he was a pup, Roadcat would look up at me and, in his sweetest voice, would say “thank you” with his head tilted back. He knew I had to be careful; the undergrowth and woodland trails were so thick and dense, it was an easy leap. In the American cat shows of the late 1980s, Roadcat could race thirty feet up a tree in a single bound, slide down the trunk, and land on all fours, with a sigh. And after the judge put him on a table for measuring, we never saw him intentionally kill anything. He could not resist that. Turned round around, I would find him sitting by the glass, licking a milk-covered paw.
he might want in these circumstances. I spoke softly to him, struggling with des­perate intensity to reach far and across the boundaries of another nation, seeking either affirmation or forgiveness. When all that is he was, as it should be, the language of caring is a language of impression and is not designed for hard and profound choices.

Eventually, his head lowered, and it was done. Georgia and I carried him home in a brisk and bustling rush of one of the trails where he earned his living. For some days after, I wore I would never go through that again. If it came to eutha­nia, I would refuse to be present. I have changed my mind. You owe that to good companions who have asked for little and who have traveled far and faithfully by your side.

Roadcat didn’t just live with us. He was a spirited participant in the affairs of our place. He was kind to us, and we to him. I remember, when I came home in the even­ing, hurriedly cracking out the wood­land path toward me, grinning, riding along on his stiff-legged trot, tail held high. I’d hunker down and rub him, and we would talk for a moment while he rolled over on his back and looked at me, blinking.

Georgia and I put the shovel away, walked back into the darkness, and stood by the lit­tle grave. By way of a farewell, she said, “He was a good guy.” Unable to speak, I nodded and thought she had said it perfectly. He was, indeed, a good guy. And a true friend and colleague who rode the great ar­row with me for a time, helping me turn the pages in some old book while the wood­wind whispers of winter were a steady song through the winter whereabouts of Iowa.

Robert James Waller, professor of manage­ment at the University of Northern Iowa, is a writer, photographer, and musician whose work, there Kali was, waiting for her out­side a pine tree. “Thank goodness you’re okay,” she sighed. A week or so later, the kitten is putting on weight. She is pregnant. What a disap­pointment, Cindy thinks. She had been wait­ing for Kali to go through one more heat cycle before she had her spayed—she’d always heard that was best. But Cindy wasn’t wor­ried about finding homes for the kittens. She will just take them into the clothing store where she works and put them in the window.

Cats have surpassed dogs as the most popular pets in the United States, with 30.6 million households owning cats. As a result of this surge in interest, the number of cats rem­ains. He kept detailed records of each cat’s acquisition, appearance, behavior, and eating habits and wrote of its eating habits and wrote of its success. All 4 find good families seeking to give away litters of puppies and kittens—field “good” pets. Many of the people seek­ing to give away litters of puppies and kittens find success—they find “good” homes for each one in their litter. They think the book is closed once the last puppy or kitten leaves with its new owner, that the problems are solved. It isn’t.

In a recent case in DeKalb County, Georgia, a man was convicted of torturing and killing 77 cats. He admitted to tortur­ing the felines and later photographing their remains. He kept detailed records of each cat’s acquisition, appearance, behavior, and eating habits and wrote of its success. All 4 find good families seeking to give away litters of puppies and kittens—field “good” pets. Many of the people seek­ing to give away litters of puppies and kittens find success—they find “good” homes for each one in their litter. They think the book is closed once the last puppy or kitten leaves with its new owner, that the problems are solved. It isn’t.

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