

The White Cat

There was nothing on my mind, except for dinner and a quiet night with a good book, as I walked through the gate to my backyard. That's when I first saw the white cat. The grass in the yard was overdue for mowing and looked a little wild. The big white cat stalked through that grass like an albino tiger in the jungle.

From the first glimpse of the cat, I thought of it as a male. There was something about the way it carried itself that suggested that. The scarred face certainly suited a tomcat.

He froze in place with one leg in the air when he saw me. The cat made quite a sight as he stood there. In the early evening light, his bright blue eyes stood out against his pure white fur, which moved slightly in the light breeze.



Something about him made me think he was a stray. Perhaps, it was the lack of a collar or because his fur looked like it could use a good brushing. Maybe it was because his ears bore the scars of many fights. Then again, it may have been his wary, but unafraid attitude. I knew I'd never seen him in the neighborhood before that night.

He stared at me with that unblinking stare cats have, until I took a step closer and then he whirled and bounded away. He was a white streak as he raced across the yard until he disappeared around the corner of the garage.

I shrugged my shoulders as if to say, 'oh, well' and then went about my business.

The white cat came to mind throughout the evening. There was something about him that caught my imagination. I pictured him wandering the neighborhood all night in search of food and water. It must be difficult for an animal to adjust to living without the protection of humans, even though cats are much better at this than dogs.

Cats are great hunters and scavengers and can usually manage to find enough food, even in a city like the one I lived in at that time. Water, on the other hand, can be one of the hardest things for a stray to find, because the excess runs off in the storm drains. It can be especially difficult if the weather has been hot and dry like it had been for the last few days. When I thought of this, I decided to put out a bowl of water for the white cat and any other stray animals that were in need.

As long as I was putting out the water, I decided I might as well add a bowl with the scraps from my dinner. It seemed to make a lot more sense than throwing it in the garbage pail. I put both bowls near the back door and then settled down to read until bedtime.

When I left for work the next day, I noticed the level of the water had dropped and that the scraps of food were gone. I refilled the water bowl before leaving for the day. When I returned that evening, I sat out more food.

The cat failed to put in another appearance for several days, although each morning the food would be gone and the level of the water would be lower in the bowl. I continued to feed and water my unknown beneficiary for about a week without knowing who or what was eating the food. Then, I saw the cat again.

He was at the water bowl as I walked out the back door one day. He immediately whirled and raced away. I realized that this was one very wild animal. That's when I determined to try to gain his trust.

From experience, I knew that even truly wild animals can be tamed, to a certain extent. One memory from my childhood stands out vividly. My grandfather would sit in his garden with a bag of sunflower seeds and scatter a few at his feet. He would sit motionlessly for some time until the birds came to feed. Before he was done, he would have coaxed those wild birds onto his lap to take seeds from his fingers. I remember seeing them perched on his hat and shoulders as he sat there. It was a truly amazing sight.

Squirrels can be easily coaxed into taking food from a human. Twice, while crouched down as I fed a squirrel, I've had one crawl up my back to perch on my shoulder. I have a picture, somewhere, of a black squirrel doing just that while my son and stepdaughters watched in amazement. This can get a little hairy when you think about those sharp teeth only an inch or two from your ear.

There are two main requirements for gaining the trust of a wild animal. One is patience - lots and lots of patience. That's something I have in abundance. The other requirement is food. I took care of that with a trip to the local pet store where I picked up some pet treats and canned cat food.

The next evening, instead of going back inside after setting out the food and water, I placed a lawn chair about 20 feet away and settled down to read.

It wasn't long before I spotted a white head peeking around the corner of the garage. After about twenty minutes, the white cat took a few steps around the corner and then stopped. He would come no closer that evening, even though I sat there reading for almost two hours. When I went back inside, I took the food bowl with me.

The next night was pretty much a copy of the first night. The stray must have been hiding behind the garage waiting for the sound of the door opening. Like the first night, he stood with only his head showing for several minutes then he moved a few feet closer and laid down in the grass. He stood up when I did, ready to bolt if I made any threatening moves.

When I walked away from him toward the door, he came a few steps closer and then stopped, his blue eyes gleaming eerily in the fading twilight.

When I reached the door, I stooped and retrieved the food bowl just as I had the night before. This time I took out a scrap of food and tossed it in his direction. He immediately shied away, and then returned to sniff the food. One gulp and it was gone. I tossed a

second bit of food a little closer, but it seemed I'd exhausted his patience for one night. He turned and strolled away as if unconcerned.

The next two nights followed the same pattern, except for a change from a Dale Brown adventure novel to a William Morrow mystery. The white cat would come no closer than thirty feet. I was beginning to think I had bitten off more than I could chew.

There was a break in the routine on Friday, due to previous plans. I thought about the white cat off and on throughout the evening. I wondered what he might be thinking of my absence. I told myself he would take it in stride and be off doing whatever it was he did when I wasn't around.

Saturday was another beautiful day, with the promise of a lovely evening. Dinner was delayed slightly, so I was a little later going out-of-doors than I'd been the first four nights. To my surprise, the white cat was sitting about thirty feet from the door when I opened it.

He crouched down when he saw me, but didn't run. Moving slowly and as non-threateningly as possible, I set down the two bowls and moved towards my chair without appearing to notice him.



After about twenty minutes, he could no longer resist the smell of the food and moved towards the bowl. He watched me out of the corner of his eye all the way to the bowl. The slightest move on my part would have sent him flying from the yard, perhaps never to return.

He ate warily, but quickly. After each dip of the head, he would look at me to make sure I hadn't tried to sneak up on

him while his head was down. I wondered what terrible events had made this creature so wary of humans. I was more determined than ever to gain his trust.

Chapter 2

The next four nights went more quickly, now that he was willing to eat with me sitting in the yard. Each night he was waiting in the yard for the food to appear.

Some nights he would be finished eating and on his way in twenty minutes. On the third night, he lay down after finishing the food and groomed himself before leaving. I knew I was getting somewhere when, on the next night, he stayed until I stood up to go inside.

I talked to him as he ate and continued to speak in a soft voice after he was finished. Sometimes, I just ignored him and read. I think he was growing to like the limited

companionship I offered. This was where things stood ten days after my first efforts to befriend Whitey - the name I had started to use for him.

Whitey seemed appropriate. He certainly wasn't a Fluffy. He was a hardnosed, blue-collar type of cat. One who was perfectly capable of looking after himself. I just thought he needed a friend. The time had come to take the next step.

For several nights, I had been carrying a plastic bag with a few soft treats in my pocket. I'd hesitated to use them, because I didn't want to rush things and risk ruining the progress I had already made. The second night he stayed after eating I decided to take the chance.

He watched my every move as I placed my book on the ground beside the chair and then pulled the bag of treats from my pocket. I moved slowly so he wouldn't feel threatened.

The first treat landed about five feet in front of him. He jerked, but didn't run off. All the while, I continued to talk to him in a soft monotonous voice. He quickly caught the scent of the treat and slowly got to his feet. A few tentative steps carried him to the spot where it had landed and he gulped it down after one quick sniff.

Even though he was still fifteen feet away, I wanted to cheer. This was the closest he had been since the day I first saw him. I tossed another treat his way with a smooth, soft motion. This one landed only a couple of feet from his face. He didn't even jerk.

Whitey stayed where he was and looked at me as if he were trying to discern my motives. Finally, he took the few small steps he needed to reach the treat and gulped that one down as well. I decided that I'd better not press my luck and put the bag of treats back in my pocket.

After watching me for a few moments to see if there would be any more good things to eat, the cat sat down and began to wash his face with his paws. This lasted for a couple of minutes then he stood, stretched, and yawned. His pink tongue curled almost in a circle between what looked like needle-sharp teeth. One last glance at me and then he wandered away to begin his nightly rounds.

That night I felt very pleased with the progress I was making - even if it was taking far longer than I had expected. On that first day, he wouldn't come within thirty feet of me. Now he would sit calmly grooming himself only twelve feet away. I was pleased, but knew those last few feet would be difficult to bridge.

The next day saw the arrival of some long overdue rain. I sat his food out at the regular time, but didn't see him anywhere around. I assumed he was sheltering from the heavy rain somewhere.

Unfortunately, I didn't get home until after dark the next night. Now we had gone two days in a row without seeing each other. I hoped this wouldn't cause a setback. I consoled myself with the thought that the first night I had failed to appear had triggered a breakthrough. Hopefully, the same thing would happen again.

On the third day since I'd last seen the cat, he was waiting outside the door when I came out carrying the food bowl and a paperback book. He was less than ten feet from the door. I said, "Hello, Whitey". He surprised me with a soft, "rrrowwwl" in return.

After sitting his bowl of food on the ground, I took two steps back instead of walking to my chair. He stared at me as if trying to decide what this new development meant. Finally, the lure of the food was too much to resist and he circled towards his supper. He kept the dish between himself and where I stood watching.

Whitey stopped a couple of feet short of the bowl and gave me another look. I realized that I was invading his space so I took another step back and crouched down. He watched me and then moved to the bowl.



He ate as he always did – crouching protectively over the bowl while he gulped down the food. The food quickly disappeared. When it was gone, he sat back on his haunches and stared at me with that unfathomable look that all cats seem to be born with.

All the while he was eating I had been talking to him in a soft voice. Now I sat on the ground, just like him, and continued to talk. He cocked his head occasionally as if trying to catch what I was saying. He didn't act in the least threatened.

His tail began to twitch when I pulled the bag of treats from my pocket. Perhaps, he remembered it from the other night or it may have been the smell. Whatever the case, I certainly had his attention.

I tossed a treat towards him. I aimed it off to the side so he wouldn't think I was throwing things at him. He quickly pounced on the deliciously smelly treat and gulped it down, then turned to watch for more.

The next treat landed on his other side, closer than the first one had been. Again, he didn't hesitate.

When I tossed the third treat just out of arms reach he hesitated. The wary animal eyed me carefully and then moved cautiously forward until he was within reach of the bit of food. He stretched a paw forward to rake it towards himself, instead of walking up to it and picking it up with his mouth.

I realized I was pushing him a little too hard, so I tossed the next one several feet behind him. As he went towards the treat, I got slowly to my feet and tucked the bag in my pocket. He meowed as if he sensed that he wouldn't get another that night. It was the softest sound I had heard from him since I had known him.

He meowed again as I moved to the door. It had that plaintive quality a cat can make when he really wants something. It tore at my heart, but I steeled myself and went



through the door. I knew that leaving him wanting more would accomplish much more than feeding him treats until he was stuffed.

Chapter 3

The next couple of nights saw steady progress. He would now come within arms reach, although I hadn't tried to touch him, yet.

The biggest surprise was the night I walked out the door to find him waiting so close to the door I couldn't open it without getting him to move. He walked towards me as soon as I was through the door and wound around my ankles like every tame tabby since cats first started living with humans. I was astonished. I was also elated. All that hard work and those long hours had paid off.

When I bent over, he allowed me to stroke his back. He even arched his back in pleasure. That was the first time I heard him purr. There would be many more nights filled with that sound.

I sat on the ground beside his bowl as he ate that night's meal and then coaxed him on my lap with a treat. He settled down as if it was the most natural thing in the world. I thought back to those first few days and compared his behavior then with the way he acted now. The transformation was truly amazing. He even rolled on his back to allow me to stroke his belly. That showed true trust.

He didn't stay in my lap for long that first night. All of a sudden, he shied away from my hand and jumped from my lap. It was almost as if he came to his senses, abruptly. Maybe, he had been sniffing some of the catnip that grew in many of the flowerbeds in the neighborhood. On the other hand, he may have just realized how much out of character were his actions.

After a quick drink from the water bowl, he gave me a last glance and then stalked off with his dignity intact. It was almost as if he were saying, 'that wasn't I, that was some stranger acting like that'. I smiled as I went back inside to spend the rest of the evening watching television.

Whitey was waiting for me when I returned home the next day. He had shown up at least an hour earlier than normal. There was no doubt he was happy to see me. He wound around my ankles, just as he had the night before, purring all the while. I leaned over and stroked him a few times before moving to the door.

That's when I found there was still a limit to his trust. No amount of coaxing could get him to step inside the house. He waited by the door until I came out with a bowl of food.

After he ate, we spent about thirty minutes together that night. He ended up in my lap for much of that time.

Whitey was quickly coming to enjoy the physical contact. I wondered if his mother was a stray cat, also. If that were the case, it was possible that he had never been as close to a person as he was at this moment. Certainly, he must have had some bad experiences with humans to act the way he had when I first saw him. Whatever the case, it was apparent that I was no longer one of the bad guys.

Eventually, when he had apparently had enough of the petting, he jumped from my lap. He stood looking at me for a few moments before wandering towards the back of the yard where a hole in the fence allowed him access to the next yard.

Whitey glanced back a couple of times as he strolled away. I wondered what he was thinking as he looked at me. Surely something, no matter what the scientists say.

Timeout:

It annoys me whenever I read a comment by a scientist stating that animals don't think or they don't have a sense of self. Animals may not think in the same way we humans do, but they certainly can think. Any pet owner can confirm that from observation.

If animals don't think, how is it possible for them to be jealous of each other? Ever have two dogs vying for your attention? Notice how jealous they get when you pay more attention to one than to the other? Well, how can that be if they have no sense of self? It's strictly a matter of, "Hey, what about *me*?"

Just because a dog or cat appears not to recognize itself in a mirror doesn't prove that they have no sense of self. All it proves is that they don't understand mirrors. Now back to the story.

End timeout

My relationship with Whitey seemed to have hit a plateau over the next few days. He would be waiting for me when I came home from work and sometimes he was at the door when I left in the morning. On those occasions, I would go back inside and get him a treat.

No amount of coaxing would get him to come in the house. I even tried propping the screen door open and placing his food a few feet inside the doorway. He just wasn't ready to take that step.

Things went on this way for about a week and then, just as at every other stage of our friendship, Whitey made the change.

One day, when I opened the door to go back inside Whitey darted through ahead of me. When he had moved a few feet from the door, he crouched down and surveyed his new surroundings. The white cat didn't seem very comfortable with the strangeness of what must be an alien environment to him.

I propped the door open so that he would not feel trapped and then went about my business as if he were a regular visitor. I gave him a little more food in a bowl and filled another bowl with water. Just like offering a human visitor tea and crumpets.

He stayed while I cooked my dinner and then, when I went to close the door he darted through the narrowing opening and off into the gathering darkness. This time there were no backwards glances. He was off about his nightly business.

After that first night inside, Whitey would come in the door whenever I opened it. I no longer left the screen door open, but it didn't seem to bother him. Whenever he wanted to go out, he would walk to the door and sit in front of it until I came to open it for him.

Once he was starting to spend more time indoors, I put out a litter box and showed it to him. He was interested, but never used it, preferring the outdoors to take care of his sanitary needs.

Spending the entire night inside seemed to be something else he wasn't willing to do. He would stay until I finished my dinner, begging for the leftovers until he was full, and then we would settle in my armchair for a night of reading or watching television. After a while, he would jump from the chair and walk to the door where he waited for me to open it. Off he would go to make his rounds. I wouldn't see him again until the next morning.

Apparently, those nightly rounds were not all fun and games. One morning he bore cuts and scratches from a fight, probably with another cat. I cleaned his wounds with soap and water and daubed on a light coating of antibiotic crème. I knew he would rub most of it off, but thought that some would remain deeper in the cut.

I don't really remember how long this went on before he spent a whole night inside. I do remember that it was raining that night and after one quick look out the door, he turned around and settled in to wait it out.

I have no idea where he spent the night, certainly not on the bed with me. He must have found a spot to curl up where he felt safe. At one point during the night, he must have used the litter box, because it was soiled when I awoke.

In the morning, Whitey was at the door waiting to go outside by the time I finished dressing. Off he went to spend the day doing cat things.

When I returned that night, there he was waiting at the door. It was obvious I had succeeded in my quest. We were friends, now. We both showed pleasure in the other's company and constantly showed affection towards each other. There was a level of trust that only comes from familiarity.

Although we had settled into a routine, I was reluctant to take the next step, which was to put him in a carrying case to go on a visit to the veterinary doctor. I was afraid of Whitey's reaction to being caged.

However reluctant I was, it was something that had to be done. It was more than likely that he had internal parasites. He also needed shots for rabies and other communicable diseases, since he spent much of his time wandering out-of-doors. The time had come to face the situation.

Chapter 4

Finding a cage was no problem; I borrowed one from a friend. Getting Whitey in the cage proved easier than I had expected. I left the cage sitting with the door open in a corner of the room for a few days to let him get used to it.

Whitey ignored the cage until I put some food in it. He hesitated for a moment and then walked in to get the treats. I quickly closed the door with him inside the cage. He whirled and stared at the door in bewilderment then seemed to go crazy. He threw himself at the door, squalling in rage. All the time, I talked softly to him trying to get him to calm down.

There was no question about letting him out and trying again some other day. I was sure he would never go near that cage again. Eventually he exhausted himself and he began to calm down. Perhaps, my calm reassurance helped. I covered the cage with a towel and off we went.

The visit to the vet proved to be a trial for all three of us. After I explained the situation to the doctor, she wisely put on a pair of thin leather gloves before trying to handle the unhappy cat. He definitely didn't take well to a stranger touching him.

The tests the vet ran proved my fears of parasites to be true. The fears I had of Whitey's reaction to getting a shot proved unfounded. He seemed to take those in stride. Perhaps, it was because of all the times he had been scratched and bitten by other cats. These pinpricks were nothing compared to those wounds.

When the visit was over, we headed home with a few packets of medication and instructions on the proper care for a cat. There was an additional benefit to the trip – I now knew that Whitey was approximately three years old. He should have many long years ahead of him.



When the door of the cage opened, once we were home, Whitey exploded from the cage as if he had been shot from a cannon. He turned to glare at me as if all of his original fears had been confirmed. I felt terrible for abusing his trust. I quickly put the cage from sight and waited for him to calm down.

At first, he stayed in the corner, glaring at the world. Eventually, as the evening progressed, he calmed down enough to eat and later came to me for a session of petting. By the next morning things seemed to have returned to normal and we settled back into our routine.

It had been early June when I first saw the stray white cat in my yard. It had taken a month to befriend him. Once the incident of the cage was put behind us, we acted as if we had been together forever.

Each morning, when I went to work, Whitey would head out into the backyard to explore his world. Each night when I returned he would be waiting at the door ready for another evening together. This continued throughout the summer. Then, one day in early October, Whitey wasn't waiting for me when I got home.

Throughout the evening, I would go to the door to look for him. I called his name a few times, but there was no response. I had no idea where he might be or what trouble he may have encountered.

That night my sleep was troubled. Every night for the last three months, Whitey had been waiting for me when I arrived home. I feared for his safety. I reassured myself that he was a street-smart cat that could deal with just about anything he ran into.

The two main dangers were cars and stray dogs. However, he was a city cat, well acquainted with streets and cars. He could not have survived as long as he had if he was careless about traffic. He was also a tough cat that would take no nonsense from any stray dog he encountered. These thoughts did little to calm my fears.

The next night there was still no sign of him. Now I was really starting to worry. I put out food and water just in case he came during the night. The next morning neither had been touched.

The days went on with no sign of the white cat. The leaves on the trees changed color and fell to the ground and still no Whitey. I despaired of ever seeing him again. When the wind and snows of November arrived without a visit from him, I knew I'd probably never see my friend again.

Friends and acquaintances come and go during a normal lifetime. We may miss them, but life goes on. I felt that I had been lucky to gain the trust of such a wild animal. A feral cat can be wilder than what we normally think of as a 'wild' animal. Whitey had been truly wild when I first saw him.

By the end of our too brief time together, we had grown to be great friends. We spent many a long evening together enjoying each other's nearness. I treasured the moments when he would forget his dignity and act like a silly little kitten. It was hard to picture the wild cat I had first seen acting like a kitten under any circumstances.

As the winter wore on, all hope of ever seeing him again vanished. It was time to move on. As hard as it was to let go, I had my memories and the knowledge that my efforts had made it possible for the white cat to accept human companionship. I began to picture Whitey curled up on a couch with a young child lavishing affection on him. I had never been willing to accept that he had run into a situation that he couldn't handle. I was sure he had been adopted by another family and had settled down to live with them. It was very possible they never let him go out-of-doors, so he had no chance to return to me.

Today, it is possible to look back fondly on these memories. The effort I put forth to befriend a stray cat had been repaid many times over by his displays of affection and trust. Wherever Whitey is today, I hope he remembers the strange man with the soft, deep voice that first befriended him. I wish him well.

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