

The Cat Killers

Mary Clearman

Camp Sunnybank, where I spent a summer instructing twelve-year-old hoodlums in riflery, had been a little subsistence farm in central Missouri. An old couple had scraped a sort of living from it for years, but finally old age and arthritis, and maybe even a reluctance on their part to do without heat and electricity for the rest of their lives, got the better of them. They sold the farm to the city parks and recreation department for a day camp, and moved to town, leaving behind them a couple of unpainted sheds, a sagging frame house with no plumbing but with a hardshell Baptist look of withstanding the worst, and an old blue tomcat and three young cats, his descendants.

This part of Missouri is rolling hill country, soft land that looks tender in the spring. The farm was knee-deep in clover and timothy that hadn't been pastured for years, shaded by elms and old fruit trees and cottonweeds down by the creek. It was hard for me to stand in the farmyard under the old pear tree, look across those hills, and believe that two old people had just missed starvation there. My part of Kansas looks tough, and when I first came down to Missouri to college, I couldn't believe the lushness. But it's wheatland where I come from. This farm was too small and poor, and all the soft and tender grass was just a come-on. Even the pears never matured.

The farm was a good enough place for a day camp, though, only ten miles from town, and still wooded and secluded. A creek ran through the meadow and down through a series of limestone caves, and there were raccoons and opossums in the trees, and copperheads in the grass. We counsellors, most of us college students hired for the summer, spent a week setting up a picnic area, laying out archery and riflery ranges, putting up a science center in the least dilapidated of the old farm sheds, and erecting a pair of outhouses labelled "braves" and "squaws." The elderly science counsellor, a school teacher during the regular year, taught us how to recognize a copperhead, and we were set. I thought I had a soft job.

No kid was bitten by a copperhead, not during the summer I spent at the camp, though one parent came close to it. On parents' night, he came up to the science counsellor, carrying a small copperhead and wanting to know what kind of snake he'd found. Dudley, the counsellor, who'd worn himself hoarse that summer making the kids leave the copperheads alone, was still quivering

when he told us about it. No kid was ever bitten, as I said. We had a mean bunch of kids.

The first kids that came were mostly white, lazy and fretful. Their parents had evidently seen the day camp as the ideal way to force their complaining children out of their air-conditioned living rooms for the summer. Then one of the counsellors, Tony King, began dragging in kids from the federal housing project in town. Everybody referred to them as the "Project" kids, and they were black and mean. I don't know which group was worst, but after a day on the rifle range with my outfit, I understood how Dudley felt about the copperheads. Maybe learning to use a twenty-two rifle was good for their frustrations, but it was hell on me.

When I had time to spare from worrying about getting shot in the back, I used to wonder about the effect of those potential snipers and guerillas and ordinary hell-raisers a few years from now, all trained in the use of small arms at public expense. Mostly I worried about me. I checked every kid at the firing line to make sure he'd ejected his shell from the magazine before I went down to retrieve the targets from the trees I nailed them to. All the way down and back my skin crawled.

My back was a tempting target, I knew, and sometimes I could almost feel the shell between my shoulder blades. The kids giggled and arsed around, and I sweated. It was three weeks before I thought to send one of the kids down after the targets while I kept the rest of the outfit from plugging him.

The kids flattened the grass all over the farm, drove the nesting songbirds to neurosis, fell in the creek, caught an opossum and managed to cage him in a garbage can for Dudley's science center without being bitten, and profited from their interrelationship. Which is to say, the black kids learned some sadistic new twists to their devilry, and the white kids learned a lot of new words.

To do them all justice, nobody seemed racially prejudiced. When they tried to kill each other, they did it impartially. And most surprising to me, all the time they were goosing each other and stealing lunches and dropping spiders into each other's cokes and setting people's pants on fire and hammering on each other, they were perfectly cheerful. It didn't make any sense to me.

Even the kid that threw the axe at the woodcraft counsellor and nearly took his leg off just below the knee was cheerful enough. I guess he just wanted to see Tony King without one leg. Or hopefully, see how he looked dead. He wasn't mad about anything.

He wasn't prejudiced, either, as far as I could make out, because he was black (one of Tony's Project kids, in fact) and so was Tony. It was midafternoon, and I was just bringing my riflery squad back for cokes, when we passed Tony's woodcraft class and saw the kid lean over and pick up the axe. Tony had his back turned, showing another kid something about tree bark. I yelled, my squad cheered and brandished their twenty-twos, and Tony half-turned, saw what was going on, and jumped almost but not quite in time to get out of the path of the blade. It slashed a four-inch gash out of his levis and nicked the calf of his leg. The axe, when we looked at it later, was razor sharp, and

why anybody'd honed it like that and turned it over to the kids, we never knew. It was like teaching them riflery. Unrealistic.

I scooped up Tony's kids with mine and took them all up to the farmhouse to turn the axe-thrower over to Mrs. Boswell, the head counsellor, for a quiet talk, while Tony got old Dudley to doctor his cut. Tony limped for a couple days, but the axe-thrower emerged from the farmhouse after half an hour, draining a coke and looking pleased with himself. It would have saved everybody trouble—us, himself, society—to have taken him out and shot him. But Mrs. Boswell talked quietly with him, and gave him a coke. Even Tony, who you'd expect to show some resentment, didn't say much. He growled something about the little bastard, and was careful from then on how he turned his back on the pack.

But I never understood Tony King. I didn't like him, really. My dislike wasn't anything I could explain, because anybody I tried to explain it to would have been bound to think it was because Tony was black and I'm white. I'm not prejudiced. There aren't any Negroes in my part of Kansas, I never even saw one until I started high school in the consolidated district, and then I always got along all right.

Tony was about twenty that summer, the same age as I was. Old Dudley told me that he was majoring in biology and was damned sharp at it, but Tony never said anything about it. He was lean and long-boned, and he wore a college sweatshirt with the sleeves hacked off, and a frayed black cowboy hat pulled down over close-set eyes, and he had a shamle-hipped walk that the kids used to imitate. He never talked much, and he never did anything to me to make me dislike him. Except things that I took for granted, just common sense things that anybody would take for granted, seemed to irritate him. And I always sensed that he didn't like me.

He was the same way with old Dudley. Dudley's school-teacherliness carried over into his day camp work, and he did his best to instill some sense of the future into his class of screw-offs, along with information on Missouri minerals and plant life, and, always, the copperheads.

"Look at Tony, there," Dudley would urge his snickering little circle. "Look what he's made of himself. All on his own, too. He climbed out of the gutter, and got through high school, and he's going to be a fine biologist some day." The speech was punctuated by blasts into his handkerchief, for Dudley suffered horribly from hay fever, and the time he spent out in the country was misery. The pay wasn't that much, either, but Dudley was an earnest old man who thought the work was worthwhile, so he sneezed and went on. Eyes watering, mopping at his nose, putting up with kids that dropped frogs into his hot coffee, never seeming to notice that he wasn't making a dent in their understanding. He reminded me of the old couple that had owned the farm, beating themselves to death against all that raw material and never changing it into anything productive. I couldn't see why it took them so long to learn.

Dudley, I learned, taught school in the small Missouri town where Tony had climbed out of the gutter all by himself, and I listened along with the kids

to the biographical details that Dudley supplied, until one day I saw Tony listening, too.

It wasn't unusual to find counsellors anywhere in that camp. I was on my way from the rifle range to the store room for some twenty-two shells, and Tony was shambling down from the farm house when we met outside the shed where Dudley conducted his science and character-building classes.

"Pay attention to Tony, now," Dudley was chattering from inside the shed. "See what he's made of himself. No reason why you can't do the same thing."

I turned around to Tony, grinning at Dudley's earnestness, but the look on Tony's face, even what I could see of it under the hat, ended my grin. For a minute I just stared at him, seeing the mosquito bite on his neck and the bramble scratch across his cheek where a scab was drying, and the beads of sweat trickling down from under the cowboy hat, and the way his mouth was twisted. I'd never looked at Tony like that, but for just a minute all I could do was to stare at that mosquito bite, while I realized that he disliked harmless old Dudley as much as he did me. I turned and walked off.

I didn't understand it, I still don't. Not really hate, but just plain dislike.

But while Dudley tried to improve character and teach the kids about the Missouri countryside and save them from the copperheads, and while I averted homicides on the rifle range, and while Tony King stalked around the woods teaching woodcraft with his hat pulled down over his eyes and not looking at anybody else, a new problem developed, and that was the cat problem.

The old folks had left the old blue tomcat and the three half-grown kittens behind when they left the farm. It would have been kinder to have shot them instead, but maybe they were sentimental, or maybe they just didn't want to bother. Whichever way, they abandoned the cats. During the early spring, when nests of baby cottontails and mice and songbirds were plentiful, the cats had done well enough. Gradually, though, we all noticed that the rabbits didn't seem as thick as they had been. I saw the old tomcat once with a lizard, and another time with a grass snake clamped between his teeth and writhing at both ends. The tom had apparently hunted the neighborhood empty, and his sides were gaunt under his fur. The kittens, less expert, looked even worse, with their hair coming out in patches and strings of matter collecting around their eyes.

Finally all four cats took to haunting the picnic grounds while the kids ate their sack lunches, waiting to pounce on bread crusts and cookie crumbs. At last the old blue tom got too hungry to wait for a crust, and grabbed a sandwich right out of a girl's hand. The girl was too surprised to do anything but sit and stare at her empty hand, while the old blue tom carried the sandwich off to the bushes and growled over it.

Mrs. Boswell, who had seen it all, called Tony and me over after lunch.

"We've got to do something about those cats," she said, keeping her voice down so that the kids wouldn't hear. It's only a matter of time until one of them bites a child. And the kittens are sick. Have you noticed their eyes?"

We had.

"What do you want us to do?" asked Tony. He had kicked a little hole in the ground with the toe of his boot, and now he filled it up again. He seemed

to like Mrs. Boswell, or at least not dislike her, which was strange, because she never had much to say to him.

"Well, they'll have to be killed," said Mrs. Boswell. "The humane society won't come clear out here, and, well, those cats are sick, you know. The humane society would kill them if they had them. You know that, Tony." I didn't know why she was making a point of explaining to Tony. He jammed his hands down in his levis pockets so that the cords stood out in his forearms, and said nothing.

"I can borrow a twenty-two rifle from the rifle range," I suggested.

"No," said Mrs. Boswell, "because I don't want to take a chance of your hitting anything else, Mike. Besides, one shot will bring every child on the run, and it's bound to upset them."

I could imagine those young hoodlums being upset over a cat being shot. Mrs. Boswell was right, of course, that a shot would bring them all running hopefully. Probably they'd set up a wail about the poor pussy cats, which would be completely phony. But I didn't say any more.

"Try to think of a quiet way to get rid of them," Mrs. Boswell went on. "Something that won't attract attention. I wouldn't ask you to do it, but—" she still had that peculiar apologetic note in her voice, and I looked from her to Tony. Tony had been putting in summers for the parks and recreation department for three years, I knew, even while they still camped out in the city park, so maybe Mrs. Boswell knew him better than I did.

"It's just that there's nobody else to ask," she ended. "Dudley, of course, and you know how he is. And those girls over in the arts and crafts center." She shrugged.

Tony nodded, and left his chin down so that his hat covered his face. "Well, we'll do something," he said.

She looked relieved. "I knew you would," she told us, and went off to supervise the shed where a pair of college girls were running a class in woodcarving and finger cutting.

I looked at Tony, and after a while he gave me a grudging glance and went back under his hat. "Well," he said, "hell. I guess we better catch 'em, first."

Catching the cats turned out to be the easiest step. We borrowed the opossum's garbage can, shutting the furiously snarling opossum temporarily under a water bucket weighed down with a stone, leaving him rattling his teeth all by himself and switching his naked tail out from under the rim of the bucket. Then we took the garbage can out in the bushes below the picnic grounds and laid it on its side. We baited the can with slices of lunch meat, and waited with the lid until the kittens came sniffing after the meat, then hurried out and clamped the lid down.

Two of the kittens were so sick that they could barely crawl into the can after the meat. I'm not sentimental about animals, or squeamish either. Farm kids usually aren't. But my stomach worked at the sight of those kittens, and I wished I hadn't eaten lunch. Their hair was coming out in bunches, and maggots had formed squirming pockets along their backs. Their eyes were half crusted shut with yellow slime, and fleas worked busily in that.

“Jesus,” said Tony. “Think we can kill the poor little bastards without touching ’em?”

The idea that Tony liked their looks even less than I did, of Tony with his gutter antecedents showing signs of squeamishness, helped to settle my stomach. We both walked off a little way from the garbage can with the two kittens in it, and talked about ways to kill the cats.

The easiest thing would have been to shoot them, except that Mrs. Boswell didn’t want us to, and then if we shot these two, the others might get suspicious. I’d done plenty of things to cats when I was a kid on a Kansas farm, but all of those things involved touching the cat at some point. We could have brained them with a rock, except that we didn’t want to get that close to them, or we could have drowned them if the creek had been closer and we hadn’t been afraid of poisoning the water. And people since have told me a whole lot of other methods that didn’t occur to Tony or me that afternoon.

“Let’s throttle the mothuhs,” said Tony finally, his voice going thick on him. I watched the muscles in his neck.

“What do you mean, throttle ’em? With your bare hands? They aren’t heavy enough to hang.”

Tony gave me one of his bleak looks, not much diluted by his reaction to the sick cats. “I think old Dudley’s got some clothes line rope.”

“Yes, but—”

Tony treated my arguments as though they had come from one of the sick cats. He went shamle-hipping off to get the rope from Dudley. Finally I followed him up to the science shed, listened to the obligatory discussion, and followed him back down to the garbage can again with the length of rope.

Then he showed me what he had in mind. We tied a slip knot around the neck of the weaker kitten, taking pains not to breathe deeply as we did it, then both backed off with an end of the rope in opposite directions, and pulled. It didn’t take long. The kitten scabbled with its hind feet and rolled its eyes back, but it was too sick to struggle much.

The other kitten was no more trouble. I didn’t exactly enjoy hauling back on my end of the rope and waiting until the cat stopped scabbaling, but Tony surprised me. Once, looking at him over the cat on the rope between us, I thought he was going to be sick. Old tough Tony, no less.

The last kitten was more trouble. We caught him easily enough, but he had been eating better than his brothers, and wasn’t quite so sick. He backed up in the garbage can where we couldn’t reach him without taking a chance on being bitten, and snarled.

“Little sonofabitch,” I snarled back. Tony and I were both dripping sweat. It was one of those hundred-degree Missouri summer days. The humidity was so high that you felt as though you could dive and swim through the air, and the first two kittens were draped on a stump, waiting to be buried. The last kitten showed his tiny teeth at us, sweat ran through our eyebrows and into our eyes, and all the time we could hear the kids yelling from the farm house yard where they were playing volleyball.

Tony made a lasso in one end of the clothes line rope, and made a trial swing or two with it.

I didn't like the looks of it. "What good's that going to do? You can't hang that cat, he's too light."

Tony glanced over his shoulder and gave me one of his not-looks. "You got a better idea, wise-ass?" He peered under the lid of the garbage can, and the kitten spat at him.

"Once you get it on him, you won't be able to get it off."

"God damn it, you got so much advice, you do it!" He didn't offer to give me the rope, though. Instead he turned the garbage can upright, waited until the kitten had frantically got its footing again, and started fishing with his noose. He made several bad tries, but at last he gave a jerk, and the kitten came sailing out of the can at the end of the clothes-line rope. I dodged out of its path as it made an arc through the air, lit in a clump of grass, spun to its feet, and was running before Tony could haul it in again.

"Now what're you going to do?" I yelled. The kitten, restrained by the rope from going any further in one direction, bolted straight for Tony and arrived at the end of the rope in the other direction.

"Told you, you couldn't hang him."

"Shut up, you bastard." Tony had shortened his hold on the rope, and began doing what he'd apparently contemplated from the beginning, swinging the kitten on the end of the rope until its own momentum created enough force to strangle it. All I did was keep out of the way.

Finally he let the kitten down. I got the noose off its neck with a stick. It was dead, all right. I looked up in time to catch Tony bent over at the waist, puking into the bushes.

Nothing was funny about the situation, but I started laughing anyway. I stood there with the dead kitten at my feet, two more dead kittens being worried by flies on a stump, looked across at Tony lifting his head and turning gray around the mouth, and laughed.

Tony's hat was gone, and his eyes looked naked without its protection. "God damn you," he said. "You bastard."

I couldn't stop laughing. "You're god damned tough," I told him. "You cool bastard! You can't even keep your lunch down over these damn cats. Lot of cool you got!" That was what amused me so, I guess, the idea of old gutter Tony losing his cool over what any farm kid had done at twelve years old.

But he was burning mad now. His hair was plastered flat with sweat where his hat had rested, and sweat was running down his neck and arms. "You dumb bastard," he rasped, wiping his mouth off with the back of his arm.

I'd got my laugh down to a grin by now. "I never figured you'd go all sentimental over a bunch of sick cats, anyway. I figured you had that much cool."

"Sentimental?" That stopped him in his tracks. He mouthed the word over, syllable by syllable, as if he didn't know what it meant. "Sentimental?" Then his eyes got tight. "You stupid, stupid bastard—listen, you dumb sonofabitch, you like it so well, you take care of that tomcat. See how you enjoy it. You bastard."

“Okay,” I said, though I knew that the tomcat was wilier than the kittens had been, and in better shape, too. “Sure, I’ll do it.”

Tony found his hat and sat down under a tree. “Stupid, stupid,” he kept muttering. “Stupid, stupid.”

I wondered if the heat had got to him. The sun steamed down even through the leaves, and I had a burning circle of chigger bites all around my groin. But I had laughed myself into a corner, so I went ahead and rebaited the garbage can.

By the time I had the garbage can rigged again, Tony had stopped talking to himself. He leaned back on the tree, jacked his knees up, and watched me from under his hat with a cynical grin. I watched him, too, as much as I could without being too obvious about it. Tony’s expression of foreknowledge worried me; he looked as if he knew I was going to find out something that he had known for a long time, and he was just going to wait under that tree until I found it out. He made me nervous. I kept glancing around to see if he still looked the same way. He did.

The old blue tomcat hadn’t survived all this time for nothing. For a long time he wouldn’t come near the garbage can, even when I’d moved it to a fresh spot and laid an enticing little trail of lunch meat from it out into the bushes. When he finally did come out to investigate, he took his time, looking at the scraps of bologna and then in our direction. At last he snatched a bit of meat and bolted it whole, glaring in our direction with his ragged fighting ears flattened. Then another stealthy advance on the next scrap of meat, another long hesitation.

I was sweating, and my chigger bites itched worse and worse as the afternoon wore on. Tony just sat there, a little way off, with a glint in his eye, while the tomcat stalked my trap, and I chafed. That bastard Tony, I’d like to beat him to death, and that damned blue cat, too.

It took the tomcat nearly an hour to make up his mind to go after the meat in the garbage can. He must have had a good idea what I was up to, and it was only being so hungry that made him give in at last. He leaped into the garbage can, seized the meat, and sprang for the mouth of the can again. I was barely in time with the lid. The tomcat hit it and snarled just as I clamped it shut. I righted the can and sat on it, listening to the tomcat growl under me.

Tony waited, and I wiped an armload of sweat off my forehead. I was going to have to get the cat out of the can the same way Tony had, only the tomcat was going to be more to handle than even the healthiest kitten had been. Damn it, I didn’t like it. I wiped my forehead again, and Tony still waited.

While I fetched the length of clothes-line rope and pretended to tighten the lasso, I thought about the cats I’d tormented in my life, how I’d been through all this and it didn’t mean a thing. The tomcat never stopped growling, a vicious steady rumble that echoed inside the can, and when I lifted the lid a crack, he leaped for daylight. I slammed it again.

I looked over my shoulder at Tony, opened the lid just a crack again, and again the tomcat leaped, never stopping his growl. He had a sick, rotten smell about him that the hot sun made worse, and my stomach lurched. None of that,

I thought. I'd have to drape the lasso over the top of the can, raise the lid, and jerk like hell when the tomcat made his leap for freedom. If I missed him, I might never catch him again, for he'd be even warier after having been caught once. But what the hell? I didn't care if he bit and infected every kid in camp. All I wanted was to get it to hell over with, go home and take a shower, and put something on my chigger bites. The tomcat rammed against the side of the garbage can, and Tony waited under his tree, smiling with that been-there-before look on his face.

I got my loop just where I wanted it. The angry rumbling growl wound on and on from inside the garbage can. One thing was for sure, I wasn't going to take a chance on being bitten myself. That old blue tom could roam the camp forever first. His smell seeped out and filled my throat, and I nudged my loop into just the right spot.

As the lid came up, the tomcat made his third leap, and it was a good one, sending him clear of the garbage can and hurtling toward the bushes in one motion. I jerked my loop, just a little too slow, and the tomcat squalled three octaves higher than his growl. Oh, Christ, I thought. I had him around his middle instead of his neck.

The tomcat was rolling over and over, clawing at the rope with all four feet, while I ran to keep the slack out of the rope. Over my shoulder I saw him bounce on a rock and shoot several feet into the air. He came down clawing and spitting. I ran, choking up on the length of rope as I went, until at last I thought I had a short enough hold to be able to stop. I turned, and the tomcat whipped over on his feet and growled at me from three feet away.

Tony had left the shade and just stood there, his hands stuck down in his back pockets. "You can't strangle him around the belly." He leaned back and watched me from under his hat, waiting to see what I would do next.

"Screw off," I told him, "or else get a club and beat him to death while I hold him."

"Beat your own cat to death."

"Well, I can't keep him on this rope and beat him at the same time," I shouted. The sweat on my cheeks was partly tears, I was so damned mad at that cat and at Tony. And at myself, too. Screw them both, and the whole pitiful camp full of mean bastards of kids that would as soon kill me as not and that I was supposed to be protecting from sick cats.

I just had on tennis shoes. If I'd been wearing logger boots, maybe, I could have kicked the tomcat to death. But I was so mad that I didn't stop to think about my tennis shoes. I just shortened my hold on the rope and waded into the tomcat.

The first couple of kicks caught him by surprise, and he doubled up and tried to get away. The rope held him, though, and after those few frantic clawings away from me, he turned on me, wrapping himself around the leg that was doing the kicking, and burrowing in with all his claws and teeth.

I felt them through my blue jeans, and yelled. The cat and I must have been going around in circles, because at intervals I saw Tony looking on. It was like watching your parents watching you on a merry-go-round, except that

the cat and I were taking less time on cycles. Tony still had that wise look, but I didn't have time to think about Tony. I stopped turning around, stood on the leg the cat had, and kicked the cat with the other foot. He came partly unstuck from my leg, with shreds of denim in his claws, and I gave him a couple good chops in the belly before he attached himself again. By that time I was feeling no pain. I mean, I felt him shredding my leg from the calf to the ankle, but I didn't care any more. All I cared about was hurting that cat, and I kicked and kicked until all I could feel in the world was the sensation my toes got from driving again and again into that squirming, biting bag of fur and bones. Somewhere I heard a funny high-pitched voice, and dimly I thought it was Tony yelling, but he said afterwards that it was me, screaming at the cat. I didn't know it. All I knew was kick, kick, into that cat, the sweat, and how mad I was, and all that sweat and madness turning into pure pleasure in the kicking.

I must have let go of the rope. Because I gave one last kick, and the tomcat, trailing the rope like a tail on a kite, went sailing into free air. He went up and up, it seemed to me in slow motion, and finally began to come down. I don't know where he landed. He landed somewhere out of sight. I know he survived, because we caught glimpses of him through the bushes the rest of the summer, but I didn't know that at the time.

I stopped screaming, and looked down at my legs. My blue jeans were shredded, and blood-stained up and down. As I stood there, my heart stopped racing, and gave a few big, hard, slow beats. I breathed out.

I looked up, and there was Tony. The been-there-before look was still on his face, but it didn't make me mad. Maybe I was too tired. I just felt, for once, as stupid as Tony had said I was. So that was what he knew, and why he hadn't wanted to kill the cats in the first place, and why he was so outraged when I laughed. He knew how it felt, and maybe he hated sharing the outrage with me.

I wiped my face, and went to find Dudley and get some stuff for my legs where the tomcat had clawed me. Tony followed me up to the science shed. He never said a word. He didn't say much to me for the rest of that summer. He had never had much to say to me before that. But from then I knew what it was he didn't say, and that made all the difference.