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Rocky the Miracle Cat

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Dedication

In memory of Casey, Cricket, Ulysses, Oscar, Pericles, Waldo, Phoebe, Miss Lilly and Rocky.

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“Everybody knew Bagheera, and nobody dared to cross his path; for he was as cunning as Tabaqui, as bold as the wild buffalo, and as reckless as the wounded elephant. But he had a voice as soft as wild honey dripping from a tree, and a skin softer than down.”

—*Rudyard Kipling, The Jungle Book* (1894), describing the black panther who befriended Mowgli, the man cub.

Chapter 1 Before Rocky

Long ago, in the previous millennium, Wendy and I had three cats—Oscar, Pericles and Waldo—and no children. Oscar was a girl with a boy's name. We decided on the name before we got the cat. She came with her brother Ulysses from the Humane Society when they were both little white kittens. Ulysses, true to his name, soon wandered away, and now more than three decades later, he has yet to return. Oscar was smart; she knew a good thing when she found it--our home. Perhaps Oscar always wanted to be a boy, but more about that in the next chapter.

Pericles was a gentle, seal-pointed Siamese cat with a mellow voice. We got him from the brother of a friend. The brother was convinced that there was a hot market for pure-bred Siamese cats. He raised several litters. The Siamese bubble burst, and he found himself with many kittens to unload. We took one. We named him Pericles after the ancient Greek statesman known for his eloquence. Siamese cats are known to be eloquent, and Pericles was no exception.

Oscar was not amused by the arrival of Pericles. Oscar hissed at Pericles when he insisted on following her around the house. But soon after Pericles came to live with us, our new baby Alex was born. In case you're wondering, Alex was a human baby, all nine-plus pounds of him, with red hair on top. Pericles turned his attention to Alex. Every night, when Wendy or I put Alex to bed, Pericles came into Alex's bedroom to yowl "Good night." For years, those friendly yowls accompanied Alex's bedtime stories or songs. Alex grew up with Pericles and Pericles grew old as Alex became an adult.

And then there was Waldo. He was a tabby. He arrived as a stray at our cabin in the Wisconsin woods. One day, we heard meowing. There were two cats traveling together. Maybe they came from a nearby farm, but who knows? Wendy put out milk, and Waldo drank it. His traveling companion moved on. Waldo joined our family. He was not afraid of people.

These were in the days before Rocky.

Next, I need to tell you about Max, our big, rambunctious chocolate Labrador retriever. I had always wanted a dog. When I was a child, my parents promised me one, but they never made good on their promise. Alex wanted a dog too. But Wendy said, "We can't get a dog until after Oscar dies." Why not? Because, in her younger days, Oscar had been seriously injured by a dog bite. How could we possibly ask her to share her home with a dog after such a trauma?

Oscar was a clever cat. She used trickery to escape from confinement or to gain access to our bedroom. But in time, she grew old and senile. She began to wander and get lost; I suppose cats and dogs can suffer from dementia. Once, we retrieved her from the pound, and once from neighbors a few blocks away. Wendy on the telephone to the neighbor: "The cat you listed on the poster is probably ours." The neighbor: "What kind of cat are

you looking for?" Wendy: "A white cat with no ears." (Oscar had lost her ears to frostbite.) Neighbor: "Yep, we've got her."

At the ripe old age of 21 years—human years, not "cat years"—Oscar passed away. Alex and I dug a small grave in our backyard and buried her.

Okay, now, how about getting a dog? We had always been cat people. We didn't know much about dogs. But we did have criteria for selecting one. "A real dog needs to be a good size," I said. "And it needs to be big enough so you can see its poop," said Wendy. (She said that because I have low vision.) We all agreed that the dog would need to be a swimmer to enjoy the lake at our cabin in Wisconsin. The internet said that labs were the best family dogs, loved the water, and were only moderately successful in chewing through house and home. Having survived shredded upholstery, fur balls and pee-soaked laundry from rampant cat activity, we felt prepared to take on a Labrador retriever.

Where would you go to get the best Labrador retriever in the world? Nowhere except Happy Days Kennels. John, the breeder, introduced us to mama labs 13 chocolate puppies. Out on the lawn, the thirteen puppies hurtled about in dizzying Brownian motion. John pointed to the calmest one. "He'd make a great family pet. These guys are bred for hunting, but he's the mellowest one in the litter." We decided to take him home. We named him Max after the Grinch's dog companion. (I'm not admitting who plays the Grinch's role in our family.) We went to the Farm and Fleet store and bought a large wire kennel for Max. You'll see why I mention that detail a little later.

Now our happy family consisted of me, Gordon the dad, Wendy the mom, Alex the son, Max the dog, and our two remaining cats, Pericles and Waldo. A pleasing pyramid: three humans, two cats and a dog!

Chapter 2 Oscar and Rocky – Transmigration of Souls

What we hadn't counted on was Oscar's lasting influence and mystical presence.

Do you believe in life after death or even reincarnation? Can people return after death as animals, or animals as people? Can a cat die, and return as another cat? Do people have souls? For that matter, do animals have souls? According to the newspapers, Pope Francis thinks they do. Who am I to argue with pontifical authority?

Why am I asking these deep theological questions? Why do such questions belong in a book about a cat? Well, I did put the word "miracle" in the book title, didn't I?

As Oscar, the girl cat with a boy's name, grew old, she mellowed. She learned to tolerate Pericles's affections and to ignore Waldo. As she lapsed into feline senility, she deigned to play with a young black tomcat who occasionally visited our backyard. Indeed, they became buddies—Oscar the old lady, and Black Cat the young tom on the prowl. Do opposites attract? Maybe Oscar always wanted to be a boy. Maybe she just admired the

muscular physique and big head of her healthy young playmate. Maybe she fantasized about a romantic encounter with a trophy tom. Maybe she was looking for someone to whom she could bequeath her territorial dominions. Perhaps Black Cat recognized wisdom and intelligence in the earless old girl. I hardly think he was lusting after her feminine charms. Or maybe he sensed that Oscar was somehow his ticket to the good life.

We were amused and pleased to see our earless wonder Oscar playing with Black Cat. They would nose each other, and hang out together in the yard. Oscar would sit at the door, waiting to go out, when Black Cat was in the yard. They made a strange pair of friends, if not strange bedfellows. Apparently, it was Oscar's last fling.

Soon, she became too old and infirm to go outdoors to play, and Black Cat disappeared. Oscar died, and was buried in the garden. We forgot about the brief and unlikely feline friendship.

Seasons passed. One day, Black Cat reappeared! What was this? We had not seen him for at least a year.

Yes, as you may have guessed, Black Cat is the hero of my story. Black Cat, a.k.a. Rocky, joined our family. How that happened will be revealed in the next chapter.

But how do reincarnation and the transmigration of souls come into the picture? Well, this is what I think ...

Rocky was the reincarnation of Oscar. You say, how could that be? Black Cat showed up before Oscar died. But who says transmigration of souls has to follow death and be all or none. Might it not be that as Oscar's life slowly flickered out, her persona passed gradually to Black Cat—female to male, boy name to boy name, white to black, clever to clever, bossy to bossy?

And now, as I speculate on this fanciful feline hypothesis, in the days after Rocky himself has passed on, I wonder, where is Rocky's doppelganger? Should we be on the lookout for a clever stray cat or dog at our back door? Will the newcomer possess those ineffable Rocky qualities of love and aggression? Or might Rocky's spirit have seeped into the hearts and minds of our two current felines—Phoebe and Ms. Lilly—or even into our human psyches?

Interlude

I come from a mysterious place far away and a time long past.

"Where do I come from" you're asking? Why should I tell you? What business is it of yours? I'm willing to remain in your presence; isn't that enough to delight you and make you proud?

You may be guessing: he comes from ancient Egypt. That's a good guess; yes, that's where my kind were rightfully revered, where we charmed Queen Nefertiti, and where we still lie with the pharaohs in endless sleep. But you would be wrong.

Think again! Think of strength and beauty, ferocity and generosity. Think of speed and stealth, of fearlessness and loyalty. , imagine me climbing tall trees and leaping from bough to bough. ,imagine me creeping through tall grasses to snare unwary birds and other foolish creatures. Think of deep, throaty growls and the mesmerism of a rumbling purr. Think of giant feet, and a tail straight as an arrow. Think of whiskers, longer than porcupine quills, probing and inquisitive. Think of velvety black fur, the envy of princesses. You are thinking of me, and the law of the jungle, and of the forest and of the garden. Now, do you know where I come from?

Chapter 3 The Cat Came Back

Next, I'm going to tell you how Black Cat became Rocky and a member of our family.

It was a cold day in February. We live in Minneapolis. I'm sure you know that Minnesota cold is a serious business. The temperature was below zero Fahrenheit.

"Look who's back," called Wendy from the kitchen. And sure enough, there was Black Cat on our back deck, conspicuous against the snow, with his nose up against the glass door. We recognized Black Cat's big head and paws, even though we hadn't seen him for months. It was close to Valentine's Day, but this was not the surprise any of us expected from Cupid.

Where had he been? We'll never know. I speculated that he had moved away with his human family, but had journeyed back to his old territory. Cats do that, you know. We had firsthand knowledge. When we moved to our current house with Oscar and Ulysses, I regularly strolled six blocks back to the site of our old house, cat basket in hand, to fetch Ulysses. (Well, yes, Ulysses, or Odysseus if you prefer the Greek version, was famous for a long journey home.)

I also argued in the previous chapter that the transmigration of cat souls takes time, and happens in a place far away. If so, it stands to reason that Oscar's reincarnation as Black Cat (soon to be renamed Rocky) might have taken a long and perilous journey in returning to his preferred home.

All of this is speculation. What we know for sure is that a big black cat stood in the snow outside our deck door, staring in.

"And it looks like he's hurt," Wendy continued. "Look at his ear. It's got a big chunk missing."

"He's been in a fight," said Alex.

"He seems to be limping," said Wendy, as the cat slowly changed position. "He's probably cold and hungry. We have to let him in."

I wasn't so sure about that, but Wendy opened the door. "Come, kitty, kitty kitty." He didn't come. Instead, he growled. His black tail fluffed up and he limped away through the snow. A moment later, he disappeared into the shrubbery at the back of the garden.

Chapter 4 Rocky Comes In From The Cold

The next day was even colder. Once again, Black Cat was back, nose to the glass, peering inside.

This time, Wendy was ready with a dish of cat food. She opened the glass door to the deck, placed the dish at the threshold and beckoned to the cat. The cold air blew into the kitchen. We stood back a few feet, shivering. The black cat looked at the dish warily, but didn't move.

"Maybe he's afraid of us," said Alex. We all backed away from the dish. When we had retreated out of the kitchen and into the hallway, the black cat approached the dish, and ravenously downed the food. Throughout, he kept his big head cocked, with an eye on us. Wendy was eager to pet and reassure him, but when she stepped toward the door, black cat hissed and scurried away. His limp was even more pronounced than the previous day. Once again, he disappeared into the shrubbery.

This ritual played out for several more days. Each time we moved the dish of tempting food a few inches farther into the kitchen. Black Cat followed the food, but hissed and retreated outside when any of us approached him.

Meanwhile, we watched the neighborhood for postings about a missing cat. We scanned the newspaper Lost and Found. Nothing! But who would want a feral, hostile cat like this anyway?

One day, after gobbling his food, Black Cat surprised us. Instead of retreating outdoors, he stepped past the empty food dish and began nosing around the kitchen. Evidently, he found the odors of other cats, dog and humans to be of interest. Could it also be, that he found them to be familiar? It almost seemed as if he knew his way around.

"He's starting to feel at home. Let's give him a name," said Alex.

"He's obviously a tough guy." said Wendy. "He looks like a fighter."

"Let's call him Rocky," Alex said. We all agreed.

I should have known that by naming him, we were committing ourselves to Rocky's future.

"Can we keep him?" asked Alex.

"No way! I said. "He's a feral cat. We don't know what diseases he's carrying. And he'll certainly cause trouble for Waldo and Pericles."

"But he's still hurting," said Wendy. "He can't catch birds or mice when he's limping like that. He's depending on us.' She sensed that I was weakening. "And it's so cold. He won't survive without food!"

The discussion went on for a day or two. I felt the pressure mounting from Wendy and Alex.

Rocky became more adventuresome, investigating the dining room and the living room after taking his meal. But he continued to hiss and growl whenever he spied another cat or when Wendy, Alex or I approached him. It became clear he was not intimidated by us, but simply issuing warnings. As he grew more comfortable with the warm, indoor environment of our kitchen, his assertiveness grew. He was almost the literal embodiment of the old cliché: give him an inch and he'll take a mile.

On the fifth day, Wendy issued an ultimatum, "He won't survive outside in his current state. We have to take him in and find a home for him."

Chapter 5 Capturing Rocky

"But who'll take him?" I said. "Nobody will take a mean, feral stray like Rocky.,.,," There was a long, expectant pause. "And we can't keep him here, with puppy Max and the cats." I thought I had a winning case.

But I should have learned. Wendy was a lawyer. She had anticipated my argument. "We'll catch him and take him to the Cat Orphanage." It so happened that Wendy's boss at the Legal Department was a lady who also fancied cats. Joan was also president of the board at the Cat Orphanage. Wendy had an in; she was sure they would take Rocky.

I had only one more card to play. "Who's going to catch him, and how will we get him to the Cat Orphanage?"

It was time for Alex to show his mettle.

Alex was 14 at the time, and ready to take on the world, including Rocky. He coiffed his red hair in spikes and wore short sleeves in the winter. He was a sweet kid, but maybe, just maybe, he could intimidate Rocky. Alex's idea: "We can tempt him with food to stick his head into the cat basket. Then, we'll push him in, and close the cover." We had an old wicker cat basket with a wire mesh cover and buckle tie. It was somewhat the worse for wear, having served as transport for numerous cat visits to the vet. As you know, cats don't like being taken on car trips, especially to the vet. They scratch, meow and sometimes protest by peeing in their carriers. We had occasionally taken two cats together in the basket; they would shove and push and bite, and claw the wicker.

I was doubtful. Was Rocky gullible enough to enter the cat basket? Even if he did, was the cat basket sturdy enough to contain him? I didn't have a better idea for sequestering Rocky and I could see that I had lost the fight to turn him away. I was intrigued to see if Alex's scheme would work.

It took a few days to implement Alex's plan. On the first day, the wicker basket sat open on its side near the food dish. Rocky came in from the cold for his daily feed, taking no notice of the wicker trap. The next day, the food dish was placed next to the opening of the basket. Rocky hesitated briefly, looked suspiciously at the basket, and then proceeded to feed. On the third day, the food dish was just inside the open basket. Once again Rocky eyed the basket suspiciously, but hunger got the better of him. He stuck his head inside the gaping entrance to the basket and began chowing down.

Whoosh! Alex made a lightning move. He grabbed the big black cat by his hind quarters and shoved him into the basket. The dish turned over, scattering wet food over the floor. Rocky snarled, and attempted to turn around to face his assailant. But he was too big to manage a quick one-eighty in the confined space of the basket. Alex brought the wire mesh cover around and began fastening the buckle. Black feet with claws reached out through the gaps in the wires. The basket began shaking. Alex succeeded in fastening the buckle. Blood trickled down his fingers. There was a long scratch on his hand.

"Damn cat," shouted Alex, plus a few other choice words, uttered with the sound of Rocky's hisses and growls. Alex showed off his war wound for all to admire.

Rocky was confined in the basket. But he was determined to escape. His claws began tearing at the flimsy wicker.

"We've got him", said Alex with grim satisfaction, "but I need a band aid."

By the time Alex returned with a Mickey Mouse band aid on his finger, it was clear that the basket would not hold for long. Claws and a black paw were appearing through an opening in the ruptured wicker.

Alex had another stellar idea. "Let's put him in the dog kennel." When we obtained puppy Max, we got a large open-style wire kennel with a sliding gate. We purchased it at Fleet Farm. It was meant to handle a big dog. Puppy Max was content to spend time in his kennel on a comfortable doggy bed while we were out of the house. There was plenty of room for him, his bed and a dog toy in the kennel. By the time of Rocky's arrival, Max was house trained and seldom used his kennel. It still stood ready and waiting in Alex's room.

Alex hoisted the cat basket by the handle. It wobbled erratically as its unhappy passenger heaved to and fro, trying to escape. Alex managed to get the flailing basket upstairs, into his bedroom, and stuffed it into the dog kennel. He pulled down and locked the gate. Soon after, the wicker basket gave way, and Rocky emerged. He stood among the wicker tatters, safely enclosed in the wire kennel.

There we had him! Our version of Bagheera, the big black ferocious panther from *The Jungle Book*, captive in a cage, no longer free to roam the jungle.

Shortly after, Alex and I put on work gloves for protection. We carried the kennel, with Rocky inside, down to the garage where we deposited it in the back of our Volvo station wagon. Fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the Cat Orphanage. We had called ahead. The volunteer staff carried the kennel to their reception area where they took Rocky into custody.

Chapter 6 A Meeting of the Board at the Cat Orphanage

We went home, feeling happy and morally righteous. We had rescued a feral cat in distress. We had delivered him to the Cat Orphanage, a no-kill cat shelter. We had even given him a name. We had done a good deed. Rocky was now in good hands, and someone else's problem. They would find a good home for him ... but with whom?

We returned to our normal daily routine, tending to Max and our two socially well-adjusted cats, Waldo and Pericles. Max didn't seem to mind that we had requisitioned his kennel for capturing Rocky.

A couple of weeks passed. Late winter gave way to early spring. The snow began to disappear from our back yard. Green shoots began to appear in the garden. Waldo and Pericles ventured outdoors.

One day at work, Wendy's boss Joan came into her office, closing the door behind her. She had a solemn expression on her face. "Wendy, do you have a few minutes to talk?"

Wendy was puzzled and alarmed. After all, nobody looks forward to a meeting with the boss when the optics of the encounter are ominous. "Sure," she said, nodding to a chair for Joan to sit down. Wendy turned away from her computer screen to face Joan.

Joan clasped her hands as if preparing to break bad news, and began, "Well, it's about Rocky."

"Is he OK," asked Wendy with concern.

"Yes," said Joan, "he's doing fine. But ... well, we've decided he can't stay at the Cat Orphanage."

"Why not?" asked Wendy.

"He's just not adjusting well. He's too difficult for the staff to handle. They're volunteers, you know. Two of them have already been bitten. He's showing no signs of adjusting to Orphanage life."

Wendy wondered why Joan was telling her this. What was coming next?

Joan went on, "We'd like to ask you to take Rocky home to live with you."

Wendy thought quickly. Gordon would not go along with this. Lawyers learn to think on their feet and to respond to adverse surprises (well, she was actually seated on this occasion). Employing her lawyerly skill, she replied, "But, Joan, we can't have Rocky live with us. We let our cats outside; they're outdoor cats. I know the Cat Orphanage insists that your adopted cats have to be indoor cats. Rocky would certainly get outdoors if he lived with us." Wendy felt she had played a winning card. She sat smugly, waiting for Joan to concede.

"Yes, we thought about that" said Joan, "but we had a Board meeting to discuss Rocky's case. We voted to make an exception in his case. We'll release him to you with the understanding that he will be living with outdoor cats and may go outdoors himself."

What could Wendy say? The boss was asking her to take Rocky. Of course, she could say no; this was not a work-related request. But what would happen to Rocky if she said no? She didn't want to ask.

They talked at length. They agreed that the Cat Orphanage would cover the cost of neutering and the implant of an ID chip. Wendy would return that evening, with reinforcements (me), to take Rocky home on a trial basis. Wendy negotiated one concession. Rocky would remain the property of the Cat Orphanage for legal reasons, because we already had three pets of the dog and cat variety, the legal limit for Minneapolis. Wendy was well versed in the city pet ordinances.

After work, Wendy arrived home with the "good news" for Alex and me. I was nonplussed. Alex was elated, and willing to take on the challenge. It was a fait accompli. Nobody consulted Waldo and Pericles, or Max for that matter. We would all just have to do our best to contend with our new housemate Rocky.

Chapter 7 Rocky's Homecoming

Our first dilemma was how to transport Rocky home from the Cat Orphanage. He had earlier broken out of the wicker cat basket. Wendy remembered that we had a sturdy wooden carrier hidden somewhere in the piles of storage in our garage. We had used it when we returned to the US from a year abroad in England. While there, we had adopted a cat named Cricket. She was a tortoise-shell cat, who had given birth to four kittens during our stay in England. We had found homes for the kittens, but not for mom. So cricket traveled with us from London to Minneapolis, riding in the large wooden carrier. Cricket never quite adapted to the American lifestyle. After a few months of uneasy life in Minneapolis, she disappeared one day, never to reappear. We assumed that she had headed east, in search of a route back to the Old Country.

After searching through the mountains of trunks, garden chairs, storage boxes, gardening implements and other desiderata in the garage, we found the wooden Cat carrier. It had a robust latched door on one end with a tough see-through wire screen. Wendy and I set off to pick up Rocky, with the cat carrier in the back of our station wagon.

We were greeted warmly by the staff at the Cat Orphanage, all of them volunteer cat enthusiasts. Assuming we had come to adopt a sweet, cuddly pet, they assured us there were many lovely kitties available for adoption. They were especially eager to show us a handsome pair of Siamese kittens.

"No thanks," said Wendy. "We're here to pick up Rocky."

Stunned silence followed. "Rocky, ... you mean the big black panther?" a young, volunteer woman asked, with obvious surprise.

"Yes," murmured one of the other volunteers. "Joan said that somebody might be coming for Rocky."

"I didn't believe it," said the young woman.

Wendy said, "We're the people who rescued Rocky and brought him here. Joan has asked us to take him back."

"Oh-kay," said the young woman, obviously very skeptical of the plan. She led us to a room full of cages containing cats. There was a din of mewing, meowing and scratching. We passed by tabbies and gingers. We briefly paused to admire the pair of Siamese siblings; they looked very much like miniatures of Pericles. Finally, at the end of the room, we reached Rocky's cage. There was a sign, prominently displayed on the front of the cage: "BEWARE! BITES!" Rocky was stretched out inside. His big green eyes peered out at us. He made a short yowling sound. Was it a friendly greeting or a warning?

"Are you sure you can handle him?" the young woman asked incredulously.

"No," I said, "but we've agreed to take him anyway."

A few minutes later, we had finished the paperwork. It was time to take Rocky home. We retrieved the large, wooden cat carrier from the car. The young woman reappeared, Goth-like, clad all in black--heavy work gloves that stretched far up her arms under the long sleeves of a heavy black denim jacket. She wore a mask covering her face, and a snug stocking cap on her head. In short, she was in full armor and ready to take on Rocky. Another volunteer stood by for assistance. He also had heavy gloves, but otherwise, regular street clothes. They placed the wooden carrier box near Rocky's cage. It was oriented with the open hinged door at the top so they could drop the cat into the box. On the count of three, the young woman in Goth-like attire opened the door to Rocky's cage. She stuck her hands in and grabbed a resisting cat by the scruff of his neck. He snarled

and tried to bite through the gloves covering her wrists. She managed to drag him out of the cage and pointed his head down into the gaping opening of the wooden box. The other volunteer gave Rocky a mighty push from behind. Together, they launched him into the wooden carrier, and then slam shut the door and latched it. Scratching and hissing sounds issued from the box.

By now, half a dozen volunteers had appeared to watch the show. Wendy and I picked up the cat carrier at either end. It was shaking as its unwilling passenger through his weight around inside. As we began to haul our cargo through narrow aisles flanked by cat cages, the volunteers formed up into an honor guard on both sides. "Can we help you? ... I'll get the door. ... Bless you for taking him." They raised their hands as in a benediction. We were the angels of mercy, adopting the unadoptable, taking home the homeless, committing to minister unto the unredeemable.

The young woman held open the front door. "Thank you, thank you," they all cried, as we exited the cat orphanage and carried Rocky to the trunk of our car.

The honor guard of admiring feline care givers followed us out to the sidewalk in front of the cat orphanage. They waved us goodbye. "Good luck," they shouted thankfully as we drove off.

Chapter 8 Rocky Meets Max

Now that we had Rocky, we had to face the inevitable question: How would he get along with our two cats, Waldo and Pericles? Rocky had encountered them during his prior visits to our yard and his incursions into our house. Although Waldo and Pericles had remained aloof from Rocky during his house visits, we sensed their grudging acceptance. But could they all coexist within our walls?

We had a more pressing concern. How would Rocky get on with Max, our chocolate Labrador retriever. You recall that we had confined Rocky in Max's kennel, prior to taking him to the cat orphanage. We had deliberately kept Rocky and Max separate from one another. Max loved to chase and play with Waldo and Pericles. They responded by running and hiding, which only encouraged Max's playful pursuit. They did not share his exuberance. The two cats had come to understand that Max was not a threat, but they preferred to avoid his company. How would Max react to Rocky? More crucially, how would Rocky react to Max?

It didn't take long to find out.

Soon after arriving home, we released Rocky into the house, putting down some food for him. He obviously recognized the place, and immediately made himself at home. He ambled over to the food bowl, scarfed down some chow, and then took a tour of the ground level of the house. He was like a nosy real estate visitor, assessing the acceptability of a potential domicile. Waldo and Pericles made themselves scarce, hiding

upstairs. Max was outdoors in the yard. Our goal was to keep Rocky indoors, at least initially, so that he would adapt to his new home. We needn't have worried; he showed no interest in leaving.

At first, all was peace and quiet.

Then, Max arrived on the back deck. He barked at the kitchen door to be let in. What do do?--well, I thought, he has to meet Rocky sometime. I opened the door. Rocky was in the kitchen, near his food dish. He glared, his shiny green eyes tracking every move of the large chocolate Lab puppy. Rocky's tail went up and fluffed out. His ears became erect. Max stared in, apparently surprised to see a new black kitty in the house. We watched transfixed—a hefty, feral black cat, weighing in at 20 pounds, and an exuberant and muscular young chocolate Lab weighing at least 60 pounds. What fun, thought Max, a new friend to play with and chase.

Rocky crouched. Max bounded in to inspect his new "friend." Rocky stood his ground. As the large brown dog approached, Rocky suddenly hissed and sprang. He charged at Max. Rocky's front right paw raked across Max's nose, the sharp claws penetrating through fur to skin. Max yelped in pain. Blood spurted. Red droplets flew in all directions. Max turned tail and ran back outside. He cowered in the backyard, far from the menacing black devil.

Rocky sauntered back to the food dish and resumed nibbling chow. He had established his territorial dominance. Max now understood who was in charge. He would not soon approach Rocky unbidden.

Wendy appeared, having heard Max's yelps and the accompanying ruckus. She pointed at the red marks on the kitchen wall. For years thereafter, faint traces of those marks reminded us of Max's first encounter with Rocky.

For the rest of the day and into the evening, the big challenge wasn't managing Rocky. He made himself at home. After inspecting and approving his new digs, he settled down on a sofa cushion for a nap. He relaxed, having established himself as the "top dog."

Our challenge was dealing with Max. He wouldn't come back into the house. I tried several times to encourage him with treats, "Look, Max, Rocky isn't here!" Max wouldn't come close to the door. He was a "fraidy cat." As night fell, I tugged him by his collar to urge him toward the door, but he dug in his heels. Finally, I leashed him, and dragged him into the house. Once indoors and unleashed, Max dashed upstairs. He wanted no further encounters with the menacing black intruder downstairs.

Rocky spent his first night in our home asleep on the sofa. Max remained upstairs in our bedroom, afraid to venture out. The other two cats were nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 9 The Fine Art of Whisking

After Rocky's violent first encounter with Max, we all wondered what horrors would follow. Would Rocky continue to terrorize Max? To bully Waldo and Pericles? And to challenge the human members of the family? Was Rocky irretrievably bad? Had we brought a demon into our house?

We soon learned that this was not the case. Rocky did not go out of his way to threaten or intimidate. Instead, he was content as long as nobody invaded his personal space uninvited. He would thump up and down the stairs, and meander from room to room as if he were the master of the house. When he felt like a siesta, he would lie on a favorite easy chair. He would not respond to passers-by, human or otherwise, as long as they didn't disturb him. From time to time, he insisted on going outside where he would disappear into the bushes. When he was hungry, he would return to the kitchen screen door, and meow insistently to be let in.

A few days after his arrival, I was surprised to hear him purring as he relaxed on the living room sofa. I gingerly approached him. The purring continued. Slowly, ever so slowly, I reached out my hand. His eyes followed the movement, but he didn't stir. I gently stroked his back. The purring intensified. I scratched his ears. His head dropped onto his paws. Then, he turned his head slightly and looked at me, as if to say, "It's about time!"

One night, a few weeks later, Wendy and I were in bed asleep. I woke up, feeling a big thump on the covers near my feet. A black form materialized in the dark at the foot of the bed. From the size of the dark silhouette, I knew it was Rocky. Occasionally, Pericles would jump on the bed at night, but not with such force. I could see Rocky's bright eyes shining in the dim light.

I wondered what he would do. Maybe lie down by my feet? Apparently not. He nosed around the blankets, slowly making his way toward the head of the bed, finding his way between the two humans lying there. Eventually, he reached our pillows and began sniffing around our heads. Wendy slept on peacefully, oblivious to the feline inspection. I lay still, fearful that any move might alarm him and result in bodily injury. Rocky's long whiskers inspected my facial topography—whiskers touching my lips, nose and closed eye lids. It felt like a large spider doing a slow ballet on my face. I felt the need to stay motionless for fear of being bitten.

After the facial inspection was complete, I felt a paw probe into my hair. Next, I felt his paw on my cheek, his claws retracted. His paw slid down and came to rest on my neck, poised above my jugular vein. Rocky settled himself, his large, furry body sprawled across my forehead and hair. Soon, Rocky's motor engaged; his body against my ear, the purring now at high volume. The big black cat had evidently found a comfortable place to spend the rest of the night.

I lay awake, afraid to move, remembering how those claws had raked Max's nose. I lay stock still for the rest of the night. I must have dozed off. When I awoke, it was morning. There was no sign of Rocky. Was his visitation a dream?

The next night, the same sequence of events occurred. It was no dream. Rocky had found his preferred site for evening repose: on my head. And so it was, night after night, month after month, and year after year.

People think that cats can see in the dark. They can't. To be more precise, if there is no light at all, they can't see. Yes, their eyes are designed to do well in very dim light. Our bedroom was very dark. Rocky would feel with his whiskers to find his way around my head, searching for the most comfortable place to settle. At night, I would feel his whiskers playing gently over my face—tickling my mouth, nose and closed eye lids, moving around to my ears. He knew his way by sensitive touch with those long black whiskers of his. He was a master of the fine art of whisking!

In time, it became hard for me to get to sleep unless Rocky had come to bed and taken his customary position, either on my head, or tucked up against my hair like an old-fashioned nightcap. Oh sure, it wasn't always sweetness and light. There were a few occasions when I rolled over on a tail or paw and was reprimanded with a warning nip. "Everything will be fine, just stay in your place," he seemed to say.

Soon, we discovered that our bed was Rocky's favored spot anytime he wanted a nap. Whether day or night, Rocky claimed territorial rights over the bed real estate. We were welcome at night, as long as we respected his ownership and provided we served his needs for warmth and comfort.

And so it was that Rocky settled into our family.

Chapter 10 Predator Pals

At first, Max kept as far away from Rocky as our house permitted. Max would leave his food dish if Rocky entered the kitchen. Rocky would assert his priority by taking a few bites of dog chow from Max's vacated food dish.

In time, Max's fear slowly turned to reticence and then deference. I would find Max waiting respectfully behind Rocky at the water dish. The two animals had learned to coexist peacefully, once Max understood the pecking order.

Months of peaceful coexistence transpired. Then, One day, I heard Max growling in the living room. What was going on? I found Max on his back on the floor, his paws in the air, and Rocky poking down at him from the nearby sofa cushion. The two of them were at play.

Playtime sessions regularly followed, often with Max growling and Rocky meowing. Max would growl at Rocky, while crouching or lying in a submissive pose on the floor. Rocky would nip Max in return. The two animals had become predator pals.

Trust and friendship continued to grow between the two animals. Eventually, we would see Rocky with his head in Max's mouth. But Rocky remained the boss, and when he decided that playtime was over, Max would reluctantly depart, his tail wagging.

Rocky went so far as to arrange a good cop – bad cop collaboration with Max, at my expense. I would be contentedly enjoying a lunchtime meal on my own. Max would approach, and sit on the kitchen floor next to me, his nose protruding over the edge of the kitchen table, just a few inches from my lunch plate. I would eye him warily on my left, trying to ensure that he wouldn't take a bite of my meal. Then, lightning would strike! Or should I say, a silent black missile would launch from the buffet over my right shoulder onto the kitchen table, and Rocky would snatch a tasty bite from my plate. I tried various strategies to fend off Rocky's intrusions. For a while, I kept a squeeze bottle full of water at hand. At first, it deterred Rocky. But in short order, he habituated. He as much as said "Water can't hurt me. Go ahead, shoot!" On a few frustrating occasions, when the tag-team operations threatened to deprive me entirely of my meal, I stood up, holding my sandwich or plate of food, and stood in the middle of the kitchen with hands held high, out of range of Max's mouth and beyond the range of Rocky's launching platform.

Rocky was happy to use Max as his foil in these snatch-and-grab operations. Perhaps Max's willing cooperation was one reason the two of them remained predator pals over the years.

Rocky retained his antisocial reputation, but also developed an affectionate persona. The affectionate side of his character was evident from his willingness to interact with people, to be petted and scratched, and his willingness to push his way into family gatherings.

One might say that Rocky had a Jekyll and Hyde personality—on the one hand, friendly and social, and on the other demonic and fearful. I disagree with this characterization. I see Rocky's antisocial side as a manifestation of his determination to be the boss, the alpha, the top of the pecking order (although his "pecks" were with claws or teeth and not a beak.) Let's say he aspired to be a benevolent dictator—"I'll be kind and gentle as long as you keep in your place and follow my wishes."

As Rocky became a fixture in our home, his reputation spread among our family and friends. When my brother Dave came to visit, Rocky purred contentedly while Dave scratched his ears and chin. Rocky lay down on his side. Dave proceeded to scratch Rocky's tummy. Rocky responded by giving him a warning nip; tummy rubs were out of bounds.

I work closely with undergraduate and graduate students in my research at the university. All my students knew Rocky by reputation and expected an initiation with him. Sometimes, he would climb on a student's lap during a get-together at our home. The student would be

immobilized, fearful of dislodging Rocky. On one occasion, an unsuspecting student leaned back comfortably on the sofa, unaware that she was encroaching on Rocky's personal space. He was lying quietly behind her on the top edge of the sofa. When her hair brushed across his face, he responded by nipping her shoulder. No blood, but an alarmed young lady!

And then, there was our visiting friend and research scholar Samantha. She visited us every summer for several days. Throughout her visits, she would keep a wary eye on Rocky. If he approached within four or five feet, she would back away. Perhaps Rocky enjoyed her apprehensive behavior. Seemingly, he would follow her. She took it as a menace. I prefer to believe it was Rocky's version of a game.

Chapter 11 Rocky and the Goth

As part of Wendy's negotiation with Joan to adopt Rocky, the Cat Orphanage agreed to cover the initial veterinary costs including a series of vaccinations. While at the orphanage, they had managed to give him the distemper and other core vaccinations. But because we had agreed that Rocky would be an outdoor cat, he still needed a shot for feline leukemia. It was agreed that the orphanage would arrange for someone to come to the house to administer the shot.

The day of the appointment arrived. It was July, and one of the hottest days of the summer. The thermometer registered close to 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The heat index was off the chart.

I was at home to receive Rocky's veterinary visitor. The doorbell rang. Max barked, as he always did when a stranger arrived. When I opened the door, I stepped back in astonishment. She was clad in black from head to toe, including a heavy leather jacket with a hood covering her head and most of her face. She wore gloves that disappeared into the sleeves of the black leather jacket. Her heavy, black socks were pulled up over the cuffs of her jeans. What planet is she from, I wondered? How could anyone dress like this on the hottest day of the summer? Was this the vet, or perhaps a Goth loose in the neighborhood?

Then, I realized that she was the same young woman we had seen in black at the Cat Orphanage. She introduced herself as a veterinary student volunteer. She had come to give Rocky his shot. She had prepared in full battle dress for the encounter with the infamous black cat.

I invited her into our air conditioned home. She was grateful to escape the July heat, but obviously anxious about her patient. I led her into the kitchen. Her gaze darted about, looking for Rocky. He was conveniently present, nonchalantly drinking from the dog water bowl in the kitchen. Max hovered nearby, wondering, no doubt, who this stranger was, and what her business was with Rocky.

She looked warily at Rocky. "How are we going to handle him?" she asked with some trepidation. "I'll need him on the table." She looked doubtfully at me, clad in shorts and a T-shirt. She had no intention of picking him up herself.

"Let me know when you're ready," I said.

"I'm just about ready," she said, "but aren't you going to wear a jacket and gloves for protection?" she asked, as she opened her bag and produced the syringe and needle.

"No need," I said, nonchalantly. As she watched in amazement, I picked up Rocky and stood him on the kitchen table. With one hand, I grasped him firmly under his tummy and with the other, I held his collar to keep him in place.

Our Goth visitor swiftly approached her patient from behind, and gave him the quick jab.

Rocky stood his ground without complaint and without flinching.

"What a miracle," she exclaimed. "It took our whole crew to give him his other shots at the Orphanage. And even then, I got a nasty bite and another girl was scratched."

"I'm sorry about that," I said. "He's settled down since he's come to live with us." I released Rocky. He jumped off the kitchen table and went back to the dog dish to continue lapping water.

"We couldn't handle him at the Cat Orphanage," she said. "They'll all be amazed when they hear how well he's doing."

She packed her bag, took off her gloves and prepared to leave. "Goodbye Rocky," she said, waving at him from a safe distance and smiling.

That was when we realized we had tamed the wild beast. Rocky the fearsome feline, orphanage reject, and threat to all, had become Rocky the Miracle Cat. He was now a socially well-adjusted member of our family.

Chapter 12 Rocky's Garden

Rocky ruled the garden as well as the house. Evidence of his sovereignty appeared periodically in the form of a headless and disemboweled rabbit on the doorstep--not a pretty sight.

He left routine mousing and bird hunting to the other felines in the household. But he was not above playing some tricks. One morning, I was putting on my shoes, rushing to get ready for work. My foot met resistance—something stuffed in the toe box. I reached in to dislodge the obstacle; it was a dead mouse. I cried out in surprise. Why Rocky put it there, I'll never know, but I'm sure he was the culprit. He reclined smugly on the bed while I gingerly wrapped the furry dead body in paper towel and disposed of it.

Rocky enjoyed sunning himself in the garden while lying in the grass. One day, while so engaged, a mangy looking canine sauntered up to the aluminum fence and stuck his nose between the bars. It was a coyote. We had recently seen them in the neighborhood. We speculated that they had moved into the territory because of the growing number of wild turkeys. They enjoy turkey dinners all year round, not just on Thanksgiving. There was evidence from the piles of feathers here and there. Coyotes are not only bad for turkeys, they like to chase and kill cats. We were worried about the safety of our outdoor felines.

Rocky stared at the coyote, but remained unmoved in his relaxed sprawl in the grass. He wasn't worried. He knew the coyote couldn't get between the fence posts. Often Rocky would slip out between the posts, leaving Max chafing and whimpering behind because he was far too large to get through. Cats use their whiskers to assess gaps they can fit through. Maybe they also calibrate those gaps for purposes of escaping predators.

The coyote eyed Rocky and pushed his ugly snout further between the fence posts. He began to growl. Rocky got to his feet and ambled toward the unwelcome intruder. Pericles and Waldo cowered under the deck. They wanted no part of this encounter.

The coyote started licking his chops. He anticipated snatching the insolent feline with a quick move, and then dragging him through the fence. Fresh feline would make a nice alternative to tiresome turkey!

Rocky slowly approached. Then, a lightning strike! The black missile hurled forward. Just as Max had experienced it, the sharp claws raked the snout of the coyote. An ear-piercing howl echoed through the neighborhood. The coyote raced off down the street toward the river, droplets of blood trailing behind him.

Rocky returned to his spot in the grass. He resumed sunning himself with a sense of satisfaction. Coyotes were not seen again in the neighborhood that summer.

Chapter 13 Rocky Talks

How many of us talk to our pets? Probably most of us. But how often do they answer back?

One day, Rocky began to talk. I hope you're not surprised. Haven't you read *The Jungle Book*, *Doctor Doolittle* or *The Wind in the Willows*? Those of us who care to, find ways to talk to our animals.

I'm not referring to a fantasy in which animals acquire the gift of speech. Rocky was more opportunistic. He spoke through Wendy's lips or mine. Sometimes he would even interject a comment when he was not physically present. You've probably heard about the Pentecostal phenomenon of speaking in tongues, where the spirit speaks through the voice of a believer. Linguists refer to the unintelligible utterances as glossolalia. Well,

maybe Rocky acquired this same miraculous capacity to inspire human speech. But unlike the typical glossolalia of humans, Rocky's utterances were utterly comprehensible.

I first heard Rocky talk one day when Max brushed by him on the way to the food dish, swiping Rocky with his tail. "Dumb Dog!" said Rocky. We heard this same pronouncement from Rocky many times over the years. Despite his friendship with Max, Rocky always made clear who was boss and who had the brains. Sometimes he would generalize, "Dogs are dumb," or "Dogs drool and cats rule!"

His snobbery was not restricted to dogs. When Wendy or I would fuss with clothing choices or bemoan the need for heavy winter apparel, he would comment, "People don't even have fur. ... Look at my beautiful coat." When we would discuss our clothing color choices, Rocky would turn up his nose and say dismissively "Black is beautiful."

Rocky liked to boast about his youthful exploits—to Max who had been neutered in puppyhood, "You've no idea what you're missing;" and to Gord and the rest of the family, "I've had more females than you can imagine!" When we reminded him of his own neutered state, he would retort "So what! I've had more than you could count. I need a break!"

Rocky frequently make gratuitous comments when I complained about something in the news. More than once, I heard him say "In the morning, you sound like a red neck!"

Rudyard Kipling tells us that Bagheera, the black panther in *The Jungle Book* "...had a voice as soft as wild honey dripping from a tree." While Rocky shared many traits with Bagheera, a mellifluous voice was not among them. His voice had a grating and assertive character, like chalk on a blackboard.

But isn't it a strange thing how that voice became sweet to our ears over the years? And how we missed it, when it became silent?

Chapter 14 The Insurance Salesman and the Mouse

One day an insurance salesman came to our house. He represented a company affiliated with our neighborhood church. Wendy and I had agreed to meet with him as a courtesy, although we had no serious intention to buy. After initial pleasantries, Larry's hard sales pitch began. We tried politely to tell him that we weren't interested. But he persisted aggressively. Then, I noticed him begin to squirm and glance repeatedly toward the floor on his left. There was Rocky, looking up at Larry, and evidently thinking about jumping on his lap.

"Don't worry," I said, "He'll be fine as long as you don't startle him."

Larry shuddered, "I don't like cats. ... I don't know what it is, but they spook me out." he said.

Rocky reached out and put his paw on Larry's creased pant leg.

Larry cringed, and pulled his leg back.

Rocky responded by jumping on Larry's lap.

Larry turned pale, in obvious distress, and cupped his hands in front of his face. He appeared to be shaking.

Rocky had done his job. I got up from my chair, and lifted Rocky down. "Sorry about that," I said, smiling inwardly.

"I'm afraid I'm late for my next appointment" said Larry in a shaky voice. "Just give me a call if I can be of any further help." He got up quickly and headed for the door, keeping a wary eye on the ominous black feline.

I thought to myself, if we need your help, we'll invite you back for another meeting with Rocky.

* * * * *

Have I already told you that Rocky liked games? One day, when Wendy and I were away, Alex and his friend David decided to engage Rocky in play. David bought a mouse at the pet store and brought it to our house. The boys showed the mouse to Rocky who took immediate interest. They released the mouse in the living room. The mouse ran for cover. Rocky pounced and grabbed the mouse. He brought it back to Alex and David, like a Labrador retriever. Maybe he'd learned something from Max.

Let's do that again, he seemed to say. And so the game continued: the boys let the mouse go, Rocky darted after it, grabbing it in his mouth and bringing it back. After a few rounds, the mouse expired: perhaps out of fear, or perhaps having experienced too many Rocky bites.

It wasn't until years later that Alex told Wendy and me about the mouse game. Always secretive about his exploits, Rocky remained mum on the subject.

Chapter 15 Where Did the Time Go?

The years passed. Rocky mellowed. His nips decreased in frequency—from weekly, to monthly, to rarely. Alex graduated from high school and went away to college. He enjoyed seeing Rocky on his visits home. Pericles grew very old and frail, and eventually passed on to Feline Heaven. He was replaced in our home by a flighty calico cat named Phoebe. She soon learned that Rocky was boss. Waldo grew old, and eventually joined Rocky sleeping on our bed at night. At first, Rocky put up some token opposition to this intrusion, giving Waldo the evil eye. Or maybe it's better to say that Rocky gave him the evil ear;

Rocky's ears folded back when Waldo came aboard. But Rocky never attacked Waldo, and the little gray tabby learned that Rocky was not to be feared.

Over the years, we lavished a variety of nicknames on Rocky—Rock, Rocket, Rock-a-by Baby, Rockefeller, Roxolie and most of all, Rocco. He didn't seem to mind what we called him, as long as we treated him with respect.

Max and Rocky continued to be good buddies. Rocky would often join Max in greeting us at the door when Wendy and I came home from work. After a vacation, Rocky would be the first of the cats to greet us. During the first night home, he would jump on the bed, purring loudly.

When I would call Max for dog training, Rocky would also show up, expecting treats, even if he didn't perform the desired behavior. His irksome meow conveyed his wish for a reward.

On summer evenings, we often took Max for a walk after dark. Rocky would accompany us, often padding along behind, meowing to let us know he was there. After a block or two, he would take a shortcut home. We would find him later, waiting on the front step to be let into the house.

Rocky aged, and began to slow down. His buddy Max also aged, and finally reached the end of his days. Lest you think that Max was second fiddle to Rocky in our house, I assure you that he too held his place in our hearts. You will find an appendix to this book describing Max's courageous last days.

After Max passed on to Doggy Heaven, we soon realized there was a gap in our home. By this time, Rocky's feline companions were both females, Phoebe and Miss Lilly. They didn't express any sorrow at Max's departure. But Rocky missed his predator pal. Wendy and I missed the doggy presence as well.

When my birthday approached, I said, "Let's look for a dog." We studied the web listings for rescue dogs. One day, we read a posting about a black lab-mix rescue dog named Hugo. He was on display at a local pet store with other rescue animals. We decided to take a look.

We found Hugo curled up in the back of his cage. We were told that people were not interested in him because he was a black dog. We took him for a walk. He was a fit, muscular dog, and very cooperative. Hugo and I bonded. He was shy, but friendly and gentle. He was deep chocolate, not black. Yes, they called him a lab-mix, but it was clear from his pointy ears and square jaw that he was a Labrador-pit bull mix. Later, Wendy described him as our "Pitador."

We asked the rescue volunteer if Hugo would get along with cats. He didn't know, but said, "Let's give him a cat test." He took Hugo to a cage containing a big orange cat. The cat hissed, Hugo sniffed, but showed no hostility. We decided to adopt Hugo.

We still wondered how Rocky and the girl cats would react to Hugo. How could we forget that first encounter between Rocky and Max? When we brought the new dog into the house, the two girl cats made themselves scarce. Rocky ambled up, went nose to nose with Hugo. In his own language, he told Hugo, "Everything will be just fine around here, as long as you understand whose boss." Hugo understood instantly. From the beginning, we observed Hugo waiting patiently behind Rocky at the water dish, and sometimes even at Hugo's food dish. Hugo and Rocky were instant friends, on Rocky's terms.

Rocky always stood his ground with dogs, never backing away, always asserting his authority. Even in his waning days, when one of my students brought a guide dog to our house, Rocky ambled straight up to the canine visitor as much as to say: "Yep, another dog. No sweat!"

Chapter 16 Honey, I Shrunk the Cat

The years rolled on. The humans in our household followed predictable paths. Alex graduated from high school. Four years later, he graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in music and a minor in anthropology. Soon after, he got a wife and a Siamese cat named Eloise. They all moved to New Orleans. Wendy and I went to work day after day, week after week and year after year. I taught my students at the university, and wrote erudite research papers. Wendy argued cases in court, and wrote briefs that were sometimes not very brief.

As I've already told you, our chocolate lab Max grew old and died. Shortly after, Hugo, our "pitador" joined our mammalian family. He arrived on my birthday, an event recognized henceforth as part of my birthday celebrations. Because Hugo was a rescue dog, we didn't know his precise age or date of birth; I was happy to share the festivities with him.

The feline generations continued as well. Pericles our beloved Siamese passed on, to be replaced soon after by Phoebe our calico. Although appealing to the eye and a conversation piece for the neighbors, she remained flighty and never learned to play well with the others in the family. and Waldo, our wallflower of a tabby, lived out his days quietly. He simply went to sleep one day on the couch and never woke up. He was soon replaced by pretty Miss Lilly, a tortoise shell with dainty white paws. She came to us as a reject from a home where a new son-in-law with allergies took precedence over a cat. While seemingly prim and proper, Miss Lilly delighted in swiping at Phoebe and generally harassing her big "sister." But Miss Lilly always maintained a proper respect for Rocky.

At times, Rocky seemed irritated by the two new girl cats in his home. At other times, he appreciated his small herem. He was even observed to lick Miss Lilly on rare occasions.

For years, Rocky maintained an ageless presence in the house. He watched the family's life story unfold with contented equanimity. He continued to rule his dominions with benign

authority. His heavy-footed paws on the stairs announced his arrival. His shadowy stealth tactics secured for him occasional bites of my lunch or dinner.

one sign of Rocky's mellowing personality was the growing ease with which we were able to clip his claws. "Growing ease" may be a slight exaggeration. We were never able to take care of the claws on his back feet. But in time, I learned to hold Rocky on my lap like a baby, with one hand grasping and immobilizing his back legs and the other hand holding him around his tummy. Wendy would snip, snip snip the claws on his front paws. Yes, I always wore long sleeves, and sometimes gloves, to fend off Rocky's bites. But, although he would occasionally yowl in complaint, he would typically sit still through the operation. He would grudgingly say, "Oh well, if you must, it's probably for the best in the long run."

One thing Rocky hated was going to the vet for annual checkups and shots. Rocky was amazingly healthy throughout his life, and rarely needed a doctor for anything other than routine annual visits. We would often take the three cats together for their checkups, each in a separate cat basket. Rocky never succeeded in busting out of his basket, but we would hear scratching from all three of them and a chorus of yowls on the way to the vet. Rocky hated being in the basket in the waiting room, especially being sniffed by alien dog patients. When it was our turn to see the vet, we would place the cat-in-the-basket on the examining table. Once the basket was opened, Wendy would drag Rocky out for his inspection. We routinely warned the examining vet that Rocky had a bad reputation. But, to my knowledge, he never did serious damage to a vet. The most he did was to pee on one or two of them. They would begin the exam by weighing him—"18 pounds ...", give him the quick once over, jab him with his annual shots and then send him back into the basket. The next cat-in-the-basket would be hoisted onto the examining table.

As Rocky grew older, his weight began to drop—"18 pounds ...", "15 pound's ...", "12 pounds." Rocky was growing old. Of course, we never knew how old he was, because he arrived without a birth certificate. We figured he was at least two or three years old when we adopted him. By the time, he was 12 or 14 years old, his weight had dropped below 12 pounds. He was no longer the weightiest cat in our household; Phoebe had caught up with him. But the change in his body-mass index did not affect the social dynamics in our household: Rocky remained firmly at the top of the pecking order. Once the boss, always the boss!

Year by year and vet visit after vet visit, Rocky's weight dropped. I started being able to feel his ribs through his fur. By the time he was 15 years with us, he had fallen into single digits, now less than 10 pounds. He was becoming a frail old cat. He slept most of the day and night, taking his place on or near my head at night as usual. On warm days, he would stroll out onto the back deck. On sunny spring days, he would take a circuit around the house and come in the front door. But no more long jaunts around the neighborhood: no more long walks with the dog.

On cold days, he would seek the warmth of the floor-level heating outlets. For weeks at a stretch, he would not go outside in winter. Of course, this was an admirably smart strategy for an elderly cat (or elderly member of any species for that matter) in Minnesota.

We reached Rocky's 18th year, or maybe more. In June, his weight was 8 pounds. He was on a special diet: the k diet for cats with kidney failure. He seemed hungry much of the time, but didn't eat much. His body was no longer absorbing nutrition. He was literally shrinking away. When I put my hands on him to scratch his head, and pet him, I felt fur, skin and bones, and nothing else. Poor Rocky! He was disappearing in plain view.

Chapter 17 Rocky Goodbye

I'm sure you can see where this is leading.

Last night, there was snow. Rocky's territory turned from brown to white. Rocky snuggled in my arms, under our blankets. He could barely move his legs. His black fur barely hid his ribs and other bones. The night before was Christmas night and he did not come upstairs with us to bed, but lay on the couch in the family room. In recent days, he has spent his time huddling near the heating vents.

Last night was Rocky's last night. After years of lying on my head and exploring my face with his whiskers, he will no longer sleep next to us. We will miss the thump-thump of his feet coming up the stairs, his leap onto our bed (lately via the viola case), and his furry bulk next to our bodies.

Only a few weeks ago, he would purr as he lay with us, pushing his head against our hands for petting. But no more. We will miss the miracle cat!

At noon today, we realized that Rocky was no longer mobile. He could barely walk, and fell down when he tried to jump. He had stopped eating. The vet discovered that he had dropped from 8 pounds to 5 pounds since June. His kidneys had failed him. He had become fur and bones. We thought he had broken his leg. Probably not, but the time had come to say goodbye.

Alex was home on his Christmas break. Alex, Wendy and I drove Rocky to the vet. I wrapped him in a towel for warmth, and held him against my chest in the car; no need now for an indestructible cat carrier. At the vet's, we held him and said our goodbyes. In true Rocky fashion, he voiced a few final defiant meows. We wept quietly together.

And now, we are at home without Rocky for the first time in 15 years. There is a missing place in our lives and in our home. But Rocky lives on in our memories as our Miracle Cat.

Rest in peace, Dear Rocky. You showed us the wonder of a simple and rewarding life. We will always remember you! Thank you for the joy you brought us.

Chapter 18 After Rocky

Why was Rocky a Miracle Cat? You know the answers. All life is miraculous. Of course, that includes a big, black stray male cat with his unique personality. But I also presume to think that Rocky was a miracle among miracles. He came to us for help and friendship, but exhibited only hostility at first. In time, he became the world's most social cat. Yes, his social interactions were both positive and negative, but over the years his affectionate persona prevailed. He insisted on his lofty perch atop the household pecking order, but he showed love for all of us, even the big dogs Max and Hugo who joined him as housemates.

Rocky came from parts unknown to join our family. Now Rocky has departed. Where has he gone? The prosaic answer is up the chimney in smoke from his cremation—we have the ashes to prove it. I prefer to believe in his reincarnation elsewhere. Perhaps he is proving his prowess among the wild animals in a faraway rain forest. Or perhaps he is prowling through the backyards of a faraway city in search of a new human family to adopt.

Or maybe he is still present in our family, his spirit having diffused and distributed itself among the rest of us. Soon after Rocky departed, I noticed Phoebe, our old lady calico cat,, adopting new assertive habits like those of Rocky; once again, my breakfast and lunch are at risk. Miss Lilly, our tabby, has now replaced Rocky as the cat presence on our bed at night. Hugo, our Labrador mix with the dark-chocolate fur, now looks black to me most of the time. And, is it my imagination, or have I heard Wendy making purring sounds, and is she a tad more bossy than she used to be? What about me? Have I adopted any of Rocky's persona? That's for others to say, but my whiskers do seem to be a little more prickly these days.

This I can say for sure. Although Rocky has gone from us in the flesh, he remains a vivid memory for us of one big, feisty and lovable cat!

Appendix - Small Victories – Big Hart

Max is our sweet, old chocolate Labrador retriever. He is twelve-and-a-half years old and nearing the end of his days. He sleeps most of the time. His back legs are failing him, so he has trouble getting to his feet. He can no longer jump into the car. He is unable to climb the few steps from the family room to the kitchen. He spends his time stranded in the family room on the ground level, except for short walks outside, exiting through the garage. We wonder if he will make it to Christmas, or even Thanksgiving just nine days from now.

Every night for the past week, a little drama has played out in our home. Wendy and I go upstairs to bed, leaving Max in the family room. Throughout his life, he has always slept with us—sometimes on our bed, sometimes on his nearby doggy bed, and sometimes on the floor beside us. Now, alone in the family room at night, he barks at the foot of the stairs to the kitchen, telling us that it is bedtime and he yearns to be with us.

What can we do? He weighs more than 70 pounds and is too big to carry. At first, we tried using a sling under his belly to help him climb the stairs. No luck! Max refused to adapt to the sling. We have not learned how to train our animals, although they have long since known how to train us. We tried to ignore his persistent barking and go to sleep. No luck there either. I became frustrated. I thought he might be more comfortable and quiet if I could get him up to the kitchen level. I man-handled him up the short flight of steps from the family room to the kitchen, half hauling him by his harness and half wrestling him up the steps. It was such a clumsy business, I was afraid I had injured him. But he stood up, shook himself, and started sniffing around the kitchen. Then he went out on the back deck for fresh air.

I hoped Max would be content to stay on the kitchen level. There was no way I could haul him up the longer flight of stairs to our bedroom. I went back upstairs to go to bed.

Then Wend and I heard the sounds. It was Max pawing at the bottom of the stairs to the bedroom level. There was no barking, just strenuous panting. Over and over, he tried to approach and climb the stairs without success. His futile efforts continued for at least ten or fifteen minutes. I sensed his frustration. I had flash backs to his youthful days of boundless energy—how he ran and walked for miles with us; how he swam circles around me in the lake acting as my personal lifeguard; and how he would drag me home on walks when he found a treasure (someone's lost glove, a dead squirrel, and once a deer's leg.). I thought about these things while he struggled at the base of the stairs. I was very sad.

And then, suddenly, the pawing sounds changed to dull thuds of lumbering feet on the carpeted steps; and there was Max, upstairs, in the bedroom, wagging his tail. He had succeeded in climbing the stairs! We greeted him with exclamations "Good Puppy! Great Doggy! Max, how did you do it?" After a drink of water, he settled down, exhausted, and went to sleep on the floor next to our bed.

How did he do it? I don't know. Somewhere, deep down inside, he drew on a reservoir of loyalty and tenacity. he was able to overcome his infirmities to climb the stairs to be with us at night. It was a small victory for a dog with a big heart.

This little drama has played out in virtually the same way for the past several nights. I know it can't go on for long. The small victories will come to an end. But these nightly dramas have given us some extra moments of joy and love.

Postscript. We said our last goodbyes to Max on Dec. 7. He died peacefully with Wendy and me petting him. We shed some tears.