

I am a nice, normal housewife with a home, a husband and a job and...I have five cats. I am certifiably insane.



**Simba**

I never intended to have cats. They, apparently, intended to have me. I have always been a dog person. Cat people sneered me at because I preferred the slobbering enthusiasm of my canine friends to the aloof disdain of cats. I never minded picking up after my dog's walks but couldn't imagine keeping a litter box in my house.

Dog Person, definitely. That is until one frigid January night two years ago.

I'm always dashing somewhere and on this particular night I was dashing into the market for a few groceries. The bitter January wind intensified my haste. I leaned into the wind and headed toward the crowded store. Half way to the entrance a high pitch sound reached me. There is nothing else in the world that sounds like a kitten, small and mewling and precious. I looked around to see I was the only person in parking lot save for the young boy collecting carts. I listened again and heard what was definitely a kitten in distress. The market was situated on a highway, nowhere near any residential areas. Some bastard had abandoned a kitten to the weather and the highway.

I moved my way around the parking lot until I located the sound coming from underneath an enormous Lincoln Continental. Getting on all fours, I spotted a dark shadow crouched near the enormous tire. The shadow cried and I moved for a better look. The light from a passing car hit the shadow, revealing a shivering calico kitten. I tried to reach under the car but fear of me was greater than fear of the cold. The ball of fur scrambled up inside the motor. Its meow echoed under the metal hood. I grabbed the box boy away from his carts.

“Don’t let anyone start this car,” I ordered.

“Why?”

“Because there’s a kitten under the hood.” Proof of my veracity came with a confirming meow.

Dashing into the grocery store (like I said, I’m always dashing) I purchased one easily opened container of cat food. I ran back to the car and laid flat on the asphalt, stretching as far under the car as I could. I held the open container under an opening and meowed at the kitten. The kitten meowed back. This exchange went on for several minutes.

“It’s not coming out,” I said to the box boy. “Go in and find out who owns this thing.”

A few minutes later a gray haired man returned to his car/parade float to see a rather strange red head meowing at his grill.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“You have a kitten in your engine.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Pop the hood.”

The man did as instructed and sitting on the carburetor was a crying tortois kitten. I scooped it up before it could get further in the engine.

“Well, I’ll be damned. How about that?” said the man.

“It wouldn’t have been pretty if you’d started your car.” I told the man in the hope he would have a little more faith in the next strange red head he encountered talking to his car.

The box boy helped me into my car. I slammed the door with a quick thank you as the kitten scampered free inside my car. As I sat at the traffic light I tried to think what I was going to tell my husband. I also wondered how my dogs would react. Did I mention I have two dogs? Like I said, certifiable.

Montie is a Schipperke, bred to hunt rats and guard Belgian fishing boats. He had never expressed an interest in cats one-way or the other. Lacey, our Bichon, had cat friends in the past, but never a tiny, terrified kitten. I had called my husband to warn him of my delay, but I failed to mention I was bringing the reason for the delay home with me. I thought quickly of the lines I could use to assure him I would just keep the kitten long enough to get it warm and find it a new home. After all, we were Dog People.

“What did you do?” he asked with the tone of a husband who was almost used to his wife’s eccentricities.

“I couldn’t let it freeze.” I said as I tried to hold the squirming kitten in my hands. Dogs were jumping and barking and the kitten was attempting to crawl vertically up my body.

“Well, you might as well put it down,” he said with a complaining tone, but he wasn’t really complaining. He would have done the same thing and I knew it.

I set the kitten down and Lacey immediately pounced, not to attack but for the opportunity to groom a baby. She licked the kitten's head until it extricated itself from her tongue and dashed to the kitchen. A small hole in the back of a cabinet proved to be just big enough for the terrified kitten to hide in.

The dogs were barking, my husband was humphing like only an annoyed husband can, the kitten was hiding somewhere underneath my bread drawer. Just another typical evening at home.

Advice, that's what I needed. Or at the very least a litter box. I knocked on the door of the first neighbor I could think of who had a cat. I discovered all cat owners have extra litter boxes and keep a ready supply of litter. My neighbor explained the mechanics of the litter box, assuring me the kitten would be instantly trained. I had my doubts.

I came back to house with my stash proudly tucked under my arm when my husband turned to me and announced, "You should probably run to the pet store and get Simba some toys, all we have are dog toys. And she can't live on tuna fish."

"Who's Simba?"

"She has to have a name," he replied.

I stood dumbfounded with the certain knowledge that my cat-free life was no more.

"Okay," I sighed, "you can keep her." He turned away to hide his little kid grin. (He will deny this to his dying day.) I grabbed my keys and headed back to the car. I got to the door and shook a warning finger. "That litter box thing, that's all you, dude."

So began the learning process for two cat neophytes. We learned the hard way.

First, never shadow box with a kitten, you'll lose. I discovered this while entertaining Simba with my finger instead of the expensive feather toy. I still have the scar. A sub heading of this axiom; never sleep with your feet outside the sheets. Twitching toes are tempting targets. My husband discovered this when Simba split open his big toe like a sausage. Like I said...the hard way.

Second, kittens can fly. Well, not actually fly, but dish out some fishy smelling goop and a kitten can leap from a sitting position, four feet away, to right next to you on the kitchen counter in one move. I believe it should be aerodynamically impossible of a three-pound fur ball to do that. Engineers should study this, really.

Third, kittens are reincarnated mountain climbers. Simba was only four months old when she conquered Mount Bookcase. I discovered her achievement at 3:00 am, the discovery time for all great cat achievements, like broken pottery and hairballs, but I digress.

I was up like a shot at the sound of a heavy metal thud. I ran with motherly concern (dad was still snoring away) to the location of the sound, the den next to our bedroom. Some one was hurt, I was sure of it. The dogs followed me to the den wagging sleepily and, I am sure cross, to be wakened at such an hour. Simba. It had to be Simba. I was a terrible cat mom. Only a month and she was injured somewhere, I knew it.

“Simba. Simba, where are you baby?”

I heard rustling and looked around, and then up...and up. On top of the seven foot high bookcase was a large artificial fern and a blank space where my brass candlesticks

had been displayed. They were now at my feet. In the midst of the fern leaves, were two golden eyes.

Which brings me to point Number Four; cats are interior designers. Simba claimed a hallway table as one of her many nests. She didn't mind the pictures of my parents. She could easily push them up against the wall...every freaking day. But the miniature ceramic pitcher had to go. This I discovered as my four-pound kitten carried the half pound pitcher in her mouth down the stairs. Apparently, she felt it looked better in the living room.

We learned, slowly but surely. We got used to seeing an animal walk above, not below us. We got used to checking closets to see if anyone had taken up residence. We learned to accept the systematic destruction and eventual extinction of all houseplants. Simba staged a campaign against ferns that would have made Schwarzkopf proud.

Our education had just begun.



**Babycat**

Spring, means flowers, sunshine and it means kittens. Heavily wooded, complete with babbling brook, our townhouse' backyard had always had its share of stray cats. They traveled from neighbor to neighbor, looking for a handout. I had never taken much notice of them before. Before that is, we'd become cat people.

My husband called me to the back door one morning. "Look at that." He pointed to my neighbor's deck. Out from underneath the wooden slats popped a white cat with black spots I'd seen before. The cat had come and gone through my backyard for the three years we'd live there.

"So?"

"Watch." Behind the cat, popped a miniature version, all white with black spots on the head and tail.

"Ahh, a kitten." (Warning: Anything that inspires 'Ahh' from you is trying to move into your house.)

There was only one kitten, only one survivor. Life outside, even with a babbling brook, is tough.

This was the beginning of the end of sanity.

We began to leave food and water at our back door. It was hot. She shouldn't have to feed her baby garden snakes. We told ourselves we had very good reasons.

Along with food, I gave them names. Being a writer and fancying myself exceedingly clever, I named them Mommycat and Babycat. We spent the next few months watching as Mommycat taught Babycat to catch slugs, hunt butterflies and wrestle well enough for the WWF.

We weren't the only ones watching. Simba stared out our French doors with great fascination at the activities. She looked like a little kid who wasn't allowed out to play. I felt sorry for Lacey, who, up until this point, had been Simba's dog mommy and the sole object of her affections. Lacey still groomed Simba on a regular basis and kicked her furry butt when she felt she needed it, but when Mommycat and Babycat were outside, nothing could distract Simba. She made plaintive little meows in Babycat's direction and he came to the door. They did a dance back and forth, chasing each other the length of the screen. They chatted, making little meows and clicking noises, I'm sure discussing the merits of fresh slugs over canned salmon.

One day Simba looked at me with a face that said *'Aww Mom, can we keep him?'* I was doomed.

Early that fall Mommycat decided Babycat was old enough to fend for himself. Instead of calling him back to their nest, she hissed at him. He came near her and she swatted him. He cried for her and she walked away. It may be nature but it broke my heart.

A conversation started harmlessly as I set canned whitefish outside my backdoor.



“It’s starting to get cold,” said my husband.

“Yeah, it is,” I answered as Babycat came out of nowhere. “It’s supposed to rain tonight, hard. I think I’ll take the dog carrier and put it outside. Maybe Babycat will use it to hide out.”

I wrapped a dog carrier in plastic, lined it with the dog’s sheepskin blanket and doused it with catnip spray, purchased in a futile effort to get Simba to use the expensive scratching post instead of the sofa. I opened the drapes the next morning to discover a white fur ball curled up inside the carrier. Babycat raised his head and stretched, pulling his long body out of the small box. I set down fresh water and a bowl of canned salmon.

Room Service.

The next few weeks Babycat developed a fondness for wet cat food and dry sleeping quarters. As I set out food I sat on the floor and slid my hand out the door. At first, Babycat shrank back. Then he began to sniff at my still hand. Slowly I was permitted a touch, a slight pet, and then triumphantly, a scratch behind the ear.

“I can’t keep this box out here all winter,” I said to my husband.

“No. We should just bring him in.”

“You’re probably right.” I turned to hide *my* little kid grin.

The next Saturday morning I came out to find Babycat asleep in the crate. I reached out quickly and shut the door.

I now owned two cats.

I should have known something was up with Babycat when the vet was startled he was five months old and nearly six pounds. Babycat grew, and grew, and grew. Yet there is not an ounce of fat on his now twenty pound frame. Babycat is just a big ass cat.

Our impulse with Babycat proved successful. Despite all the warnings I received about taking a wild born cat into my house, all was well. Simba and Babycat were inseparable. Simba became Babycat's substitute mom, grooming and showing him the ropes of indoor life. He even tolerated the occasional tongue bath from Lacey. Unlike Simba, who'd made short work of our slipcovers, Babycat used the scratching post.

Things couldn't have been going better; a sure sign things were about to get crazy.



**Mommycat**

Winter was fast approaching and I was still feeding Mommycat. I discovered she had a fondness for anything bird. She started taking bits of chicken from my hand. After she'd had enough bird to fill her tummy I held my hand outside the door. The first time she brushed up against my fingers was a small victory. I was tempted to reach out but I resisted, allowing her to come to me. Eventually I worked up to a ten-minute pet after every meal, scratching behind her ears and talking softly to her.

I put the dog crate back out, wrapped in plastic to protect it from the winter winds. Sheepskin blankets doused with catnip spray proved just as appealing to Mommycat as it had her son. I snapped a picture of Mommycat, warmly ensconced in the crate surrounded by high snowdrifts. This could not go on.

One morning as I we had our after breakfast pet, I reached my other hand out and snatched her into the kitchen. She hissed and spit when only moments before she was curling her head in my hand. With some inherent cat radar, she found the same small hole Simba had used her first night and slid her body through.

Hunger eventually won out and she came out of her hiding place to eat.

“Here you are Mommycat,” I cooed.

She looked at me with a fear that broke my heart. I would have to win her trust all over again.

“You’re looking a little hefty, Mommycat.”

It was Mid-February and a feral cat was fat. Things were going to get very crazy indeed.

It was the third morning Mommycat was with us. The night before the temperature had turned bitterly cold and it had begun snowing heavily. At breakfast I saw that Mommycat had gone inside the covered litter box and wouldn’t move.

“What’s up with that?” I asked my husband.

“She’ll be fine. Just give her some time. At least she’s not outside in this weather.” he replied as we both left for work.

Having a commute of only one block allows me to come home for lunch. That afternoon I came home, threw the mail on the kitchen table and froze.

I heard several high-pitched meows. Mommycat was still in the litter box. In the box with her were five kittens.

I called my husband. “Now what do I do? She won’t let me get near her and I have to get her out of the litter box. That can’t be good for her and the kittens.”

“Don’t Penny and Steve have a vet that comes to the house?”

A quick trip to the neighbors and I put in an emergency call to their vet, Duke. I placed another call to my office that I would not be returning from lunch due to the sudden addition of five new members of my family. Margie didn’t have to laugh *that* hard.

Duke arrived looking less like a duke than I expected. His slight, wiry frame proved beneficial to the treatment of Mommycat. He climbed over counters and moved himself into contorted positions to retrieve Mommycat. She hissed and spit as he held her tight, giving her shots and drawing blood. He literally sat on her while we waited for the result of the blood test for feline HIV to appear on the plastic stick. She was negative.

He let her go and she fled to the hole under the counter. Duke picked up each kitten and pronounced it in satisfactory condition. They were also pronounced all male. He placed them in the large dog crate I had prepared and I moved the crate in front of the hole. Mommycat instantly joined her babies.

“She looks like a good mother. They should be fine,” said Duke.

Still in shock, I stared at the box of noisy, squirming fur. “At least they’re not outside in this.”

“They would have died,” Duke said with terrifying certainty. “Mommycat too. She would have never survived the trauma of giving birth in this storm.”

I looked back at the kittens, Mommycat staring at me warily. Timing really was everything, for Mommycat and for me.

They say what a difference a day makes. *They* are a pain in the ass.

The next day one of the kittens started crying and wouldn’t stop. Mommycat was ignoring the kitten that was off to the side of the crate, away from his siblings. I tried to get close, but Mommycat was a hissing, clawing force to be reckoned with.

I placed one more emergency call. “Duke, I don’t know what to do.”

“There is probably something wrong with the kitten. That’s why she’s ignoring it. You can try bottle feeding it.”

A quick trip to the pet store and I returned with a miniature baby bottle and a supply of hope. My husband lifted the crate and tilted it just enough to make Mommycat leap out. As she sat in the corner, glaring at us, I placed the crate on the kitchen table and reached in. The plaintive meows had stopped.

I was too late.

Nature may be beautiful and wondrous, but sometimes it really sucks. My husband consoled me, telling me it was meant to be. There was probably a defect with the kitten. That didn’t stop me from mourning a creature that died without a name.



**Moose**

Three days after the kittens were born; I had several nasty bits of my insides removed. Five days in the hospital meant daily visits and phone calls, not to check on me, but for me to check on the status of ‘my babies’. My husband assured me that all was well. No, the dogs weren’t tormenting them. Yes, Mommycat was eating. No, the kittens weren’t crying too much.

The next month of my recovery was spent watching four little fur balls begin to explore their world, their world being my kitchen with the occasional glimpse into the far off universe, the living room.

The first kitten to peek his head out was the image of Babycat, shrunk down to less than one pound. The little boy sat boldly alone on the kitchen floor, looking up at me as some great cat mystery. He began springing around the kitchen with jerky bounces. He was first to eat solid food, or rather walk through the food bowl. He was first to discover the

joys of a tongue bath from Lacey. He was also the first to discover that he could hide quite nicely underneath the refrigerator. This first little brave boy was christened Stormin' Norman.

The second kitten to come out was the image of his father, who by this time we had identified as a stray from the neighborhood we named Daddycat. (*A Writer. Very clever*) Just like his father, this kitten had a black hood of fur on his head and more black on his body and tail. A visiting neighbor said he reminded her of a Toby, so Toby it was.

The third kitten to explore was a carbon copy of his mother. MiniMe.

The last little kitten didn't so much bound out of the crate as he did waddle. Rounder, fluffier and twice the size of his short hair brothers, I took one look at him and said "Lord, what a Moose!" The name stuck.

As soon as I could stand, I grabbed my camera and snapped pictures. The kittens and the havoc they wrought became a constant source of amusement and diversion. It's hard to think of your stitches when a few ounces of fluff decides to crawl under your blanket and go to sleep.

Mommycat did a good job taking care of her babies, but was forever licking the dog spit off her kittens. The moment the kittens began to wander, Lacey took them to be hers. Mommycat was constantly retrieving her babies from their dog mommy and carrying them back to her nest. Montie remained aloof, distaining anything that diverted my attention from what was truly important, namely him.

The topic of new homes came up at six weeks.

"We have to start looking," said my husband.



“I know,” I sighed.

“We can’t keep them.”

“I know,” I repeated.

I found homes for three of the kittens. The new owners were people who promised to never de-claw and to return them to me, not a shelter, if they couldn’t keep them. I didn’t spend enough money on them to have paid for a top of the line computer system, only to have them wind up in a shelter. We agreed to let them go at twelve weeks.

Three down, one to go.

My husband called me at my office. “You really want to keep Moose, don’t you?”

“A-huh,” I muttered, knowing what he was doing.

“Well I suppose its not much difference between three cats and four cats.”

I squealed into the phone.



Missy

Memorial Day weekend. Everything was calm, or as calm as it can be with two dogs and four cats in your house. Babycat and Simba had taken an interest in Moose, chasing him around the house and showing him the ropes of kittenhood. Mommycat was enjoying a postpartum rest. All was right with the world. (You'd think I would have figured this out by now.)

“Meow”

We were sitting at the table enjoying dinner and ignoring the critters at our feet, begging for food.

“Meow”

I looked around. It didn't sound like any of our cats. Each had a distinctive 'voice' ranging from pathetic whining to demanding. I glanced at the back door. Sitting at the on the step was a gray and black striped cat with the most amazing green eyes I'd ever seen.

“Meow”

“You can't live here,” I shouted. “No vacancy. No way, Jose.” My maternal instinct seemed to be on hold.

“Give him something,” said my husband. “He looks hungry.”

I set out a bowl of cat food laced with bits of our meatloaf dinner and a bowl of water. The cat sank its head into the bowl and devoured the entire meal. Hungry didn't cover it. The ridges of its spine and ribs were clearly visible. The tail looked like a fur stick someone had attached to the body. This cat was starving.

The wrapped crate went back outside along with the accompanying room service. But I was determined this one was not coming in. I thought I'd feed it enough to get its strength back while I looked for its owners.

Day after day the cat sat at the door quietly staring at me. *“Come on. Who are you kidding? You know your going to let me in. Do it already and get it over with. Otherwise I will sit on your back step and make you feel guilty forever.”*

On the seventh day, I finally agreed with the cat. I closed the door on the crate while it was asleep and took it straight to the vet. After a quick check the vet pronounced my new madness healthy, but hungry. Approximately fifteen years old, the cat weighed only six pounds. The cat had been de-clawed in the front, which would have made catching prey more difficult. And it was a she.

“She has probably been neutered. They may have done it when she was de-clawed. But with scars this old it's hard to tell without opening her up,” said the vet.

“Great. I guess I'll have to see if she goes into heat.” Just what I needed.

What our new addition needed was a little discipline. Fussing with her housemates, hiding in closets, sleeping on my head, she had to assimilate.

“I don’t think so, Miss,” became a well-worn expression in my house. “Get over yourself,” I cautioned after a run in with Mommycat. “You live in a big family now.” Think ‘*The Walton’s*’ with fur.

For a time I allowed her to go in and out. She always returned and it was one less cat underfoot. That is until my neighbor told me that my cat was running into everyone’s house. It seemed like she took any open door as an invitation. Some of my neighbors didn’t take kindly to it.

Imagine that.

She was confined to the house. Each time she made a dash for the door I said “What do you think your doing, Miss?” in *that* tone. I sounded just like my mother.

Missy had joined the family.



### **Territories, Détente and the Worst Smell on the Planet**

Each cat has their own unique personality. Blending them has not been easy. Simba is an adventurer, quick to hunt the errant housefly or the piece of chicken that just happens to be on your fork. Babycat, for all his size, is a shy love bug. He climbs on the bed in the night, nudging me with his head to be petted. Mommycat is my personal triumph. Skittish to the point of terror upon her arrival, she now comes when I call her for head scratches and lunchmeat. She has a thing for lunchmeat. It helped her bond with my husband, who has a similar obsession. Moose is still a kitten at a year and a half. He adores television. We bought him the movie “Ice Age” for Christmas. (Yes, we really did). Whenever we can’t find him we put the movie on. As soon as he hears the opening cartoon, he flies into the living room and perches directly in front of the screen. Missy is my South Philly girl. Never one to start a fight, she is more than ready to finish it. The girl kicks fur.

Shortly after Missy joined us, the ‘troubles’ began. Each cat tried to carve out his or her piece of territory in my 1100 square foot home. Missy decided the area on top of the dryer near the cat food was hers. We were introduced to spraying.

The wall was scrubbed down with enzyme cleaner and Missy was carefully watched. No sooner did we get her under control than Babycat started. As a tomcat it was to be expected, despite the fact he was neutered. Babycat tried to identify everything in the kitchen at waist high level as belonging to him. He marked each corner of my kitchen counter, which I faithfully scrubbed and sterilized, and he, just as faithfully, re-marked. Babycat had a few surprises for me.

One evening after a long day at work I decided to cook, a remarkable event in itself. I threw the ingredients for stroganoff in the skillet and began to cook.

“What is that?” I asked no one in particular.

My nose twitched. Was the meat bad?

My eyes watered. It didn’t smell like bad meat.

My nostrils began to burn. “What the hell is it?”

I pulled the skillet off the flame and turned off the stove. As I examined its contents I glanced at my dark yellow range top. What had apparently been a puddle was now a crystallized spot between the burners.

I had discovered the worst smell in the world. It’s not cat pee. It’s HOT cat pee.

I did what any sensible person would do. I laughed my ass off.

The problem continued with increasing frustration.

“The book says he’s stressed,” I told my husband.

“What has he got to be stressed about?” he shouted. “He has all the food he wants, playmates and a queen size bed to sleep in.”

After a call to a local rescue service for advice, I added a fourth litter box and bought an expensive bottle of spray that alleged to ‘calm’ my stressed out cat. Much to my surprise and relief, diligent cleaning of the boxes and re-spraying Babycat’s favorite spots every couple of weeks reduced the problem from a constant frustration to a rare event.

Within a few months each cat had identified his or her favorite areas of the house. Mommycat rules the kitchen. Missy has possession of all heating vents. Moose loves the top of the china closet. Simba, who never met a meal she didn’t like, claimed rights to the dining table. Babycat, well, when you weigh more than the dogs, you can sleep wherever you please. There are still the occasional skirmishes, but no one walks away broken and bleeding.

Détente has been achieved.



**Montie and Lacey (in the interest of equal time)**

Why do I do it? I get asked that a lot. Two and a half years after that night in the freezing parking lot, four thousand cans of cat food and one thousand pounds of cat litter later I ask myself why.

One night, I got my answer.

All the animals, dogs and cats, have ‘Mommy and Me’ time. Mommycat is first thing in the morning while I drink my tea. Moose is post-tea, before shower. Each animal has a few minutes in my day when I pay attention only to them. Simba is 11:00 p.m., as I’ve settled into bed. She jumps up on my stomach and does ‘the kitten dance’. Kittens knead their mother’s stomach to stimulate milk. Cats continue the habit as a source of comfort. Simba finished her dance; carefully thank heavens, since I don’t believe in de-clawing. Two circles of my waistline and she curled up on my tummy. I scratched behind her ear and under her chin as she purred. She rested her head on my stomach and dozed.

I had my answer. Two years before I’d found a tiny, half frozen kitten on a carburetor. Now, here she was, Garfieldesque, and sound asleep on top of me. I had made a life for that frightened little kitten. I made a life for all of them. I never intended for any of this or any of them to occupy my life so completely. But that night I came to understand what I did was important. Maybe it’s only important to me; it’s definitely important to them, but important just the same.

They are well fed, healthy, and content enough to fall asleep on my stomach.





All is well...