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# Mrs. Nikki's Cats

Stephen H. Jansen

She loved to plant flowers. Lilies and petunias and pansies, geraniums and hydrangeas surrounded her house. There was no particular order or sequence, not even a grand scheme for the landscaping she did. She would just plant and plant and when she was tired she'd plant some more. She created such a beautiful array of color and textures that her house was the talk of the town. The old widow, Mrs. Nikki, had the most striking house on the block, maybe even in town, even if it was a little busy looking. Some folks would stop by thinking the wild assortment of flowers was a greenhouse. They'd park their cars on the street and walk all over her property like they were at market. Mrs. Nikki would come out on her porch, her tattered apron billowing in the breeze. Thin wisps of grey hair swirled about her head as if charged with electricity. She'd raise a broom in hand and chase them away with ancient Celtic utterances that frightened even the largest of men. But still they came.

But it wasn't the flowers so much that she loved, although she certainly found enjoyment in them sitting on the front porch, rocking away the latter years of her life. Mrs. Nikki loved to get her long bony fingers into the soil beneath the ground. She loved the smell that came not from the first couple inches of topsoil but the dirt below, the deep dark moist ground way down. The earth there smelled like the charred wood of a smoldering campfire. Her fingers prodded about and stopped momentarily to enjoy the coolness that radiated upward through her body on hot summer days. Perhaps that's why the dead slept so well. They'd been given a cool, comfortable resting place for their last nap.

She ate mostly macaroni and cheese. It was a simple meal, one she'd never forgotten how to prepare. When the water bubbled ferociously like a witch's cauldron she'd dump in the elbow macaroni and watch them play tag like kids at the pool. Then when she'd strained the noodles and put them in a large bowl she'd add the yellow/orange cheese-milk coating. All the while a few of her twenty-seven cats would purr and rub against her ankle-length nylons. They could smell the cheese-milk coating, the earthen fingers that stirred it and the dry flakes that floated to the floor from her cracked, wrinkled skin.

She'd open a can of tuna fish and scoop some out onto the rose-petaled china plates her mother had passed on to her. Those that were hungry would come and surround the bowls like birds to a birdbath. Others would stare aimlessly out the slits of light where long, dark window drapes shuttered the day. The shears behind filtered the light giving it the same hue as the stale clouds of cigarette smoke floating throughout the room, imprisoned forever by closed windows, even in the summertime.

All too often, another cat would show up on her front porch. Some were just alley cats tired of life in the streets or too weak to fight for their food any longer. Many happened by and stayed because they were lonely. Others came because they knew of her. She took them all in.

On Friday nights Mrs. Nikki would play jazz records on the hifi in the front room. There she'd sit in her velvet-lined rocker, glass of sherry in a multi-cut crystal glass and a cat on her lap. All the cats gathered around, rubbed up against each other and swayed to the hifi's magic sounds. Their ears peaked straight and tall, their fur bristled and their tails flip-flopped the beat like a tick-tock clock. And if the jazz singer hit a high enough note all the cats would meow in unison to croon the moon. After another sherry and the jazz songs were over, Mrs. Nikki would rock to sleep. A faint smile crossed the lines of her peaceful face. The needle on the hifi bumped tirelessly against the spinning record label over and over and over.

Night passed and morning came as if they were one and the same. She replaced the tone arm on the hifi and shut it off. Then she gathered up her empty crystal sherry glass and placed it on the counter to be washed, next to the one from last Friday and the Friday before that. She almost tripped over what she thought was a rumped throw rug. Below her feet one of the older cats had passed away overnight. Bending down to pick it up, she stroked its soft furry head and without a tear, ran her bony fingers down the length of the body. Mrs. Nikki placed the cat into a shoebox and took it outside.

Once outside she dug a small deep hole near the side of the house. Her fingers felt good down deep in the cool soil. She breathed in the earthen smell and gently placed the shoebox into the hole. Next she brought out a tray of bright yellow marigolds and planted them on top smoothing the dirt flat with her rough hands. Then she stood and tamped down the dirt around the flowers with the toe of her shoe.

Later she sat on the porch rocking. Another car pulled up and a couple got out to approach her. But she was in no mood for strangers. Today was a day of mourning. She stood and uttered a guttural Gaelic curse learned long ago as a child. The couple frightened, retreated and left. As the car pulled away from the curb the passenger door opened and a kitten was left by its lonesome. It sauntered its way up to the porch suspiciously. Mrs. Nikki picked it up and placed it on her lap and stroked the kitten gently behind the ears. Its purr was faint. They went inside for macaroni and cheese and tuna. Come Friday they'd have some jazz music and a glass of sherry, or two.