

## **The Itty-bitty Kitten**

She was about 16, her sister was 14 and her brother was 12. The whole family, five people, lived in a two-bedroom apartment in a slightly rundown neighborhood, with a busy, 4-lane arterial a block away. Her brother had the smaller bedroom, she and her sister shared the bigger bedroom and her mother and stepfather slept in what would normally be used as the living room. If TV was going to be watched, it was watched in the combination living room/bedroom, usually by sitting on the bed and watching the TV that sat on a dresser against the wall.

Economizing like this was necessary due to some financial problems that her parents had experienced. To her, it wasn't that important whether she lived in a big house or a little apartment, because she was embarking on the biggest adventure of her life: growing up. What she was going to make of her life was a project currently under construction, and making sure that the project got done right was a matter that consumed most of her attention.

Big bedrooms, your own bedroom, makeshift living conditions, none of these things mattered very much. What mattered was GRADES, at school, so that she could go to college and plunge into whatever she decided to become. Oh, and boys, also. How to have a romantic life, and have confidence about boys. How to figure them out, and get them to like her, and want her. Because she liked them, and wanted them, that was for sure.

Both her mother and her stepfather were capable of almost childish enthusiasms, where they would get worked up about something and decide to carry it out, without regard to the usual boring adult prudence. This kind of thing happened one Sunday, her stepfather was extolling the unusually desirable properties of Siamese cats. Her mother caught his enthusiasm and together they started looking through the classified ads in the Sunday newspaper under "Cats" and they made phone calls and then an appointment to go look at some Siamese kittens.

The three children were of course excited about this also. Children love to have pets! And they had not had a dog or cat in the house for years. Before you could say "Jack Robinson" all five members of the family had piled into their beater car and driven off to find the address of the people who had Siamese kittens for sale. To a place that took 45 minutes to get to, that they had trouble finding in the dark, in an unfamiliar suburb, when it was getting late, on a Sunday night, when Monday morning, with all its demands, was looming.

No matter. They were going to look at a Siamese kitten and maybe have a pet again! They finally found the place, were enchanted by the kittens, and bought one, a female that got named after about a thousand communal suggestions. This name was forgotten, eventually, because she was actually called "Itty-Bitty", by the stepfather, since she was so little, and that was the name that everyone used.

She was wildly popular at first, and her popularity never really declined very much. She was the family's only pet, and everyone loved her. They went through the boring details of taking care of her, making sure that her food and water bowl were duly filled, and her cat box cleaned. At night she slept with whoever was lucky enough to have her.

There was one thing. Sometimes she went outdoors, and she became familiar with the immediate area around the apartment building. But it was dangerous, because the street outside the family apartment had a car go by about every two or three minutes. But, nothing bad happened, and it all seemed to be working out.

Until. She reached about 6 months, and began to go into heat for the first time, and the question immediately was raised, should they get her spayed? The teen-aged girl's mother, who ultimately made all the decisions in the family, decided that it would be fun for the family if Itty-Bitty had kittens. They would be so cute!

So, Itty-Bitty did not get spayed and she was not restricted from going outdoors. And pretty soon, it became apparent that she had gotten pregnant.

Everyone was so excited. Before too long, the family would have little kittens playing all around the apartment. Except, the teen-aged girl had some reservations about this whole prospect, about her mother's decision to let Itty-Bitty get pregnant. Actually, they weren't just reservations, they were fears.

Itty-Bitty was not a full-grown cat yet. What if, since she was little, there wouldn't be a big enough exit out of her body for the kittens to get born? What if they got stuck inside Itty-Bitty? Then Itty-Bitty would die. And all the kittens would die.

And getting successfully born did not only depend on the mother being able to push the baby out of her body. The afterbirth had to come out, and if Itty-Bitty's biological birthing processes were immature, maybe things wouldn't happen quite as they should, like maybe the kitten would come out but the afterbirth would stay inside, and if that happened, Itty-Bitty would die. And what if she conceived a whole bunch of kittens, and the birthing process worked for some of the kittens,

but not all of the kittens, because the whole process would have to happen over and over again: kitten comes out, then afterbirth, then next kitten comes out, then afterbirth, etc. And if it didn't work just right, Itty-Bitty would die.

A more subterranean fear was that Itty-Bitty would encounter difficulty during delivery of her kittens, and then a decision would have to be made: should she be taken to a vet? And the teen-aged girl was afraid that the answer would be "no". Her parents, who were financially strapped, would make that decision. The girl did not want to have to encounter something so awful, as a decision to just let their cat die.

But, the reality was that Itty-Bitty was pregnant, and eventually, about 6 AM one morning, she started to deliver her kittens. Who would help her? Well, the girl, of course. Her parents were content to just "let nature take its course". Her 12-year-old brother did not know anything about gauging the birthing process of kittens, and she couldn't really see him wanting to handle the afterbirth. And the little kittens would be all wet at first, and not look so cute as kittens do when they are grown up enough to take cute pictures of.

Her 14-year-old sister, sleeping in the other bed in the shared bedroom, maybe would offer moral support, but she might not be happy about being woken up so early in the morning, when she had to go to school that day. But moral support was all that she could offer. Because only the teen-aged girl, 16 years old, knew how animals got born.

That was because, as a younger girl, she had been horse-crazy. And she had had an opportunity to indulge her desire to learn everything she could about horses. Because, when she was in the 5th grade, her elementary school had been renovated, and half the old buildings had to be torn down. So that year, there were only half the buildings available to house the students.

The way that the school district decided to cope with this problem of too many students and not enough school buildings was to assign half the students to morning sessions (8 AM to 12 PM) and the other half to afternoon sessions (12 PM to 4 PM). That year, students only had to go to school half a day!

The teen-aged girl had been assigned to the afternoon session. And she had mornings free. All that free time, after breakfast! What did she do with it? She read library books about horses! She read about training horses and how to groom horses and how to take care of horses, and, how to help with the birthing of horses. Well, the birthing of foals. That is how she found out that the afterbirth had to come out of the mother, or the mother would die.

But as it turned out, that 6 AM school-day morning, all the afterbirths came out, all the kittens survived just fine. There were five of them. Itty-Bitty and her five kittens stayed in the bedroom where the two sisters slept, fenced into a large part of the bedroom, with cardboard walls. All of them slept on a blanket and some towels, and everything got cleaned up every day and the blanket got washed every couple of days, and everybody thought that the kittens got cuter every day. Then those days came when their eyes opened, and they looked cuter than ever, and soft and fuzzy!

But it was true that having those kittens in the two-bedroom apartment where five people lived, and two of them worked full-time and three of them went to school all day long, was a lot of work. The teen-aged girl's younger brother didn't notice the pressure too much, but the girls and the parents did, because everyone had to be careful not to step on kittens. As the kittens got older they became able to hop out of their cardboard-walled enclosure, and their bedding had to be washed all the time. Accidents sometimes happened, on beds or floors, and this meant an immediate clean-up, and changing sheets, and more washing of blankets.

The mother started to be a little bit irritable about having to live with kittens. But after all, homes could be found for them in about two more weeks, and then everything would go back to normal. Except. One thing was looking worrisome. Itty-Bitty's teats started to look not quite right. They were starting to look as if the milk inside them was getting solid.

It turned out that Itty-Bitty had something called "milk fever", and it was a serious medical condition. If it wasn't treated, and treated pretty fast, the kittens wouldn't be getting any more milk. Kittens that didn't get their mother's milk would have to be bottle-fed. And there were five of them in the apartment. And veterinary treatment was expensive.

The day after these facts became apparent, the teen-aged girl came home to an apartment that was changed. The cardboard barriers that formed the sides of Itty-Bitty's kitten enclosure were gone. The kittens were gone. Itty-Bitty was gone. "What happened?" she asked her parents, she was in shock. They said, "It was too much trouble. We just couldn't do "kittens" anymore. We dropped them all off at the Humane Society earlier today."

The girl was angry, more angry than she had been in years. "How could you do that?" she practically yelled at her parents. Her mother yelled back, "You have no appreciation for how hard I work to put a roof over your heads and food in your mouths! You all take me for granted! You don't care about my health! I'm not strong, because my mother never fed me right! None of you care about that! All you care about is kittens! You loved those kittens more than you love me!"

The girl gave up. It was not out of respect for her parents that she gave up. It was not out of recognition that a yelling match wouldn't solve anything, that she gave up. Nor did she give up out of a realization that what was done was done, and it was too late to make the situation right. All these things might be true, but she would have fought on, in requiem for Itty-Bitty and her kittens. But what made her stop fighting was the recognition that her mother had no ability to imagine the reality of what she had done. It would be like yelling at a baby.

Hundreds of thousands of cats got euthanized at animal shelters every year in 1965, when the teen-aged girl was 16 years old. Any cat that had milk-fever was not likely to be treated by a veterinarian at an animal shelter. The kitty would be either not treated, and get worse and die, or be put on a list of animals to be euthanized, and die. And the kittens would not be bottle-fed. They were too young to be adopted, and animal shelters did not have the resources to bottle-feed five 6-week-old kittens, five times a day. So the kittens would go on the list of animals to be euthanized. Itty-Bitty and all her kittens would die, just as the girl had feared.

Her mother had made this tragedy happen. At least, it was tragedy for the cats. The rest of the family could go on living their lives, unimpeded by sickness and death. And why had her mother made the decisions that she had made? Because it had gratified her to think that it would be "fun" for the family, if Itty-Bitty got pregnant and had kittens.

When the teen-aged girl thought about it, the hair practically stood up on the back of her neck. Because what her mother's decisions revealed was that her mother was capable of brutality. And this fact made the ground under the girl's feet heave up and then back down again. The upheaval made ripples, in the ground, in the girl's understanding of what she faced, in being her mother's daughter. Because, if her mother was capable of brutality toward a creature that she seemed to love, she might someday exhibit the same kind of brutality toward her own daughter. Were mothers sometimes brutal toward their own children? Evidently her mother could be. This recognition was something that could not be gainsaid, it was not something that she could avert her eyes from, she was now too much of an adult to pretend it wasn't so.

The recognition of her mother's brutality stayed with the girl from that moment on, like a silent companion, accompanying her everywhere she went. She was no longer alone. She had a friend. The friend was fear.

Cynthia Vautier December 8, 2016