

# The Perfumed Kitten

by Con Chapman

The cat had come to the house on a cold October night. Mom went to the front door when we opened the drapes and saw her, an orange tabby, meowing as if she already belonged us. I don't know what possessed Mom to take the cat in. We already had a collie in the back yard who gave her no end of trouble. He would jump the fence and run the neighborhood in the mornings when she had to get us off to school.

She brought the cat in--it was starved for food and attention. It rubbed everybody's legs and purred so loud you could hear it across the living room. We gave it some of the dog's food and put it down in the basement for the night. Since it was quiet and didn't wake Dad up, he let us keep it in the morning and didn't make us take it to the animal shelter.

We named her Big Cat—I don't know why. Maybe because she was already grown when we got her, unlike the kittens we'd seen in the pet store window that Dad wouldn't let us have. She figured out how to go in a cat box the first night, and there was never any issue after that.

We found out around Christmas that Big Cat had been pregnant. She went missing for a few days, then we found her behind the couch, then she disappeared again. Then one night we

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heard her in the basement and went down to check on her and she was having kittens.

She had five in all; four that looked like her, orange or mixed orange and white, and one black calico one. The first four we named Mitsy and Kitsy and Trixie and Bitsy. I guess we'd run out of names when we got to the black calico; we decided to just call her "Baby Kitty."

The other four were taken as soon as they were old enough; every little girl in the neighborhood wanted a kitten of her own, but nobody wanted Baby Kitty. She wasn't as lively as the others, and by the time the other four were taken she wasn't cute anymore. Everybody who'd come to the house ignored Baby Kitty for one of the others. It's hard to give away a litter of kittens, and after a while we were resigned to the fact that we'd have two cats, not just one.

We had Big Cat spayed, and then Baby Kitty when she was old enough, so we wouldn't have to go through the process again, and then they settled in for a life as our cats. Big Cat was the cock of the walk in our neighborhood, always getting into fights--and winning them. We didn't know whether she was sticking up for Baby Kitty or just feisty; we would hear a howl from across the street and see her heading up the hill towards a bigger cat, even a male, like a general leading the charge. If Baby Kitty were around, she'd slink back to our side of the street and hide in the crawl space under the house.

We began to worry about whether Baby Kitty would ever get married—Mom said she couldn't have kittens, but we figured she could still have a boyfriend. Mom said it wasn't likely; boy cats wanted to have babies by girl cats, and they could tell if the girl cat couldn't have them. It sounded like a lonely life to us; Baby Kitty had probably figured out she'd been passed over by every human who'd come into our living room to look at the box of squirming kittens. That must have hurt her feelings, and then she had to go out in the neighborhood, down into the storm drains or the alleys where everybody put their garbage out and the tom cats howled at night, only to hear them say “Sorry, I'm not interested,” like that girl Candace did to me last Valentine's Day.



I don't know whose idea it was to take Baby Kitty around the neighborhood—probably my sister's, but I was the one who thought of pulling her in the wagon. That way people who hadn't come to our house could see her and maybe take a liking to her. I thought it was worth a try.

We took the tiara from one of my sister's dolls and got it to stay on Baby Kitty's head. We used one of dad's pipe cleaners—the crown kind of leaned back like Baby Kitty's ears on one of the rare occasions when she got mad, but we knew if we made it too tight she'd run away and scratch it off with a hind leg. I thought she looked pretty good in it, but I'm not a tom cat.

Then Caroline said if Baby Kitty had perfume on boy cats would like her better. I said we were trying to give her away, not get her a boyfriend, and Caroline said it didn't matter, people liked perfume too, didn't I know that? I said okay, but the problem was getting the perfume downstairs without my mom hearing. We had to get the perfume off of mom's dresser because we couldn't take Baby Kitty up the stairs with her crown on, mom would get suspicious. We decided that I would go up the back stairs and ask mom to get me a Q-Tip while Caroline snuck up the front and brought down the bottle of Evening in Paris I'd bought mom for Christmas. Mom said I shouldn't have, that I should save my money for college, that she didn't need presents and that she loved me, but that wasn't the point. You wanted to give your mother a present—there'd be like a big hole inside of you all Christmas vacation if you didn't.

Anyway, Caroline got the Evening in Paris down the front stairs and out the door, then mom went back to her bathroom or her bedroom and didn't notice, so we were pretty much set—we just had to spray Baby Kitty and we'd be on our way.

“Don't spray her in the face,” I told Caroline. “Cats don't like that. Spray her from behind, otherwise she'll run away.” For once Caroline listened to me and just gave Baby Kitty a few squirts on her fur; she blinked but she didn't seem to mind and then curled up and laid down in the wagon. Baby Kitty, I mean, not Caroline.

We walked down Harrison Street, me pulling the wagon and Caroline holding Baby Kitty down, not too hard, just petting her and letting her know she should just stay still. Baby Kitty wasn't jumpy like some cats—she'd lie there as long as you went slow and rubbed her under the chin. There was a bunch of old women on the

next block who we knew from selling Christmas cards; we figured maybe one of them would take pity on Baby Kitty and keep her.

The first one was Mrs. McKenzie, the grandmother on the corner. She was nice so it wasn't hard for me to get up the nerve to ring her doorbell. I pushed it until I heard a sound inside, then she came to door with a pretty big smile on her face. She knew me because I would sometimes go into the rock garden in her back yard. It had a hidden metal frog that seemed so real it surprised me the first time I saw it. She never chased me away, she always let me stay.



"Well hello there, young man," she said. She talked like that, like a kindergarten teacher at the door on the first day of school. "What brings you down my way?"

"We wanted to know if you'd like to buy a free kitten," I said. Caroline had picked Baby Kitty up and was holding her so Mrs. McKenzie could see.

"Well, I don't believe I can use one right now," she said. "I can call up Mrs. Joseph and she if she'd like one for my grandsons."

I knew the answer to that one; the Joseph boys hated cats, and threw rocks at them. "No thank you," I said. "We'll take our business elsewhere. We appreciate your looking." I was trying to sound business-like, so she wouldn't feel bad about turning us down.

"Well, thank you for bringing him by," she said.

“It's a her, but it's been fixed,” Caroline called from the walkway, but I knew it wouldn't make any difference—Mrs. McKenzie had already made her mind up.

Next was the Schonfeld's, halfway down the block. We hardly ever went over there, but last summer they had cousins over and we were invited for lemonade. The cousins were a boy and a girl and they were older and stuck-up. The Schonfeld kids went to school out of town and were only home in the summer so we hardly ever saw them.



I told Caroline it was her turn to ring the doorbell. That's how we sold Christmas cards, we'd take turns so one of us didn't have to be embarrassed all the time. We would spread the misery around that way and we wouldn't be so discouraged when we got home.

Caroline rang the bell two or three times and was about to walk away when somebody came to the door. It was a man—he just had on his pants and an undershirt, and I think he'd been sleeping.

“Yes?” he said when he came to the door. It was Mr. Schonfeld; he didn't recognize us because he was never around when we came over.

“Hi,” Caroline began, and I could tell she was nervous. “We were wondering if you were looking for a kitten.” I didn't think her sales pitch was as good as mine.

“No, we didn't lose a cat,” the man said, and started to close the door.

“She didn't mean that,” I yelled out from the sidewalk. “We have an extra kitten we're giving away free—she's already fixed.”

Mr. Schonfeld looked at me like he was all woke up now, like he understood. “We don't need any cats, thank you,” he said as he closed the door.

I could tell Caroline was upset by how short Mr. Schonfeld was with her, so I put my arm around her as we walked away. “That's okay—I'll take the next two houses,” I said.

We tried one more on the corner where the Youngs lived, then we walked down the other side of the block to where we knew there was a big family named the Hunters. They had a lot of kids and there was always something going on there. They had an old rusty truck that sat out in the front yard; my mom would make that noise of hers when we drove by and one time she called it a “disgrace.”



Still, we figured with a lot of kids maybe they'd want a cat—I reminded myself to say kitten. Their house was katty-corner from the Jones' place, across Grand, a busy street. There wasn't a stop light, so we had to wait until there wasn't any traffic, then go fast enough to get across without getting hit but not so fast that Baby Kitty would jump out and run away.

When we got across the street we stopped to catch our breath and looked the Hunter place over. We heard the back screen door bang and one of the kids came flying around the house to the side yard. He was one of the younger ones, probably running away from a big brother, I figured. He hid behind a tree, and didn't turn around as we walked over to the sidewalk that ran alongside his house—he was peeking Indian-style around the tree and didn't notice us. He finally turned around when we got closer and he heard us.

“Is your family looking for a house pet, because if so, we have the one for you,” I said. I played Santa Claus in my fourth grade play and have also been in an oratorical contest, so I know how to project myself and catch people's attention.

The boy didn't say anything—he just held his finger up to his mouth and said “shh” real low, lower than a teacher would say it because he didn't want to be heard. Caroline and I just stood there for a second waiting for him to ambush whoever was chasing him. We didn't see the bigger kid come out of the bush behind us, and neither did the boy behind the tree, because before he knew it the bigger kid had jumped on his back and wrestled him to the ground.



They were having fun at first, you could hear them laughing, then it turned mean. The bigger boy got on top and pinned the other boy to the ground by kneeling on his arms, then he started punching him in the face.

“Make them stop it,” Caroline said to me.

“It's none of our business,” I said to her. I didn't think I could take either one of them.

While we were watching the boys and weren't looking Baby Kitty had hopped out of the wagon and was walking around in the side yard, which was part grass and part dirt, unlike the houses up on the street where we lived. Caroline noticed and yelled “Baby Kitty!” real loud and that brought a woman to the window. I guess she'd been sitting on a couch in the front parlor all that time and hadn't done anything to stop the fight. She had real big arms and a sleeveless top on. She looked like she was hot and was trying to stay cool.

“Is your cat lost?” the woman said through the window—there wasn't any screen.

“No ma'am,” I said. “We are showing her around the neighborhood to interested parties. If you'd like, we can bring her inside for you to look at.”

“Bring her 'round to the back door,” she said. She was smiling and her teeth were brown at the gums. “Darrell, Gene

Ray—stop that!” she yelled at the boys, but they just kept on fighting.

We wheeled Baby Kitty around to the back and the woman opened the door. A little girl stood behind her skirts; she was skinny and had a pink nightgown on—in the middle of the day.

“Here kitty, kitty,” the woman said as she bent down to pet Baby Kitty. She had on a pair of cut-off blue jean shorts and no shoes. The little girl stood behind her, her eyes opened wide. My mom says there are some children who do not have the advantages we have of going on trips to the St. Louis Zoo and such, so maybe she'd never seen a cat before.

“That's a mighty pretty cat you got there,” the woman said. “She's all parti-colored, see sugar?” The woman gathered the little girl under her arm. “Is it all right if she pets it?”

“Sure,” I said. “She's a real sweet cat and never harmed anybody.”

The woman took the little girl's right hand and put it down on the head of Baby Kitty, who didn't mind at all. I was telling the truth, she had never scratched me or my sisters. Of course, she also didn't play much either, that was the other side of her personality, but I figured I didn't have to tell them that.

“Doesn't she smell good?” the woman said to the little girl, who had started to smile just a little. “I believe that's the best-smelling cat I've ever seen.”

“We put Evening in Paris perfume on her,” Caroline said, which I wish she hadn't. I wanted them to think she smelled like that all the time.

“Is the kitty a princess?” the little girl asked.

“No, but she likes to dress up,” I said.

“Lots of cats won't let you dress them up, but she's not like that,” Caroline said. “She's just like a doll that way.”

That made the little girl excited—I guess she figured she could get a pet and a doll at the same time. “Can we keep it?” she asked her mother.

"You know your daddy, sugar," the woman said. "He's allergic to cats, and 'sides we've already got Spike."

"Who's Spike?" I asked.

"He's the German shepherd over there," the woman said, pointing to a chain-link pen alongside the garage that stood next to the alley.

The German shepherd was looking at the three of us and started to growl when he saw Baby Kitty. "Is he dangerous?" I asked.

"Only when my husband lets him off his chain," the woman said. "Don't worry, he can't git you now."

The dog barked loud and I could tell Caroline was getting nervous. I didn't think it was a good idea to give Baby Kitty to a home where a dog could eat her up.

"Well, if you already have enough pets then we won't trouble you anymore," I said. "We just thought we'd see if you were in the market for a calico cat."

"Momma I want to keep her!" the little girl said, but Caroline put her hand on Baby Kitty's back to make sure she didn't run away from fear of the dog, and I grabbed the wagon handle and started to walk away. The dog kept barking, and Baby Kitty made the noise she makes when some other cat wants to fight her—a low moan that's not a meow and not a growl.

"C'mon, let's go," Caroline said.

As we made our way along the sidewalk the boys stopped fighting, apparently tired, and came up to us.

"Is that a cat?" the smaller boy asked. I felt like being sarcastic but I didn't. He liked to fight too much.

"Yes, but your mom says you don't need another pet," I said and tried to move past them.

"She ain't my mom, she's my step-mom. She's *his* mom," the boy said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at the bigger boy. They both smiled as if this was some kind of accomplishment, or they were smarter than me because they knew what I didn't. How I was supposed to figure that out is beyond me.

“We don't think Baby Kitty would be safe with your dog,”  
Caroline said.

“Baby Kitty?” the older boy said, then laughed. “That ain't  
no Baby Kitty, that's a full-growed cat if you ask me.”

We just kept moving until we got to Grand, then stopped  
and waited for the traffic to clear again. I know my heart was  
beating fast, and Caroline was teary-eyed. The only one of us who  
was calm was the cat, and I had to admit she wasn't a kitten  
anymore.

