

THE STRAY

by

DAMOND FUDGE

Ron had just finished a particularly strong run—eight miles, well on his way to his half marathon goal—and had slowed to a walk for the two blocks leading up to his house. He checked his vitals on his fitness band while he caught his breath. Everything was looking good, his heart rate stayed within its optimal range most of the route, only spiking during that incline on Hamilton Court. He didn't need to include that street in his routine, but he liked the challenge of trying to keep his pace steady all the way up the hill.

He began his cool down stretches on the front porch steps like usual. That's when he heard the mewling. It was so soft, at first, that it was difficult to pinpoint. As he leaned down close to his stoop, it was clearer. He moved around to the side and peaked through the wood lattice. He thought he could see the faint reflective glow of a pair of eyes way back under the porch.

Ron got out his phone and kicked on the flashlight. Sure enough, a cat was there, and it skittered quickly out of the beam and back into the darkness, though staying under the porch.

“No no, it’s okay,” he cooed. “I won’t hurt you.” He caught the feline in the light, again. It had backed itself into the far corner where it was penned in by the cinder block foundation and the solid side wall of the porch. Ron could see it clearer now: scrawny with matted grey and brown fur, shivering and darting its head as if looking for an escape route. “Come on out. It’ll be fine. I just want to see if you’ve got an owner, that’s all.”

The cat didn’t make a move, but it did let out a meow that sounded weak and frightened to Ron. An idea came to mind, so he said, “I know what. Just stay there,” then bounded up the steps and into his house.

He had a can of tuna in the back of the fridge that was dangerously close to being *way* past its Best By date. He cracked the lid, momentarily recoiling from the smell, and dumped it into a bowl. He returned to the front yard, checked and found the cat still in the same spot. He set the bowl in the grass halfway between the front walk and the point where the steps met the porch. “Here you go. Come and get it.”

Ron knew there was no way the animal couldn’t smell the fish. He could’ve set it on the sidewalk across the street and still tempted it. He sat on the top step and waited. Eventually, hunger got the best of the cat, and it slowly made its way to the bowl. It hesitantly sniffed at the food then whipped its head around to look directly at Ron, as if it just noticed he was there in its peripheral vision.

Ron simply smiled and motioned toward the bowl. “Go on,” he whispered. “It’s all yours.”

The cat kept its gaze on the human for a while longer. Finally, it turned back to the tuna and began its meal. Watching the feline devour the snack, Ron noticed an odd feature to it. In the middle of its head, exactly between its eyes, yet a little higher up the cranial ridge, was a bump about the size of a shooter marble.

He also noticed the cat wasn't wearing a collar. "Let's hope you've been 'chipped, little one," Ron said aloud. As if understanding the words spoken by the human, the feline darted back under the porch. There was still some tuna left, so Ron sat watch for a few minutes, eventually deciding to leave the animal to its own devices and heading inside to shower off his run.

The leftover tuna went untouched every time Ron glanced out a window at it or checked the doorbell cam app all that night before he went to bed. First thing after he woke, Ron looked at his phone. Sure enough, the doorbell cam had recorded something. He pulled up the video and watched the cat sneak back out and finish its dinner. There wasn't anything else in the kitchen he could see a cat eating, so he poured most of a bottle of water into the bowl as he left for work.

Ron stopped by the grocery store on his way home and bought several cans of actual cat food. The water in the dish was almost completely gone, so he tossed the residue onto his yard and popped open one of the cans. Then he sat on the steps with the book he was currently reading and waited. Eventually, the feline crept up to the bowl, still cautious of the human. It looked to Ron almost like it was keeping one eye on him the entire journey from the porch. The cat left some food in the bowl when it scurried back to its hiding place. Ron closed his book and set out for that night's run.

The food was still there when he returned.

Yet, it was gone in the morning.

This went on for five more days, which meant—between breakfasts and dinners—Ron had to make another trip to the store. The cat stayed longer every night, eating more, leaving less. On the second of these nights, rather than speed off back under the porch, it casually sauntered, even taking a moment to pause and look at Ron, as if sizing him up. The nights after, the feline made its way closer and closer.

Finally, on the first night it ate every morsel in the bowl, the cat bounded up the steps and rubbed against Ron's shin. He let it rub for as long as it wanted, not making any move toward it. Once it had gotten what it needed, the feline resumed its trek back "home."

The dynamic changed from that point, yet Ron never tried to rush anything. He simply allowed the cat to acclimate to him at its own pace. In the meantime, he kept an eye out for any "Lost Cat" posters around the neighborhood when he went for his runs, but none ever appeared. The night the cat finally leapt onto his lap and settled in for a spell, Ron asked it, "So, you finally ready to come inside?" The cat looked up at him as if accepting the invite.

Maybe he was seeing things, but Ron could've sworn the animal nodded, too.

The first thing he did was lead the cat to the main floor bathroom and show it the litter box. "This is your new toilet, buddy," (the *real* first thing he'd done was hold it up and look, so he was now certain it was male.) "You'll also be sleeping in here, at least the first couple nights until you're used to..." The cat hopped into the box. "Okay, then, guess you know how to use that, and...yep...I'll give you some privacy."

That night, they played together for a while, then they sat on the couch together and watched a basketball game. As Ron got ready to go to sleep, the feline watched from the bed.

“Tomorrow,” Ron said through a mouth of toothpaste foam, “I’ll take you to a vet. See if you belong to anyone. And also get them to take a look at that lump, make sure it’s nothing serious.”

The only vet who could see him on short notice was Dr. Marta Andrews, a kind-faced older woman in—Ron guessed—her late fifties, with a single tuft of grey at the front of her otherwise auburn hair. She ran the cat through a battery of tests.

“Well, first thing, he doesn’t have a microchip. If, as you said, you haven’t seen any ‘Missing’ posters, he’s all yours. Plus, the good news, he’s in perfect health. Especially for a stray.”

“Really? What about that lump?”

“It doesn’t seem to be anything,” Dr. Andrews stated, pointing to an x-ray clipped to the light board. “As far as I can tell, it’s solid. Probably a bone anomaly, of some kind. If it doesn’t bother him, at all, I say we just leave it alone. Of course, let me know if it ever does.” She began petting the feline. “You’ve got a good boy, there. He was perfectly calm through everything.”

“I’m guessing that’s unusual?”

“A little, yes. Anyway, we can go ahead and put a microchip in him if you’d like?”

“Sounds good.”

“Let me get everything ready, here. Oh, do we have a name for the little guy?”

Ron thought for a moment. "I've been just calling him 'buddy' this whole time, so I guess that works."

Dr. Andrews prepped the syringe for the procedure. She placed one hand gently on Buddy's back, and just before she got the needle against his skin, ready to puncture, the cat began to flip out, screeching and flailing. The vet kept a firm hold on him, pressing down even more to keep him from flying off the exam table. Finally, she just jabbed into Buddy and successfully injected the microchip.

"That was strange," she said, after Buddy had calmed down enough that she felt safe to let go of him. "I guess somebody doesn't like needles. Is that so?" She continued to gently stroke his fur and make soothing noises until he relaxed and resumed his calm purring. She picked the cat up from the exam table and cooed to it, "Are you ready to go home with your new daddy, Buddy?" The doctor handed the animal to Ron, who cradled it to him.

Neither of them noticed the tiny wisp of smoke rising from the needle hole in Buddy's skin, dissipating as it wove through the strands of fur.

Buddy turned out to be a dream pet. He hardly ever mewled, except when his food dish was empty. Ron stopped at Pet Supply on the way home from the vet's and brought him into the store. In the cat toy aisle, Buddy would reach out and bat at specific ones, as if he was the one doing the shopping, so they had plenty of toys to choose from for playtime.

Like he did that first night, Buddy was in the habit of sitting on the couch with Ron and watching TV with him. The cat also had taken to sleeping in the chair in Ron's room. As far as Ron knew, Buddy stayed there all night, seeing that he was in the same spot every morning.

Since he had no idea how long Buddy had been out on the street—maybe even his whole life—Ron decided it was best for him to forgo his nightly runs for a bit, until he felt Buddy had acclimated to living both indoors and with a human. Two weeks after he officially took the feline in, he resumed his exercise.

Buddy seemed oblivious to this change in the nightly routine.

Things went on like this for about a month and a half. It was around this time that Ron began noticing his stamina begin to drop. The week previous he had pushed himself to the ten-mile mark and had held steady there for the next five days. On that sixth, though, he had difficulty making it all the way to a full ten before needing to begin his cool down walk.

He thought nothing of it that night, but it was the same—possibly a little worse, even—over the next few days. After it had gone on for more than a week, and his distance had cut back again to nine miles, he went to see his doctor.

Dr. Evan Parcels had been his GP for more than ten years. He knew how much fitness meant to Ron, and that any reduction in his routine was cause for concern, so he put Ron through a rigorous physical. While Dr. Parcels could tell simply by observation that his patient wasn't operating on all cylinders, all the data said otherwise.

“I’m sorry, Ron,” the doc said afterward, “I don’t know what to say. By all indicators, you’re as healthy as you’ve ever been.”

“Then why don’t I feel like it?”

Dr. Parcels shook his head in resignation. “I’m not sure. I could tell by watching you that...*something*...was going on, but all your tests...” His voice trailed off as contemplation took over. “Tell you what. Keep a record of your activity—all of it—for the next two weeks, then come back to see me and we can decide on a plan of action from there.”

Ron was frustrated by the lack of answers, but begrudgingly said, “Okay. Can do.”

“Good. Of course, if things get a lot worse before then, call me.”

The two weeks progressed much the same way the days preceding Ron’s doctor visit had. He noticed a gradual decrease in his stamina along with, around day eleven, an occasional desire to just stay home rather than run. It took so much effort to push past this feeling and go for a run that he was sure it affected his endurance even more. He even fell asleep during a meeting at work, which wouldn’t have been so bad if he hadn’t begun snoring. Loudly.

Ron also began getting lightheaded from time to time which would affect his sense of balance, almost like having vertigo without the heights. Occasionally, if he was standing too long, say talking with someone at their desk, he found his hand subconsciously reaching out, his fingertips settling on the desk’s top to steady him.

Fearing the possibility of a tumor, Dr. Parcels decided to run a CAT scan, but that was clean. Next, he sent Ron to a cardiologist, Dr. Ramath Nuri. He put Ron through a heart stress test, where he had to walk on a treadmill as it gradually changed difficulty. Once he couldn't take anymore, he had to quickly jump off the machine and a nurse checked his heart with an ultrasound, the results of which were compared to the one given prior to getting on the treadmill.

Once again: Nothing abnormal.

Dr. Nuri's next option was having Ron wear a portable EKG for twenty-four hours, even insisting he go for a run. The data showed the increased activity of the exercise, yet despite Ron's claims of the run lasting less time than usual, the doctor could only see the heart of an exceptionally healthy individual.

Ron's most embarrassing moment came three days later. Desperate for a coffee fix to hopefully counteract his exhaustion, he made his way to the kitchenette on his floor at work. He lucked out to find a pot that appeared freshly brewed, maybe short a mug or two. He poured himself a brimming helping and stood at the counter while he sipped.

The next he knew, someone was calling his name through heavy fog. He pried his eyes open, not without a bit of effort, and found Patti Henniman from accounting standing in front of him.

"You okay, Ron?" she asked, concern dripping from her face. "I've been calling your name for, like, a whole minute."

Still a bit dazy, Ron shook his head and asked, "Huh?"

"You were literally asleep on your feet. You're lucky you didn't spill, there."

Ron looked down at himself. He was standing exactly as he had been, and his mug was miraculously still upright, still full. “Wow,” he exclaimed. He tried to laugh it off, casually positing, “Well, it probably would’ve woken me up had I spilled.”

Patti uneasily laughed with him, then asked, “So...you’re sure you’re alright?”

Ron nodded, a little too energetically. “Yeah. Yeah. I’m good. Long night. I’ve...” thinking on his feet, “...got a new cat. Trying to get him box-trained and used to the house. That’s all. You know how it is?”

She appeared satisfied with that answer, and they exchanged a few more pleasantries—mostly about Buddy—before heading back to their respective cubes.

Four nights later, Ron finally got his answer...

He had always been a lucid dreamer, able to control his actions within them. He also could usually remember, with few exceptions, most of the details of his dreams the next morning. Lately, though, this ability had eluded him. In fact, it was his own, personal, theory for why he was so tired. It had happened before, and it usually meant he wasn’t sleeping well. Since that was usually caused by stress, and the only thing he was stressed about was how tired he was, he was afraid he might be stuck in some hellish loop.

On the night in question, the lucidity slowly came back to him during a particularly strange dream. He was walking through a field of wheat, but the ground was incredibly marshy. Every step was a chore, his feet making a shurp-pop sound as they entered and exited the watery mud. A mild breeze blew around him, rustling the stalks. He could've sworn their brushing together was causing them to sound as if whispering his name.

He saw a small house on a hill in the distance, so he angled his progress toward it. Occasionally, it seemed like the building moved farther from him, so Ron would concentrate hard and the house would briefly shimmer before shifting back where it had been. Also, the closer he got to the building, the louder—and clearer, for that matter—the whispering became.

It was definitely saying his name.

After plenty of effort, Ron made it to the door of the house, a dilapidated Depression Era shotgun shack. Its siding had once been painted white, but most of that was peeled off, and the boards were now mostly black with a substance that was either soot, mold or some unholy alliance of the two. In sharp contrast, the doorknob was beautifully polished brass, with an intricate, almost runic, pattern carved into its glittering surface.

Ron reached out and grasped the knob.

The burning was instantaneous.

The knob began to glow white.

Ron could not let go.

The glow intensified to blinding.

The burning intensified.

The sound and smell of his sizzling skin filled the air.

He opened his mouth to scream, but...there was nothing.

He forced himself to twist the knob.

The door opened, and...

...he woke.

Buddy was lying on his chest instead of in his chair. The cat's eyes were closed, its head tilted to point the bump on his head at Ron's face. At the bottom of the lump, it appeared as if the skin was slit open ever so slightly. Ron craned his neck for a better look, which is when he saw the vapors.

What could only be described as a thin trail of mist was flowing from Ron's mouth and nostrils directly into Buddy's mouth. Ron tried to clamp his lips shut tight, but the mist simply slid between them. That was when he heard it, soft but distinct. His name repeated at a moderate speed, like a mantra. It was coming from Buddy. His mouth was forming the word, making the sound.

The stray was talking!

This broke Ron out of his trance, and he cried out, "What the fuck?!"

The chanting and the mist suddenly stopped. The skin over the bump flipped up, revealing a third eye. Not a cat's eye, though. No, this was a fully formed and functioning *human* eyeball.

Buddy let out a screech-hiss kind of sound.

Ron screamed and flung the cat across the room.

It hit the opposite wall hard enough to crack the plaster before falling to the floor and out of Ron's range of sight. He heard Buddy's claws skitter across the hardwood and into the hall. He jumped out of bed and slammed the door shut. Then he ran to his closet, pulled the doors open and grabbed his baseball bat. The instant his hand wrapped around the handle pain shot through his palm and the bat clattered to the floor.

He looked at his hand and saw what could only be the burns from the doorknob in his dream. Too much had happened in the past couple minutes for this bastardization of known physics to faze him. He looked around the room for something to wrap it with, opened the top drawer of his dresser and grabbed a sock. With the wound dealt with, he once again grabbed the bat. He made his way to the bedroom door and listened. Hearing nothing, he opened the door a crack for a peek. Buddy was nowhere to be seen, but Ron knew that didn't mean he wasn't *somewhere*.

He opened the door and cautiously stepped into the hall. As silently as he could, Ron crept to the top of the stairs, his ears tuning to the almost overwhelming stillness of the house. At the landing, he carefully leaned as far as he dared over the railing to check the foyer. As far as he could tell, he had a clear shot at the front door, so he moved to the top of the stairs.

Before his foot made it to the first step down, a shriek pierced the air as Buddy leaped onto the back of his neck, his claws digging in and tearing at the flesh. Ron lost his balance, tumbling down the stairs, the cat continuing to rip at him. Ironically, Buddy's body acted as a cushion, keeping Ron's head from smacking too hard on the stairs and the parquet floor of the foyer. He lost control of the bat during the fall, and it clattered across the floor, landing in the dining room.

Once he landed, Ron began grasping at Buddy, attempting to get a decent hold on him through the cat's flailing legs. He finally was able to slide his hands under the cat's belly and push out, slowly lifting it from his neck. Ron felt Buddy's grip loosen and, with some effort and plenty of force, straightened his arms as far as they could. With a last rending of flesh, the cat was pulled from his body, at which point Ron got a better hold of Buddy's midsection, swung him over his head and slammed him into the floor.

Still holding on, Ron maneuvered himself onto his knees for better leverage, then continued to smack the feline over and over into the hardwood. The entire time, that perverse human eye stayed open, staring flatly at nothing. Ron finally let go, uneasily got to his feet and staggered over to the waiting baseball bat. Breathing heavily, he picked it up, lifted it to his shoulder and turned back to...nothing.

Buddy was gone.

"Where the hell are you," Ron asked the air. He cautiously advanced to the edge of the living room, bat held at the ready. He could now feel his blood rolling down his back. "Come on out. I won't hurt you. Just kill you."

He took a few steps into the room and stopped, pricking up his ears, listening for any clue. That was when his curiosity hit, and he asked, “What the fuck are you? Because you sure as hell aren’t a cat.”

Simultaneously from across the room and deep inside his mind, Ron heard the hissing reply, *“You could never fully understand my existence.”* The voice caused Ron pain, like a splitting migraine. He gasped sharply and pressed his hand to the side of his head. *“Your feeble human brain would never be able to comprehend what I am. Why I am. Where I come from. It would be useless to even attempt explanation.”*

Ron shook his head to recover his senses, then stepped into the middle of the living room. “Fine,” he replied, “don’t explain. Just show yourself and let’s fight this out. Face to face.”

He stood there, slowly turning, keeping an eye on every inch of the room he could see, for what felt like an eternity. Finally, from behind came that awful shriek. Ron spun around, swinging the bat and stepping into his movement with perfect technique.

The bat caught Buddy square, propelling him across the room on a beeline to the fireplace. His spine struck the edge of the header at full speed, snapping in two with an audible crack, before he landed inside the firebox with a thump, lying there, twitching.

Ron, taking no chances, wedged the bat inside the fireplace, the fat end pinning Buddy to the spot. Then he went into the kitchen, took some paper and cardboard out of the recycle bin, grabbed a box of matches and returned to the living room. He dumped the kindling in, added a couple logs and set it all ablaze. He slumped onto the couch and watched the flickering until his head lolled back and exhaustion took over.

What he failed to notice was the thin, rapidly evaporating trail of fluid on the floor, originating from the fireplace.

Ron was getting his afternoon cup of coffee from the office kitchen when Patti Henniman sidled up to him.

“Hey, Ron.”

“Oh,” he said, startled. “Hi, Patti.”

“You look like you’re feeling better. Getting more sleep?”

“Um...oh, yeah. I’m feeling great. Tip top.”

“Well, you look it. You definitely have more color in your cheeks than the last time we spoke.” She had been looking him over the entire conversation, but she suddenly got very interested in his face, even leaning in uncomfortably close. “That’s interesting. I never noticed before...”

“What?”

“Have your eyes always been different colors?”

The End