Cats

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In spite of my love of dogs and cats, I would never consciously decide to get a pet. Living alone in a big house, working full time, and often traveling out of town on business, I could not afford to have any pet. And yet, one day I found myself being "a mother" of four, then five cats. It was not me who got them. They all adopted ME.

Everything started during an early spring of 1984. A skinny white cat with large brown and black spots was seen a few times passing through my lawn. When it realized my presence, it used to run quickly toward the bushes of the back yard. The cat was very shy, and seemed wild. On my attempts to approach or to call, the cat in panic climbed up the wire fence surrounding my garden, and quickly disappeared in the grasses of a large pasture behind my back yard. Frankly, I did not pay much attention to this cat, nor to my back yard. It was always a mess, as there was never enough time to do gardening and landscaping.

One day in April, my neighbor, seeing me in the garden, approached the fence and said: "Do you know that in your back yard, under the pile of wood, over there, you have got a family of cats?" This was a surprise to me. "The mother-cat, the white cat, with black and brown spots, gave birth to two kittens. We were watching them yesterday playing together on the grass. Very cute!"

Interesting news! So, this skinny white cat passing through my garden was actually a female cat who had chosen my back yard as a home for her kittens! The first thing I could think of was to provide some food to the cat family. Apparently the mother-cat was hunting in the pasture, but though there should have been plenty of mice around, she looked exhausted. Feeding two youngsters was a tough task. Later that day, after a visit to a grocery store "my" food was installed in front of the woodpile. The cats were not in sight, but an hour later the food disappeared.

A couple weeks later two small kittens, one looking very similar to the mother, all white with a few symmetric black-brownish spots, and the other, striped brownish-gray, a classical European brand cat, were playing on my lawn. To each of these kittens I gave names, actually two names, in English and in Polish. The white kitten had beautiful almond- shaped eyes, and got the Polish name Migdałek (Little Almond) and the English name Kittycat. The striped kitten became a Tiger (or Tygrysek – a Little Tiger, in Polish). I started calling them in Polish: "Kici, kici Migdałek, kici, kici Tygrysek, kici, kici kocury!!!" ("Kocury" ['kotzury'] means "Big cats".)

Carrying food to the wood-pile was not very convenient, and I started leaving the food on the porch. Through the window I watched the cat family. The mother-cat, still quite shy and wild, very cautiously, suspiciously looking around, approached the porch, and when reassured about safety, called the kittens. She started eating, showing her kids how to do it, then watched them eating. The kittens were very cute, looked like ready to be pet, but their mother seemed very severe: at any of my attempts to approach them, the kittens received a warning signal, and together with the mother quickly disappeared hiding under the porch or running through the lawn to the safety of the back yard bushes.

That summer passed fast, the kittens were growing up, looking healthy and joyful. The mother-cat became much less skinny. My food visibly brought positive changes into the health

of the entire cat family. One day in September, to my big surprise, I discovered that the cat family suddenly significantly increased. Three new small furry kittens emerged from under the same woodpile! This time the mother-cat looked really exhausted. She was skinny again. Two older kittens and three new ones, all of them hungry and demanding!

My cat food rations served on the porch increased. Soon three more cute kittens, led by the mother, and accompanied by the older siblings, started climbing the porch steps, and tasting the cow milk and "real American" cat food. Among five of them there was incredible variety of colors and fur styles. Soon differences in their personalities also became visible. An orange, slightly striped kitten seemed to be the most courageous, or rather least disciplined. When the mother warningly meowed, ordering the family to escape on my approach, this orange kitten was always the last to disappear. I gave him the name Dopey, the same as the smallest and always the last to run among Snow White's seven dwarfs. Dopey-kitten got also the corresponding seventh dwarf Polish name, Gapcio.

Totally different looks and different personality represented the beautiful white kitten sparingly covered with orange spots. In distinction to most other kittens and the mother-cat, it had long and bushy hair. It was very shy, and always closely followed the mother. With no hesitation he received the name Snow Ball, and in Polish, Śnieżynka (a Little Snow Flake), enigmatic and fragile.

The third kitten of the second litter also had long hair, this time a calico style. The white, orange, brown and black were mixed together in a bushy bundle. It received the name Dirt Ball, as its appearance looked like an autumn ground covered with various color leaves. It resembled also a ball of colorful wool yarn, so I gave it the Polish name, Kłębuszek (a Little Ball of Wool Yarn). The forth kitten, which looked similar to Dopey, got the name Grizibella. Unfortunately very soon, Grizibella disappeared with no traces.

The rest of the cat family happily grew up. Apparently the winter cold and snow did not change their daily activities. By then, they learned well to recognize my call from the porch: "Kocury"!!! I usually spoke to the cats in Polish. It was much easier for me to find warm words in my native tongue. (A long time ago in Poland I used to have cats; my mother had a female Siamese cat, named Mulutka, who was older than me; she lived with my family during 16 years and often had small kittens.)



The Mother-cat (center) watches Snow Ball (left) and Dirt Ball eating on the porch; Grisibella (left) and Dopey have already eaten.

On the call "Kocury!!" the cats emerged from under the porch, or from the garden bushes, running fast to reach the porch, their dining place. Still maintaining a distance, they nervously observed the plates being filled with food, waiting until I disappeared behind the patio door. At that moment the food was theirs! It was a fun to watch them eating, under careful supervision of their mother. The mother tried the food first, tasting cautiously, and showing the kittens how to eat, and that the food was okay. Then the kittens used to rush to the plates, while the mother watched, looking around, surveying the surroundings. At any suspicious sound, she used to give the kittens a short warning signal, and all family run fast to the safety under the porch or in the bushes.

By the next spring, all kittens were quite grown up. Then one day, the mother cat disappeared. Maybe something happened to her during her daily trips to the streets and to the pasture (coyotes

were seen there), or maybe she just went away, as she probably realized that the kittens were already grown up cats, and did not need her anymore. With the food provided they were well off.



Mother-cat and small Dopey

By now, the kittens knew well the daily routines, the call "Kocury" for food. Eventually they correlated the timing of these calls with other noises coming from my house: in the morning, my walking downstairs and upstairs, then around the kitchen, and in the afternoon or evening the sound of garage door opening, when I returned home. Through the kitchen window in the morning, or approaching the house and activating the remote garage opener, I often saw the cats running from various directions, rushing to the porch. They sit there and are ready to greet me and rush to the food.

For a real greeting, when the cats would allow me to come closer, and then to pet them, I still had to wait for about a year. The first who was not afraid of me, and liked my petting and brushing, was Dopey. The last one was Snow Ball, still very shy, although the most beautiful cat among all of them.

In the meantime my neighbors suggested that the cats had to be spayed; they did not like the idea of continuously increasing cat population in the neighborhood. At that time catching and carrying all cats to the vets seemed an impossible task. Finally one day during summer I went to the Wild Animal Center and rented a trap cage, designed for wild animals. That evening I installed the food inside the cage. Almost immediately the most courageous Dopey got trapped in the cage. Poor Dopey! He did not like this at all, meowing hopelessly, as it had to spend all night in this cage, carried to the garage.

The next morning he (he – because soon I was to learn his sex) looked miserable, and then later on, even more miserable, after the eventful visit to the Animal Hospital. By the next morning, however, he evidently recuperated, and came for breakfast, as usually. In the meantime the cage was ready for the next cat.



Dopey and Snow Ball visiting in my family room

It took me over a week to catch all cats, as several times the same cat, not learning the lesson of being trapped, got into the cage. The last to catch was the shy and cautious Snow Ball.

All cats, except Dirt Ball happened to be males. Soon after the massive "cage operation", Dirt Ball, to my regrets, disappeared with no traces. Too bad! Possibly a hawk or an eagle, or coyotes at the pasture, caught her. At that time the cats learned well how to climb the fence, and often visited other surrounding territories.

The routine of the cat food being served on my porch soon was known to other cats in the neighborhood. They used to come to visit my back yard and help themselves to the food that my cats left over. I have also often seen big birds, such as magpies or craws, waiting until the cats leave, so that they too could get some bite. One evening I saw a big horned owl sitting on a branch of the willow tree while my cats were eating at the porch. This time, however, the owl was certainly after a cat rather than the cat food, so I scared it away.



Snow Ball barely tolerates an intruder



A skunk helping itself with the cat food

The cat food also attracted skunks. One evening, after putting the cat food on the porch, glanced through the window and found, to my disbelief, not my cats eating, but a skunk! This time it was a serious situation. The cats withdrew on the skunk appearance, they would not fight with skunks like dogs often do, with miserable results, but still a skunk in my yard is a threat to me, personally! I tried to gently scare it away, and even in meantime succeeded to take a picture of it, eating on the porch. I wondered how it got inside the fenced yard. Skunks are too lazy and too clumsy to climb the fence! The skunk happily finished the full plate of cat food and moved to the lawn. Before disappearing in the bushes it grazed on the grass: evidently it needed some "fresh salad" to digest the cat food! The next morning I discovered a hole and a tunnel dug under the fence separating my yard from the pasture. This was the skunk's route! The hole was soon fixed, but later on, skunks often dug holes under the fence to get into my yard. The cat food was very tempting.



Dopey



Cat's family dining

My cats were shy and wild for about two years. Finally I succeeded to tame them, one by one, and they graciously allowed me to pet them, and they shared the love. I always talked to them in Polish with soft voice. They returned affection with loud purring, and rubbing my feet. I taught them not to jump at me and not to use claws, so they practically never scratched me, even when playing.

I taught them the routine of brushing their fur before breakfast, especially during the spring and summer, when they were shedding. The cats learned to recognize the brush I was using, and enjoyed the brushing, lying flat on the porch, then rolling over and exposing the furry belly to be brushed too. I have to brush and pet all of them at once, touching them one by one, so that none of them feels left alone, without attention. The most demanding was always Tiger, the largest among my cats, meowing and pushing away others. As a contrary, Dopey never liked a crowd. He preferred to be pet alone with me, when the other cats were gone. Very often, when during weekends I sat on the porch bench reading, Dopey immediately appeared, and rubbing my legs requested some caressing, without the crowd of other cats.



Tiger's after dinner nap



Snow Ball playing on the snow. Sierra Nevada mountains in the **background**

I was often traveling. The cats intuitively always recognized the time I was getting ready for a trip out of town. Maybe it was because I talked to them about leaving them alone, with sorrow in my voice. They become nervous and sometimes angry. Each time while I was traveling, somebody else would come to bring food to

the cats. Most often I left a big bag of the dry cat food at our plant Security office, asking kindly for a daily delivery of a food portion to my cats. When bringing the food and pouring it to the plates installed on my porch, the Security guards were often puzzled whether there were any cats at all in my yard, as none of them was in sight. The cats used to recognize only my call, in addition, it was always in Polish. The cats did not like strangers, in that sense they remained entirely wild. Even my American friend, who was a regular guest in my house, never was able to establish close ties with the cats. On his call, the cats run away in panic. After several long trips out of town, the Security guard, Art, who was apparently most often assigned to bring the food to my porch, told me that finally the cats started recognizing and liking him. At last they associated their familiar food with his strange sounding voice, and began appreciate its owner's presence in the yard. The first thing I did every time when I got back from a trip was to open the patio door and call "Kocury!" The cats run to me in big hurry, always enthusiastically greeting me mewing with joy, purring and rubbing my feet. In spite of being well fed they visibly missed my presence.

Some time later, I found out that one more cat moved permanently to my yard. I used to see many various cats coming and going, visiting my porch, eating leftover food, but this one started persistently appearing to get a chunk of food, when I was calling "Kocury." The cat was skinny, small, wild and always very hungry. It was also visibly badly treated in the past. Its body had scars and the orange fur was dirty and rumpled. Its rear legs seemed shorter, or more probably they were broken and badly healed in the past, so this cat slightly resembled a hyena. Apparently the cat did not have any home to go, like all other strange cats, which used to visit my yard. It also probably never had a loving mother-cat, which would teach it how to behave, how to clean its fur. It was a male cat. I called him Rudzielec, for his orange color ("rudy" in polish means "red hair color"; actually Dopey was much more "red" than Rudzielec, but he already had the name). Later on, he also got the English name "Amber," as I noticed his very unusual, deep yellow, amber-like eyes. My other cats did not like, but tolerate the newcomer. While all four of my cats were always very close to each other, resting together on the porch, rubbing against each other, and often licking each other's fur, they always kept a distance from Rudzielec. His smell was apparently not very appealing



Dopey in the jungle of my back yard



Rudzielec



Tiger quietly eating while Rudzielec sitting on the porch still wants more

to them. Sometimes when my hungry cats were eating, and Rudzielec, also hungry, was pushing his way toward the plates, my cats used to hiss at him, or reprimand him with a paw. Rudzielec understood and complied with the warnings, moving slightly back, but trying to push forward again, starting from another end. My cats did not like the pushy Rudzielec, and I noticed that they used to stop eating earlier and go away, leaving almost full plates to Rudzielec. On the other hand, Rudzielec loved this. He could devour abominable amounts of food. The food was his love. When he could not possibly fit more into his stomach, he used to lie down near the plates digesting, and waiting until more room would allow his stomach to be filled again. In order to prevent my cat starvation I finally taught them to come to eat inside the house, leaving Rudzielec outside, with the food especially portioned for him.



Dinner at home

Actually, I started inviting my cats inside the house, to the living room next to the porch, much earlier, when there was bad weather, rain or snow. The cats liked it very much, especially rolling over on the soft carpet and walking around, smelling and discovering new objects. They were not allowed, however, to visit other rooms. Their food was served near the patio door. Usually I watched them doing something else near by. When the cats finished eating a short time of petting would start. The cats learned the sound "Do widzenia" (good bye), followed by the opening of the patio door, and knew that this was the end of the session. It happened a few times that I was too busy with other things in the house and forgot for 15 minutes or so, about the cats eating inside. After finishing the food the cats started doing their favorite things, visiting around. When finally got bored being alone, usually Dopey or Tiger used to find me in another room, coming with a question: "Meow"? "What is going on"?



Yoga by Dopey



Kittycat resting on my carpet

In a few months, Rudzielec started looking more like a normal cat, but he always remained small, dirty and with the hyena-like looking appearance. He also remained quite wild. For over three years he kept a secure distance from me. Rudzielec used to observe the routines of petting and brushing other cats, but he would not allow me to touch him. When sometimes he was busy eating with his front legs inside the plate (a bad manner that MY cats would never do!) I tried to pet him, he always used to jump away, in a panic, like touched by a hot wire. He also used to hiss at me. Witnessing his violent reaction toward me, the other cats many times took up the cudgels for me: they reprimanded Rudzielec with their paws. Finally during the Christmas



Tiger and Rudzielec converse



Dopey's snow shelter

Holidays a miracle happened. Christmas is, according to beliefs, the time of miracles, when animals speak with human languages. No, Rudzielec did not talk to me either in Polish, or English, but came to me, and allowed me to pet and brush him. Ever since he has looked much healthier, and happier.



Szpiona

Last winter, a new cat started coming to my yard. It was a big, gray, long-haired cat. I suspected that it came from a neighbor across the street, who works for the company which is in competition with mine. I called the cat Shpiona ("Shpion" means "a spy" in Russian). In early spring it became obvious that this cat, it happened to be a male cat, chose my yard as his own territory. He marked the boundaries (the lawn stunk a lot as the result), and tried to dominate the other cats. My spayed cats did not understand what it all was about, and always kept away from Shpiona. The only cat to defend the homeland was Rudzielec! A few times I saw Shpiona and Rudzielec intimidating each other, standing in front of each other in ready-to-fight poses, and growling in shrilly tones. The fight that followed ended with unfortunate score for the small and meager Rudzielec. He was once again in wounds, with torn ears, and limping. He also lost a couple of teeth. I had to urgently interfere to remove Shpiona from the premises. First of all the food was carefully rationed to my cats, with nothing left to the intruder. I also used a water gun toy to shoot toward Shpiona, yelling "Uciekaj stąd!!" ("Get out of here"!). Finally, by the end of spring we (Rudzielec and I) succeeded to get rid of this unwelcome intruder.



Kittycat and Snow Ball

It became my habit to bring home "doggie bags" with meat or fish scraps from restaurants where I was dining out. Sometimes we hosted dinner for big groups of customers. The doggie bags might then look like five-pound cat food bags full of goodies. Our guests were always informed about the existence of my wild hungry cats, waiting for me to supply something tasty, and that they were never spoiled to eat only cat food, but also appreciated human food. The guests would eagerly contribute to the collections. We used to explain to the surprised waitresses that we had to feed an alligator.

Looking back I realize that it took me a while to admit that my yard was the cat's home, and they were here to stay. Occasional trips to the pasture, or to the neighbor's yards, never changed their habits to come back, run to me at my call, and to expect breakfast and dinner being served at the porch. My cats that practically adopted me, were always likable and their presence and cheerful purring very often helped me to decrease the stress level accumulated during busy days at work. Pleasant companions, and yet not demanding, very independent, mostly taking care of themselves.



My cat's traces on the snow-covered lawn

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The Author with a kitten

In 1992, after over 12 years living in America, when I went back to visit Poland, my friends praised my correct Polish language, apparently unchanged during these long years spent abroad. They knew that in Nevada there are almost no Polish people, and I did not have many opportunities for conversations in Polish. "But I speak Polish a lot, every day," I explained. My friends seemed surprised. "I have **Polish** cats!"

Minden, Nevada, in October 1992
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