

## **My Darling Little Cat**

*By Alexander Saxton*

Madeleine Graves had always wanted a cat.

Madeleine wasn't especially good with people, having a tendency, as she did, to make them deeply uncomfortable. It wasn't her fault-- after all, she was just a little girl-- but there was something unsettling about the way she carried her hands folded up in front of her, like a praying mantis, and something alarming about the intensity of her staring grey eyes. She didn't know when to stop making direct eye-contact with people, and since nobody had ever had the decency to politely tell her, 'darling one, would you please stop staring directly into my eyes, it's giving me the creeping giblets', she never learned to behave any differently. Her hair was quite literally mousy, in the sense that to look at it would remind you of the very soft, but somewhat damp and oily pelt of something that had just darted out from under the stove.

No, altogether, people didn't care too much for young Madeleine Graves, and though I don't believe I would have much enjoyed spending an evening at the Graves Family dinner table, in the presence of that watchful, grey-eyed child who liked so much to gum at her hair and pick at her scabs, I can't say it was anything other than a tragedy.

And so, being denied the companionship of people, Madeleine wanted a cat.

Some girls liked dogs. Madeleine found dogs overwhelming. Other girls preferred budgerigars and suchlike. Madeleine found these animals too bright, shiny, and hard. Yet other girls enjoyed the presence of hamsters and hamster-alternatives, but Madeleine saw too much of herself in such timorous, damp little creatures.

No no, a cat was just perfect.

And so, after much wheedling and begging, Mr. and Mrs Graves capitulated, and acquired for their daughter, by means both fair and foul, one (1) completely unremarkable cat.

This cat was a tabby. It was medium, in both size and colour, in both temperament and ability. The cat had a favourite word: that word was 'meow'. Sometimes, when inspired by one of the Divine Muses, it would add the variation 'prrut' or sometimes, 'hiss'.

This cat was completely indifferent toward Madeleine. But, since indifference was such an improvement over the baseline of 'inquiet dislike', Madeleine decided this cat loved her, and was the greatest thing that had ever lived. She named the cat, Chicken. She kissed it on its head at least ten thousand times a day.

Now, here's where the story begins to get a little difficult, and the difficulty obliges me to remove my glasses and clean the lenses with a soft cloth, as a distraction to myself.

Wipe. Wipe wipe.

Ah, there.

Well, as it happens, Mr. and Mrs. Graves owned a little house in a town called [STATIC], which was just on the edge of the Greater [STATIC] Area. Leaving the city by car, if you drove two boroughs to the left, and then two boroughs directly up, you would arrive in their town. If you were to take the regional train instead, it could bring you right there. This is just one of many examples underscoring the importance of public transit infrastructure.

The Graves's little town was just far enough from the Big City that there was unspoilt countryside at its perimeter. Hills, ravines, farmland, and other such descriptors of a naturalistic sort were both plentiful and abundant. If you went out in the very early morning, and walked very quietly, you might be lucky enough to spot deer romping silently through the undergrowth. If you stood on the balcony at sunset, you might just be able to hear Coyotes baying at the rising crescent moon.

And that brings us to the difficulty. You see, the subdivision where Mr. and Mrs. Graves had bought their very regular home was just one block away from a ravine system which bore the evocative name of, 'Greedy Gulch'. And at the entrance to Greedy Gulch, signs had been posted cautioning pet-owners to keep their dogs on-leash, because Coyotes had been sighted.

Now, Madeleine was keen to have Chicken be an indoor cat, for just that reason. But Chicken, being a very ordinary cat, had absolutely different ideas, and was constantly conspiring to get outside. After all, outside was where birds were, and Chicken, despite his name, absolutely adored the act of killing birds. Haha! What an incorrigible little scallawag.

But Chicken made sure to never spoil his supper by actually eating the birds he killed, and so he was always home in time to hear the wet sound of Madeleine peeling back the lid of a fresh tin of 'Kitten's Delight Brand Ultrapremium Cat Slop, Now With Added Chhhunks'. In fact, Madeleine had almost gotten used to the notion that it was safe for Chicken to go outside...

Until the night of August the 28th arrived.

And with it, No Chicken.

It was a dim evening, with a dim breeze blowing in off the twilight. The air was still summertime humid, but a subtle chill was sporulating under the hemlock tree in Mrs Kaur's backyard. It was one of those evenings when an icy shard of moon had crystallized on the blue opal of the sky. Coyotes yodeled in the distance.

"Chicken??" Madeleine cried. "Ch-Chicken? Are you out there??"

But no response came from their shady street; no cry of Meow, or Prut, or even, Lord Preserve Us, Hiss. Madeleine ran to her parents in tears. Mother was sitting on the couch, scrolling through her phone with the assistance of a glass of white wine. Father was cooking dinner, with the assistance of several glasses of white wine.

“Please, Please,” Madeleine begged. “We have to go look for him.”

“Now Madeleine,” said Mr Graves, pouring himself the last drops of a green bottle of Sauv Blanc. “Chicken is probably fine. He’ll almost certainly be home in a few minutes. Pass daddy that cork-screw, would you? There’s a good girl. He *is* a cat you know, darling: he keeps his own schedule. Hannah? Would you like another glass of White? Hannah?? God how I hate yelling from room-to-room. Madeleine, would you go ask your mother if she wants another glass of white?”

But Madeleine did not ask if her mother wanted another glass of white. Instead, she stomped upstairs and slammed the door to her bedroom. The room, although matted with cat hair, felt empty without her sweet Chicken with his pruts and his meows and his way of rolling over so that his head hit the floor with an audible thunk. She pressed her nose to the window, and looked down at the moonlit street below, at the wavy shadows cast by maple trees blowing around the streetlights.

She made up her mind until her mind was all made up.

If they wouldn’t help her, she’d set out on her own. She would bring back Chicken.

After a sullen dinner where she barely touched her food (Chicken cutlets-- a diabolical cosmic joke), Madeleine cleared the table and asked to be excused. Since Mother was on her phone and father was vibing on Kim Crawford, neither of them noticed the rebellious jutting of her chin. And so, dismissed, she scampered back up to her room, and barricaded the door. There, she had already laid out everything she’d need: her packed knapsack, her flashlight, her lucky sweater, and, of course, a spare kitchen cleaver smuggled out of one of the lower drawers. She’d already knotted up her bed-sheets before dinner; all that was left now... was to go.

A few knots around the radiator, and she tossed the bedsheets out the window. Climbing down was harder than she’d expected it to be, with her child’s upper-body strength, and she ended up sliding most of the way down, burning her hands and landing with a heavy thud among the rhododendrons. It hurt, quite a lot, but she had too much at stake to stop and cry. After waiting a moment to see if her parents had heard the thump, she picked up her heels and scampered down the block.

In passing, Madeleine nearly bowled over Ms Melanie Myers, the Metallurgist, as she climbed out of her Mauve Mercedes.

“Goodness, Madeleine, whatever are you doing out so late?”

“Hello Mrs Melanie Myers, the Metallurgist, I’m out looking for my Darling Little Cat, Chicken. Have you seen him?”

“I... is that a meat cleaver?” Mrs Myers asked, ignoring the question.

“Yes.”

With that, Mrs Myers shook her head and turned away, murmuring something about how she needed to cool off on the molly because she was quote-unquote, ‘seeing that little ghost girl again’. No, the neighbours simply did not understand young Madeleine Graves.

With a shrug, Madeleine ambled on down to the bottom of the street. Passing that sign which warned dog-owners about the coyotes, she clambered down an old flight of wooden steps, and descended into the darkness of Greedy Gulch.

*Clump clump clump, clump, clump, thud.*

Her footsteps rang against the old plank steps as she bounded down, barely able to see in the thin moonlight and blue glow of the post-sunset sky. At the bottom of the path, a chalk trail ran off through the dark foliage, pale enough to be seen even in the falling darkness.

“Chicken?” she called. “Ch-Chicken? It’s me... Madeleine...”

But she didn’t feel brave enough to fully shout his name out loud; instead, her voice came out in a thin, whispering quaver.

Something rustled in the undergrowth.

“Chicken? Is that you?”

No response. After a long, slow moment, she decided to convince herself that it was nothing. Shivering, though the dusk was warm, she followed the chalk path further into night.

Now the ground on either side had grown marshy, and for a while the path became a boardwalk, spanning soggy fields of bulrush and cattail. She felt exposed up on those boards; they were only about a foot above the ground, and she imagined being a coyote, hidden out among those fading reeds, and watching a lone girl make her way through the vulnerable darkness. She felt a cold fear begin to drip its way in frigid droplets down her spine, and began to think about turning back.

But then she thought about Chicken- perfect Chicken, out there alone in the darkness - and the thought of him in danger made her brave. She dropped a hand to her hip, where she’d shoved

the kitchen knife into her waistband like a pirate's cutlass. She had played pirate before, many times, and it was on such training that she called in this, her hour of need.

She was ready, Madeleine decided, for anything.

At the far end of the boardwalk, the path forked beneath the fondling boughs of a gnarled old weeping-willow tree. Off to the left, another trail of white gravel dwindled into the distance, winking under the tenuous moonlight. Off to the right, a muddy, unlit game trail meandered into the tenebrous woods.

"Chicken?" she quavered, one more time.

She thought she heard something like a meow off in the woods.

And so, tiny heart tapping against her ribs, she turned down the game-trail.

And only a few yards later, she discovered... The Deer.

The Deer, I must inform you, was dead. Extremely so, if you don't mind me saying: all splayed-out on its side with its throat ripped open and its belly gnashed to shreds.

Madeleine was neither a biologist, nor a hunter, nor anyone who could have gleaned any useful information from the corpse. All she knew about deer was what she had learned from picture books, and from that, she was fairly certain that this was a mommy-deer, and not a daddy-deer.

But if it was a mommy deer, then where were its little fauns?

Madeleine edged around the carcass. *Coyotes*, she thought, vengefully. *Coyotes must have did this, and then run off with all the little baby deers.*

She took a deep breath, and stared down the trail. *Well, if they did, she thought, then I'll be the one to bring them back. Chicken and the little fauns, and we can all be a happy family together.*

She marched down the trail, hand resting on the hilt of her kitchen knife, and called out into the darkness with a voice that had grown resolute.

"Chicken? Little baby fauns? It's me Madeleine. I've come to rescue you."

Something rustled in the brambles up ahead. She stopped. The crescent moon, though thin, hung directly above her, like a sabre dangling from a string. Her breath caught, somewhere between her chest and throat.

Out of the black elders bristling up ahead, a tiny baby deer stumbled forth from the darkness, its hooves black as black crayons, its little dappled flanks set glowing in the moonlight.

Madeleine let out her breath and relaxed. She reached into her pocket; she hadn't thought to bring any food for baby deer, but she had brought some kibble. Maybe the deer could eat that? She slowly crouched, and tossed a small handful of the food into the dewy mulch between them. The baby deer took a halting step forward...

And dragged something along with it.

At this point I'll have to stop and clean my glasses again, and maybe take a drink of water, because this part of the story makes my mouth go dry. Also, cleaning my glasses will hide, just for a moment, the fact that I'm not quite sure how to describe this part of the story to you. Or if I should even make the attempt.

Hm.

Imagine for a moment that you're standing at the snake-enclosure of the zoo, watching the head of a snake emerge from the foliage further back. 'Hm,' you think to yourself. 'That's a medium-sized snake alright; a medium-sized snake if I ever saw one.' Only, as it continues to unfurl itself from the shadows, its body doesn't dwindle into a tail the way you're expecting; instead, it gets bigger and bigger and bigger, and your eyes widen as you realize you're not looking at a regular snake at all, but at an 18-foot King Anaconda the weight of a small car, fed on jaguar-meat and thicker than a steel keg.

The experience was something like that, but without the glass between you. Where Madeleine had been expecting the deer's body to end, it didn't. Instead, it flowed further back into the darkness, thickening, until it joined up with some huge, dark mass of flesh, in the midst of which a pair of yellow night-eyes glowed, overtop a set of white, pearlescent fangs.

I... shall call it a Coyote, because not to call it *something* would be abhorrent. Certainly, the... *crux* of its body was coyote-shaped, but as it stepped, *lurched*, grinning from the darkness, it became clear that this creature had absorbed many different woodland beasts into the weft of its flesh. Paws, hooves, and tiny bird's feet trembled as it oozed forward, expanding and contracting, sluglike, only half-supported on its spindling limbs. The assorted eyes of deers' heads, hare's heads, muskrat's heads, half-subsumed in its swelling trunk all rolled with blind panic. A set of discontinuous heron's wings flapped wildly and out of sync from the beast's humped flanks, but as it... rolled or slithered toward her, the grinning coyote's face that led the way was bright with hungry slaver, which, foaming, reflected in the moonlight.

For a moment, Madeleine stood, transfixed.

Birds, otters, beavers, fox all reached and craned toward her, mewling from the creature's bulk. A furred tentacle that ended in a screaming, half-digested mouse, almost brushed against her cheek, before some inner tension snapped it back, and it was reincorporated into the coyote's mass, like flour folded into undermingled batter.

And that, finally, was enough for Madeleine Graves. She broke from her paralysis like a swimmer punching up through the surface of a half-frozen lake; she gasped a deep breath of the cold air, and, filled with terror and revulsion, she turned and ran.

The Coyote howled and lunged after her, bulging and collapsing in on itself like an unstable waveform, so that its shape was almost fully coyote-like with one step, almost fully deerlike with the next, almost shapeless and without form upon the third. She dropped her flashlight and her knife, letting the backpack slip from her shoulder as she ran, but even without all those things to slow her down, the freakish creature bore down behind her, chortling in a cacophony of different creatures' voices. A bubble formed at its front end, bursting into furred, expanding tentacles like a cuttlefish's head, and those strange, twitching limbs extended after her as she broke through into the clearing at the boardwalk's end.

She could feel them grasping at the edges of her clothes as she put on a final burst of speed, sprinting up along the weeping willow's slanted trunk, and scrambling up into the upper branches.

Not a second too soon; because just as she pulled her right foot up, a set of jagged white teeth slammed shut in the air where it had dangled a single half-heartbeat before.

The Coyote leaped and yowled, eyes wild, flinging strings of saliva through the moonlight. It extruded shapes at her, but couldn't quite reach; it convulsed itself down into smaller forms that could climb or fly, but these were too weak to pull the beast's combined weight up the tree-trunk after her. She caught her breath and held on tight to the willow-bough.

After a final assault upon the tree, the coyote below settled in to wait.

It was well past Madeleine's bed-time by this point. If she hadn't been so terrified, she might have nodded off right there on the tree branch while she waited out the next long hours.

But that was hard to even contemplate, with the Coyote pacing down below; now canine-shaped, now birdlike, now like a dog-headed cluster of rats, but always with its surface bubbling through half-potential forms.

For a while it stopped pacing and simply watched her, yellow eyes reflecting distant stars. That was the hardest part for Madeleine Graves. She shut her eyes tight and clung to the branch, feeling the Coyote's attention on her skin like the beam of a cold spotlight.

A very long time passed, before she felt that attention turn away.

She dared to open her eyes just a sliver. Although she could not tell time from the position of the dying moon, it must have been well past midnight by that point. The Coyote was gone. She

could hear it moving away from her through the bushes, and she held as still as she could, not wanting to draw its attention back in her direction.

After its rustling had faded into the distance, she waited another long while before tentatively dangling one leg down.

Nothing lunged from the darkness. Far off in the distance, she heard a coyote howl.

Madeleine lowered herself from the branch and jumped down as quietly as she could. Freezing for a moment, she craned her ears, listening for any crack of twigs or swish of leaves in the gulch around her. But there was no sound, other than a low wind stroking the reeds of the marsh.

She decided to go. Quick and quiet as a mouse, she darted off down the boardwalk, bent nearly double so she wouldn't be visible over the tops of the swaying rushes.

On the far end, she began to feel a little safer. There were plenty of trees here, with plenty of crooked, lower branches. If she had to, she felt sure that she could clamber up the trees in seconds, and hold out there 'til sunrise.

But the trail was silent, and before too long, she reached the flight of wooden steps that led up and out of Greedy Gulch. Coyotes were howling in the distance, but they were far away, maybe even past the highway on the other side of town.

With a tired sigh, she reached the streetlight overlooking the wooden steps. She felt like a failure, and she felt like a fool. Probably daddy had been right. Probably Chicken was already back home.

But just then, as if in response to her thoughts, a small meow greeted her from the privet-hedge out front of Mrs. Beeden's house.

"Chicken?" she whispered, overjoyed. "Is that you?"

"Meow," came the answer, and then that inspired, and unexpected turn of phrase: 'Prut!'

No hissing; not tonight.

"Chicken!" she said, and her cat, her perfect, medium, and ordinary cat, emerged from the undergrowth, with his tail held high.

But then Madeleine's face fell.



Because as Chicken stepped forward on his dainty little paws, his body didn't end where Madeleine expected. Instead, it flowed further back into the darkness, where a pair of yellow night-eyes glowed, overtop a set of fangs reflecting white from the white streetlights.

"Oh, Chicken," she said.

And she rushed forward to embrace him.

Excuse me-- oh excuse me. My glasses are well and truly fogged up this time.

But maybe I shouldn't be so misty; after all, it isn't such a tragic story in the end.

You see... Madeleine Graves.... Had always wanted a cat. She wasn't so very good with people, you understand, but she loved her little Chicken very much. She kissed him on his head at least ten thousand kisses every day, and when it came time to feed him evening slop, she made sure he only ever got the very choicest kind; *the kind that comes with extra chunks*.

The cat itself, as it turned out, was fairly fond of Madeleine too; fond enough that when it ran away one August 28th, it decided to return to her, a little later in the night.

And so, after a surprised Mr. and Mrs Graves answered the door at 3 AM to find their daughter and her cat, blinking and yawning at the threshold, Madeline climbed back into bed and fell asleep with Chicken in her arms.

And of course, she was so happy and so cosy, that as she fell asleep, she didn't even notice Chicken changing shape, and oozing down the hall to where her parents slept. Madeleine Graves, well, she wasn't all that good with people now, you understand. But she had decided... that that was perfectly alright.