

Kittens Are Not Squeaky Toys

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With sorrow and confusion, our Sheppard, Jubile, peered up from the scattered straw. An object that resembled Jubile's furry stuffed lamb lay at her paws. I could almost hear her confessing to Sara, "Mommy, it didn't squeak. What happened?" At that moment the farm was silent.

My heart began to race, palpitations growing stronger like a train picking up speed as it began a journey into the treacherous abyss. I could still taste the bread I'd been munching on in the kitchen moments earlier with my father and Sara. My nostrils still held the scent of the fragrant garlic chopped for dinner. These flavors were soon replaced by the bitter flavor of worry. My fingers then felt the air rush through my hands as I flailed my arms in the still mountain air. I hugged myself for comfort and noticed little beads of sweat moistening my fingertips where my hands met my arms.

It was not Jubile's toy on the fresh straw. It was one of the five young kittens from the first litter of kittens born in over four years at our farm. These playful kittens brought a fresh energy to our farm. Their presence filled the space left by my brother and me in my mother's empty nest.

Two of the kittens were black as night, one as calico as its father that we'd rescued from the putrid dumpsters of Radcliff, Kentucky one year earlier, and two as white as cotton with radiant blue eyes. They represented the perfect litter, a calico and its yin and yang of twin siblings. Jubile's action threw off the balance between black and white; now there were four, two black, one calico, and one white. I barely had time to contemplate the balance – at that moment I'd have to tell my mother.

Mom was in the garden tending her tomatoes. In a place so full of life I trembled, "Mom, you know Jubile and the kittens..."

Before I could get much more out of my mouth she blurted out, "Oh no! Oh my God! What happened?"

I gathered the courage to speak. "It's dead!" tumbled out of my mouth.

"Really dead?" she gasped as she ran – heart racing, hands waving, suddenly speeding like a train to the front porch. "Oh, no! Oh, no!" she muttered with anger and sadness. "Lock that dog up!"

Jubile was locked in Sara's car now. Upset and deeply disturbed, Sara and Jubile communicated with each other. Jubile was a wise animal, a natural nurturer. She had never killed anything before – especially not another animal – another member of our extended family.

Sara paced on the porch. Her pet, her daughter Jubile, had just killed a kitten. As she paced, she contemplated those around her. How would she handle Jubile? How could she punish Jubile and communicate, "We don't eat kittens?" How did this happen? Why had we given her that little squeaky lamb toy? Sara's attention turned to my mother. She thought about how she was already on Mom's bad side and how this dinner was an effort to earn points with my mother. How would Sara make up for this incident and mend her already tense relationship with my mother?

My mother stood there upset, and cursed. She was angry at Jubile, the killer dog, angry at Sara, and angry at me.

As Mom left to get a shovel, we remained pondering the remains of the fallen kitten. Its fur was matted from saliva. One red spot was the target for death's entry into its tiny body. The other kittens began examining the scene - kittens are curious about commotion. Suddenly, the twin, white kitty pounced over its sibling's dead body.

The moment was surreal – was this pouncing animal the live twin sharing its soul with its twin? Was this an animal spirit? Was this the last remnant of the dead kitten's soul moving to the animal afterworld? Was the white kitten sending a message, a destiny to its twin?

The kittens scattered to safety as Mom lifted the lifeless limp body with the cold hard shovel. Mom placed the kitten to rest in our back yard and scattered rich mountain soil over its body. Her golden dog, Tonka, observed it all a few paces behind my mother. Back at the car, a yippie-momma-dog yapped at Jubile, chastising her for taking the kitten's life.

The tension in the air was thicker than the wild, thorny, berry bushes on the edge of the garden. The kittens were all hiding now, sheltered between the deep dark earth and the crumbling boards of the porch. Soon, they would have to emerge from hiding to consume their dinner. We, the humans, also had to prepare our dinner.

The aromas of simmering codfish and garlic invited us back into the kitchen. As we entered, Dad sipped a rich, dark beer. He exhibited an air of calm which was a distinct contrast to the mood of the uneasy women. He lightened the atmosphere as he consoled Sara; almost nonchalantly, yet with an air of experience, he stated, "Life, Death, it happens on the farm."

The bitter flavor of worry was gently replaced with comfort of familiar flavors of my mother's kitchen. Tension dissipated as the food left our plates. Between bites of garden broccoli and last summer's corn, the conversation advanced with each passing course. Soon, we were finishing our salads which consisted of crisp garden greens, picked especially for this meal, mixed with cherry tomatoes and blue cheese.

Amidst the aroma of my parents' kitchen, each person opened up. The kitten's sacrifice had provided such a cathartic emotional reaction that my mother seemed to forget her dislike for Sara. Perhaps she had buried a little of her dislike with the kitten, or maybe she transferred it to Jubile. Sara and I would soon be leaving – taking our killer, chastised dog into town.

Driving down the dark, windy, country road, one whose turns I've nearly memorized, I was filled with new emotions from our evening with my family. Unlike the kitten, we had survived the evening, although Jubile was left with a strong sense of guilt and loss. The kittens were bedding down now, four in the straw, one on the ground. I wondered, as we drove off, what unknown destiny the twin kitten had passed on to its sibling? How the balance would be altered by two black kittens and only one white one, and finally how Jubile would get over her traumatic evening? Perhaps she needed to hear Dad's words, "Life, death, it happens on the farm." As we drove around the last turn and prepared to turn onto The Five Lane into Elkins, I turned to Sara and sighed, "You know, overall, I think that went pretty well."