



Last Chance Shelter

On his twelfth birthday, Merle Jaspers and his mother rode the Number 23 bus to the Last Chance Animal Shelter and Truck Farm in Rainier Valley, where he was to choose a cat, preferably a Siamese.

Merle was writing a novel. What he really wanted was an IBM Selectric, to replace the antediluvian Corona his mother found at Gino's Pawn Shop and Estate Jewelry. The Corona was having a hard time striking "e"s and "i"s on the same level as the rest of the alphabet, which bothered Merle a great deal. He was an artist. Having maverick "e"s and "i"s appear as if they were playing leapfrog was enough provocation to send crumpled sheets of precious onionskin flying across his room.

Aside from implacable artistic judgments, he was an affable boy and old enough to know that an IBM Selectric would cost his mother more than she made in tips in a month of evening shifts at Dominic's Trattoria Romano.

If his mother wanted him to pick out a cat he would be happy to pick out a cat, especially a grateful cat, rescued from the demon infested crematorium behind the Shelter. They already had a cat, Old Ginger, rescued on another mission to Last Chance, but she was not as grateful as she should be.

Riding out to the Shelter he remembered telling his mother how much he liked playing with the Siamese kittens at Brendan's house. Brendan was his second best friend who lived in the same part of Seattle where Merle's father lived. A neighborhood where the houses got new paint jobs every third year and lawns were mowed and edged every week and everyone understood that Vikings and their descendants do not tolerate weeds. Where the boy lived, south of the Boeing plant, paint was used mostly as a weapon.

His father, whose name he didn't know and whom he had only seen

once, when his mother pointed to a man out in the parking lot at the Aviator Cafe, drove a silver Cadillac and looked like Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*.

The morning he saw his father, his mother had been drinking wine most of the night. Two empty bottles were in the kitchen sink when he came out of his bedroom, hoping his mother hadn't eaten all of the leftover Chinese.

Walking to The Aviator steadied her, after nights when she frightened him with her panic and wildness, sometimes tearing off her clothes and huddling in the recliner for hours. He would cover her with the blanket from the couch and Old Ginger would lie on her stomach.

The coffee at The Aviator made him jittery and gave him a headache, but he loved sitting with her and taking deep, bitter slurps, like a writer would. He scorned efforts to persuade him to add cream or sugar, even from the waitress who looked like Kim Novak in *Vertigo*.

They would sit at their corner table while men came and went from the Boeing plant, staring at his mother with ravenous eyes, like she was one of the Aviator Specials. He wished she wouldn't wear dresses that showed so much of her chest. She never looked back at the men, just at him, smiling and stroking his hand or his shoulder, sometimes leaning over to kiss his forehead. He didn't mind, even though she didn't wipe away the smears of lip gloss. He waited until she got up to use the restroom before swiping them off with his napkin. It would have been rude to do otherwise.

When they got off the bus at the Shelter he chose a longhaired black kitten, because there were no Siamese. A black cat would look good with orange Old Ginger, and the kitten seemed grateful. When he couldn't think of a name, his mother called the kitten Zorro.

The first night he spent hours playing with Zorro, dangling a crow's feather from the tip of his new fishing rod. A gift from his father, his mother said, before she got drunk and told him something even more ludicrous.

She told him that when he was about two months old the King County Sheriff sent a deputy to her apartment, who took him from her. When he asked her why a deputy sheriff would kidnap a child, she just laughed and told him it was a complicated grownup thing he wouldn't understand.

She told him she called his father, who convinced the Sheriff to give him back to her. She told him she had to call King County Animal Services to retrieve him, since the deputy who snatched him was also the

Animal Control Officer. She said the Sheriff had taken him to Last Chance Shelter because that's where they took strays, and when she got there she found him bundled up in a cat cage, because the deputy hadn't known what else to do with him.

He didn't know whether to believe her, because she lied about everything. Whenever he told the story to his friends, he always added a part about how he would have been put to sleep and shoveled into the crematorium if his mother hadn't rescued him. That part always got the best laughs.