



The Procrastinator

Brian Bowman would put off the sunrise if he had that kind of power, which he obviously didn't. Men with that kind of power don't wipe other people's literal shit off toilet seats, which was what he sometimes had to do as a maintenance man for Feingold Business Tower, which was mostly full of lawyers and shrinks and accountants. Maybe it was their clients who made the messes.

Maintenance Man. What a joke. He hadn't maintained much of anything after Daphne left. Or while she was still married to him, for that matter.

They were only two, maybe three weeks into using ice chests to store everything, after the refrigerator died, when she fell apart.

"I can't live like this, Brian," she said. "Nobody should have to live like this."

The next day he came home from work to find his neighbor, James "Jimbo" McMann, using a hand-truck to strongarm a stainless steel Kitchen Aid into place.

"Don't you dare say anything," Daphne had said. "Thank god Jimbo helped me figure out what to do and thank god for credit cards." He wondered what else Jimbo had helped her figure out.

A week later she texted him from the airport, on her way to her sister's in San Diego. There'd been some furious texting for a couple of weeks - she wouldn't talk to him, voice-to-voice - but the upshot was she stayed in San Diego while her lawyer did the paperwork for the divorce. He didn't fight anything, there were no kids, just debt, which he agreed to take. When he tried to get money out of the credit union he found that

she'd beaten him to it. It was only fair, he supposed, since it was mostly her paycheck that went into the account.

That morning Jimbo came across the street and sat next to him on the porch swing.

"How's that refrigerator working out?" he asked.

"Fine," Brian said. "Just fine." Jimbo was sweating from his morning run - "five miles every day, not an inch less" - and Brian felt a few drops on his arm. Disgusting.

"So, Brian," Jimbo said, "I thought I should tell you that when I put the refrigerator in I noticed your kitchen faucet was dripping. I couldn't get it to stop. You don't want to let that go. It won't fix itself, you know. You might want to think about refinishing those hardwood floors, too. Helps the re-sale value, if you have to sell, now that you and Daphne are kaput. You can do it yourself, you know. You're a hands-on guy, right? I've found a lot of pleasure over the years in keeping things in good shape, including this old body."

He laughed and patted his taut abdomen, then reached over to pat Brian's stomach. "You might want to think about that, Brian," he said. "You're back on the market now, kiddo. You don't need six-pack abs, necessarily, but you don't want to look like a big round keg, either, if you catch my drift."

He slapped Brian's leg and stood up. "Well," he said, "my work here is done, soldier. Carry on."

A couple of days later Brian was in the kitchen, trying to stop the leak from the faucet, when he heard some commotion in the front yard. He went outside.

Jimbo was standing next to the big maple tree, looking up into the yellowing leaves and cursing.

"Fucking cat is stuck in your fucking tree, Brian," he said. "Come down, Brewster, c'mon kitty." He started shaking branches. A few leaves floated to the ground and the cat meowed and tried to move higher.

"I don't think you should shake the branches, Jimbo," Brian said. "You're just scaring him."

"Well I don't think you should have a damn maple tree in your front yard. This thing scatters leaves everywhere. No one else has maple trees except you, and you don't take care of it. This thing needs some limbing. What it really needs is to come down. A couple of those branches look pretty sick to me."

Brian had no idea what a sick branch would look like. It was Daphne who insisted they buy the one house in the neighborhood that

still had a maple tree. The funny thing was their house was in a development called Maple Valley. He liked having the tree, but it did shed a lot of leaves. Next fall he'd do better at raking them up before they scattered over the neighbors' lawns.

"Shit, Brian," Jimbo said. "I'm going to have to call the Fire Department. All because you have to be the only one in the neighborhood who won't get with the program and get this tree the hell out of here. It's a hazard."

"I saw on the Internet that Fire Departments don't really do that, it's sort of a myth," Brian said. "You have to call this volunteer group that does cat rescues. But let me see what I can do."

He was pretty good with animals. He even worked a couple volunteer shifts at Critter House, cleaning cat cages and ferrying cats to vet appointments and the like. He would have had a cat of his own, except Daphne didn't want a cat chasing the birds that came around because of the tree. He told her they could keep the cat indoors, but she thought that was weird. Maybe he could have a cat now that she was gone. He'd have to think on it.

He was also pretty good at climbing trees, he'd climbed this one a time or two back in the day. He swung himself up onto a branch, and once he got himself set he climbed up to where he could almost touch the cat. It meowed, but didn't try to move. He slowly eased up one more branch and he was eye-level with the cat.

He stroked its head and it didn't seem to mind. He'd brought along a sack made out of some kind of mesh. He pulled it out of his jacket and held it open with one hand, while he leaned back against another large branch and put one hand under the cat's stomach. It hissed a little, but didn't try to scratch. He slowly pulled it toward his chest. It finally let go of the branch it was clinging to, but then dug its claws into his arm. It hurt like hell, but he didn't let go until the cat was in the sack and he could pull his arm free. He was bleeding in a few spots, but he was so happy he wanted to cry.

You cry about everything, Daphne said. Half the time when we're watching TV I look over at you and your face is all scrunched up and you're swiping at your eyes. She didn't usually make a big deal about it, unless they were going to a movie with their friends, or her parents, when she'd ask him to *bottle it up, Brian, just this once.*

He climbed down and dropped the last few feet to the ground, clutching the sack to his chest. The cat seemed fine.

"Oh, my god, Brian, that was fantastic," Jimbo said. "I didn't think you had that in you. I'll be damned. Can I pay you something?"

"Oh for goodness sakes, no," Brian said. "I'm just happy the kitty is okay."

Jimbo went home with his cat and Brian went looking for band-aids. Daphne must have taken them. He'd have to get some more sometime. In the meantime he made do with strips of dampened toilet paper. He was the master of making do.

A week later the cat was back up in the tree. This time it took Brian a little longer to get him down, though he did remember to wear a long sleeved heavy jacket.

"Maybe you should keep the cat indoors," he said to Jimbo. "There's a lot of evidence that they live longer, no cars or predators to worry about, and they don't kill birds like they otherwise might."

"Fuck that," Jimbo said. "Cats were meant to be outdoors. They'd die of boredom if they had to stay inside."

"Actually, you can build some interesting things for indoor cats," Brian said. "You can even have outdoor cages if the cats have a way to go to and from the house, to sleep and eat and so forth."

After that he didn't see the cat for a couple of weeks. He hoped it meant Jimbo had taken his advice.

One Saturday, maybe a month after the last tree rescue, he was at Critter House and saw some paperwork on the manager's desk. His eye caught an address that looked to be in his neighborhood. Holy crap! It was Jimbo's address. He hoped it wasn't a lost animal report. No. It was an animal surrender report.

He went into the room where they kept the new arrivals, the cats not ready to be adopted yet, who needed time to be vet checked, neutered and vaccinated and micro-chipped. There he was. Brewster! The cat cowered in the back of the cage, blinking at him, like the newbies always did. Some of them didn't eat or use their litter boxes at all for the first day or two.

"Hey, Brewster, it's me," he said. "You're going to be okay." He opened the cage door and carefully extended a hand. The cat stuck his head forward a little and Brian rubbed the top of it. The cat inched forward until Brian could rub a hand down his back. The cat flopped down and started to purr.

He stood there petting it for a good ten minutes, before he shut the cage door. He had other chores. He moved through the three cat rooms over the next hour, refilling food and water bowls, spending a little time

coaxing the shy ones out of their corners or off their perches so he could pet them. A few he knew not to bother until they'd settled in a little. He learned that the hard way.

Later he came back to Brewster's cage and took the cat out for a few minutes of padding around the small room, sniffing and pawing at things. He took him onto his lap and the cat climbed up the front of his shirt and sniffed at his neck. Brian held him up on his shoulder and stroked his long body.

Finally, he put the cat back in the cage and went over to the manager's desk. He picked up the surrender report.

"Owner says cat is becoming a problem, climbing trees, getting lost, etc.. Surrender fee paid, eligible for adoption in five days." The five days were up today.

He opened a drawer and pulled out an adoption application form.

He knew exactly where he was going to build an outdoor cage. He could visualize one of those indoor cat playgrounds, like the ones he saw in *Animal Sheltering* magazine. He was actually pretty good with his hands when it came right down to it.

When the manager came back in from outdoors she took the application and Brian's check for the adoption fee.

The only question left was whether he would keep the name Brewster. Probably not. The cat seemed more like a Bilbo, or maybe a Fonzie. Yeah, that was it. Fonzie.

Which reminded him. He pulled out his phone and tapped in a number.

"Hey, Richie, my man," he said when his friend, another Business Center maintenance man, took the call. "You still doing remodels on the side?"

"Well, yeah," Richie said. "But remember you can't blab that around. I still don't have my contractor's license and, so far, the IRS doesn't know Richie the Remodel Guy exists. I'd like to keep it that way. Who wants to know?"

"I want to know, asshole," Brian said. "I'll pay you to help me build an outdoor cage for my new cat."

"Yeah, I could do that," Richie said. "Like when?"

"Like right away," Brian said. "And I might have a couple other things for you. How are you with leaky faucets and hardwood floors?"

"Just say when," Richie said.

"Now," Brian said, "can we start this afternoon? I'm bringing the cat home today."