

Ben P. Robertson

Late-Night Standoff

He had me cornered. I cowered in the bathtub, droplets of water left over from my shower a couple of hours earlier soaking into the shoulder of my t-shirt as I leaned uneasily against the cheap plastic tub insert near the showerhead. The clear plastic curtain hung limply to the left — a flimsy shield — and I held the white plastic laundry hamper to the right to protect my bare legs and other, more tender, parts. He had caught me in my underwear, and I felt all the more vulnerable as a result.

I tried not to return the gaze of those angry blue eyes that glared at me with hugely dilated pupils. *I have to keep an eye on him*, I thought, *in case he springs for me. But if I meet his gaze too much, he may see that as a threat.* As I stood there pondering what percentage of eye contact might work best to keep him calm and protect my tender flesh from violence, it occurred to me all too clearly that I had no way to escape. He was between me and the only door in the bathroom.

I considered various alternatives to get out of my predicament, but all of them involved considerable risk if he felt threatened enough. I could try to slide past him to the left, ever so slowly, but I'd have to move closer to him. I could jump out of the tub and make a run for it. After all, I needed to make it only six feet — maybe seven — but any sudden move most assuredly would send him into another panicked frenzy that could leave me bloody. I could even upend the laundry hamper and try to clap it down over him long enough to make it to the door, but if my first attempt didn't work, I'd be in deeper trouble. I considered using my still-damp bath towel for the same purpose, but he might not even let me reach the hook where it dangled. Besides, his claws and teeth could go through the towel.

He had me at his mercy, and as I stood there feeling helpless, I wondered how long this standoff might last. He could keep me here for hours — all night, even. No one else was in the house, so I couldn't call for help, and my cell phone was about fifteen feet away in the bedroom. I couldn't even reach out to anyone electronically. It was around this point that the irrational part of my mind decided to be heard. *You're going to die here*, it said.

He'll slash you until you bleed to death or he'll keep you here until you starve. You might even lose an eye! I could see my own clear, gelatinous cornea parting to let the claws pass through effortlessly. I imagined news headlines about the professor who was killed in his own bathroom. Or starved to death trying to outwait a predator. Maybe Brian would find the body when he arrived for the weekend. Do the cats have enough food to last until then so that they won't be tempted to eat my remains? No, I'd have to extricate myself somehow. I had gotten myself into this situation alone and had to get myself out of it.

To my embarrassment, it was my own fault that I found myself in this standoff. Lying in bed a few minutes earlier, I had heard a clattering noise in the bathroom. Without even looking, I knew he was the culprit, and I was delighted that he had come out of his hiding place. He had been hiding in the laundry room behind the water heater all day. I'd been worried about him and had checked on him many times throughout the day. Each time, my glance was met with a hard, unblinking stare even though I was careful to make quiet noises when I approached so he wouldn't be startled and even though I spoke to him in what I hoped was a soothing, nonthreatening tone. Of course, he didn't understand my language, and my own large size — compared to him — must have been terrifying looming from the sky.

I sprang from the bed, careful to make as little noise as possible, and took two paces to the bathroom door to see the gray fur of his rump poking out from behind the cabinet. I'd been right; he was loose in the house again, and the clattering noise was his attempt to open the locked cat door that led into the back yard. How did he know the cat door was an exit? He'd probably never seen one anywhere else. Maybe he could see a glimmer of moonlight through the clear plastic flap, or maybe he detected some of the familiar myriad odors of my back yard. Regardless, he knew that freedom lay in that direction.

Excellent, I thought. *I've got him now!* I had decided finally to set him free, but as long as he was hiding behind the water heater, I couldn't get him out the door. He'd been in the house for a week and a half, but I had kept him confined to the other bathroom for all but the last two days. The network camera I had placed on the edge of the bathtub let me keep an eye on him without having to open the door and scare him. When the lights were off, the infrared lights on the camera revealed two intense, shining eyes staring into the dark from the depths of the plastic

carrier that held my guest. He must have slept at some point during those few days — he had to have — but I never saw him close his eyes. This guy was serious, and he had no intention of being caught unawares.

To be honest, I was lucky that he had chosen to go into the carrier of his own accord. I had used a trap to catch him, baiting it on successive nights with treats that I thought would tantalize his sense of smell. This guy was so wily, though, that he virtually ignored the best I had to offer. He fell into my trap only after hunger goaded him into it on the fifth night. I've caught other such creatures, but it usually takes only one attempt. This guy, on the other hand, actually had entered the trap repeatedly. I had watched him go in long enough to get a big bite of my carefully curated bait before backing out to chew (a little) and swallow his prize with impunity. *How dare he?* I thought. I was almost offended that he had the nerve and dexterity to carry out such a heist. My trap was being robbed!

Finally, I walked away from my secret vantage point, expecting to see an empty trap with no bait in the morning, but the next day, there he was. At some point, he had made a mistake, a miscalculation. He had stepped on the pressure plate and tripped the spring. He was mine!

My first step was to call the vet's office. Could they do surgery on short notice? Would they be able to neuter this angry creature today? I couldn't have him breeding in my neighborhood. Already, there were too many of his kind prowling around the streets, sometimes climbing the fence into my back yard to steal my cats' food or to pick a fight with them. My smallest cat, Lily, had charged at him on several occasions, prompting him to flee each time, but he kept returning to the sweet temptation of the cat food. I had even caught him napping in one of the chairs on the porch and on the warm electric pad I kept outside for the cats during cold nights. This guy wasn't just visiting.

Why didn't you just kill him? you ask. I didn't have a gun, and I wasn't willing to use poison. Besides, he was a living creature and had as much right to life as anyone else. He hadn't actually hurt anyone or anything, and my two larger outdoor cats, Ernie and Charlie, basically ignored him. He wasn't violent; otherwise, he would have received very different treatment. As it was, I had no desire to hurt him any more than I do the "little brown people," as I call the deer in the woods near my house, or the bright yellow-, red-, and black-ringed king snake that tried to get

in my back door one evening as he tried to escape from Lily, who glared at him with a look in her eyes that suggested she had just seen something supremely obscene and offensive. However, I had no qualms about curbing my prisoner's reproductive abilities.

The vet's office was open, and yes, they could do the surgery immediately. I thrust the prisoner, still in the trap, into the trunk of my car and took him for a ride. A surprisingly short time later, the vet's assistant called to tell me to come pick up my guest. Hereafter, he would not be creating any little clones of himself.

When I brought him home, I decided to keep him for a few days. A period of inactivity would work in his favor as he recovered from the involuntary surgery, and I had hopes that I might be able to make friends with him. After all, he had been hanging around my house every night for almost five months. *If he's not leaving and isn't violent, I might as well try to befriend him*, I thought, so I set the still-occupied trap on the floor, released the latch, and closed the bathroom door.

My guest stayed there for nine days. I left a camera in the room so I could check on him. I put my cat carrier in the room with a nice bed inside, and to my surprise, he went into it immediately — probably because it was dark inside and felt safer. I could then remove the trap, which he probably associated with the panic he must have felt when he had tripped its mechanism. I gave him food and water, and I cleaned the mess when he used the bathtub as a toilet. The smell was awful, but I was delighted when he stopped resisting his urges to relieve himself. I even gave him a litter box to use, although he had no idea what it was. When I cleaned his messes in the bathtub, I put the excrement in the litter box, hoping that he would understand that it was meant for that very purpose. To his credit, after nearly a week in the room, this wily creature finally understood the function of the litter box, and from then onward, he used it instead of the tub.

I checked on him several times a day, talked soothingly to him, and allowed my friendlier cats into the room so he could see that there were other small animals who didn't find me too objectionable. They were very little help. They would come into the room, stare at the guest for a few seconds, eat some of his food, and walk away, bored. I sometimes sat on the floor in the room, ignoring the guest so that he could see that I wasn't a threat. I even left the door open a few times and lay on the carpet in the hallway, still mostly ignoring him while my ever-curious cats came to see what I was doing.

After seeing that he had used the litter box several times, I decided to let my guest explore other rooms in the house. He came out of the bathroom only when it was quiet — mostly at night since he essentially was nocturnal anyway. He hid behind a bookcase one day for several hours until I partially unloaded the shelves and moved the furniture away from the wall to extricate him. And today, he had spent the entire time behind the water heater.

When I heard the clatter in the bathroom near my bed, I was happy that he had come out of his hiding place, and I was doubly happy because that bathroom had a cat door set into the wall about eight inches from the floor. It led into the back yard. *That's* how I would release him back into the wild. I promptly closed the bathroom door so he couldn't come back out and get into any other inaccessible nook where I couldn't pry him loose.

Then I realized I had another problem. The cat door was locked. It stayed locked all the time. As much as I would like to give my cats the ability to come and go as they please, I have no desire unknowingly to admit wild animals like the very guest I was hoping to free this evening. I also had no desire for the outdoor cats to bring their favorite “toys” — snakes, shrews, lizards, spiders — into the house, alive or dead. For more than ten years — since I've lived in the house, in fact — the cat door has remained unused for these reasons. Instead, I have served my cats as valet, opening the human doors for them countless times each day. They merely ask to come in or go out, and I hop to the door to carry out their wishes. Meanwhile, the plastic flap on the door that was actually designed for cats to use independently remains securely, and ironically, fastened, and it can be unlocked only from inside the house.

To unlock the cat door, I'd have to go inside the bathroom — inside the confined space — with my scared, untamed guest. For eleven days, he had rebuffed my attempts to make friends, and the one time I had come within inches of his nose while offering a tasty snack, he had tried to strike me. At least he had stopped growling at me after the first couple of days, and with this fact in mind, I stupidly opened the door and walked into the bathroom wearing nothing but a t-shirt and underwear. Even more stupidly, I closed the door behind me.

His reaction was instantaneous. He bounced — like a ping-pong ball, like a ball in a pinball machine — from one part of the room to the other. He bounced from the floor to the shelves to

the walls to the ceiling and back to the shelves in quick succession, knocking the two pictures from the wall, overturning toiletries, and littering the floor with clean sheets and other loose objects that had been stored neatly.

I quickly grabbed the clothes hamper and used it as a shield, holding it between him and me when he came close enough to do any damage. He finally came to rest on the top shelf of a small shelving unit to my right, after I froze just inside the door, now holding the clothes hamper firmly to protect the lower half of my body.

At this point, a smart person probably would have backed out of the room. In my own defense, I did consider it, but the confusion had left me in a position in which I would have to move *toward* my guest about a foot before being able to get through the door frame. He was only three feet from me anyway, so I decided that instead of trying to flee and risking another outburst from him, I would slide to my left toward the cat door and get into the bathtub. I hoped this might calm him since I would be moving away from him rather than toward him to get out the door. I could not have been more wrong.

Once again, his reaction was instantaneous. By the time I froze in the bathtub with the laundry hamper still held before my lower half as a shield, he had knocked over several other items and crouched on the counter growling at me, prepared to strike. However, I'd had the presence of mind to bend down and unlock the cat door as I moved the agonizing six feet across the room, trying to minimize my movements and any noise while he continued to panic.

I'd done it. The cat door was unlocked. The plastic flap moved freely. He could exit on his own. All I had to do was get out of the room.

It was only now that I fully realized how stupid I had been to enter such a confined space with him. He had me cornered. He didn't think of himself as a guest the way I did; he was a prisoner, and he was in a fight for his life. He was on the counter, roughly between me and the door, and he had no intention of letting me move. He countered each movement I made with a menacing growl, and those intense blue eyes never wavered.

As I stood there pondering how I'd probably lived a long-enough life, I realized that getting out of this situation was entirely in my hands. My guest wouldn't let me move toward him to escape, and he certainly wasn't going to move toward me to get to the cat door. It was a stalemate.

Gingerly, not meeting his glare too much, I leaned over far enough to reach into my clothes-hamper shield and pull out my dirty jeans. At the very least, I would have that much protection for my lower half. I balanced my shield on the bathtub's edge and carefully wriggled into the pants, sopping up some of the leftover water droplets in the bottom of the tub with the legs. Then I just stood there. It seemed that there was plenty of time for me to contemplate my situation, and admittedly, I was perplexed as to what to do next. This could last a while.

Moments later, I noticed that the bathroom door wasn't closed all the way. Either I hadn't gotten it to latch, or in his ping-pong movements my guest had hit the handle and opened it. Either way, I could see a narrow opening that gave me hope. If I had to make a mad rush for the door, its being unlatched would speed my progress by a few milliseconds, possibly saving precious millimeters of my vulnerable flesh from my guest's assault. Or my guest might notice that the door was open and flee in that direction. However, neither one of us made a move. In a sense, we were both cornered.

We waited only a short time, punctuated by the occasional growl, before I heard a familiar scratching sound. Bennie — the largest cat in my herd, the cat who never goes outside — was at the door, and he wanted to know what was happening.

It's important to understand that Bennie hates doors. Well, Bennie hates *closed* doors. A closed door is an affront to his feline sense of dignity and independence. If I close the door to the bedroom, for example, he yowls plaintively as if he has lost his best friend. For once, I was very happy that Bennie hates closed doors because as I watched from my bathtub confinement, he pulled the door open a few inches and stuck his small, pink-and-black nose into the room. The nose was followed promptly by the rest of his large, furry, white self as he came to investigate what had caused such a commotion in his domain.

My guest was not scared of my cats, and Bennie was no exception. I did worry that Bennie wouldn't be a match for the wild creature that held me at bay if a fight started, but I was more hopeful that Bennie's presence might actually calm him. Ignoring the intruder, Bennie came to see what I was doing in the tub, which he likes (when it's dry) almost as much as he hates closed doors. He even stood to place his front paws on the closed toilet lid so that I could reach from my plastic prison to scratch the top of his head a few times in greeting.

My chance of escape would get no better than it was at that moment. Bennie had distracted the guest, who was now watch-

ing the interaction between the cat and me. Taking advantage of the situation, I carefully slipped out of the bathtub, still holding my shield protectively, and made it slowly to the door. My guest was not happy and threw a few more growls and hostile glares in my direction, but Bennie had managed to diffuse the situation enough to let me escape. He followed me out the door, which I closed, leaving our guest alone in the bathroom.

Moments later, I opened the door just enough to place my network camera on the shelf to watch the guest. He growled at me again but stayed mostly still, only slinking into the cool embrace of the white porcelain sink as I pulled my arm out of the crack and closed the door. I watched him through the feed on my tablet computer until he finally gathered enough courage to come down from the cabinet and try the cat door once more. As he slipped into the night, leaving me with a wrecked bathroom to clean, I thought, *He'll be back.*