

Dinner

May be
Ross Chamberlain's
fanzine for Apa V #13
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I think, a short-hair with bold markings, possibly a calico but maybe he just had large black-and-white patches. Fluffy was a grey persian.

For a time, we lived in a house in the midst of the Pisgah National Forest, in western North Carolina, in the eastern foothills of the Blue Ridge. The house had been built as a hunting lodge by John Jacob Astor, presumably before the area was established as a protected forest; the house was named John Rock after the granite face of a nearby hill. I was too young to be especially aware of such things, but in retrospect I realize it was a fairly primitive domicile, with no piped water—I assume we had a spring. I have a vague recollection of a structure to one side of the building that was meant to hold wild animals, probably deer, but that would have been before our time. As I think about it, it seems as though we did have either a tame or simply unafraid deer around, briefly; I think I recall a snapshot of Elinor, my sister, who would have been in her early teens then (she was 11 when I was born, my brother, Hale, was 13) with the deer.

At some point we moved into another house just outside the forest (there was a large stone gate at the forest's official entrance on the road close by). This house we named Ecusta Vista because from our front porch we could see a large paper mill, about a mile or so away; its name was Ecusta (*e-koo-sta*) then, but it had become an Olin-Matheson property when we came by to visit the old haunts some years later.

We lived in these places because they were fairly convenient to a fish hatchery and my father worked for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. There was a ranger station close by as well. Dad took me to both places from time to time—not as often as I would have liked, as I

MY FAMILY was a cat family, as opposed to a dog family, or a parakeet or fish family. We had cats, or to be slightly more accurate, cats had us—when it was opportune to reach the sort of mutual agreement or compact that's involved. We moved fairly regularly, and I'm not sure that they moved with us. Certainly, when I was very young, before school age, I know there were several around from time to time, though I only remember the names of two—Christopher and Fluffy. Christopher was,

recall, but I'm sure that in reality these were not ideal places to have small kids hanging around.

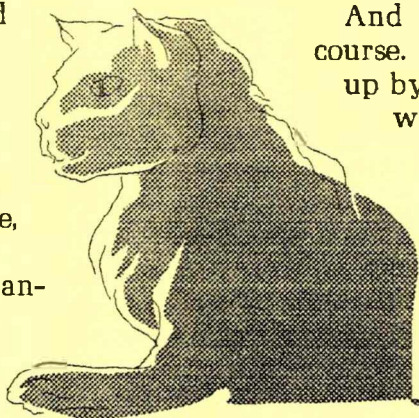
In some ways, had I been a bit older, both houses would have been great places to live because of all the play-room they provided. The...*forest!* Notwithstanding all the grim fairy-tale stories of what happened to kids who wandered off into forests. One can understand why such tales were told on the fringes of such places, of course, because no doubt nasty things could happen to such peripatetic urchins—and no doubt could have happened to me had I been too adventurous too often. As it was, I scared my folks a couple of times, traipsing off.

And there were dangers, of course. One of which was pointed up by the fact that I found what was left of Fluffy out in the yard, one day...

I didn't understand, then—I'd have been three, maybe four. She'd been gone a while, and probably Elinor had told me she'd gone to Heaven. So I came back into the house and announced the fact that Fluffy had

fallen down from Heaven. Understand, I don't actually remember much more than seeing a considerably reduced in size ball of grey fur out in the yard and making that assumption, and that despite her brief return she was soon gone again (equally mysteriously to me).

We moved to College Station, Texas, when I was six going on seven, and lived there for about eight years. This was a different kind of community; we had a fairly good-sized house on maybe a sixth of an acre, but it was in a



residential neighborhood, albeit on the edge of town. Two blocks and a field away on one direction (east, in retrospect) was the Black community (you know what we called it then, in the mid-1940s); two blocks perpendicular and clockwise to that direction were the tracks of the Southern Pacific and, if I remember right, the Missouri Pacific—there were fewer trains on that line, but those on the SP were frequent and regular. There were woods and rural areas in easy bicycling distance along the highway that paralleled the tracks and across the tracks. There was a tiny town named Copy down *along* the tracks but seemingly unaccessible by road (at least to a naive boy like myself). College Station is in the Brazos River valley, about a hundred miles north of Houston; my guess is that the recent rains may have been heavy along there, too, but probably not as devastating as in and around Houston. It was a six-mile exhausting bicycle ride to the river; one I took only a couple of times in all the eight years we lived there.

Continuing clockwise, we were about (again) two blocks from the South Gate shopping center (grocery, drug store, barber shop, cleaners), and beyond that were The Projects, and then the beginning of the Texas A&M campus, with tennis courts and a practice field, then the gymnasium and swimming pool, alongside Kyle Field, where the Aggies played when at home. Finally, northerly, it was roughly a mile to school through residential neighborhoods. I had a couple of ways I could go by road, around a park-like area called the Lake, but of course I usually went through it. I think it had been at one time a pond or small lake, but there was a small concrete culvert that ran through it when we were there, and the area was full of wonderful trees and shrubbery and—well, it was a favorite and I think slightly dangerous place to play.

We did get a cat, there. He was ostensibly mine; I think it was the usual ploy to teach a kid responsibility, but I didn't get much teaching, and I'm afraid he became an unfriendly cat, the terror of the neighborhood. Just picture Slugger, and you have a fairly good image of Buttons—a largish gold short-hair, I think with faint tiger-stripes but no

large white patches.

I remember him stalking bugs or other critters with considerable dedication, but uncertain about the occasional tarantula; they were big enough to be heard walking across the floor. The most striking image I have of him, though, was once when he got ahold of a quarter-rind of a cantaloupe. He began to growl like we'd never heard him before, and dragged it around, fiercely protective. I don't remember now what he did with it finally, if anything.

I never learned his final fate, but we did hear after we'd moved away and given him over to some neighbor family, that he remained the lord and terror of all the loose pets in the area. I suspect something may have been done about him after not too long.

After Dad retired for health reasons and we left Texas for New England, we as a family were never any place where we would have had the opportunity to have pets of our own. The place we settled the longest was an intentional community called Gould Farm in the Massachusetts Berkshires, and there were now and then dogs and cats around, in whose affections we all shared. I dealt with animals in a different way, there, with such interesting jobs as helping shovel out the cow barn (once) and plucking chickens after they were killed for Sunday dinner (once). It took me a little while before I could appreciate chicken after that.

My first job with the folks at Gould Farm was helping in the pasteurizing and bottling of the milk—In some ways, that was my first experience with Real World work (I was 16), and initially I bitterly resented having to do it at all. I was severely introverted and hated dealing with other people in any fashion. Gradually, I got to the point where I knew what I was doing and could take some pride in what I'd accomplished, even though it was work that I still felt in my heart was beneath me. It took a long time to get over that attitude, folks, and I have to admit to occasionally still having to struggle with it in terms of everyday chores around the house.

After an unpleasant year at the local school in Great Barrington, I went to a boarding school called Buxton School in Williamstown, home of Williams College, the

Clark Art Institute (opened while I was there) and a fairly seminal summer theatre—one hears of well-known actors who appear there or have come out of there. Uh, none come to mind at the moment, but trust me...

Buxton was/is a school that emphasizes creative activities. I got interested in theatre there, and wrote some halfway decent poetry and did some semi-halfway decent artwork of one sort or another. But we're talking about pets and I was going to write about a cat that hung around there except that I just realized I already did, back in *Apa V* #4. Somehow, between then and now, I seem to have mislaid the disk with my old *Dither* files on it... Owell, re-typing time. This was in a comment made to Marcy, who'd written something about hunting cats in an earlier issue, and I mentioned this one at Buxton:

"I stayed alone at the main house one summer (I was supposed to be painting the rooms, but that's another guilty story), and every so often, in the middle of the night she would bring in a rabbit from the adjacent woods, and leave its entrails on the living room floor. The worst was not cleaning up after her, but the fact that all too often she would actually kill them in or close to the house—in earshot. I hadn't known until then that rabbits made any kind of noise, let alone scream."

I had made a verse about the cat, that began something like "I know a cat and her name is Sue..." I couldn't remember that name when I wrote the comment before, possibly in deference to Ms. Williams. I still don't remember how the rest of it went, save that it ended, "and leaves their entrails on the floor." Which is probably why I phrased it that way in the comment.

In New York, Joy-Lynd had a dog, a beautiful German shepherd named March that she loved dearly. Something happened to March, and she had to be put away at last; unfortunately, Joy-Lynd isn't available as I write—off at a computer swap meet this Saturday morning—or I'd ask her more about that. Later, when we lived Brooklyn, Joy-Lynd and I had a couple of cats whose names I can't remember, nor how we acquired them. Sadly, we were both working, and while we were gone during the day the two cats got into bad habits (unlearning their housebreaking) that

there was no opportunity to train them out of, and it reached a point that we couldn't keep them. At another time, Joy-Lynd found a kitten while she was attending a 4th of July concert in Prospect Park; it was terrified of the fireworks explosions and she brought it home, clutched to her bosom as it were. His name was Dickens—as in Little... yeah. He grew up in better shape—though I discovered it was still unhappy when I played the 1812 Overture on my stereo. Somewhere in that period we also had a rabbit, whom Joy-Lynd named Theo, or Theelzebub for long. Theo was neither godly nor devilish, but a pretty decent rabbit all in all; I've never cottoned to rabbits (semi-pun status accepted) as I have to cats and even dogs, but she was very fond of him.

When she left for a job in Virginia, that cat was given away or had already gone to live some place else. There was a friend of hers who almost came to share the apartment with me, and she had a large German shepherd that I thought was friendly—he kept standing up and putting his paws on my shoulders—but I later learned (after he and she were long gone) that he was trying to be the dominant male.

Hank Davis and I shared the Brooklyn apartment for quite a while, and he had a couple of cats, one of whose names I actually remember: Telzy, from a story or two some of you may recall. These cats were friendly and nice to have around, and I remember them with great pleasure. Later, Hank moved back to Kentucky for a while, and took them with him.

After that, I (and later, Joy-Lynd and I) have lived in places where we could not have pets, and as it turned out, Joy-Lynd developed allergies that would prevent us from keeping a cat or dog even if the landlords allowed it. We've considered both fish and birds, but I think neither of us want to make the commitment and expense this would involve.

Well, that's a lot about the pets and animals in my life. I've somehow mislaid my copy of the last distribution of *Apa V*, so I fear I have no comments for any of you this time. Mea culpa. And besides, the time is late (as usual) and I need to get this printed out to run off. See you next month.

Ross