

CHARLOTTE BECK

## TAKING CARE OF HARVEY

FIONA WAS MORE TIRED THAN SHE HAD EVER BEEN in her life, yet she lay awake, dreading the next interruption. It came when her aging tabby landed on her pillow and padded back and forth, inches from her face.

“Leave me alone, Harvey,” she said.

But Harvey wanted out, and he usually got what he wanted. If Fiona didn’t respond right away, he would jump to the floor and back onto her pillow, and he wouldn’t stop until she got up. Kirk lay sleeping beside her, his hair a curly dark mess on the pillow. She wished he would get up and let Harvey out now and then, but he could sleep through anything. She would take care of Harvey herself. It was easier that way.

She felt around on the floor for her slippers, more out of habit than necessity, since it was warm for October. By the time she made it down the stairs to the patio doors, Harvey had gone into hiding under the chair beside the freezer. The chair was big enough that as long as he was under it he was out of reach of her groping arms. She slid the glass door aside and stood back. Groggy, she closed her eyes and leaned her head against the door-frame. Ever since Erin was born her nights had become a haze of feedings, her days a frenzy of chores. She never dreamt that having a baby could be so much work. And in between she had to deal with Harvey, who was ever more demanding.

Eventually, Harvey squeezed out from under the chair and sprang across the carpet. But Fiona had forgotten to open the screen, and he smashed into it and rebounded squarely. She chuckled in spite of her annoyance and slid it just wide enough for him to slink through. He disappeared into the incomplete darkness of their tiny back yard. Kirk had finished the privacy fence during the summer, and all Fiona could see was a few of the roofs and second-story windows of the houses in their new subdivision. There were no lights on anywhere. Everyone was asleep—everyone but her.

Then Erin woke up and Fiona hurried up the stairs. If Erin got too

worked up she had trouble settling down for her feeding. The walls were thin in their semi-detached home. The neighbours wouldn't appreciate being woken up by a crying baby again.

Erin latched on, and pain pierced Fiona's nipple and surged through her. She ground her toes into the carpet to keep from crying out. When the pain subsided and Erin's nursing became a rhythmic tugging, Fiona's head lolled back on the chair, surrendering to exhaustion. At times like this she was tempted to abandon nursing altogether, but everyone said there was no better way to nourish her baby. She couldn't take that away from Erin just because she was tired.

Three hours later, Fiona set a hard-boiled egg in front of Kirk.

"How did you sleep last night?" he said.

For the first few months he had kept her company during night feedings, but the effort of getting him up and then watching him doze off had been so frustrating that Fiona had given up and let him sleep instead. Ten-hour days on the job site left him too exhausted to help. Her naïve visions of the two of them comforting Erin and each other in the depths of night had long ago evaporated.

"Not great. I don't remember how many times Erin was up."

She didn't bother to tell him that Harvey got her up too. If she complained about the cat, Kirk would offer impractical and possibly violent suggestions as to how to deal with him.

Fiona swept the kitchen floor after breakfast and noticed more cat hair than normal in the dustpan. It occurred to her that every time she had come upon Harvey lately, he had been licking himself, one hind leg high in the air. At first she had laughed at his undignified pose, but lately there was a maniacal quality about his activity that made her uncomfortable. As Harvey walked away from his bowl, she noticed patches of pale bluish skin on the backs of his legs. He had licked them clean.

The vet, a short, humourless man, examined Harvey's legs.

"Have there been any changes in the house?" he asked.

"Well, yes." Fiona thought the answer self-evident since Erin lay sleeping in her car seat on the floor of the examining room.

After poking and prodding Harvey in what seemed a random manner, the vet concluded that Harvey's licking habit would pass as he adapted to

the new family member.

But every day from then on Fiona found cat poop on the bedroom carpet. And every day she cursed Harvey as she scooped it up in a tissue and flushed it down the toilet. Harvey wasn't adapting.

Fiona took him to the vet again.

"Have there been any changes in the house?" he asked.

"Well, yes." Fiona wondered how he had gotten through university.

"I can prescribe a behaviour-altering drug for you—I mean him."

"You want to put my cat on Prozac?"

"He'll need a pill a day for the first week and then weekly after that."

"You want me to pill him?" Fiona raised her eyebrows.

She still had a scar from the last time she'd stuck a pill down Harvey's throat. His fangs had sunk into the flesh between her thumb and index finger and left rounded bluish-red marks that never completely faded.

That afternoon, Fiona went to the hall closet and rummaged for her heaviest winter coat and thickest leather gloves, hoping they would be enough to protect her from Harvey if he went wild.

She found him curled between the pillows on their bed.

"Come here, Harvey. This won't hurt a bit."

He purred at the sight of her, complacent in half-sleep, until she straddled him and locked him between her knees, making him squirm and hiss. Moving quickly, she pulled back his cheeks and pried his mouth open wide enough to stuff the pill deep into his throat. She withdrew her finger and clamped his jaws shut. She waited for him to spit the pill out, but he swallowed instead.

She rubbed his head. "Good boy, Harvey. That wasn't so bad, was it?"

He would be less accommodating tomorrow, and worse the day after that. It was ridiculously optimistic to think that one pill would be enough. But she managed to get him to swallow several pills on schedule, and to her relief the hair began to grow back on his legs. He also made fewer deposits in the bedroom, but his nightly jumping continued.

After letting him out one night, Fiona lay awake formulating a plan, and by noon the next day she had carried it out. She stood back to admire her work and wondered why she hadn't thought of it sooner. The tiny basement window was now propped open, just wide enough for a well-fed cat to slip

through, and a loose plastic sheet hung over the opening to keep the bugs out. Harvey wasn't as agile as he used to be, and Fiona wasn't convinced he could jump from the floor to the window unassisted, so an old board served as a makeshift ramp from the window to the top of the dryer. Her moment of satisfaction was cut short when Erin began to cry. She trudged upstairs, undoing the latch on her nursing bra as she went.

For several nights Harvey came and went as he pleased, and Fiona began to relax, secretly proud of her ingenuity. But a few nights later, she was jerked out of a restful sleep, the kind that was so elusive these days. She sat up in bed, rubbed her eyes, and listened carefully, trying to quell the irritation she felt at having been woken again. There was a distinct crunching sound coming from under the bed. She turned on her book light, placed it on the floor, and leaned over. There sat Harvey, huddled over the remains of a mole. Bits of intestine lay strewn in front of him, like soggy rubber bands, and beside him lay something more glob-like, like a stomach.

"Oh Christ," Fiona whispered, falling back onto her pillow.

"How'd you sleep?" Kirk asked over breakfast the next morning.

Fiona stiffened and wondered if he had been aware of her as she crawled under the bed wrapping stringy mole parts in a tissue before flushing them down the toilet. He wouldn't think much of cat kills under the bed. He seemed oblivious, as usual. Just as well, since she didn't have the energy to enlighten him.

She shrugged and got up to empty Harvey's dish. Mould had blossomed around the edges of the cat food, and it smelled. Harvey had become so particular that the only food he would eat was 9 Lives Super Supper, and apparently that was no longer palatable.

"How about mole guts?" she said to Harvey where he sat waiting.

She rinsed and refilled Harvey's dish with hard cat food. If he wanted soft cat food he could hunt it down and kill it himself, which he was evidently quite capable of doing.

After Kirk left for the job site, Fiona went downstairs and shut the basement window and dismantled the ramp. She had no desire to clean up more rodent remains. While she was down there, she stooped over the litter box to clean it out and discovered a streak of something on the floor. She knelt down, sniffed, and then gagged as she realized that it was dried fecal matter mixed with blood.

“It looks like he has an ulcer,” the vet said, withdrawing a thermometer from Harvey’s rectum.

“An *ulcer*?” Fiona threw up her hands. “What does he have to worry about?” She sighed and shook her head. “Never mind. What do I have to do?”

As Fiona drove home, with Erin crying in her car seat and Harvey wailing in his cat carrier, she tried to empathize with Harvey. She had adopted him as a kitten, and they had been together since long before Erin was born, and even before she met Kirk. Harvey used to have her all to himself, and now there were days when she hardly paid him any attention. No wonder he acted the way he did.

At home, she assembled her gloves and a half-full syringe of Pepto-Bismol on the back step. Then she zipped her coat up to her neck, found a blanket, and went to look for Harvey. He was already curled in his spot between the pillows.

“Here, Harvey. I have something that’s going to make you feel better,” she cooed as she ambushed him with the blanket.

She wrapped his legs inside so that only his head protruded. Once outside again, she held his squirming mass between her knees, trying to squeeze not too tightly but tightly enough so that he wouldn’t escape. Then she opened his mouth and squirted into the dark spot at the back of his throat. Harvey burst free from her grip and shook his head so fiercely and for so long that pink foam formed at the corners of his mouth and bubbles slid to the ends of his whiskers. He shot off the step and left a trail of pink behind. Everything within cat-shaking radius was splattered with pink, including Fiona. She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“I need you to put Harvey outside every night, and I don’t care how you do it,” Fiona said to Kirk as they got ready for bed that night. “Don’t ask me why,” she said in response to his questioning look.

Kirk was always eager to help and had only given up trying because she had a tendency to push him away. She knew he would be happy to do it.

Despite Kirk’s success at exiling Harvey to the outdoors that night, Fiona’s sleep was interrupted. Bleary-eyed, she pushed herself up on her elbows and looked around, trying to determine what she’d heard. Light from the harvest moon spilled into the room, outlining Harvey’s silhouette on the ledge outside their open window. He was pawing at the screen, his claws

catching. How had he gotten up there? He must be nimbler than she gave him credit for.

She got up and closed the window between them. "There. Take that."

Instead of jumping down to the roof level below, as Fiona expected, he turned, raised his tail, and headed in the direction of Erin's window.

"Don't you dare wake that baby," Fiona said through clenched teeth.

She rushed silently through the hall into Erin's room. She pushed the screen out at the bottom of the window, and it clattered into the hushed night. She darted a look at Erin, who stirred but didn't wake. Then she reached out, took hold of Harvey, and tossed him into the hallway, where he landed with a thud. He padded downstairs, tail held high.

An hour later, he jumped onto her pillow and stepped on her hair.

"What do you want now?" she whimpered, on the verge of tears.

Defeated, she eased out of bed and went downstairs. She opened the sliding door, but then remembered that Harvey had just wanted in. How could she be sure that he wouldn't come back to their window or to Erin's window? She would have to lock him up somewhere, like the basement or the garage. But she would have to catch him first.

In a flash of inspiration she left the screen door closed and stepped aside. It seemed to take forever, but finally Harvey extricated himself from his hiding spot under the chair and made for the door. The screen stopped him, and Fiona lunged. Harvey was swifter and more sure-footed than she was at this time of night. He raced upstairs, and she chased after him with her heart pounding. She closed the door behind her in the bedroom, and the room was silent; all she could hear was the blood roaring inside her head.

She forced herself to focus. He was in here somewhere; it was only a matter of time before she caught him. Looking under the bed, she strained to see a fuzzy shape within reach. She grabbed at it but came away with handfuls of fur. She rubbed her hands on the carpet, but they were so sticky with sweat that the hair clung to them in clumps. By now the shape had retreated to the farthest corner. She lay down on the floor on Kirk's side of the bed, wondering how he could possibly sleep through this. She should shake him awake, make him see what she went through at night, but she was too tired and frantic to deal with him too.

Her proximity was enough to flush Harvey out, but finding the bedroom door closed, he had nowhere to go. She lunged again and caught enough of him to hold onto. She held him in a vice-like grip at the back of his neck,

beyond caring that he was too old and heavy to be carried that way. Any empathy she had for him was gone.

Claws extended, Harvey squirmed and flailed in all directions as she made her way down the stairs with him.

“Why can’t you let me sleep?” she said, her face inches from his nose and whiskers. “You’re such a pain in the ass!”

At that, Harvey swung sideways and threw her off balance. She bumped into the freezer, and his hind leg caught her forearm. Claws sank in, and blood bubbled to the surface in a series of parallel lines across her skin.

Fiona gasped in pain and stared at the writhing mass of fur and claws that dangled before her as blood fanned out along the cuff of her nightshirt. There was nothing here to remind her of the meek lovable kitten she had adopted so many years ago. Tears sprang to her eyes but didn’t fall. In one deliberate motion she opened the freezer and dropped him in.

She stood there for a moment, disoriented by the sudden tranquility. Then she lowered her head and rested it on the freezer. The lid felt cool and solid against her cheek. An unprecedented calm settled over her. She breathed deeply, and her heart slowed. She closed her eyes.