

The cat appeared one afternoon sitting on the sidewalk along the edge of the porch, a perfect feline figure of Bastet. Feet at the end of straight legs rested together, encircled by a thin tail. At first glance, it looked black. But this was an illusion created by dense dark brown. Slowly blinking lids covered golden eyes only visible during the brief and infrequent looks my way.

Despite my devotion to neighborhood-cat watching, I had never seen this one. I guessed it was a juvenile female. This assignment of gender lacked any foundation. Her five feet of strict interpersonal space revealed her feral nature and prohibited examination of her nether regions. My daughter decided the cat's small size and slow, unsteady walk meant she was hungry. We watched as she devoured my last can of tuna. Once finished, she stretched and casually walked away without a backwards glance.

The next morning, I found her recumbent on the first step. Heart strings stirring, I ignored her as I drank my coffee. Eventually, my daughter joined us with a tin of sardines. The cat ate and left, only to return in the afternoon to lounge in a patch of sunlight slowly moving across the porch rug.

By the third morning, my husband took notice. He stepped onto the porch and watched apprehensively as the interloper ate the prior night's leftover roast chicken. I could see him wondering whether there would be a challenge to our agreed no-pets rule. I assured him that once my daughter ended her visit the next day, I would stop feeding the cat, and it could go back to living as it had before.

That evening, I sat between my husband and daughter while we ate dinner. He asked me if I knew the temperature outside and, at almost the same moment, she asked me what I was going to name the cat. Ninety-two became the answer to both questions.

My daughter left. Ninety-Two stayed. She clearly had no intention of returning to her prior life despite my withholding food. Every morning she appeared and silently watched me drink my coffee. When I finished, she would amble into the bushes along the side of the house, only to return the next morning.

After several days I became concerned that, if unspayed, she might find herself in a family way, compounding her difficulties. Postponing formulation of a plan to catch her, I started calling no-kill shelters. They offered no room.

I walked down to my neighbor's house to see if she could help. Last year, we caught a fugitive chicken together. After we were unable to find the owner, she cared for it and eventually found it a home. If she could find a chicken a home, surely she could place this cat. After hearing the ineluctable stray's story, my neighbor came over for a look.

She immediately recognized Ninety-Two—a geriatric, neutered male she called Salem—as one of the feral cat colony she had been feeding for the last few years. He had recently disappeared after an episode of bullying by other, younger colony members, returning later to find himself ostracized.

The next morning, I sipped my coffee and began to conspire about how I might keep him.