

Blue Cat

By Gail Grenier Sweet ©2006

There is a little cat who is trying to walk on my keyboard as I write this. He keeps sneaking his small grey paw under my fingers, typing LLLLLLLLLL. I keep pushing the paw (and the cat) away. His name might be Max -- I haven't decided yet. He's only about 11 weeks old, a nothing. He's been living with me for one week. I'm not sure if I'll keep him — I adopted him from a rescue group that promises you can return your adopted cat if things aren't working out.

Things aren't working out. It's not Max's fault. He's just not Gracie.

I didn't want to adopt Max. But I listened to my daughter Anna's advice, dispensed by phone from New Zealand: "You should get another cat, Mom. Sadie is so old she probably won't live much longer, and I'll be home soon and take Jack away from you."

My husband refers to this logic as "It wouldn't be right to go more than a week without three cats." It's true that Sadie is 15, the same age Gracie was, and she's a wreck. She weighs about four lbs. and you can see every one of her bones, covered with gold fur. She reminds me of pictures I've seen of cat skeletons. Yet she purrs and runs and jumps like a young cat. Jack is a huge grey tabby, more than 15 lbs., and when Anna returns in November, off he'll go with her to some apartment on the East side.

I got the new little cat from my friend, Tina, who just happened to be "fostering" a dozen or so orphaned kittens in her home. I went reluctantly to "just look" at the animals because I know you can only get kittens a couple of times a year. When I finally picked Max, I knew he couldn't be a replacement for Gracie, but I chose him because he was the friendliest. That's what Gracie was: the friendliest cat I've ever known.

Fifteen years ago, I got a call from my neighbor. She said, "Would you like a cat? We've got a stray here who is a really nice cat, but doesn't get along with our other cat."

I said, "Sure," and walked over to see the cat. She was a young "adolescent," just a few months old. I've seen a lot of grey cats, but this one was the only truly blue-grey cat I've ever laid eyes on. My neighbor's son said, "I call her 'Friendly,' cuz she's so friendly."

There was no way I could name a cat "Friendly," but the kid was right — this was a friendly feline.

My daughter says the first time she saw Gracie, she saw only a skinny grey front leg and paw "waving" to her around a door. Apparently I waved Gracie's paw like a puppet and said in a high voice, "Hi Anna, I want to come live with you," or something like that.

Anna, who was five years old at the time, thought I had a grey cat puppet until I emerged from the other side of the door, with the young cat in my arms. Of course Anna was thrilled. Kids are always thrilled to get new animals, and you can never have too many, as far as they're concerned. Anna and I came up with the name "Gracie" for the new cat, only Anna spelled it "Gray-C" when she got older. It was a spelling that could only have been arrived at by a child taught inventive spelling in school — a spelling worthy of a rapper.

Gracie had to deal with Sadie, who had just joined our family earlier that year. Sadie wasn't thrilled about sharing her space with a new cat (they never are), but she adjusted. Gracie and Sadie never became licking-each-other or sleeping-with-each-other friends, though, something I thought was too bad.

Sadie was the first cat I had declawed and the first cat I made a truly "inside" cat. My friend Tina had convinced me that cats should be kept inside because of the damage they do to the bird population. I had another reason for creating an inside cat: from a lifetime of having cats, I knew that just about every one of them got killed by a car.

But Gracie was a stray at heart and a true huntress. She had been adopted first by our elderly neighbors, who gave her to the neighbors who gave her to us. All along, she had been catching mice. I continued to let her go outside, and our neighbor Mark often commented, "I never see that cat without a mouse in its mouth."

As fierce a hunter as she was, claws and all, Gracie was a purr-ball. She'd be the first one to nestle in my lap while I watched a movie. She followed us when we took walks on our land or even down the street, meowing all the way. I'd sing the old song when she'd trail me: "Me and my cat named Dog, walking all around the town."

There was one annoying thing about Gracie: her meow. It was loud and Siamese-y. If you've ever known a Siamese cat, you know they "talk" in a most nagging way. Well, we found out there was a reason for her weird voice. When she had her first litter, she threw one kitten with perfect Siamese markings. Apparently there's a grey Siamese breed, and Gracie was one of those; or maybe she was just part Siamese. After that, we had Gracie bred to a Siamese male, and she had a litter of four well-marked cats. I realized I'm too lazy to breed and sell cats, though, plus there are too darn many of them in the world. I was happy that our kids at least got to experience the birth and growth of those kittens. After those two litters, I had Gracie "fixed," the fate met by all my cats.

Gracie grew into a mature cat always thin in summer and heftier in winter. Winter or summer, though, she went out to hunt every day. Sometimes I'd see little grey junco feathers and I'd feel bad, because I love birds too, and I knew Gracie had made a meal of one of my little snow birds. But I couldn't turn that wild cat into a caged animal.

In her later years, Gracie finally pudged out. Her winter chubbiness became her permanent "look." She became a softball on four legs. Also, her eyes were two different colors -- just a slight difference in color. I'm not sure if they were always that way, or if they changed over time. I asked the vet about it, but the vet had no explanation.

During the last couple of years, Gracie never asked to go out in winter — shocking to us. She still enjoyed venturing forth in summer, almost, it seemed, for old time's sake.

If we ever wondered if Gracie had lost her touch, though, our doubts were vanquished whenever there was a mouse in the house. Sometimes in fall, a field mouse would find its way inside, looking for warmth, I guess. Both old Sadie and Anna's young cat Jack, indoor cats, were pathetically slow. Jack could play all day with a mouse and not know what to do with it. Gracie, on the other hand, moved faster than our eyes could follow. Blam! She'd have that mouse trapped under her paw, and Crunch! She'd administer the coup de grace to its neck. >From there on, it was munchin' time.

About a year and a half ago, I was petting Gracie and I said to Mike, "This is my blue cat of Castletown."

Mike said, "WHAT?"

He had no idea what I was talking about. We've been married 33 years and it always shocks us when we learn something new about each other, because we think we've heard every story. But apparently I had never told Mike about my favorite childhood book, *The Blue Cat of Castletown*. I told him how I had hunted for the book in my adult years, but never found it.

About a week later, I was going away alone on a trip. My packed suitcase was in the kitchen and I checked it one last time. Just inside the top was a copy of *The Blue Cat of Castletown*. Mike had found it on Amazon.com, something that would have never occurred to me to try. I don't cry easily, but that made me cry. "Mike, this is the best present I've ever gotten!" I re-read it with great pleasure. It was still a great book.

And I had my own blue cat.

One night, Anna and Mike were watching a movie in the family room. Gracie walked along the back of the couch toward Mike's head. Anna watched, expecting Mike to swat the cat away. Mike is not known for his great love of animals. But when Gracie finally reached Mike, he scratched her under the chin.

"I thought you'd push her away, Dad," Anna said.

"She's my favorite," Mike said, in a baby-talk voice.

That's how we all felt about Gracie. About a month ago, my brother David visited. Unbeknownst to me, David took a bunch of pictures of Gracie. He visited again sometime later, and presented the portraits of Gracie, blown up and framed. I was taken aback. They were beautiful, back-lit portraits, sort of kitty centerfolds. There's Gracie, looking at the camera with lazy eyes as if to say "Why don't you just let me sleep?" There's Gracie, lying on her back with her paws in the air, stretching in the sun on her pillow, a queen.

“Wow, David, I’m gonna hang them in the stairway,” I said. “Thanks!”

I think maybe David’s soul knew something his mind could not know. Just weeks after he gave me those pictures, Gracie was gone. We always thought the first to die would be Sadie, old bag-of-bones.

It happened like this: On Thursday morning, I found Gracie in the basement, with her head inclined downward, standing stiffly as if staring between the washer and dryer. I leaned down to pet her head, and said, “What’s wrong, Gracie?” She stayed frozen like that and I figured she must be stalking a mouse between the laundry machines. I left for work and didn’t think about her all day.

That night at midnight, I went down to the basement and found her walking stiffly in a circle, as if she had a stroke. Her head was still inclined downward, very un-catlike. I stooped way down and saw her eyes were big and staring. She drooled just a little.

Then I knew.

“Mike,” I wailed, “Gracie is dying!” I don’t panic any easier than I cry, but I started panicking and crying. I had enormous guilt knowing that she had suffered all day because I didn’t check on her more thoroughly in the morning.

I made a couple of emergency calls (one to Tina my cat friend, another to the animal emergency hospital). Afterward, I figured Gracie would make it through the night and I’d take her to our regular vet in the morning. I wrapped her in a towel and put her in a laundry basket in our bathroom. I gave her food and water, even though she showed no interest in either. I knew she wouldn’t want them because I knew she was dying.

In the morning, Gracie seemed a little better. She still walked stiffly, but could move in a straight line. Her face still looked all wrong, though. Her eyes had lost their typically relaxed look. They sort of popped out of her face in a creepy way, like those old 70s paintings of big-eyed children. My Gracie was already gone.

At 9:00 am, I was able to get through to the vet and set a 10:00 am appointment. I thought I’d have the vet see if Gracie could be saved. But shortly after I made the appointment, I watched Gracie go into a violent seizure that lasted about three minutes. It was horrible, horrible, horrible. She lay, drooling, on her side and her whole body jerked, her back legs hitting the wall over and over and over. After the seizure, she looked wiped out and confused. I knew then that I would have the vet put her down.

At the vet’s office, I explained my intentions immediately and they were very understanding. The vet gave Gracie a shot to anesthetize her. Gracie’s eyes closed and her breathing slowed. I felt relieved to see Gracie free from the terror that had seemed to have her in its grip. No more big wild eyes. Then the doc gave Gracie the shot that killed her.

I was crying. The doc gave me a hug and said, “I want to thank you for doing the right thing. I guarantee you, there would have been nothing we could have done for Gracie. When a cat gets that old and has seizures, it’s really bad. It could have been a brain tumor or an enlarged heart or a dormant bird virus, or something else. It would have been cruel to put an old cat through a bunch of tests.”

Yeah, and expensive, I thought. I had been raised with a farm-cat mentality. I don’t spend money on animals beyond neutering and rabies shots. I knew we couldn’t afford the hundreds of dollars I’ve heard of people spending on sick animals. And in my heart, I knew it was Gracie’s time.

I e-mailed my brother David almost as soon as I got home. He wrote me, “I can’t begin to tell you how bad I feel. Gracie was one of the world’s best all-time cats. It seems like God’s best gifts to us also last the least amount of time. Ten years ago when you were nice enough to let me stay with you, Gracie used to sleep with me. She was a special cat and I’ll miss her too.”

I called Anna in New Zealand. She had to know. We cried together on the phone, especially when I read to her the poem the vet had given me -- “The Rainbow Bridge.”

“This is so corny, but it made me cry,” I told Anna.

The poem, which has no author attribution, tells about a place between here and heaven where our deceased pets wait for us until we can walk with them through the pearly gates.

I read it to Anna, my 20-year-old sophisticated world traveler. My voice was squeaking by the last verse, and the words were all blurred by my tears. The line that got to me went:

Together, the animals chase and play, but the day comes when a pet will suddenly stop and look into the distance... bright eyes intent, eager body quivering. Suddenly recognizing you, your pet bounds quickly through the green fields and into your embrace.

Anna’s voice was muffled. “I thought ‘Man, this is corny, but why am I crying by the second line?’”

Then we cried-laughed together. I told her I agreed with one of my favorite writers, Mel Ellis, who said, “If there are no animals in heaven, I don’t want to be there.”

Anna is the one who remembered the stories about Gracie as a hand-puppet and Gracie as a cat-named-Dog who took walks with us and Gracie who was Mike’s favorite even though he isn’t wild about animals.

I didn’t remember any stories about Gracie, except that she was always there... and my hand on her head always brought a big purr. She was one blue-grey purring ball of fur, my movie-watching buddy.

Mike and I had a funeral for Gracie the next morning. The words were simple: “Gracie, you were the best cat we ever had.” She’s buried next to Maggie, the best dog we ever had. We put an old car tire over the burial site to prevent grave robbery by some varmint. We’re not very fancy in the country.

So here I am, typing with a little tabby kitten making trouble on my keyboard. Like I said, I don’t know if I’ll keep him. There will never be another blue cat for me, I’m sure. But each day Max stays with us, he gets a little less hyper. And just the other night, he let me hold him for a whole movie, purring all the while.

The End