

TO KILL A FLEA

by Eleanor Thomson

A cat wearing a flea collar stalked long-legged in front of me last week, and I recoiled in horror.

One year we agreed to "cat sit" for a friend until she found an apartment. I had been known to quote "a house is not a home without a cat" and we had been catless for years, so I welcomed the two long-haired beauties with open arms and a completely carpeted house. They got off the plane wearing flea collars.

One cat immediately adjusted, taking up residence under the verandah, coming in for food and water, rumbling happily beside me on the couch while I napped. The other one immediately had a nervous breakdown, taking up residence under our bed, refusing to come out for food, water, loving or threats. We spent a lot of time with our heads poked under the bed, backsides in the air, coaxing, wheedling, commanding, and being ignored. We didn't know we had set the stage for the arrival of a horde of other visitors, and these would refuse to be ignored.

The cat's illness lasted for three weeks and included panic flights to almost inaccessible areas: places like that little panel behind

the bathtub cut out to make plumbing repairs easier; the area behind the furnace; and finally the little hole under the kitchen cabinets where the pipes and drains go up and down.

We developed a "find the cat" game, because daily medication had become a necessity, and as we dragged an increasingly dusty feline from stranger and stranger hiding places, we learned that each of us knew more four-letter words than we had realized.

Recovery came almost simultaneously with the finding of a new home. We did have a few days while we congratulated ourselves on a job well done and the cats rolled happily around in the sand outside, then watched television at night, equally happy in my lap. The garden shed was adopted as a more acceptable motel for sleeping, so the area under our bed was once again without an animal tenant. The next stage of the invasion had been completed.

A few mornings later I woke up scratching. Rows of little red spots marched along my abdomen, back, and chest. I knew they were flea bites, but I didn't want to "confess" to my husband, who honestly hadn't had his heart set on these guests in the first place. He wasn't scratching, and neither was a visiting daughter. But by the middle of the next week, I had used a whole

bottle of anti-itch lotion, and the spots were multiplying every night. Then I found the first flea while I was making the beds, and I could ignore them no longer.

Somehow, the bug exterminator sounded as if he was enjoying himself as he recounted over the phone the birth, death, and sexual experiences of a flea. Our extremely wet spring that year, combined with the hot, humid summer had encouraged the reproduction of dormant fleas all over the area. They prefer animals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, but humans will do. Mine obviously had a weight problem, because they also ate all night! We had provided the animals for them for a few weeks, the dust and sand had provided a perfect nursery, and the eggs and offspring had been dropped into our carpets, furniture, clothes and into all those dusty areas where the cat had hidden. Then the cats had moved outdoors, and the starving, sexually berserk fleas had made do with second best. Me. The creatures seemed to prefer women and young children. Cowards. The real zinger came when the bug exterminator told me they also lived on dust mites. My house could feed a flea battalion in each corner, and form a soup kitchen for vagrants. I begged him

to come quickly, then decided to think about it when he told me the cost, adding that we would have to clear everything off the floors, vacuum everything, and leave the house for twenty-four hours. He also said that they might return in ten days, but these would be sterile fleas, incapable of reproducing, so the bites would last only a few days. And no, he couldn't say if bites from sterile fleas itched less than those from productive ones. I called a friend who had cats.

"Of course you can do it yourself", she assured me, "but stay away from that stuff you get from veterinarians. Go to the exterminator and buy it. Vacuum everything, wash everything, dry clean if it won't wash, and you may have to do it twice. Oh, yes, bath the cats."

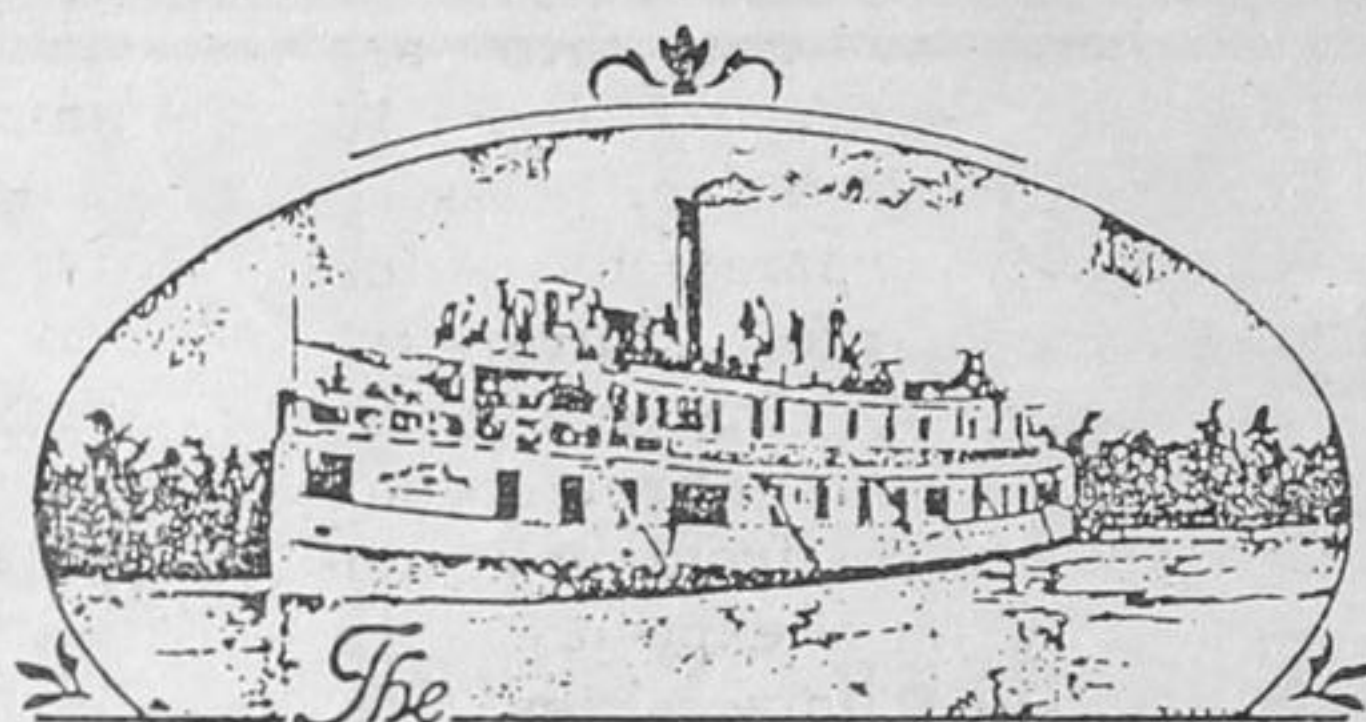
Then friends, relatives and neighbours began "confessing" that they too had once had fleas, and the game of "flea upmanship" was hatched. The players recount their most grisly tales about the extent of the damage, the pain of the bites, the work involved to get rid of the pests, and the cost of all of the above. The winner is the one who can count the most fleas from ankle to knee in the distance from the front door to the kitchen. We went to the veterinarian. Corners that hadn't seen the light of day for years were vacuumed and sprayed. Bedding was washed, curtains cleaned, drawers and cupboards scrubbed, sprayed, and their contents washed.

Have you ever bathed a full grown cat? One who has finally recovered from a nervous disorder, but still tends to jump sideways at shadows and backwards from loud noises? My publisher phoned during the process, said it was vital to talk to me, and I shouted I couldn't possibly, I was bathing a cat. My daughter phoned from Vancouver, and was told "she can't talk to you, she's bathing a cat". The minister dropped by, and, after one look, backed out the door, no doubt suspecting that total immersion for everyone in that room was a distinct possibility.

The clean, shiny, revitalized fleas loved it. They went forth and multiplied. We called the exterminator.

Would I "adopt a cat" again? Probably. In some situations I have absolutely no sense.

Our special thanks to Eleanor Thomson who is generously allowing us to use a wide selection of her published work. Eleanor is a regular contributor to the Kingston Whig Standard Magazine and newspaper. She is also the author of *A Loving Legacy*, recently published by Butternut Press.



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