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On these bitter cold nights I still watch for Ritalin the cat. He's not coming, I know, but I leave the porch light on just in case he decides to come in from the ice and the wind.

I still listen for his melodious "meep." I don't wait up long, though. The porch light says there's a vacancy at McMillan's House O' Fur. The old tom can just let himself in the way he always did.

That's how I first met Ritalin one windy fall day when the clouds and cold were coming in. And so did he. I came home from work and found the front door slightly ajar. Inside was a bizarre sight...

That year we had five dogs, including two Scottish deerhounds and an Irish wolfhound, giants who were historically used to bring down stag and kill wolves, but they'd settle for just chasing and harrowing little critters. Cats, for instance...

Yet there they all were, sitting in a circle, looking downwwwn at a dapper black and white tomcat. They looked sheepish and baffled. But, amused, too. Because Ritalin was a charmer. Obviously. He'd slit the storm door screen, squeezed in and tapped the door handle somehow just right so the mechanism popped.

How he learned that trick or why he picked a house full of the biggest dogs imaginable I don't know, but I wish I'd witnessed the introductions. Whatever he said to my hulking giants, they were pretty relaxed and jolly by the time I got there. Which may

have been why my daughter named him "Ritalin." He had a calming effect on the colossal pack. And some of them had never even *met* a cat before, much less had a chuckle and then curled up with one.

I don't know how long he'd been in the neighborhood. We live next to a fast country road and people regularly stop, dump animals and roar off. I guess they see the lights of the subdivision and figure maybe somebody will take in yet another cat or dog. We've even had horses and goats drift through, but I'm guessing they were farm refugees and not throwaways.

I don't think it ever occurred to Ritalin that he was unwanted. He regularly invited himself in for a bite and a warm corner to sleep. No, don't get up — he didn't want to be a bother. He gave me an affectionate head butt to say hello, made the rounds and touched noses with each of the hounds, helped himself to the sack of cat food, then strolled off somewhere for a nap. He just did his own thing.

Going to work at four one morning, I saw his own thing was dancing on my rooftop. The moon was full and there was Ritalin, silhouetted by that giant, golden orb, standing on his hind legs, merrily swatting at moths. You never knew what to expect from Ritalin, but it'd likely be something startling and magical.

Everyone grows old and slow, even enchanted cats. I made sure he got in on icy, winter nights. When the sun shined, he stretched out on our car top to warm his old bones. He had an easy-going trust that he'd be taken care of. It was his undoing.

I heard a racket outside one afternoon, yelling and growing. A

Rottweiler three doors down that was kept inside most of the time escaped and found Ritalin drowsing in the sun on a porch. By the time I got there and the owner had pulled him away, Ritalin was broken and fading. I held him and stroked his head behind his soft ears and cooed to him while he passed....

And a strange thing happened. People from four or five houses had rushed out and gathered around Ritalin, some with tears in their eyes. They'd come to see what that dog had done to *their* cat. This was a lynch mob in the making and I never saw the Rottweiler again. His owner was visibly shaken by the neighbors' reaction to the death of Ritalin.

Or Boots. Or Sparks. Or...they'd *all* named him. They'd all left bowls of food on their porches. The charismatic tom had had homes all up and down the block.

What his real name was or how many of his nine lives he'd gone through I never knew. But I still leave that light on. Surely a cat that loved had *ten* lives...