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How I was Conned into Adoption by a Fluffy-tailed Tabby

by Barbara Brabec

The story of how Barbara selected and rescued a cat at the Humane Society and the big surprise she got after bringing it home.



- * [How to Select a Cat](#) * [The Adoption Process](#) * [How to Get a Reluctant Cat to Eat](#)
- * [How Charlee Conned Me](#) * [Communicating with a Cat](#) * [Aging Cat Perspective](#)
- * [Charlee and Dewey, Iowa's Famous Library Cat](#) * [A Christmas Cat Tale](#)
- * [Saying Goodbye](#)

IN THE LAST WEEKS OF HIS LIFE, my husband surprised me when he said, “You need to get a cat when I’m gone.” I was already thinking along those lines, because I knew how hard it was going to be for me to live alone with no children and my whole family living in California.

I grew up with cats. Everyone in my family has always had a love of both dogs and cats—but especially cats. Harry was a dog person, and although we had a couple of cats for short periods of time in our early years of marriage, we concluded then that our lifestyle wasn’t suited for pet ownership. That is, until the day we found and rescued a dog in the wilds of Missouri in the seventies . . . but that’s another story in a book-in-progress titled [*Call of the Heart*](#). Once widowed, I didn’t wait long to visit my local Humane Society where I found a sweet cat I wanted to adopt.

How to Select a Cat

WHEN I ARRIVED at the Humane Society and said I wanted to adopt a cat, I was taken to the “cat room,” where I found several caged cats of various types, sizes, and ages. I read the description of each cat, found three I liked the looks of, and asked if I could hold each of them for awhile. All were asleep or not interested in company, except for one: a cute little orange tabby with a fluffy tail. She begged for attention with soft meows as she rubbed her body and gorgeous tail against the cage.

My sisters, who have had many cats, told me I needed to find a cat that would let me hold it on my lap and, more important, lie in my arms on its back like one holds a baby. “This is the ultimate test as to whether a cat is going to be affectionate and trusting or not,” they said.

I started with my third choice, then the second, and was pleased when both cats appeared to like being on my lap. But they wouldn’t let me hold them like a baby, so that left the long-haired orange tabby. When I lifted her out of the cage and sat down, she settled on my lap and seemed very happy as I petted her. And then she looked up at me, her green eyes boring into my soul, and started to crawl up on my chest. Purring loudly, she rubbed her face against my chin and stole my heart in that moment. Finally, the big test: I held her on her back like a baby and she seemed as content in that position as any cat could be.

My heart also went out to this little cat because she was so thin I could count every rib and vertebrae in her spine. I later learned that her previous owner—a woman—had become ill and had to give her up. She was about eleven months old when she came in to the Humane Society, and I thought she might be mourning the loss of her previous owner and familiar surroundings and just didn’t care to eat. Or maybe she was stressed by being confined in a cage, or by the barking of nearby dogs in cages of their own. Any of these things would have been enough to depress an abandoned cat, even one in good health. I would learn later that she weighed only four pounds.

“I’ll take this one,” I said to the attendant as I reluctantly put her back in the cage with another affectionate rub to her head and ears. “Don’t you worry, sweet thing. I’ll soon be taking good care of you.”

[\[Back to Top\]](#)

The Adoption Process

I WAS TOLD I'd have to wait 24 hours to be sure I really wanted the cat, and if so, I needed to come back the next day and pay the \$100 adoption fee. I assured them I'd be back and they agreed not to let anyone else take this cat.

When I returned the next day, I learned that the next step in the adoption process was to have her spayed that evening and that I'd be able to pick her up the following morning at my local animal hospital. That place was a madhouse of people bringing in and taking out pets, with all kinds of people and animal noise. I could hardly wait to get my precious cargo out of that madhouse and into my quiet home. She had come in to the place as Amber, which was the name on the "box of cat" they gave me and helped me get into my car.

I had already decided to rename her "Charlee" (*pronounced shar-lee*) prompted by a humorous rendition of "Happy Birthday" that Harry had once recorded for me wherein he pretended to forget my name and called me ACharley.© So I simply let Harry name the cat by softening and feminizing it a bit. Charlee mewed a little on the way to her new home; no wonder—after surgery, in a box, not knowing what was going on. I had a workman coming that day, so when I brought her into the house I went straight to my office, which I had prepared for her arrival with a cat pan, dishes of water and dry food, and a new cat bed I'd made for her out of some leftover teddy-bear fur. Once out of the box, she didn't seem the least bit wary, just relieved and curious. She began to snoop everywhere, rolled around on the carpet—obviously liking the feel of it, which was certainly better than her newspaper bed in the shelter's cage. She explored under my desks, peered into every corner, and kept coming back to brush against my legs, purring loudly with every stroke I gave her. I saw then how much she was shedding and figured she hadn't been brushed in months. I'd need to get a better cat brush as soon as possible, I thought.

Charlee continued to search the room for about fifteen minutes before checking out the litter box to take a little pee. Then she checked out her catnip scratching pad and rolled over on it a couple of times before walking in and out of my storage closet looking as though she wanted a place to take a nap. I grabbed the new furry bed I'd made for her and put it on the floor. She quickly settled down in it and slept there for a couple of hours while I worked at the computer. We spent the rest of the day together in my office with her checking out other things of interest in the room between catnaps and petting sessions, and I thought we were off to a wonderful start. The only thing that worried me was that she hadn't taken a drink of water all day and wouldn't eat any of the dried cat food I'd put out for her. But I thought maybe she just needed more time to get past the effects of the surgery.

[\[Back to Top\]](#)

How to Get a Reluctant Cat to Eat

ALL CHARLEE WANTED TO DO the next day was sleep; wouldn't drink or eat anything. Worse, she wouldn't sit on my lap or let me give her comfort by holding her in

my arms. So I took her to the same vet that had cared for our beloved rescue dog, Ginger, fifteen years earlier. He not only remembered me and Harry, but our dog as well, and he spent a considerable amount of time with Charlee, checking her out and telling me that she was too thin and needed some nutrition right away. "If she won't eat on her own, you'll have to force-feed her," he said.

I said this was going to be hard for me to do when she wouldn't even sit on my lap now, so he gave me some tips on how to do that and sent me home with three cans of a special nutritional formula. He charged me only for the cat food, saying, "We don't charge for the first visit when people have adopted an animal from the Humane Society."

Did you ever try to hold a squirming cat with one arm and hand, force its mouth open with the other, and then squeeze a syringe of food in its mouth? "Most of it will not make it into the cat's mouth," the vet warned me, "but if you can get even a teaspoon of food into her, she will be nourished by it."

To do this, I first set up a feeding area where I had an armchair for support next to a table. Once I'd contained Charlee in a towel so she couldn't do more than squirm a little, I positioned her for feeding by holding her close to me, grabbed the syringe I'd filled with my right hand and forced her mouth open my left. Frankly, this was a very tricky maneuver, and I'm not sure which of us was the most upset while I was feeding her. When I'd forced as much food in her mouth as possible and loosened the towel, she jumped out of my arms and hid under a piece of furniture where I couldn't easily get to her.

I repeated this feeding process three times a day for a couple of days, picking her up when she least expected it. Because she knew what was coming when I did this, it got harder for me to find where she was hiding, pick her up, and get the towel around her. Eventually I got the procedure down pat and managed to get about a teaspoon of food in her mouth each time. Each day I put a little of the wet nutritional food in a dish, but she simply wouldn't eat it . . . until the evening I saw Charlee licking her paws and washing her face like all cats do whether they've been eating or not.

I suddenly got the idea of putting a little food on one of her front paws that she had to lick off. *Voila!* No more force-feeding. As I added more little dollops of food to her paw, Charlee continued to eat her first little meal that way. The next day, I again put the food into a dish, which she refused, so I gently mashed her face into it so she'd have to wash her face to get rid of it.

After doing this for a couple of mornings and evenings in a row, she began to eat on her own, and I knew we'd finally gotten over our first major hurdle. Her appetite gradually improved as she began to eat the dry food the vet recommended. In time she put on enough weight that I could no longer count her ribs or the bones in her spine, and was comforted when the vet told me she was a small-boned cat that might never weigh more than five or six pounds.

[\[Back to Top\]](#)

How Charlee Conned Me

ONCE CHARLEE NO LONGER felt she had to run and hide, I introduced her to one new area of the house at time until she had the run of the place. Now here's the surprising and amusing part of my adoption story. *The lap cat I thought I was thought I was adopting turned out to be not a lap cat at all, but a little con artist who figured out what she had to do to get adopted in a hurry.*

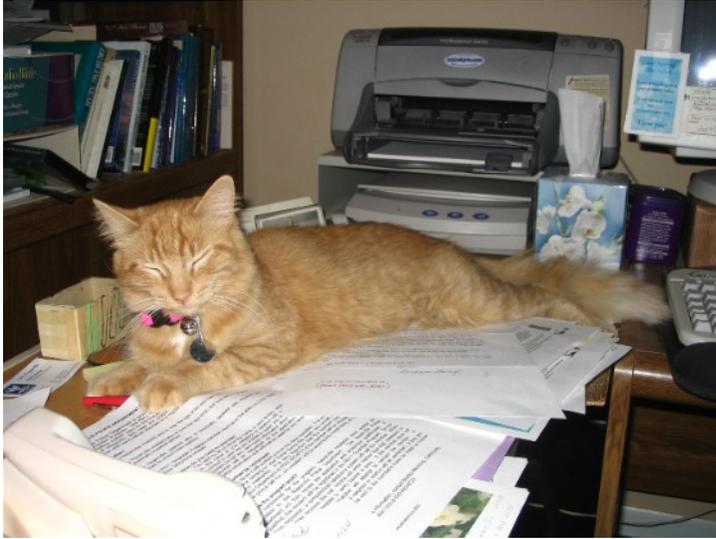
I adopted Charlee in April, 2005, and it took me *six years* to get to the point where I could even pick her up and hold her in any position without her yowling as if she were being led to slaughter. Even though she never wanted to be held or be in my lap, she was always extremely affectionate, rubbing against my legs, rolling over on the floor and begging for a belly or back rub, and encouraging my petting when she was napping. In short, I quickly learned that life with this cat was going to be on her terms (kinda like my life with the [unusual drummer I'd married](#)).

Finally, in early 2012, after loudly protesting every time I picked her up, Charlee began to allow me this small pleasure with only a few loud meows of protest so I'd know she was *very* unhappy about this. Within seconds, she would begin to squirm in my arms as she looked for an escape route. Initially I limited those pickups to a few seconds but repeated the process three or four times a day until I finally got to the point where I could hold her for maybe a whole minute. I held her close to my breast as I spoke softly to her, telling her what a good girl she was and then put her down before her patience was completely gone. After awhile, she began to forget herself and actually purred as I was holding and petting her. I remained hopeful that one day she would decide she was too old to fight with me about this and let me love her this way any time I wanted.

I could only wonder what kind of life she'd had with her first owner that turned her into the kind of cat that hates to be held. Perhaps she was abused in some way to make her so fearful of being trapped in someone's arms. Or maybe the force-feeding I had to do reinforced her desire to not want to be constrained in any way.

Strangely, even though she didn't want to be held for more than a minute or two, she always trusted me completely to the point where I could pick her up while she was sleeping in her usual curled-up-tight position and move her anywhere in the house to keep me company. She never moved a muscle when I did this, just got up after I'd set her down, stretched, and curled up again in the new bed in which I'd placed her. Who can figure out how a cat's mind works?

By then, I'd given up all hope that Charlee would ever be a lap cat, but she made up for it by letting me know she loved being in my company. She spent most of her daytime hours with me in my office in one of the four special beds I made for her there. She was a night-owl cat, so she naturally slept most of the day, but I frequently got up from the computer to stretch and take a short "cat petting break" that gave both of us pleasure. After a long afternoon's nap, she usually jumped on my desk to say hello, and she was very respectful of the computer keyboard. I'd pet her for awhile as she rubbed against the printer, the lamp, and every item on the desk before plopping down on whatever papers I happened to be working with then.



What is it about papers that cats love so much?

I was happy that Charlee never stepped on the keyboard or had any interest in what was on the monitor. All it took to train her was my hand in front of her face when she got too close to the keyboard. At day's end I'd cover it with a box lid because I figured she might want to walk across it to get to her evening bed on the filing cabinet on the other side of the computer.

[\[Back to Top\]](#)

Communicating with a Cat

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for Charlee to learn her name, and “dinner” was the second word she learned. I loved how patiently she waited for me to fix her dinner, whether she was on my desk and pawing my arm for attention as I worked on the computer, or just sitting in the kitchen doorway to remind me it was time for her dinner too. She rarely meowed for food, but as she got older she tended to meow more, and I couldn't tell if she felt bad then or just wanted more attention.

Early on, we learned to communicate well. She quickly understood what I meant when I asked her if she wanted to BE BRUSHED? And she definitely knew what I meant when I said NO! and GET DOWN! when she jumped up on the kitchen counter, dining room table, or the coffee table in the living room. Here I'd long displayed an expensive collection of a dozen porcelain carousel animals on a turntable, any one of which could have been swept to the floor with one good swish of her tail. It took only a couple of loud NO! commands to keep her off the coffee table for good. As for the dining room table, after awhile all I had to do was look at her with a grumpy look on my face, say CHARLEE! and point to the floor. But once, as you'll see in the Christmas cat tale and photo near the end, I didn't have the heart to do that but could only laugh at how clever she was.

For a long time, Charlee always came when I called her. But when she was older and completely secure in her surroundings, the “Queen of the Castle” would come to me only if she wanted to come when I said “Come here, Charlee.” But no matter where she was when I couldn't find her (and she seemed to take great pleasure in hiding and waiting for me to find her), she would always come without fail if I sang my “Charlee Song” very loudly: “*Where's my Charlee, where's my Charlee, where's she at?*” And then I'd make up some silly verses that used her name over and over again, and after awhile she'd give up and come to me with a look on her face that clearly said, “What on earth's the matter with you?”

Early in our relationship, Charlee always met me at the door when I came in from running errands, but she rarely did that in her older age, unless she happened to wake up when I was gone and was nowhere to be found. Since she took me for granted most of the time, it made me feel good to think that she did miss me once in awhile, especially on the few occasions when I took a short trip or vacation. Then my neighbor would take care of her, as I did for his cat when he was away from home. She always seemed very glad to have me back.

Sometimes Charlee was so well hidden in a place she'd never slept in before that I couldn't find her, which was a problem in the early days when I needed to take her to the vet. The last time I counted, I identified 21 places in the house where Charlee liked to nap and where she sometimes "secluded herself" if she wasn't feeling well or just wanted to be alone.

[\[Back to Top\]](#)

Aging Cat Perspective

I WON'T BORE YOU with Charlee's special medical problems which we soldiered through together, but I wasn't prepared to hear in 2014 that she had liver disease that couldn't be treated surgically because of her age. Of course I was emotionally devastated when the vet said this disease would eventually kill her. But he added that it wouldn't cause her pain and that she might live several more years. Then he pointed to his office cat, which looked perfectly healthy, saying she had the same disease and had been diagnosed three years earlier. So every day after that with my sweet companion became extra special to me.

Charlee turned fourteen in 2019 (which is about 72 in human years), and she did several things differently then than when we were just getting acquainted. By this time we'd had many interesting and often challenging times together, and her companionship made all the difference in my being content as a widow. She had never been outdoors, except twice when she squeezed through the door when I'd stepped outside for a minute. Both times she stopped in her tracks, suddenly frightened by what she saw.

One of those times was a winter day when the temperature was near zero and there were several inches of heavy wet snow on the ground. Suddenly concerned about something I needed to check outside, I stepped out the back door without a coat, figuring one step and a quick check would answer the question I had. But with that one step, I slipped on the ice under the snow on the concrete slab in front of the door and fell hard on my back. Unable to get up from that position I did as a fireman had once instructed me and rolled over on my belly so I could bring my knees up and then crawl to the door. But it was brutally cold and panic set in as I suddenly realized how foolish I'd been. My hands were already ice cold, and if I couldn't get up and inside quickly, I'd suffer severe frostbite or even death; and I wouldn't have been the first widow to die outside her door in the winter if I had. My replacement knee joints were a major problem for me in simply getting up off the floor, so I had reason to be scared. Thankfully, God wasn't done with me yet, but by the time I got hold of the door handle and pulled myself up, my hands were so red and numb I could hardly feel them.

I thanked God as I stepped inside to safety, but just as I was bringing my other foot through the door, Charlee dashed through the open door. I turned and saw a very surprised golden bundle of fluff up to her head in the snow, suddenly realizing that she needed to get back inside too. I was so near the end of myself that I couldn't have gone back out then to get her, so I just stood there with the door open, shivering and quietly saying in my sweetest begging voice, "Come here, Charlee, come here. . . come to mamma." Thankfully, with a few leaps and bounds she got inside, and I towed her dry as soon as I got in control of my frozen hands.

After that, Charlee was content to enjoy the outside world through several windows where she had a special place to sit or nap. As soon as the weather was warm enough each spring, I'd open one window or another where she had a perch, and she'd sniff the fresh air and eventually curl up for a nap there, or wherever the sun was shining on another of her beds.

For awhile in our first few years together, she used to wake me up early in the morning and crawl onto my chest. I quickly learned that she wanted me to raise my left arm to the upright position so she could put her head against it. As I petted her, she would kneed my arm and purr loudly. One day she stopped, and I missed this special loving. Then about ten years later, she started to do this again. (I learned that adult cats may do this because they're remembering how they once suckled their mother's nipples.) This made me wonder if in her older age she knew she wasn't well and wanted more motherly comfort, which might explain why she began then to give me less resistance when I picked her up and held her a bit, why she kept closer tabs on me during the day, and why she sometimes needed attention from me in the wee hours of the morning.

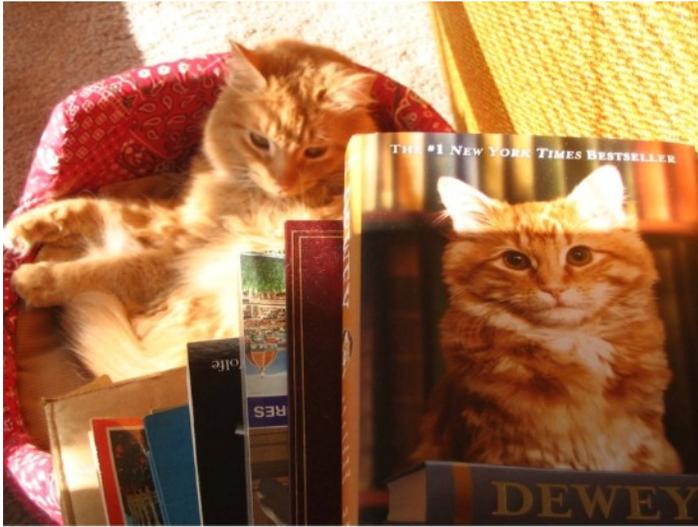
In reflecting on how I got tricked into adopting a cat that wouldn't sit on my lap, I decided this was just one more of God's little blessings. After all, how could I work at the computer all day with a cat in my lap? How could I do my cross-stitching or do mending if she was always playing with the thread? No, it was definitely a blessing that Charlee just wanted to be near me and not on my lap. And what did it matter if I occasionally lost a little sleep because she needed some extra loving in the middle of the night?

But I still can't figure out how she knew that my test for a cat was being able to hold her in my arms like a baby, and why she let me hold her that way before I brought her home, only to make me wait six years before she'd allow me to even come close to doing that again. I laugh every time I remember how this sweet little con artist wormed her way into my heart, and I thank God for bringing us together. As I write this story, I'm praying that Charlee will be in my life for a while longer, but I'm also bracing myself for the inevitable. It's going to be very hard to say goodbye to this sweet companion when the times comes.



EARLY ON, I began to include pictures and little stories about Charlee on my website. Following are a couple of them.

Charlee and Dewey, Iowa's Famous Library Cat



ONE YEAR WHEN I WAS rearranging all the books in my living room, sorting out those to be sold on Amazon vs. the ones I was going to keep, I put boxes behind the couch, filled them with books I wanted to keep, and then began to stack books on top of those boxes when I ran out of room.

One of those books was [Dewey the Small Town Library Cat Who Touched the World](#). When I put the book there, I saw that Charlee was in her bed behind the couch, taking in

the afternoon sun. Since she looked a lot like Dewey and the sun was just right, it was a photo begging to be taken.

A Christmas Cat Tale

This was one of my Christmas pictures on my website and one I treasure today. Here you see Charlee the way she always slept, tightly curled up in her favorite sleeping position with her head burrowed under a paw, as if the light bothered her eyes.



MY TREE IN 2005 was Charlee's introduction to glitter and fluffy stuff, and while I thought she might pull tinsel off the tree or bat a low-hanging ornament, she never showed the slightest interest in any of the trees I decorated. What surprised me most was how careful she was to not touch the train as she stepped over or around it. She delighted in curling up under the tree on the soft cotton tree skirt, both in the afternoon when it was sunny and at night when the tree lights were on.

One Christmas during the undecorating process when I was placing ornaments on the table before packing, Charlee was watching every move I made. Knowing she couldn't resist anything new and soft to lie on, I folded some of the white cotton padding on the floor while I was working, and she immediately curled up on it. Later, nearly done, I put that folded piece of cotton on the dining room table along with some decorations I still needed to put away. I was out of the room for awhile, and when I came back in, there she was—curled up on that piece of cotton and refusing to look at me.

Now you need to remember that when I brought Charlee home from the Humane Society, I had trained her to stay off the dining room table and other places I didn't want her to jump on, and she was very good about minding me—until this particular day when I put “her” piece of cotton padding on the table. Any cat owner will understand the silent message she sent me with the look I captured in the photo below, which clearly said:

“When this white stuff was on the floor, you said it was okay to curl up on it. So now it’s on the table and I figure I can STILL lie on it, even though I know I’m not supposed to be on the table. But then, I’m not ON the table. I’m on this white stuff. Right?”



I had a good laugh that day and figured I couldn't argue with this kind of cat logic. So I posed a few of the remaining ornaments on the table and snapped the above picture as a Christmas card on my website in 2008.

Saying Goodbye

I WON'T GO INTO DETAILS here, but Charlee developed a urinary problem in 2019 that made it impossible for me to keep her. I closed off carpeted rooms upstairs and she then focused on using the carpeted area downstairs for her new potty. I knew I had to have her euthanized, but it was an agonizing decision because she could have had another year or two before her liver disease killed her, and she clearly didn't know she

was sick. For nearly a month, I tolerated the rug damage going on figuring I could always rip up the carpet if it couldn't be cleaned, because I simply needed more time to say goodbye to my sweet life companion.

The day before the appointment with the vet, I gave Charlee my attention all day. The weather was beautiful, so, one by one, I took her to each of the windows she'd always enjoyed, opened them and gave her all the time she wanted to sniff the fresh air and survey her kingdom from each bed she had by them. She especially loved the ground-level view from this window:



As she took little naps here and there, I gave her lots of petting and brushed her beautiful coat in between preparing her burial box. The next morning, my neighbor and cat-loving friend drove me to the animal clinic because I knew it wouldn't be safe for me to drive back home in such an emotional state.



At the vet's, I wrapped my arms about Charlee as she lay quietly on the table, seemingly glad to have my protection. With tears streaming down my face, I petted her and talked to her as I waited for the vet. He came in with a tranquilizer shot, and when she was completely out of it, found a vein in the leg and injected the medication to stop her heart. It worked immediately, and then my tears really flowed.

While I was crying for Charlee, I was also remembering another day when the dog Harry and I loved had to be euthanized. Only people who have loved and lost a beloved pet can understand the heartache one feels when they have to say goodbye to a dog or cat that was like family to them.

Afterward, the vet's assistant brought in a heart-shaped piece of clay into which she had imprinted Charlee's name. And then the vet's assistant pressed her front paws into the clay to give me the sweet keepsake pictured here. Before I left, I gently laid Charlee in the pretty little burial box I'd made for her with padding from one of her favorite beds,

positioning her in a little ball like she always slept (*as in the Christmas tree snapshot above*), with her paw over her eyes and her tail over her face.

Charlee died at 10:15 a.m. on September 17. Born in April 2004, she lived to be about fifteen years old; not as long as I had hoped for, but long enough to give me years of love and companionship and many sweet memories I'll always cherish.

I grieved for Charlee for two months before I went in search of another rescue cat I could adopt. Knowing this would probably be the last cat I'd ever have—and believing that God knew exactly what kind of cat I needed for the last leg of my life—I asked Him to let me know when I'd found the one He'd chosen especially for me. You may scoff at this if you wish, but my prayer was answered in a miraculous way, and when I first saw this gray cat with green eyes and a furry tail like Charlee's, I knew she was the one God had been saving for me. I adopted her on December 3, named her Liza (a variation of my mother's middle name), and quickly learned she was everything I wanted and needed.

Yes, there's an uplifting story here—a "Christmas Godwink story" I've titled ["A Rescue Cat for Christmas."](#)



"A catless writer is almost inconceivable. It's a perverse taste, really, since it would be easier to write with a herd of buffalo in the room than even one cat; they make nests in the notes and bite the end of the pen and walk on the typewriter keys." – Barbara Holland, American author (1933-2010)

"No amount of time can erase the memory of a good cat, and no amount of masking tape can ever totally remove his fur from your couch." – Leo F. Buscaglia (1924-1998) Author and speaker

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IF YOU'D LIKE TO comment on this writing or tell me a story about your cat, [Email me here](#). I would love to hear from you. I have a growing collection of stories from my readers that I'd like to publish someday. If you have a message you'd like me to include in another article or share in an upcoming blog post, be sure to include your phone number when you write, along with your time zone. I'd like to have the opportunity to call you if I want to continue the discussion.

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BARBARA LAUNCHED BarbaraBrabec.com in 2000 and quickly began to populate it with home-business articles and resources. Over the years she added hundreds of articles on several other topics related in one way or another to the larger topic of LIFE.

Now, LIFE itself is Barbara's focus. Unlike her original website, her new domain launched in 2021 features only her own writing—new content and an archive of timeless and relevant articles in fourteen life-related categories, all updated and reformatted for republication on the all-new "[Barbara Brabec's World.](#)" It reflects Barbara's current writing interests, latest books, and professional services.

Visit the [ARTICLES Table of Contents](#) to see article categories of possible interest to you and join her mailing list to receive her email *Brabec Bulletin* posts.

[Back to Cat and Dog Tales](#)

[\[Back to Top\]](#)