



They
Taste
Like
Chicken

A Short Story

by

Valerie Bonham

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For Mom

They Taste Like Chicken

IN my wildest dreams I never thought I'd give evidence for a police investigation into a death. I certainly got that one wrong. If my stylist hadn't already textured my 'platinum blonde' hair so that most of it stands on end, what happened might have made it might do that by itself.

I'm Patty West, retired and widowed. I live with my dog, a Belgian Tervuren named Bourbon, so-named for the color of her eyes. She has beautiful eyes. If you're curious, a Tervuren is one of the four Belgian herding breeds – think of a long-haired black and brown German shepherd. Since my kids are grown and live out-of-state I like having a good-sized dog as a companion, especially one who doesn't warm up easily to strangers. My husband and I had our own landscaping design firm and I still garden and give the occasional consultation. I take jobs if the price is right. My price seems to go up each time a job shows up because, without my husband, the work's not as much fun. To fill in the odd hours when the price isn't right, I ran for office with my homeowners association. My campaign wasn't strenuous as only eight people volunteered to fill the nine positions. I found out later that once you're on the board, it's almost a lifetime position.

The area our homeowners association covers isn't large and the people who bought houses here are mostly middle class and not very showy—my garden is the fanciest, but it's not all it could be, kind of like my knees. We live in an older part of town; what used to be the wrong side of the tracks but now gentrified, in a middle-class way. It's bordered on one side by the river, on the other by the railroad tracks. This stretch of rail isn't used anymore so the neighborhood is quiet. The Army Corps of Engineers built levees by the river so the area is dry and pleasant.

The homeowners' association board meetings don't sparkle much, either, which is fine with me. The most excitement we see is when Mrs. Grunwald brings in another set of paint samples for the outside of her house, in accordance with the bylaw that requires approval by the architectural committee of any exterior changes to the houses. Mrs. Grunwald has yet to understand that colors such as fuchsia or chartreuse do not blend well with the natural colors of our neighborhood. Sometimes the architecture committee (Ben Ames) is present at the meetings and he sends Mrs. Grunwald home to pick out more appropriate colors. If Mrs. Grunwald hasn't mailed us another application the 'committee' might be absent. Mrs. Grunwald is about the only person in the neighborhood concerned with painting her house a new color.

The night of the big blow up at the monthly board meeting, we were all there—a first for this group.

Michael Kreutzer, Jr., our illustrious President, and his wife, Evelyn, the Newsletter Editor, were already at Christa Robataille's house when I arrived. Christa's the Welcoming Committee, and she also volunteers to walk dogs at the local pound. She fosters rabbits via the House Rabbit Association, and we've all seen her outside releasing bees, spiders or beetles she's found in her house. She's

the mother of Robin, a busy six-year old, who should also be walked, rescued, trapped, or released, as needed.

I arrived in Christa's dining room to find Michael in full cry about how he hated meeting at anyone's house other than his because we all insist on owning what he calls 'tiny chairs.' He has a point since he's a big man and has to duck to get through some doors. At Christa's he even has to stand or perch on a stool because her Colonial-type dining chairs have arms and he doesn't fit comfortably in them. We'd meet at the Kreutzers' house but when Michael and Evelyn are on home-ground they're even more annoying than when they're out. Because of this, the rest of the group put up with his complaining, and with the danger of Michael breaking a chair.

Soon after I sat down Perry Wells (member-at-large), Ernest Gallion (treasurer) and Ben Ames (whom I've already mentioned is our architectural committee) came in. We do without the master at arms since Mrs. Grunwald rarely gets out of line.

The last person to arrive was Dandi Lyon, a sort of bossy young woman who is vice-president. I assume Dandi got her ridiculous nickname because her hair is a bit of pale, blonde, flyaway down that curls about her head. Dandi is a veterinarian who received a zoning variance for her business because she planned to run only a small clinic. She also makes a lot of house calls. Naturally, she and Christa are great friends.

Rather than bore you with my view of the meeting, I'll just let you read a transcript of the tape recording I made of the meeting's minutes; I'm the secretary. I gave the tape to the police – it's evidence. The parts in parentheses are explanations of the speakers and noises.

(First on the tape are the usual getting-settled noises. I turned the digital recorder on early because one or two times I've forgotten to do it when the meeting

actually started. Senior moments don't help when, later, you're trying to write up the minutes and there's nothing to listen to.

Michael asked where Dandi was. Ernest said that he saw the lights in her clinic, and that a car was parked in front, so maybe she was delayed. Christa fussed around the table with snacks and made sure everyone had a drink. Evelyn's chair scraped when she stood up.)

"Please join hands."

"Why?" (that was Perry)

"For grace." (Evelyn's our self-appointed prayer leader, even though none of us want prayers.)

"It's chips, dips, vegetables, and crackers and cheese!" (Perry again)

"That the Lord has provided."

"Actually, that was Safeway."

"Can we join hands?" (Evelyn ignored Perry.)

"No, we can't join hands. It's unsanitary. Ernest might not have washed his hands." (Perry is determined not to participate. Evelyn sighed.)

"I most certainly wash my hands." (Ernest didn't appreciate Perry's crack.)

"Bow your heads, then. Dear Lord, thank you for this meal of the fruit of the land that you have so kindly provided for our sustenance, and—"

"Amen!" (It wasn't on the tape, of course, but Perry got a dirty look from Evelyn for that one.)

(All the guys helped themselves to the refreshments and when the vacuum seal popped when I opened my Thermos of 'special coffee,' the tape picked it up. I need that bit of Irish in my coffee to get through some of these meetings—I can indulge because I don't have to drive home. It was about ten past seven when Dandi arrived. I didn't realize how much chair-scraping there was.)

"So, you decided to come after all." (That was Michael talking to Dandi and I remember he pointedly looked at the clock-sized watch strapped to his wrist. When

Michael leaned on the table to reach for the bowl of dip the amethysts hanging from the branches on Christa's little tree decoration tinkled.)

"Beg pardon?" (Dandi didn't sound apologetic. She's polite, but she doesn't seem to think much of Michael and Evelyn.)

"It's ten minutes past the start of the meeting. You could have called." (I almost couldn't hear what Michael said because he was crunching the celery.)

"Emergency, just as I was leaving the office. A cat hemorrhaging."

"Is it okay?" (Christa was concerned.)

"I like cats. They taste like chicken." (Michael laughed at his own joke.)

"No, Christa, it's dead and a little boy is crying his eyes out. (Dandi wasn't happy, but whether it was only because of the cat or because of Michael's reaction to the cat, I couldn't tell.)

"Oh, no! That poor cat." (Christa was stricken.)

"So, what have I missed?" (Dandi didn't seem to want to talk any more about the cat.)

"Just the opening prayer and the hors d'oeuvres." (That was Evelyn.)

"Evelyn, this is a secular organization?" (Dandi made this point two meetings ago - the one held in the Kreutzers' house.)

"It is." (Evelyn again.) "But even schools and colleges have invocations. Congress begins with a prayer and if those placed in authority over us need guidance from above, then who are we to think that we don't?"

(That snort was from Ben.) "If praying is what inspires Congress then we'd better steer clear of it."

(Perry and Ernest laughed.)

(The front screen door slammed.) "Mommmy! Can I help you cook?" (That's Christa's daughter Robin. Every time we meet at Christa's house, Robin wants to 'help' her mom make snacks for the meeting. A second slam was Christa's husband Tom. He had Robin over at her grandma's.)

“Everything’s already made, sweetie.”

“I got those berries. I can make a pie.”

“The berries are gone, sweetheart. You already ate them, remember?”

“I can get more off the little bushes.” (Robin ran for the back door then slammed it.)

“Tom, will you head her off before she gets back in here?”

(Tom grunted.)

“Sorry about that.” (Christa always apologizes when Robin disrupts a meeting at their house; Robin has yet to miss one.) “She won’t be back to make her pie because the strawberries are finished, they’re just June-bearing, early this year, not ever-bearing or Alpine. Not that strawberries make a good pie –” (Christa babbles when she gets nervous; Robin’s possible appearance at a board meeting always makes her edgy, and I can’t really blame her. Makes me glad I’ve got a dog now instead of kids.)

“Is this instant coffee, Christa?” (Ben always asks about the coffee. He orders his through the mail and has to make a big deal out of any coffee he’s served at meetings.)

“Fraid so, Ben. I usually have only herbal tea but I got this coffee for the meeting. It isn’t decaf if that’s what worries you. Would you rather have chamomile or rose hip tea?”

“Good god, no!”

“You shouldn’t take the Lord’s name in vain.” (Evelyn)

“I was referring to Zeus. Do you worry about his name, too?”

(Dandi snorted. Everyone started talking to cover Evelyn’s frustration.)

I’ll spare you the next half-hour of the tape as it’s mostly the reading of the minutes from the previous meeting, approval of the minutes; talk about the residents who haven’t paid their association assessments yet; whether garbage is to be collected for those people since garbage pickup is paid out of the assessment;

Robin crying about the strawberries and running back outside saying she was going to find *something*; and so on. After Robin went out again, Tom went into the living room and turned on the television for whatever sport was in season, and even though he kept the volume low, we could still hear the sportscaster.

Under New Business, Dandi explained how she wanted to help with our stray cat problem. I already mentioned that the area we live in was a bit run down. Like I said, it's between the old railroad tracks and the river, and there's a bit of woods on one end. That's where the cats live.

The cats were here when most of us moved in, probably offspring of housecats that people dumped. They're nuisances on garbage day as they claw open the plastic sacks of people who don't use garbage cans, and dig around to find food, and they drive my dog Bourbon nuts. Dandi proposed a 'trap, neuter and release' program to control them. Baited cages would trap the cats, Dandi would neuter them, and then they'd be set free. She says that in studies of this technique on feral cat colonies, the neutered animal keeps its place in the cat society, and if it was a breeding animal, and it seems not all of them are, it would stay dominant and keep non-breeders in their places. I think she said it's got something to do with pecking order. When she told us about it, Michael objected.

"Wait a minute, what do you mean, let them go? Those animals are wild, they carry germs, and I don't want them around."

"I understand, but the only other solution is to euthanize them." (Dandi's using her 'patient' voice.)

"So? What's wrong with killing them? They're pests." (Michael finished off the vegetables but some crackers were still on the plate.)

"What's wrong is that, if you eliminate one of the breeding animals, its niche in the hierarchy will be taken by a non-breeder."

"So? Hey, Christa, you got any more of that dip?" (Michael likes to dip crackers.)

“No, Michael. It’s all gone.”

“I got some stuff, Mommy.” (Robin again. Be glad you can’t hear those crashes in the background.)

“When you kill a breeder another moves up to take its place.” (Dandi was persistent. Neither hungry homeowner presidents, nor wired six-year-olds will stop her from her appointed explanation.)

“Yeah, but there’s one less of ‘em roaming around at night having catfights.”

“I agree with Michael.”

(Dandi ignored Evelyn.) “As I said, if you neuter a breeding animal and return it to the group, it holds its place and keeps others from filling in. You stop two animals from breeding, and that reduces the number of kittens. As time goes by, and assuming nobody else dumps a cat here, the colony will stabilize and the cats will, eventually, die off from old age.” (Dandi sounded like a teacher explaining simple arithmetic to the slow group. Ben walked over to the living room doorway to see what Tom had on television. I remembered because he made the floor creak.)

“Well what if you fix a non-breeder. That wouldn’t help anything.” (Michael didn’t give up.)

“Then, if you haven’t managed to trap them all, you keep it from breeding if one of the breeding animals dies.”

“Well, what about disease?” (Evelyn)

“We vaccinate animals when we neuter them.” (I think the look Dandi gave Evelyn is called ‘withering.’)

“What if the trap catches a cat that’s already been fixed?” (That was Perry. He’d finally polished off the crackers and cheese, so now he could talk without spraying me with crumbs)

“When we capture an animal, we not only neuter and vaccinate it, we also ear-tip it while it’s under the anesthesia. That way, we can tell if we’ve caught an animal twice. For Pete’s sake, don’t you people watch nature shows?”

“Nope, I watch sports.” (That was Ben.)

(Dandi was muttering. You can’t make it out but I remember what she said. “Surprise, surprise.”)

“Aaaaaagh! What are you doing?” (That was Christa. Robin carried a pan into the dining room with two huge potholders but her grip was slipping and I thought she was going to spill the contents of the pot onto Ben’s pant leg.)

“I made some hot dogs and beans for everybody.”

“You did what?”

“Woohoo! Tube steak and musical fruit. My favorite. Okay, everybody, I hope none of you want any of this because this is my all-time favorite meal. I love this stuff.” (Who else but Michael. Even Perry stared at him.)

“Didn’t you eat supper?” (Skinny Ernest can never believe how much Michael can feed himself.)

“It was my fault.” (Evelyn can’t resist the martyr role.) “I didn’t get home in time to make supper. Michael must be starving.” (Well maybe he was hungry when he arrived, but surely he wasn’t by that time.)

“You’re all just jealous ‘cause I got the hot dogs and beans first. Hey, Robin! Get me a spoon.”

(Robin thundered off to get the spoon. Everybody laughed when she brought back a serving spoon. Michael took it.)

“I have a question.” (That was Ernest. He can’t just ask a question, he always has to announce it.) “I do not see how you can undertake an operation of this size all by yourself, Martha, no pun intended.” (So why did he simper and be such a prig by calling Dandi by her given name when nobody else did? By this time I needed a smoke break, but they weren’t finished.) “Surely the costs of the traps,

the personnel to service the traps, the necessary medications, the disposable syringes and such, aren't all free?"

"You're right. That's the obstacle." (Dandi didn't look very happy right about now. I think she knew Michael would jump on her weak financial position.)

"Wait a minute." (Michael again.) "What's in these beans? Weird flavor, but it's not bad."

"Do they taste like chicken, too?" (Perry couldn't resist that dig after what Michael said about cats.)

"There's a bottle of barbecue sauce on the counter. I guess Robin thought it was ketchup. Robin? Honey?"

"Yes, mommy?"

"What did you put in the beans?"

"I found hot dogs under the hot dog tree . . ."

"Hot dog tree? Never mind. I don't have time for one of your stories."

"But, mommy . . ."

"No, 'but mommys' young lady. You go upstairs and get ready for bed. Shoo." (Christa firmly 'helped' Robin toward the dining room doorway and that was followed by more thundering.)

"Martha, can you afford this undertaking or will you be requesting subsidization from the association?" (Ernest again)

"No, Ernest, I can't pay for it all, and yes, I had hoped for help." (Dandi was getting testy.)

"Will it cost more than a box of rat killer?" (Michael was at the end of the beans and hot dogs.)

"Michael!" (Christa was outraged.) "You can't put out rat killer for cats. For god's sake, what if a child found it!"

"Christa! The Lord's name!"

“Oh, shut up, Evelyn.” (Dandi finally cracked.) “Your husband sits there talking about leaving poison around the neighborhood and that’s okay with you, but you’re upset over a word?”

“Don’t you tell my wife to shut up!” (Michael stood up suddenly and the kitchen stool he was sitting on fell over. He towered over Dandi—he does that when he wants to make an impression. This was exciting for a homeowners’ meeting. Maybe I should give up smoking so I don’t miss these things?)

“And what’re you going to do about it?” (Dandi’s chair scraped when she stood up. I remember that even Ben turned away from the game to see if they’d fight. If Michael fell on Dandi he could flatten her, but she wasn’t afraid of him.)

“Listen here, you little bitch –”

“Michael!” (Poor Evelyn. Now even Michael offended her.)

“She’s been asking for it, shoving her pansy-ass animal rights trash down our throats, and I’m the one who’s going to give it to her.” (He actually took a step towards Dandi.)

“Michael, your heart!” (Poor Evelyn has to worry about Michael’s bad heart, too. She doesn’t let him miss a pill, no matter where she and Michael are.)

“If anything deserves to be fed rat killer, I’ve got a perfect candidate.” (Oh, Dandi gave Michael such a nasty look when she said that! Maybe we do need a master at arms?)

“Enough!” (Tom shocked us all by bellowing. I think it’s the loudest thing I’ve ever heard him say.) “Out of my house. Now. Everyone. This meeting is over.”

“I haven’t adjourned—”

“Out!”

(No, the long silence doesn’t mean the tape was recorded by the staff of the Nixon White House, everyone was just stunned.)

“I’m sorry, Christa. I didn’t realize how upset this would make everyone.” (At least Dandi tried apologizing.)

“Thank you. Would you all please just leave.” (Christa looked as brittle as she sounds.)

I turned off the tape recorder and went home. I thought that was the end of it, that the whole thing would blow over. The meeting had been so emotional that I didn’t even transcribe the notes the next day, like I try to do before the details disappear from my mind, never again to be remembered.

The next afternoon I took Bourbon to Dandi’s clinic for her rabies shot. Dandi had converted her house’s two-car garage into a clinic, with an addition on the back for storage. She’d painted it a color someplace between tan and sand. Ben had no problem approving her color choice. We were the last appointment of the day so that Bourbon didn’t have to sit in the same room with any small animals, especially not with cats. Bourbon feels the same way as Michael about felines.

I’d just gotten Bourbon almost settled in the waiting room (she hates Dandi’s office), when Michael came in. He looked belligerent and was dressed as if he was going someplace that was chillier than our nice May evening.

He saw me. “Hey, Patty,” he says, “Where’s *Ms. Lyon*?”

“She’s in the treatment room,” I said. “Why?” I wondered because Michael and Evelyn don’t have pets. I think it’s enough for Evelyn to take care of Michael.

“That’s between me and her,” he said. Then he turned away from me, fidgeting. He looked around the waiting room but I guess he didn’t see anything interesting. He turned back to me, “She been in there long?”

“That’s between her and her patient,” I said. It didn’t exactly make sense, but he’d annoyed me and I don’t cooperate with rude people.

“Huh?”

He didn’t get it. Just then Dandi’s vet tech came out of the treatment room.

“Sorry we’re late, Patty. Had to fish the patient out from under a cupboard.”

“Is Ms. Lyon going to be out soon?” Michael didn’t say hello or introduce himself.

The tech just looked at him, waited a beat, and then said, “*Doctor Lyon is still with a patient. May I help you?*”

“No. I want to see Lyon.”

Good old Michael. Mr. How-To-Win-Friends.

The tech crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m afraid you’ll have to make an appointment. Dr. Lyon is busy.”

“She’s got one dog sitting here. How busy can she be?”

“Pretty busy,” I interrupted. “I’ve got places to go, Michael, so you need to take a number.” The longer we sat, the antsier Bourbon got, and I wasn’t about to sit around while Michael blew off steam at Dandi.

“You just live around the corner and you’re retired. How busy can *you* be?”

“As busy as I want. Get in line.”

“Well, I got to get up to a campsite in the mountains and the sun’s dropping lower in the sky. I’m sure whatever you got to do has electric lights to go with it, so I need to talk to her first.”

Just then, a woman walked out of the examination room with a fat ferret wearing a blue harness and squirming in her arms. Bourbon perked up so I stepped on her leash so there was no slack for her to get a running start. Dandi followed the woman telling her that she needed to put the ferret on a diet. The woman said that Buster (that must have been the ferret’s name) was so cute when he begged that she couldn’t resist. “Harden your heart, Mrs. Briggs, harden your heart. And don’t let him sneak into the refrigerator again.”

Michael actually waited for Dandi to come all the way into the waiting room before he spoke. “Lyon, I got something to tell you.”

Dandi looked at him as if he was something she’d stepped in at a farm. “I’m busy, Mr. Kreutzer. Please make an appointment.”

“This won’t take long.”

“However long it takes, you’ll need an appointment. I’m still with one patient and I have another waiting. If you want to speak with me, you will need an appointment.” She turned to the ferret owner as the woman waited for the receipt from the vet tech while Buster perched on his owner’s shoulder. Buster eyed Bourbon. “Good-bye Mrs. Briggs. Keep an eye on what Buster eats. He’s almost outgrown his harness.” She turned to me, “Patty?”

I stood up, shortened Bourbon’s leash as she returned Buster’s gaze, and followed Dandi into the treatment room. I dragged Bourbon after me.

“Hey!” yelled Michael. “I’m gonna get a lawyer after you. You’re endangering public health by not killing those cats. I’m gonna shut you down.”

Dandi closed the treatment room door. She sighed and leaned against it. The electric bell on the entrance door to her clinic chimed and I guess that’s when Michael left, his message apparently delivered without an appointment.

And that was the last we saw of Michael Kreutzer.

On Sunday, I was over at Christa’s house. Bourbon and Robin have similar amounts of energy, and since they’re both ‘only children,’ letting them chase each other around the back yard seemed a good way to give Christa and me a break from keeping up with the two of them, even if we did have to listen to Robin squeal each time Bourbon nipped her heels while herding her. Dandi was over, too. She and Christa trade copies of magazines.

Dandi sat on the sofa, and leafed through the Sunday newspaper. “Well I’ll be damned.”

I turned from the dining room window where I could see Robin and Bourbon. “What is it?”

“Read this article,” she said, and handed me the folded-over newspaper.

I read aloud:

A local man, Michael Kreutzer, Jr. was found dead by friends at a campsite on Cloud Mountain. According to police, Mr. Kreutzer arrived at the campsite on Friday afternoon. He was found soon after the men arrived on Saturday morning. Death appears to have been caused by an accident. Police are investigating.

“Oh, my god,” said Christa. “I thought I saw a commotion over at the Kreutzers' yesterday afternoon but I never dreamt Michael was dead. This is terrible. Should we go over to see Evelyn?”

“You could go,” said Dandi, “but I don’t know that I’d make her feel any better.”

Just then, the doorbell chimed. Christa went to answer the door.

I shivered and said to Dandi. “Judging by the way he was dressed, we must have been some of the last people he saw. I’m sure he was leaving to drive up into the mountains when he was at your office.”

Christa came back into the living room followed by two police officers. She looked puzzled. “Dandi, these men want to see you.”

“Are you Martha Lyon?” asked the taller of the two men.

“Yes,” said Dandi.

“Can you tell us where you were on Friday afternoon?”

“How did you know I was here?” asked Dandi.

“Your car is out front. Where were you on Friday?”

“At my clinic. I’m a veterinarian.”

“Did anyone see you there?”

Dandi looked as if something smart-alecky was on the tip of her tongue.

“I did,” I said quickly. “I had an appointment for my dog.”

“Why do you want to know?” asked Dandi.

“We’re checking the whereabouts of everyone connected with this case,” said the officer. He wrote something in a small notebook. “It’s routine.”

“What case?” asked Dandi. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The death of Michael Kreutzer.”

“How am I concerned with it? I don’t know anything about Mr. Kreutzer’s business.”

“We had a report that you threatened Mr. Kreutzer.”

“What?” said Dandi. She jerked her head to stare straight at the officer. “I never even talk to Kreutzer. When would I threaten him?”

“The report said that the threat was made at a —,” the officer looked at his notebook, “at a homeowners’ meeting. You and Mr. Kreutzer had a verbal altercation and you,” he looked at his book again, “you threatened to poison him.”

“Oh, get real.”

The police officer’s face tightened after Dandi’s response, “Did you threaten to poison him?”

“Kreutzer said he was going to put rat poison out in the neighborhood. What’s a rational response to that?”

“Did you make that threat?”

Dandi’s face had the same look Bourbon had when she was watching Buster.

“Officer,” I said, “the person who brought up poisoning anyone was Michael Kreutzer.”

The officer kept his attention on Dandi, “Were you alone with Mr. Kreutzer when he visited your clinic?”

“And how do you know that he visited my clinic?”

“We had a — ”

“Yeah,” interrupted Dandi, “you had a report. Did Evelyn also tell you that her husband nearly tried punching me? Look, when he was at my office, I came out of my treatment room with one patient, a ferret named Buster Briggs. Mrs. West

here,” Dandi gestured at me, “was waiting for Bourbon’s appointment. Bourbon’s her dog,” Dandi gestured at the window. “Mr. Kreutzer tried talking to me on her time and I told him he had to make his own appointment. He didn’t like that. I didn’t care. Mrs. West and I went into the exam room. I didn’t see Mr. Kreutzer after that.”

“Are you sure?”

Dandi looked at the man for almost a full ten seconds. I hoped she wouldn’t say anything rash. She chose discretion. “Yes. You can ask my tech. She was with me until we closed the clinic.”

“Officer,” I interrupted, “why are you questioning Dandi? The newspaper said Michael died because of an accident. How could Dandi have done anything at her office that would make Mr. Kreutzer have an accident?”

“Mr. Kreutzer bled to death after he cut himself badly with an axe. The preliminary findings by the medical examiner point to Mr. Kreutzer having ingested not only his anti-coagulant medication, but also additional anti-coagulant.”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” said Dandi. “And you think I somehow gave an anti-coagulant to Kreutzer.”

“It did cross our minds.”

“What did I do? Pill him?”

“Mommmy!” It was Robin. “Bourbon’s eating all the hot dogs.”

“Not now, Robin. Hush.”

“But, Mommy! I found another hot dog tree and Bourbon’s eating them. She’s not leaving any for me.”

I jumped up to fetch Bourbon. That dog would eat anything. Through the back window I saw her pawing under the hedge marking the border between Christa’s backyard and the Kreutzers’. I went out the back door and, as I walked out to her, I called, “Bourbon! Drop!”

She let fall what was in her mouth; it was half a hot dog, just as Robin had said. I picked it up carefully and brought it, and Bourbon, back into the house. “She’s right. There are hot dogs under the bushes.”

Dandi looked up quickly, her eyes widened. “Give me that.” She took the hot dog from me, went into the kitchen and laid it on a plate. I followed her. With a knife from Christa’s draining board she cut the hot dog open. She poked at it and gently picked things out of it. “Patty,” she said, “get Bourbon over to my place.”

Christa walked in to see what we were doing, with Robin close behind.

“Why?” I asked.

“I think she’s eaten rat poison. I need to give her an emetic. Christa, you’d better take Robin to the E.R.”

“What?” I said, simultaneously with Christa. We both stared at Dandi.

Dandi looked around. “Christa, where’s a plastic bag?”

“What? Why? In that cupboard.” Christa gestured at the cabinets. She looked confused.

The police officer came into the kitchen. “Is everything all right in here?”

Dandi handed the officer the bagged hot dog. “I think you’ll find what you’re looking for in here. Mr. Kreutzer talked about poisoning feral cats in our neighborhood and from what I’ve seen here, I believe he put rat poison in some hot dogs and left them under the hedge. His backyard borders this one and I think Robin found them, brought them into the house, and, at the homeowners’ meeting, Mr. Kreutzer ate some. If you want more evidence you can go out in the backyard and check. You’d probably better collect all of it and make sure it’s disposed of.”

Christa sat down on a chair as if her knees had just given way. “Oh, my god,” she breathed in a whisper.” Shaking, she grabbed Robin to her.

Dandi and I hurried to the front door to get Bourbon to the clinic. I was shaking, too.

Everything came out okay, as they say, and Bourbon didn't suffer any ill effects other than liking Dandi less than she'd done before. Robin came through just fine as well, although about as happy about it all as Bourbon.

Evelyn wasn't so lucky. It turned out that, at Michael's direction, she'd spiked the hot dogs with the rat poison. At the trial she was found not guilty of manslaughter. Her home is up for sale now, and I think she went to live with a sister. I don't know if her conscience didn't let her off as easily, or if she just couldn't take the daily reminder of what had happened. I hope she's better off, there because, as irritating as she could be, she wasn't mean-spirited.

We see people coming by to look at the house, but, so far, no one bought the place. Some of the cats have moved into their back yard. I think they like that the yard is fenced. The silver lining to that cloud is that it makes them easier to trap.

End