



Catch and Release

Carol Kavanagh

Don't I just step off the bus when me dear niece, Tara, greets me and gives me a big hug.

"Auntie Anna, you haven't changed a bit since last September!"

"Go 'long wid ya!" I say. 'Tis true, though, that I've been blest with a robust constitution. At ninety-five, amazing as it is, I live by

meself, can do a good walk and take the bus, unassisted, to visit Tara and her family.

It being May, the bus company cuts seniors' rates by half, and don't I take advantage of that. Better be sparinn' at first than at last is the old sayin'. Last is just around the corner for me, but can I tell exactly when it's comin'? I've no time to waste. Never marryin' or havin' children of me own, I can now take dear Tara under me wing. Wasn't I after sayin' that her mother, me sister, God rest her soul, left a few bits of training out of that girl's upbringing.

After me luggage is stowed in the guest bedroom of Tara and David's old house, she tells me that the boys, Seamus and Rory are off with friends and David is in the middle east heading up an archeological dig. How that man can head up anything is beyond me. He can't hang a picture or change the furnace filters. Ah, well, she loves him then.

Tara suggests we go for a walk and with me being all cooped up in the stuffy bus for three hours, isn't that lovely. We meander down sidewalks of dappled light edged with big elms and don't I hear the birds twitterin' away in the trees. I don't see too well, far away objects bein' just big blobs, but the eye surgeons tell me I'll never be completely blind, which is brilliant.

"Och sure 'tis a grand walk, but how far are we goin'?" I finally ask Tara.

"Auntie, would you like to rest?" she asks.

"No, no, 'tis fine —"

"With your eyes, perhaps you can't see the —"

"Och, I see it now, a bench. Well, then, we may as well have a sit." Close up I have a better look at me niece. Doesn't she look the same, too? Pale as ever, but not sickly at all, at all. She's blessed with strawberry-blonde hair that's perfectly straight. Ah, well, Tara is an old soul, buys from thrift stores. She's into reusing, and recycling and all those r words including her latest, refusing — like pamphlets and freebies, keeping clutter out before it even gets in.

I glance at me dear Tara's shoulder covered with the white cotton blouse.

"Eeeek," I scream and Tara jumps. She brushes at her shoulder and a spider flies off into the air, its regurgitated goop swinging it to the concrete at the foot of the bench. With me peripheral vision, I see quite well when I look down, and don't I stomp me foot firmly on the spider.

"Auntie, NO!" Tara screams and holds me knee down.

I'm guessing that my murderous attempt has gone arseways on me. "Is he scurrying off, then?" I ask.

"Yes, thank goodness."

"Insects should be killed. They're pests," I say.

"They're creatures who want to live as much as we do."

I snort derisively. I'm here to straighten her out, not keep me mouth shut, so I say, "I never heard such poppycock in all me life."

"They have their place in the order of things."

"As long as their place isn't anywhere near where I am."

"Spiders eat mosquitos and they're food for birds."

"What they do among themselves is up to them." I shake me head. I knew I'd be up against this nonsense.

"C'mon, Auntie. Have a heart."

"Och, sure, 'tis grand." I say, "but I don't believe in getting all soft about creatures with tentacles, wavy arms and large globes for eyes."

A little later, in Tara's kitchen, fourteen year-old Seamus, a strapping dark-haired lad with a Mohawk, gives me a perfunctory hug. "Hey, how's it goin'?"

"I'm grand Seamus."

He nods, bows his head and returns to his i pad.

Carrot-haired Rory, six, runs into the kitchen, gives me a hug and says, "Hi Auntie Anna! I'm taller than you now." His blue eyes loom large behind round-rimmed glasses. 'Tis true I'm only four-foot-eight and shrinking. "Here, Auntie —" He jostles us into position, "Stand back to back with me."

"She's still a bit taller than you, Rory," Tara says, as she gently rips the romaine into pieces.

"Och 'tis brilliant then, soon you'll be taller than me," I say, huggin' him and sittin' down at the table. Tara pulls open the oven door to check the vegetarian lasagna. Steam and heat roll out of the oven fragrant with Italian spices and yeasty dough from the garlic bread.

"I have a pet spider, Auntie. Wanna see it?" He picks up a jar off the window sill.

Glory be to God. Two in one day. "My eyes are too bad to see it."

"Up close you can see." He thrusts the glass jar in me face.

I lean away almost tippin' backwards.

"Mom says I can't keep it very long. We have to release it. Spiders have been in our basement for years. See, I gave it some leaves to eat."

"Och aye, well —"

Tara, looking at the countertop says, "Oh, dear."

"What Mom?" Rory about turns and hops a couple of steps to have a look.

"It's either ants or spiders," Seamus says without looking up from his tablet.

Me heart goes crossways, and I wonder if I've heard correctly.

"A spider. I've noticed the odd one lately. Sweetie, fetch me the trap," Tara says to Rory.

Seamus looks up from his i pad and rolls his eyes. Rory marches in with a small glass jar and a playing card. "Let me Mom, please." I get up and go to the counter to have a look as best I can.

Tara asks, “Okay. Now, where did he get to? Oh yes, here he is. Gentle now.”

Rory cracks the open end of the jar down on the countertop over the spider. “Got him!”

“Rory, I said, ‘gentle,’” Tara says. “The spider may be frightened or deaf after that loud bang.” Seamus at the fridge, gets himself a glass of milk and exercises his eyes again. Rory carefully slides the card under the rim of the jar, and the spider climbs up onto the wall of the glass. Rory slides the card all the way under so that the top of the jar is covered. He turns the jar right side up and holds it out in triumph.

“It isn’t another pet, now, is it?” I ask.

“No. I’m taking it outside,” Rory says.

“We catch at least two or three every day,” Seamus says.

“Sure, there won’t be room for the half of us when the insects take over,” I say. The faintest rendition of a smile spreads across Seamus’s mouth.

“Now, Auntie, it’s not as serious as it might seem. They’re usually just in the basement,” Tara says.

Seamus says, “If you ask me, we should just get the fumigators in.” “Brilliant,” I say.

“They’re not hurting us,” Tara says as Rory goes outside.

“But they’re bothersome,” Seamus says “when we’re always having to trap them.”

“Not *always*,” Tara says.

Seamus grunts, plops down in his chair and gulps down his glass of milk.

Tara sets the lasagna and garlic toast on the table. She whisks a huge bowl of caesar salad from the fridge.

“Aren’t we after having the grandest meal,” I say, “if only for a wee bit of beef.”

“Now, Auntie, what would you like to do tomorrow? Shopping? The conservatory? Going for tea? Another walk?”

“Sure, don’t I love them all? I haven’t come for a long time. I’ve come for a good time.”

The next morning I shuffle into the kitchen to see if Tara has a nice cup of tea ready for me, and all is in darkness, for but a second. “Good morning, Auntie. Did you sleep well?”

“Oh, dear girl, ‘twas a frightful night. I had a nightmare of the spider’s bent legs crawling up the bedpost and onto me duvet. I screamed like a banshee when I looked at one close-up — four eyes, two huge and two small, those claws with pincers and the hairy body. UGH! I woke-up just as it was about to inject me with its poison.”

“I’m sorry you had a nightmare, Auntie,” Tara says. “Our spiders don’t bite. You can see the odd one on the shower floor or on the ceiling, but like Rory said, they’re all in the basement.”

The boys shuffle into the kitchen bleary eyed with dishevelled hair and Tara busies herself with preparing breakfast. “Now, Tara, me love, as regards the spiders, you must attack the *source*. I think they call it being pro-active, but I see it as common sense.”

Doesn’t she pretend to be absorbed with the popped toast. “Here we go Auntie, eggs medium, buttered toast and tea with cream and sugar. Preserves on the table.”

I say, “Isn’t it grand then, but for wee bit of bacon.”

Seamus gives me a big smile as he finishes off his cereal and reaches for the eggs. Rory slurps up each spoonful of his cereal

Later that afternoon, Tara and I are taking our ease in the kitchen, and I say, “Thank you, dear Tara, for taking me for the lovely Victorian tea with the scones, jam and clotted cream. Och, sure, ’twas wonderful —

“Glad you enjoyed it, Auntie.”

“But I’m wrecked now, though.”

“Would you like to lie down?”

“I’ll be fine.”

Seamus and Rory come into the kitchen. Seamus opens the fridge door, drapes himself over it and stares inside.

“Seamus, honey, get something or close the fridge door.”

Eeeek! I scream. “Seamus, help me up! Help me up!” I bellow. He helps me up onto a chair, the dear lad. Don’t I surprise meself at how quickly I can get atop a chair at ninety-five?

“Good heavens, Auntie Anna, what is the matter?” Tara asks.

“A mouse. Wasn’t I after sayin’ that a mouse just ran across the floor?”

“Auntie, I’m sorry. It’s okay. He’s gone now. Come down. Let me help you.”

“Sure, I won’t, then.”

“We’ve had a little mouse problem lately, but we’re getting on top of it. I’d hoped we’d have it solved by the time you visited, but as you can see — ”

Rory says, “Yeah, we had to keep the mouse situation under wraps . . .” Doesn’t he run his finger across his throat, make a sound as if his head’s being severed from his neck, and fall to the floor?”

“Get up silly,” Tara says, laughing.

“Come down,” Auntie,” Tara pleads. “He’s gone now, wee timorous beastie.”

“Wee Timorous beastie!” I accept Tara’s hand to descend from the chair.

“Don’t worry. I’ve decided to get a cat. I guess it’s okay if the cat kills the mouse.” She sighs, then, as if a cat is a last resort, a failure.

“When will you be getting it?” I ask.

Tara seems not to be paying attention, as she busies herself with stirring the vegetarian chilli. “When it’s born,” she says almost mumbling.

Methinks me hearing aid batteries just went dead. “Pardon?”

“My friend’s cat is having kittens.”

“JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH, preserve us! Look in the newspaper, bring one home TOMORROW — FREE! IT’S just common sense.”

“I do have traps around the house in the meantime,” she says.

“Surely not those things with the piece of wood and the snap thing that comes down on their wee necks, crushing them as they nibble their last bit of cheese?”

“Now you’re making fun, Auntie. No, these traps catch them live, and then I drive them out into the country.”

Now, don’t I roll me eyes.

“Yeah, it’s a catch and *release* program,” Seamus chimes in absently as he uses his mother’s phone to send a text.

“My dear Tara, I’m not stupid. I saw one mouse. There are more and if there aren’t more now, there soon will be. Tomorrow will not be spent at the conservatory. We’re going to get a cat.”

“Yay,” says Rory. “A real pet!” He jumps up and down.

“Yeah, cool,” says Seamus, “not quite as cool as a dog, but whatever.”

Haven’t I put me foot down.

At the end of the next day, we’re all in the back yard. The portobello mushrooms, peppers, and vegetarian burgers are sizzling on the barbecue. Not a speck of meat to be found. Ah, well, I haven’t keeled over yet.

There were several kittens at the pound needing homes and I worked hard to convince Tara to stop at two. Didn’t the dear boy, Seamus join in. Now, the boys pull a toy mouse through the grass on the end of a string and the two tabby brothers with white paws and racoon masks, pounce on it and chase after it. Tara and I sit at the picnic table watchin’ the kittens’ antics, havin’ a brilliant laugh. But, me mission to save me dear Tara from herself isn’t over yet, so I say, “Now, Tara, about the spiders in your basement . . .”

“After a thorough cleaning they disappear,” Tara jumps in.

Seamus pipes up, “But they always come back.”

I say, “Sure, the catch and release program is brilliant — in many cases — but does it work so very well with spiders born in the basement?”

“What do you mean?” Tara asks warily. And now the boys are all ears.

“Your spiders grow up on plush carpets, find corners for spinning webs, have no predators, and eat pizza crumbs left over from watching TV.”

“Yes- s- s,” Tara says cautiously.

“When you release a spider into the yard, isn’t it like an alien abduction? It lands on a strange and hostile planet.”

“Cool!” says Rory. “The glass jar is like a spaceship and it travels all the way from the dark basement onto this, like, weird planet with a blazing sun.”

“It’s as if the spider’s transported this inconceivable distance even it can’t imagine,” Seamus adds.

Isn’t this a friggin’ brilliant story and don’t I have the boy’s full attention? I continue. “When the spider lands, she encounters this tall grass she has to plough through.”

“It’s like a huge forest,” Rory says with wide open arms.

“What can she eat?” I ask.

“All she knows is pizza,” says Seamus.

“And, doesn’t she have enemies like birds, for example, as you pointed out, Tara. She’ll be eaten quick as may be. And in the winter when it’s forty below —”

“She’ll freeze to death,” Rory finishes, becomes rigid and falls down onto the grass. We all laugh.

“Och, poor wee thing. Wouldn’t mercy killing be a blessing?” I ask.

“Nice story guys!” Tara says. “You do make a good point, Auntie, about winter. But we could just let them all ‘be’ and have a battalion of glass spaceships bring them up in the spring.” The boys’ eyes grow big and round as visions of Space Wars churn through their brains like a

mesmerizing opiate. I can just see them running door to door collecting glass jars to make up the fleet of spaceships. Don't I have to nix this quick?

"IGNORE THEM TILL SPRING?" I screech. "Spiders, mice. Not to put too fine a point on it dear, but you do have children living here and who knows how social services might —"

"Okay, maybe I could agree to euthanasia in the winter, but *I* can't kill the spiders."

"I could do it, Mom," Seamus offers.

"Good lad," I say.

"Yes, thank you, Seamus," Tara says. "But I feel strongly that the spider'd have a chance in the summer. She'd know instinctively that she'd found her true home."

Rory says, "Yay. We get to do the battalion of space ships all summer long."

"Don't get your hopes up," Tara says. "There might not be that many to transport."

"Especially if we get out the pails of soap and water," I add. "Let's clean tomorrow," I say, "then I can be helpful to you, dear Tara."

"Auntie," she says scrunching up her nose. "No need for that. You don't want to spend your time here *cleaning*."

"I do indeed."

"Well, we'll talk about it later. I have to get the plates and cutlery now." Tara steps from the patio into the back door. Gory be to God, don't I see a spider descending from the eaves onto the table. I let out a screech and both boys look my way. "Are you all right, Auntie?" Rory asks.

"Fine." I stand up, take off me shoe and I'm about to bring it down on the spider. I hear Rory gasp. Although I can't see his wee face, I imagine it contorted with concern. Don't I hold me shoe in the air for a few seconds, then lower me arm and put me shoe back on.

Rory runs to me. "It's okay, Auntie. Don't be afraid," he says takin' me hand.

Sure, I'm thinkin' he's trying to comfort me, but why he'd be doin' this, I can't imagine, but then I admit, "Perhaps there's a wee bit of truth to the notion that I'm afraid of spiders."

"That's okay Auntie, lots of people are. I've been reading about it. It's called ar-ach-no-pho-bia," he says slowly sounding out the word.

"A fine word, Rory, a fine word."

Seamus saunters over to see the spider and the three of us stand shoulder to shoulder to watch it crawl down the leg of the table and into the flower bed. As Tara comes out the back door with a laden tray, Rory says, "Hey, Mom, Auntie didn't kill a spider."

"Ah," says Tara, grinning, "That's just common sense."

"I'll not be listening to any blarney," I say, but for once I try to hold me tongue. I look over at the kittens. Aren't they me brilliant accomplishment on this visit. I was useful, then, to me niece, and I'll be back in September when the bus fares are cut, to see how me dear Tara did over the summer with the elimination of spiders from her basement.