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If you've got a cat, you'd better watch your back

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UP FRONT/COMMENTARY

Cats will always eat you in the end.

I dearly hope my Uncle Bob was dead before learning that lesson - before Clancy, his cat companion of many years, turned on him after he fell and cracked his head on the tub. Like a Mogul prince groomed and pampered on a daily basis, Clancy was apparently unprepared for the hunger pangs that followed the accident. When one missed meal turned into two, then three ... well, one can only wonder how long the little beast waited before appetite trumped loyalty.

I've shared this morbid tale with a number of my cat-lover friends and all stoutly maintain that they, too, would gladly sacrifice their bodies to spare poor Fluffy the slightest discomfort. At least Bob's cat waited several years before showing its true colors. Apparently not all do. A friend called the other day and said she was on antibiotics because her new saber-toothed fiend sank its teeth into her back two weeks after moving into her home.

This friend, Michele, is the kind of person who, rather than squash bugs that have wandered inside, gently scoops them up and carries them outside. She cringes if her car hits a butterfly. For a cat, scoring her as an owner is like hitting the lottery: Future comfort is assured, as long as those distracting carnivore urges can be ignored.

Michele's first cat, Kinky - named for the numerous right-angle bends in its tail - clearly understands this. She is the privileged stepsister to Michele's patient Cinderella, and she does what's needed to maintain this relationship. Other than clawing the stuffing out of the furniture, she never displays much temper. Until Michele decided to experiment by bringing a new cat into the home, she'd never even heard Kinky hiss.

Domestic harmony went out the door once the newcomer arrived. Kinky was willing to give friendship a try, but Zoe immediately wanted to be the new queen of the roost. She was all lovey and cuddly at first, but when Michele kept her from smacking Kinky around, the inner beast unmasked. The minute Michele's back was turned, Zoe saw her chance.

There's a reason cats sit there watching you in the morning, and it isn't because they're eager to greet you to a new day. They're checking your pulse, wondering if they can get away with a little nibble or two.

You never hear these kind of stories about dogs. Yes, they may roll in every rank, disgusting pile of I-don't-want-to-know-what they can find - and there's always the occasional story of them ripping some poor stranger to pieces - but when it comes to owners, dogs tend to be slavishly devoted. You hear about them wandering the train station for years, waiting for their long-dead master to return from that last trip. Or Lassie gets lost on vacation and spends the next six months finding its way back home, scaling mountains and saving a few lost children along the way, arriving just in time to cheer up little Timmy on his birthday.

Cats, as long as someone comes by to feed them, barely notice your absence. You could return from a month in intensive care and they'll just yawn and go back to watching birds.

All of this makes me wonder why I like cats so much. I suspect it highlights some inner flaw, a subconscious fear of commitment and other dog-like behavior. Whatever the case, it occurs to me that the recent debate over health care reform offers cats a perfect opportunity to demonstrate their value to society: We could give them to all the old people, a furry, purring companion who will comfort them and bring joy to their lives.

When the geezers eventually stop showing up for their doctor appointments and those expensive medical treatments, we'll know Puss 'N Boots has done its job. That's got to cost a lot less than the \$1 trillion or more Congress is thinking about spending on reform.

Michele pointed out - somewhat sarcastically, I think - that hyenas could do the job more effectively, being gulpers rather than nibblers. But they aren't as cuddly. To get true, bipartisan support for the idea, cuddles are needed to seal the deal.

I don't know where I dream up these ideas. Maybe, given my landlord doesn't allow pets, it's during all that peaceful sleep I get at night.

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