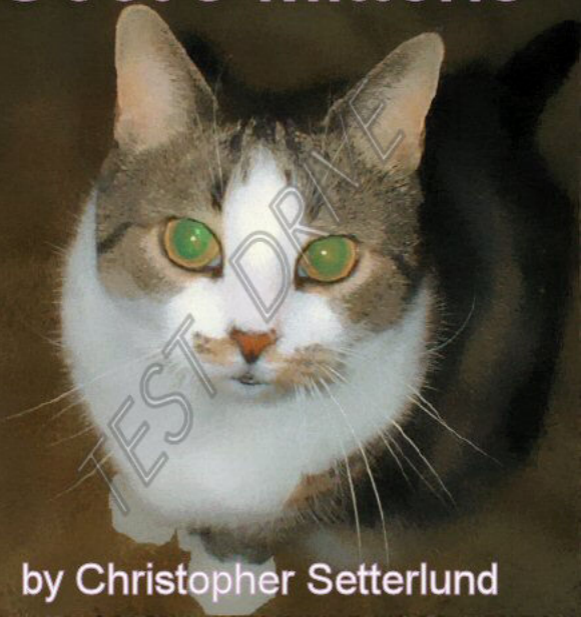


Goot's Mittens



by Christopher Setterlund

Morning On Boxberry Lane

The sun shined brightly over Boxberry Lane. It was late-September but the air had the feel of summer to it still. Nana had just sat down with her newspaper and morning coffee; the aroma filled the dining room. The morning was full of life; yellow finches and sparrows chirped in the rose bush in the front yard, children laughed and played in the street as it was a Saturday. It was the kind of morning that made anyone want to wake up early; anyone except for Goot the cat. She lay tucked deep beneath several blankets in her round, wicker cat bed. Not even a hurricane could make Goot get out of her bed before noon, and there hadn't been a hurricane in those parts for years. Still, Nana did not approve of the many hours Goot wasted in bed, and she knew the secret weapon to raise her pet's sleepy head. Nana shuffled into the kitchen, her shoes squeaking on the freshly waxed linoleum, and she reached into the cupboard. She shook Goot's box of dry cat food with a smile, then she waited. Not a sound. She shook it again, louder this time, and waited. Again there was no sign of her lazy friend.

"Goot," Nana called out, "come and get some nice breakfast!" From inside her bed Goot's eyes slowly cracked open; she rolled onto her side and tossed her blankets onto the carpet. She was a chubby grey and white striped cat, quite normal except for one trait that made her stand out. Her two front paws were double in size, like she was wearing baseball gloves on her feet. Goot rubbed her eyes. Being a hefty cat it was sometimes hard for her to stand up, she rolled back and forth like a big furry turtle until she had made it onto her feet. She stretched away the sleepiness and took a few wobbly steps, then sat down and stared at the bedroom door. It was closed. Goot's eyes grew wide, her stomach growled inside, she stretched her big paws high toward the door knob but couldn't reach. Goot scratched and clawed at the door and cried out for help. By the third "Meow" Nana came to investigate. She opened the door and Goot rushed past her feet out into the kitchen. She buried her face in her ceramic dish with 'Goot' written in black marker on the side. Nana came back out and shook her head with a smile.

"Good morning to you too," Nana said sarcastically. Once Goot's belly was full she rubbed up against Nana's leg. "Oh now you want to be my friend?" Nana laughed. Goot purred a little to show Nana that she cared. "The day is beautiful," Nana continued, "you need to go outside." Goot stopped purring and thought about running, she knew what that meant, her quality time asleep had all been spent. Goot lowered her head in surrender as Nana swung the squeaky front screen door out into the bright sun. "Go on now, you've done enough sleeping, now go have some fun." The front step was hot on her feet and Goot jumped back, but Nana's foot met her furry behind and nudged her out before she had a chance to run. The screen door swung shut and Goot sat on her rear pouting and swatting ants with her big paws.

"Why did she make me come out here?" Goot thought out loud. "I can see all of this from the window sill." She heard a sound behind her and turned her head to see Charlie the Catbird land on the iron railing along the steps. He stared at her with his small black eyes and shook his head.

"What are you whinin' for? I heard you all the way up in my nest." Goot was used to these sorts of lectures from Charlie, he was the elder statesman of the neighborhood and often liked to give advice by comparing today with 'how things used to be.' He was also very ornery if he felt he wasn't being listened to, so as usual Goot humored him.

"Nana made me come outside when I wanted to sleep," Goot replied. Charlie puffed up his dark blue feathers and let out a couple of hoarse "meows" as cat birds do.

"You know I don't understand," he said, "when I was young whining was illegal. In fact I

remember an old friend of mine being sent away for years because he complained about his mother's cooking. You know what I mean? So what if it was worms every night, you ate it and were thankful you had it!" Goot had no clue what Charlie was talking about but nodded just so he would leave her alone. "All right then," he continued, "quit your whinin' Goot, life ain't so bad." When he finished Charlie flapped his wings, let out another "meow," followed by a couple of hacking coughs, and took off up over the roof of Nana's house. Goot went back to moping on the front step until she heard another familiar voice call out to her.

"Hey Goot!" She looked up, it was Mystery the Cat. She lived across the street. Mystery was skinny and orange, very sweet and a bit naive; she was a few years younger than Goot. She was what Goot like to call her "groupie" because everything Goot did Mystery loved. "I was waiting for you to come out," Mystery said with her usual awe. "I was sitting in the top of the big arborvitae next to my house watching your door."

"What if I had never come out today?" Goot asked. Mystery's face looked confused.

"Uh, I don't know," she stammered, "I guess I would have kept waiting." Goot rolled her eyes, sometimes Mystery's devotion went overboard.

"What if I never came outside again? What if I lived inside forever?" Mystery looked confused which made Goot feel bad. "Okay," Goot said, "never mind that; let's take a hike to the cranberry bog. I could use a roll in the muck." The two cats began their march to the cranberry bog a half mile up the road. Along the way they passed another familiar face. Cindy the Dog, a black and white Labrador Retriever, was chained up in her yard and began yelping when she saw her two friends passing by.

"Hey, hey, guys!" She yipped as she hopped with excitement on the front lawn. Goot and Mystery stopped walking. They wandered up on to the lawn and sat just a few feet out of Cindy's range. Yes they were her friends but sometimes they liked to have fun at the expense of the slightly slow-witted canine. Cindy kept on barking and jumping, fully expecting the two cats to come over to her.

"Oh hi Cindy," Goot said calmly, "Mystery and I are heading up to the bog to hang out, you wanna go?" Cindy's face lit up and she began to leap and yelp even more uncontrollably. "You wanna go? Huh, do ya?" Goot asked again with a slightly higher tone which riled up the poor dog even more. The cats let Cindy leap and jump for a few minutes until she grew tired and lay down in the grass panting.

"Nah," Cindy breathlessly said, "I am too tired to go. But thanks for asking."

"We'll bring you back something nice, a stick or something," Goot responded. They continued on their way leaving Cindy collapsed in a heap in the shade of an oak tree.

Cranberry Bog

They came to the end of Boxberry Lane where they had to cross busy Cow Yard Road. The cautious Goot began looking side to side over and over. Mystery, however, blazed across the hot asphalt leaping as far as she could up on to the dirt hill on the other side.

"C'mon Goot," Mystery encouraged, "just shut your eyes and go!" Goot was not that brave and continued looked back and forth. She could see the heat lines rising off of the street and her feet already ached at the idea of getting burned. Mystery had already started down the path to the bog and Goot didn't want to be left behind so she took yet another look both ways and ran as fast as her legs could take her. She crossed Cow Yard Road easily but tripped as she hit the dirt on the other side; a big cloud of dust rose into the air around her. Goot's normally grey and white fur was shaded brown; she pulled herself up to her feet and shook wildly trying to get the dirt off of her. Once satisfied with her appearance again Goot looked down the path, she could see the wide open space of the cranberry bog waiting. Mystery was waiting too, sitting on the edge of one of the bog's rivers that encircled it. Goot slowly sauntered down the path in the shade trying to reclaim her dignity after her fall, but once Mystery saw her appearance she burst out laughing.

"What happened to you?" Mystery asked gasping for air from laughter. Goot frowned and walked past her sitting down next to the river. She ignored the continued snickering from Mystery and began to dip her large feet into the water and wash off the dirt. The cool water felt good on Goot's fur, when a breeze blew it made her shiver. Goot closed her eyes and lifted her head up to feel the sun beaming down, as usually was the case Goot's anger at Nana for making her go outside was gone; she loved Nana and knew that she only wanted the best for her. She heard a cough and whirled around. Mystery was close by coughing and shaking her head. She then sneezed loudly and twitched a bit. Goot chuckled which caught Mystery's attention.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly, "I ate too much grass. Then I kicked up some dust when I coughed." Goot walked over and gently brushed the dirt from Mystery's whiskers; they made their way down toward the other side of the cranberry bog which had been flooded for harvest. Since the water level was high the two cats went over to the water's edge and drank a little. Of course they had to use their paws to brush away the leaves and berries first. It tasted terribly, even by cat standards, but running in the warm sun had made them thirsty. The afternoon moved on, Goot and Mystery sat along the bog and talked. It was a carefree time, but then again most times are carefree for cats. Hours passed, Goot and Mystery had fallen asleep along the water in some tall grass. A loud shout startled them awake.

"Cannonball!!!" The voice shouted. That was followed by a splash which soaked Goot and Mystery. Both of them looked out into the water and saw rippling waves but nothing else. Goot looked confusedly at Mystery who had her head tilted to one side. When the ripples began to die down the cats cautiously walked to the water's edge. The water was like a mirror; the cats, especially Goot, enjoyed looking at their reflections even with her fur now dripping wet. From under the surface a black object shot up frightening them.

"Woo hooo!!!" A voice yelled. "Did you guys see that jump?!" The voice belonged the Gus, a black cat from Boxberry Lane. Goot and Mystery's hearts were beating hard from the scare, they looked angrily at Gus who was also dripping wet and pulling himself up out of the cranberry bog water. Gus was a fun-loving adventurous cat, he would often disappear for days at a time, roaming around leaving his family worried sick. Then he would return with tales to tell of his adventures across the highway. Goot always wanted to accompany Gus on one of his journeys but was always too afraid to go further than the edge of the cranberry bog.

It was Teddy the Dog who had told her the story of a cat he once knew when he was a young pup that had crossed the highway never to return. He had told Goot that a monster that lived in the woods on the other side of the highway had made the cat into soup. Being somewhat naive and gullible Goot believed every word that the much older Teddy told her. Gus always insisted that the monster story was not true, but Goot played it safe.

"What are you doing out here Gus?" Mystery asked curiously. Gus was now sitting in the grass next to the two girl cats licking his paws and rubbing them on his head in an attempt to clean himself up.

"I just got back from my latest adventure across the highway," Gus replied. Goot was excited to be one of the first to hear of the latest Gus tale. She moved in closer and listened intently, trying her best not to stare at Gus' missing left ear. Oh he didn't mind the stares, Gus loved attention; in fact he often made a point to draw attention to his mangled ear while cleaning himself. He had said that he lost part of his ear in a fight with a coyote a few years back. That story only helped to cement Gus' legendary status around Boxberry Lane.

"What did you see across the highway Gus?" Mystery asked impatiently. Gus cleared his throat loudly and exhaled slowly to build the anticipation.

"Well, I walked south along the highway once I crossed," Gus began, "and after what seemed like an hour of thorn bushes and poison ivy I came to a clearing. There was a farm, a small farm with only a few animals that I saw. These animals were vicious and mean, they came after me thinking I was there to steal food." Goot and Mystery were shocked that such a place existed, they were amazed that Gus had made it out alive.

"What happened then? How did you escape?" Goot asked while nervously rubbing her large front paws together. Mystery slid closer to Goot as if she was afraid these animals might show up at any time. Gus, gave a cool steely glare at his two listeners.

"I took them on one at a time," Gus announced confidently, "and by the time I had knocked around the second animal the rest backed off and let me go on my way." He then sat up straight and lifted his head toward the sun waiting for the adulation to begin. Gus was a natural born story-teller, he had a way with words. Mystery and Goot looked at each other in wonder.

"Wow, that's incredible," Goot gushed.

"Yeah, you're so lucky that you know how to handle situations like that," Mystery added, "I'd be scared and trying to hide." That made Gus raise his eyebrows momentarily. He patted Mystery on the back in encouragement.

"Don't worry my young friend," he explained, "someday you will be brave like me and there will be nothing that you can't do." He put his right paw up like he was on stage acting. Mystery smiled in gratitude. "Now let's head back to Boxberry Lane, it's almost dinner time and I've got some eating to do!" The three cats headed back up the dirt path out of the cranberry bog toward Boxberry Lane. Gus naturally was a few steps ahead, leading the way like a brave General leads their troops. He stopped them at the edge of busy Cow Yard Road by sitting up and holding his front paws out like a scarecrow.

"What is it, Gus?" Goot asked. Gus turned his head to the side in a very exaggerated way to show them that he was listening for something. After waiting a moment he turned his head the other way and did the same thing.

"It's all clear," Gus announced, "let's go." With that he started across Cow Yard Road without even looking either way, he did a confident half-trot like a horse in a parade until he made it to the other side. He turned and looked but Goot and Mystery were not following, they were still looking side to side. "Come on you guys, it's safe," Gus shouted. They looked nervously again and began to step cautiously onto the asphalt; the two cats walked slowly. As they crossed Gus shouted to them again. "Hurry you guys, there's a car coming!" Goot and Mystery, scared out of their minds, raced in a mad dash across the street. They leaped up onto

the grass, did a couple of rolls, and whirled around to see...nothing. There was no car, only the sound of Gus cackling and rolling in the dirt. Out of breath and dirty again, Goot and Mystery were not amused by Gus' trick.

"Thanks a lot Gus," Goot cried breathlessly, "it'll take me hours to get my breath back!" Gus sat up and tried in vain to stop his chuckling.

"Hey, it got you moving though didn't it?" Gus cracked. He started down Boxberry Lane, the two girl cats followed, but this time a little further behind muttering to each other the entire way. In the distance they could see what looked like a couple of big trucks close to Goot's house; there was a commotion going on.

As the three cats approached the action ahead they passed by Cindy the Dog again. She began leaping and jumping and tugging at her rope tied to the oak tree.

"Hey guys, guys," Cindy shouted, "what's going on down there? I can't see from here."

"We don't know," Goot replied, "but we're going to find out." Cindy kept gnawing at her rope in an attempt to free herself.

"Can one of you untie me so I can come too?" They all looked at each other perplexed; none of them knew how to untie a knot and the definitely didn't want to try to chew through the rope for her.

"Sorry Cindy," Goot kindly soothed, "we'll come back after and let you know." Mystery and Gus had continued on and Goot took off after them to catch up. The house where all the commotion was sat diagonally across from where Goot lived; it was directly across the street from the house where Teddy the Dog sat. Fearing the imposing moving vans that sat in the street the three cats gravitated toward Teddy instead. Teddy was an old English Sheepdog who had lived in the neighborhood since before Goot was born. He spoke in a sort of mumbled Cajun drawl since he had been born in the South. When speaking to him the other animals had to really listen hard because sometimes they'd miss whatever words of wisdom Teddy was giving. He was sitting stoically, unleashed, in his front yard. His once white coat was covered with patches of brown and gray; he stared at the moving men unimpressed. He had seen his share of new neighbors through the years. Goot and Mystery were hesitant to break Teddy's trance-like state, but Gus was more brazen. He stepped in front of Teddy's line of sight and began firing questions at him.

"What's going on over there Ted? Have you seen any people yet? Do they have any animals?" Gus waited for any response, Teddy slowly opened his mouth. He let out a loud belch which cause Mystery and Goot to laugh. Before Gus could say anything Teddy spoke up.

"Been sittin' out here close to 'round an hour, mmm hmm," Teddy explained in his mumbling drawl, "ain't seen nuthin' but the backs of them there fellas when they's takin' in the dang ol' furniture." The three cats sat silently as if still processing what had just been said to them. Instead of asking Teddy to repeat himself they lined up and sat beside him, joining in the staring at the moving men coming in and out of the open garage door. Twenty minutes had passed and there had not been a sign of the people who had bought the house. Goot grew hungry and headed home for dinner, shortly after Gus and Mystery also went inside their respective homes to eat leaving Teddy sitting and keeping watch like a sheepdog is known for.