

Over the Back Fence
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The risks of cat-sitting
By Alva Wood

Whenever Tessa Vanderkam takes a holiday, she has to get someone else to take care of her cats.

There are three of them. Augustus is fat and complacent, and spends most of his life lying on anyone's kitchen counter, soaking up the sun.

Julius is the original scaredy-cat. Like his namesake, he's convinced someone wants to stick a knife into his back, so the least unexpected noise is enough to induce catatonic panic.

Hannibal is the holy terror, lean and mean, with claws capable of drawing blood from a visitor's buttocks without any warning at all.

Most often, the cats go next door to the B&B run by Aynsley Kastor and Deirdre Pollacks. It seems reasonable, since Julius already favors their kitchen counter.

The complication comes when the cats are there at the same time as B&B guests show up with their own pets.

Like earlier this month, when Marshall and Martha Vinyard showed up with two yappy Jack Russell terriers.

"Oh, they're cute!" says Deirdre, bending down to pat the little brown and white dogs.

Marshall opens his mouth to warn her not to do that, but he's too late. One of the terriers has already sunk sharp little teeth into Deirdre's hand.

"They're a little defensive," Martha apologizes. "They'll be fine once they get to know you a little better."

"You'll have to keep your dogs leashed," Aynsley warns the Vinyards. "We have three cats we're looking after right now."

"No problem," says Marshall. "They'll be in our room all the time."

Too bad no one warned Janie Smith, who's working for Deirdre and Aynsley, making up guest rooms. Janie opens the door to the Vinyard's room, and gets bowled over by the rodents' charge for freedom. They fly down the main stairwell like Snoopy playing Red Baron, barking insanelly. The female is so excited she dribbles pee all the way down.

Julius would normally be under the couch in the living room. But he chooses that moment to cross the front hall to Deirdre's office.

Julius flees for the kitchen with the terriers ki-yi-ing behind. Augustus panics off his sunny counter and heads for the back door, sending several pots and pans crashing into the sink, where Hannibal has been getting a drink from a dripping tap.

Hannibal never needs an excuse for imitating a lightning bolt. All three cats shoot out the back door, pursued by a pair of demented terriers.

The terriers return, strutting proudly. The cats don't.

By that evening, Deirdre and Aynsley were getting worried.

They went outside and called.

They rattled food dishes.

They cooked bacon on the barbecue.

Nothing worked.

They called in neighbours for search parties. Roger Ramcharan and John Smith happily crawled under people's porches. Matilda Weatherby went door to door. Astrid Bowers and Nellie Rinehart patrolled the creek.

No success.

"Well," says Aynsley at last, "those two damn dogs are pretty obsessed about cats. Why don't we turn them loose and see what they can find?"

The volunteers homed in any location where they heard excited yapping.

Augustus, despite his bulk, had managed to climb a telephone pole. He was sitting on top of a transformer, bleating piteously.

Rigger Moortice, who works for B.C. Hydro, got him down safely.

Julius turned up in Astrid Bower's flower shed. He had dived into a large flower pot, which had fallen off a bench, flipped over, and trapped him inside.

Hannibal didn't show up at all. Until the weary searchers trooped despondently back to Aynsley's kitchen.

Where Hannibal ambushed the terriers. As they pranced through the back door, a whirling blur of teeth and claws, like the legendary Tasmanian Devil of Saturday morning cartoons, landed on them.

Fur flew. Blood spattered. Yelps resounded. The terriers shot up the stairs, peeing as they went.

They didn't risk poking even their noses out of the room again until the Vinyards checked out.