The kittens were given to me, my parents would say, unloaded on me, by the cook. I had stopped in the alley behind the Columbia Hotel Restaurant on my way home from school. I was nine at the time, in the third grade, and I had been checking the hotel trashcans for redeemable bottles and other treasures. The mewing had drawn me to the back door of the kitchen where I discovered three little black and white kittens in a cardboard box. As I knelt over them, petting and talking to them, the back door opened and an old Japanese man in a dirty white apron carrying a five-gallon bucket filled with food scraps, stepped out into the alley.

“Hi, Boy.”

“Hi.” I responded, withdrawing my hand and sitting back on my heels.

“You like the kittens?” He swung the bucket toward the box.

“Yeah. They’re really cute.”

“You want them. You have them,” he said, more as a statement than a question.

“Really? For myself? Oh wow. Thanks, Mister.” I could not believe my good fortune.

“You take them now.” He was shaking the contents of the bucket into the large garbage can. The smell of the rotten vegetables mingled with the fried meat and soy sauce aroma wafting out through the screen door.

“Sure. No problem.” I was so pleased. I knew my sisters would love them. I was sure my dog, Mike, would love them too, because I knew he allowed the wild kittens, who hid from me under our house all day, to spend the night curled up next to him on the back
step. I lifted the box carefully onto my handlebars and, after a wobbly start, managed to exit the alley and ride off proudly through the streets, across town to my house.

When I arrived home, I rode up to the back door, let my bike drop to the ground, and bounded up the back step and into the kitchen. Feeling very pleased with my new adoptees, I slid the cardboard box onto the kitchen counter.

“Elece. Look what I have! Baby kittens!” My sister Elece came in from the living room. She eyed the kittens excitedly; then wrinkling her freckled nose, she announced, “Their eyes are all shut. They’re blind kittens.”

“Their eyes just haven’t opened yet,” I countered. “They’re still too young to see.”

“They seem awfully big for their eyes to be closed.”

“I’ll ask Mom.” I had learned, the hard way, not to launch an unsupported challenge to either of my older sisters’ opinions. I had once lost a whole quarter to Elece, insisting that sugar had to be spelled s-h-u-g-a-r.

I ran across the living room and through the door opening into the back part of our grocery store. I knew, if there were customers in the store or at the gas pumps, Mom wouldn’t leave, not even for a minute, unless it was an emergency. No one else was in the store and she was at the end of the canned goods aisle, straightening, marking, and restocking the cans of Campbell’s soup, as I ran up to her.

“Now, settle down, Danny. What are you so worked up about?”

“I have some kittens. A man gave them to me to keep. And Elece says their eyes should be open and that something is wrong with them. But I think they’re just fine—just really young.”

“Kittens? Oh, you didn’t bring kittens home did you?”
“Yah, Mom. They’re really cute. Come and see.”

She sighed, wiped her hands on her apron, did a quick check out the front store window for potential customers, then followed me back through the house to the kitchen.

“Get that dirty box off the kitchen counter. You know better than that.”

“But look at them, Mom. See how pretty they are. Black backs with white faces and paws.” I motioned to them with my head as I set the box on the floor.

“But their eyes are shut,” Elece piped in.

I gave her a dirty look and stepped between her and the box.

“No. See, Mom. They’re just too little. Their eyes aren’t ready to open yet.”

Mom picked the up largest of the three kittens and held it up on the palm of her had, looking into its furry face. She frowned. Her upper lip lifted in a look combining pity and disgust.

“Their eyes aren’t normal. They’re all crusty and swollen.”

Returning the kitten to the box, she looked in at the other two.

“Oh Danny, why did you bring these home. There’s something wrong with them. They’re sick.”

“I can take care of them. I promise I’ll help them get better.”

“No, I think you’d better take them back.”

“I promise I’ll take good care of them. I’ll feed them warm milk every day and their eyes will heal up and be normal. Please. Please. Please, Mom?”

“Oh, I don’t know. That’s a lot of responsibility. What if they don’t get better?”

“They will. I know they will. You’ll see. I’ll be responsible for them no matter what happens.”
“Well, okay, but don’t expect me or your dad to take care of them. They are your full responsibility.”

“Thanks Mom. Thanks a million.”

Elece and I found them a new box in the storage room and fixed a nice rag bed in it. Each morning for the next week I put a bowl of warmed milk on the floor and placed each kitten in front of it. They couldn’t see the milk and they didn’t seem to be able to smell it. So I pushed their noses into the milk until they snorted and licked it off. One day I even gave them fresh milk from the cream-testing station Dad operated next to the store.

Unfortunately, they didn’t get better—in fact, they seemed to be getting weaker and more pitiful each day. By the weekend they had stopped eating. The eyes of the two smaller kittens had swollen, forcing the lids apart enough to reveal the opaque yellow sightless eyes behind. The head of the larger one had swollen so much on one side the weight of it toppled him over when he tried to stand.

I couldn’t stand to touch them anymore. I went to my mother.

“Mom, I don’t want them anymore. They’re just suffering. Could you ask Dad to do something with them?”

“I warned you about this. Now, you know you brought them home and you insisted on taking full responsibility for them.”

“But I don’t want to have them anymore. Can’t Dad take them someplace?”

“You will have to ask your father yourself.”

Everybody liked my dad. He was congenial, generous, loved a good story, and he had an infectious smile. He had worked hard all his life. At 17 he dropped out of high school to take care of his father’s farm after Grandpa, diagnosed with “rheumatic heart,” was advised to avoid exertion. After Grandma and Grandpa moved off the farm, Dad got married to Mom. By his early twenties, he had worked on several
farms in Idaho and eastern Oregon. In 1932, he’d even jumped a freight train to California in an unsuccessful search for work. He had pumped gas, changed tires, collected and sold scrap metal and bones, bought, cured, and sold rabbit hides, worked in a gold mine, driven a gravel truck, and most recently managed our own gas station-grocery store and adjacent cream station.

In my early years I was very close to Dad. As soon as I could walk he took me along in his dump truck, hauling scrap to sell in Utah and gravel for local building projects, including a World War II Japanese internment camp near Twin Falls, Idaho. As I grew older and became involved with school, and as he became busier with his work projects, we began to drift apart. By the time I was nine, the age when I acquired the kittens, I had begun to re-bond with my mother, largely through my schoolwork and our mutual love of reading, and I felt less easy, more in awe, around him.

Although he was usually very congenial, when he got irritated, upset, pissed off, he could be very stern and short-tempered, especially if he were working on something frustrating. So, when I approached him in the tire shop I waited patiently and watched until he had wrestled a threadbare old tire from its wheel rim with two tire irons and a rubber mallet, pried and hammered a new tire onto the rim, and was in the last stages of inflating the tube inside the tire.

“Dad, you know those kittens we have?”

“You mean the ones you brought home? Sure.” He was bent down over the tire, and, although all his attention appeared to be focused on the valve stem of the tire as he watched for intransigent air bubbles to form beneath the foam cap of spit he had transferred from his mouth via his finger-tip to the tip of the valve stem, he had caught my subtle attempt to share ownership of the sick-kitten problem and had lain it squarely back in my hands.
“Yeah, well they’re really sick and I can’t take care of them anymore. Dad, could you get rid of them for me? They’re just too sick.” I tried to keep the whine from creeping into my voice. He didn’t like whining.

He didn’t say anything immediately. He screwed the cap onto the valve stem, made a mark on the side wall with a piece of chalk and rolled the tire over to the shop wall, where he leaned it against another tire on which he had patched the inner tube. With his sleeve he wiped his forehead above his wire-rim GI glasses and pulled an olive drab grease rag from the hip pocket of his gray striped overalls. As he rubbed his hands with the rag he looked down at me. I didn’t think he was angry, but I knew from the look on his face and the long silence, that he was not looking forward to the next task.

“Go into the storage room and find a cardboard box big enough to hold the box the kittens are in. And make sure it has a lid that closes.”

I brought the box around to the back steps of the house, put it down beside the box of miserable mewing kittens and set them, box and all, into the larger box. Dad came out of the house with a gunnysack in one hand and a long blanket-wrapped bundle in the other. He tossed the sack onto the front seat and carefully laid the bundle in the bed of the pickup. He picked up the double box of kittens and placed them in the back beside the bundle.

“What’s in the blanket, Dad?”

“The 4.10.” I knew from his clipped answer not to ask any more questions about the 4.10.

We drove wordlessly along the straight stretch of highway past the Idaho Power substation on the right, past the county highway’s sand and gravel piles on the left. We turned onto the bumpy gravel road that led to the town dump. Though there were no written or enforced rules about where to toss your trash at the dump, a rough kind of order had developed over time. Old tires were piled here, faded and torn couches and chairs over there, piles of glass shard—green, brown, clear—had formed at various places along the road. Ringer-type washing machines, electric ranges, and old ice boxes with chipped enamel sat rusting together, some of them with wires and hoses trailing out like robot entrails, leading to where their salvageable motors and copper wire coils had been cut loose by enterprising recyclers.

The gravel road had turned to a winding two-track dirt road before either of us spoke.

“Why are we coming to the dump, Dad?”
“We have a job to do here.”

“You mean the kittens?” I knew without asking. But I didn’t know any details and he wasn’t ready to offer any yet.

“Yes, the kittens.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“They’re your responsibility, Son. I’ll show you how, but you need to take care of this yourself. This is part of what it means to be a man.” As we came to a stop, part of the dust cloud that had arisen behind us settled onto the back and side windows.

“Can’t we just leave them here? I don’t want to kill them.”

“Now listen, I’m not going to tell you again. You know they are in pain and starving. They will never get well. It’s cruel to let them go on suffering if you are able to do anything about it. And you are old enough to do this yourself.” He opened his door and stepped out.

For a long time I was unable to speak. I knew he was right. I allowed myself to wish for a moment that I had never brought them home, but let that thought pass away as a pointless distraction. As I slid across the seat to the open door I picked up the gunny sack that had lain between us.

“OK. What do I do?” I sighed.

By the time I climbed out of the truck, he had set the box on the ground. They were scratching softly on the inner walls and mewing pitifully. He produced a pocketknife from his pocket, opened it, and rubbed his thumb across the blade checking for sharpness.

“Close the lid and hold the box steady.” Resting one knee on the ground, he cut a two inch round hole in the upper corner of the box.

“OK, Son.” He pointed toward the back end of the pickup. “You can push the end of the exhaust pipe into this hole and the fumes will asphyxiate them. It will take a few minutes and they will scratch and cry a while before they die.” A heaviness settled into my chest. I looked longingly down the dirt road toward the highway.

He continued, “Or we could put them in the gunny sack and you can shoot them with the 4.10. It’ll be quicker than the exhaust, but you’ll have to aim carefully.”
I don’t know what persuaded me to choose the 4.10, but I lifted each of the kittens into the sack and while I was tying the top closed, Dad came over with the 4.10 in one hand and three shotgun shells in the other. He took the sack and placed it against the side of a dirt mound about 25 to 30 feet away. He explained that, as the buckshot come out of the barrel, they spread apart. The farther you were back, the larger the pattern of shot and the more likely you were to hit your target, but if you stood too far back, you might only wound, not kill what you were shooting at.

He cracked the gun open, pushed a cylindrical, red paper-walled shell into the back of the barrel, closed it up and handed it to me. It was much heavier than I expected—much heavier than my BB gun. I hoisted it to my shoulder and pressed my cheek down against the wooden stock, looking through the sighting notch, along the barrel, past the small bead sight at the tip. I watched the gunny sack shift shape for a second, then squeezed the trigger, as he had shown me. The explosion slammed against my shoulder, knocking me backward to the ground. By the time I was up again, Dad had grabbed the gun from my hands and had loaded and fired twice more. Then we waited; watching through the wisps of gray sulfur smoke until we were certain the sack was not moving. I sat in the truck rubbing my sore shoulder while he dug a hole and buried them at the base of the mound.

The ride back home went quickly. We didn’t talk. I thought about asking Dad if it was a sin to kill a suffering animal and where he thought animals and people went after they died, but I decided not to. When we got to the highway I rolled down my window and put my head far enough out to feel the wind in my face.

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His strong, work-hardened muscles seemed to have melted away beneath his skin leaving it stretched tight, gray-blue, over the long bones and round joints of his arms and legs. The cancer had spread gradually through his body—from his colon to his lungs to his liver to his bones. Last night it transmuted his speech and melted his smile, leaving him a hollow reed, a plaintive monotone pleading for relief from the deep, pervasive pain.

From the high pillow propping up his head, he fixed his gaze on me again, expectant. It had been only five minutes since the last dose of morphine. I slipped my hand from beneath his and drew up another half
milliliter from the small brown bottle the hospice nurse had left for us. I squeezed the dropper bulb slowly, placing each of the ten drops behind his lower gum beneath his tongue, as she had described. I stroked his forehead for a few minutes, until his eyes closed. Then I sat, holding his hand, listening to the air rattle in and out through his gaping mouth, and waiting.

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