
The Dreamcatcher Trilogy · Volume Two

The
Squirrel
Behind
the Tree

S H A R O N K A Y E

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Formula to live your dream: 1. Be bold.
2. Begin now. 3. No exceptions.

— *William James*

I am a killer.

Don't judge me—because so are you.

You probably just haven't thought about it as much as I have. I've been thinking about it a lot lately.

First there's all the really little stuff—the dust mites and the bacteria that I kill without even knowing it, just by living. Excuse me for living! I can't even live without killing stuff.

But then there are the mosquitoes and other insects that I deliberately—and even gleefully—kill whenever I'm the slightest bit annoyed by them.

Next the chickens, turkeys, cows, and pigs come marching in. How many of them by now? Hundreds? Maybe thousands. Oh, I never kill those directly, but I eat them—with relish, on a regular basis. I therefore conspire in their killing. It's indirect, but that doesn't make it any better—just more cowardly because I don't have to get my hands dirty. I sometimes try to picture myself cutting the throat of a chicken and plucking it myself. Not sure whether or not I could do it. Probably I could. I've done as much to a fish before.

Because I'm a killer.

And so are you. But have you ever killed a cat before? Me neither. But I did try once. And that's where this whole story begins.

PART I. THE JOURNEY

C H A P T E R O N E

I fully intended to do it. I planned it out and made a good effort. But I botched the job—which makes me, not just a killer, but an incompetent one. Apparently, I didn't quite have what it takes. Does that make me better or worse as a person?

Oh, I'm not some kind of sadist or something. Not at all. I never *want* to hurt anything. I certainly had no desire to hurt the cat. It's just that I needed to get rid of her, and killing seemed to be the only way. Does that seem excessively cold?

I mean, if it was a rat, you'd just give it some poison, and that would be the end of it.

And by the way, my cat is a *killer* killer. She kills mice and chipmunks and baby squirrels—just for fun.

“Welcome to Doc Brady's Office. May I help you?”

“Hi. Just a question. I have a cat who needs to be...um, eliminated. How much does it cost to...you know...”

“Euthanize?”

“Yes.”

“It depends on whether you want the body back for home burial, or a group cremation, or an individual cremation with memorial ashes.”

“I see. Um, I’ll have to think about that and come back.”

The cat was my cat. She was a good cat—very pretty, actually. She was what you call a “dilute tortoiseshell” because she had interesting brown and gray stripes. And she was affectionate, particularly when she was hungry. That’s what made me realize that maybe it was time for her to go.

She came to me from the woods. I didn’t ask for her. On the other hand, I didn’t shoo her away either, like my parents told me I should.

“Don’t you dare feed that evil creature,” my mother warned.

But I didn’t listen. Well, I heard what she said, but then I made my own choice.

The cat would come and sit on the back porch where I was reading, silently waiting for me to look up and make eye contact with those glossy black eyes, intense and knowing. Then she would start purring.

That cat had the loudest purr I’ve ever heard. She didn’t meow much, but she really knew how to purr. I imagined that maybe she was speaking to me in her own feline way, saying we could be friends.

I started secretly bringing scraps of meat and cheese out for her. She was scared of me at first, not wanting me to touch her. But after about a week, I got to where I could pet

her. She taught me how to scratch her behind the ears the way she liked.

Sometimes she would find me when I was walking in the woods. She would follow me at a distance, watching, wanting me to see that she was watching. Or she would run up from behind me at an angle and cut me off, almost tripping me, as though to be sure I would notice her and how fleet she was. It seemed we were friends—secret friends. And those were good times.

But soon it became clear that she was pregnant, and I had to come clean with my parents.

“Seriously, John?!” my father roared. “Now you’ve got a real problem.”

A problem, yes—probably the first life-or-death problem I had ever faced. Absurdly, I felt like the guilty boyfriend. How had I gotten myself into this? How was this my fault?

The kittens, seven of them, were born under the back porch, and Morgianna—that’s what I called her, after the heroine of *Ali Baba*—was a real champ, nursing them all in turn with just six nipples. There was one orange tabby, three Persian, two black-and-white, and one dilute tortoiseshell.

Fortunately, the kittens were so beautiful that I was able to give them all away to neighbors and friends who wanted them. It helped that they weaned around Easter. Who doesn’t love an Easter kitten? Morgs was not sentimentally attached to her offspring. In fact, she seemed relieved to go back to being the woodland huntress she loved to be.

But it wasn't long before she was in heat again, doing her telltale belly crawl and yowling hormonally. I was not about to play surrogate father again.

"Control your urges, for crying out loud!" I begged her.

She just looked at me and smiled. Then she yawned and stretched languidly in a patch of sunlight. I rubbed her strong white chin.

"Morgs, you understand that I can't keep feeding you if you're going to keep reproducing."

She returned my gaze levelly, knowing that I would never let her starve.

"I'm leaving soon," I told her. "I'm leaving here for good. And I *cannot* take you with me."

She blinked at me and licked her lips the way she always did when she felt that it was time for me to feed her some scraps—or perhaps a saucer of milk, please, if my mother wasn't home.

I harrumphed defiantly. No, I would never let her starve. But I might just kill her. It would be the humane alternative. Paying someone else was cowardly and not affordable. I'd do it myself.

I knew how to do it; I'd heard of it being done. You trap the cat in a burlap sack with a brick, and then you throw the sack in the river.

Well, I didn't have a burlap sack or a river handy, but I had a brick and an old sheet. I thought the sheet would be

easier anyhow, since it would be hard to get a cat in a sack but not hard at all to get a cat to sit and eat bits of fish on an old sheet while you quietly gather up the edges around her.

Our big rain barrel was half-full of water. I used a bucket to fill it more from another rain barrel. It started leaking through two cracks toward the top, but I figured three-quarters full was enough.

And it would have been, too, if I had done a better job of knotting the sheet shut. I figured I'd just tie the corners together. Well, try doing that with a cat inside.

When I made the first tie, the animal inside froze. It was as though there was nothing in my sack but a brick and a cat-sized pillow or something. Then suddenly she went nuts.

I guess that's when I started shaking. I was in a hurry to get her in the barrel and close the lid. I figured she could kick all she wanted then. So I dropped the sack in before it was really tied tight, and she kicked it off of her. She must have, anyway. I didn't watch. I shut the lid. But before I could get out of earshot, I heard her call me. It was an eerie, low, throaty moan, almost like she was trying to call my name: "Johhhhhh."

I had to open the lid and see what was going on. If she was able to keep her head above water, it was never going to work. Can cats swim? I had no idea.

But once I opened the lid and saw her drowning in there, I didn't even think. I tipped the barrel as fast as I could. She came spilling out with the deluge of water, soaking wet and

wide-eyed like I'd never seen her before. Like a smear of paint on canvas, she took off into the woods.

I figured I'd never see her again. She'd get sick and die a slow, painful death, thanks to me. Or she'd go find some other human—a decent one—to support her and her infinite brood.

But she did come back, waiting for me at the back door that afternoon, purring and showing me how dry she'd gotten herself. I was so happy to see her that I almost cried.

“No hard feelings, Morgianna? How is that possible? I just tried to kill you.” I crouched down and reached out a hand so she could rub her cheeks against it.

Animals try to kill one another all the time. I guess it's just no big deal to them. I pictured Morgianna shaking hands with a mouse she'd been chasing around and torturing all day long. No hard feelings.

But did she even know? Probably not. It occurred to me that she might think I actually saved her from some random, incomprehensible accident.

As I stood, Morgianna rubbed up against my leg, annoyingly shedding fur on my pants. “I just tried to kill you, Morgs. You shouldn't like me, okay? No one should. I'm a heartless killer.”

C H A P T E R T W O

The incident with Morgianna would not have been so bad if it had been an isolated confrontation with the killer inside me. If it had happened to you, you probably would have shrugged it off—chalked it up to a lousy day, the stress of modern existence, temporary insanity.... You'd probably donate some money to your local animal shelter and then forget about it.

But it *wouldn't* have happened to you. It wouldn't have happened to just anyone. It happened to me for a reason. It's because I'm actually not just a killer but a murderer—a killer of my own kind.

At least, I think I am. I've come to believe it. The incident with Morgianna merely confirms my suspicions.

My name is John Dewey. I live in Burlington, Vermont. I grew up in a small house with my parents and three brothers. I had a completely ordinary childhood, except for the death of one of my brothers. Even that was nothing out of the ordinary. Accidents happen. People die. And that was in 1859, before the Civil War.

However, my dead brother's name was John Dewey, too. Nine months to the day after his death, my mother gave birth

to me and gave me the same name. One day, when I was about seven years old, I learned all about it.

“Mother, I found a stone in the back field with my name on it.”

“Yes, my son. That is a gravestone.”

“You mean someone who died is buried there?”

“Yes, John. *You* are buried there. The first you.”

“What!?” I felt my jaw drop. “What do you mean?”

My mother laid her rag on the counter and knelt down in front of me so that we were eye to eye. Then she spoke the words she had clearly been rehearsing in her head for a long time. “This is how it is, John. You were born for the first time in 1856. The devil got hold of you and tried to drag you down into the fiery pits of hell, but God has a special destiny for you. So he saved your soul and sent you right back.”

After saying this, she hugged me tightly and wept. I didn’t have the courage to ask her anything more about it.

Sometime later, when I dared to ask my father about it, he said that my brother fell into the fireplace and died of severe burns, but he wouldn’t quite look me in the eye. I wanted to believe him; I didn’t want to believe my mother.

Finally, my older brother Davis confessed to me that he was there the day the first John Dewey died and saw exactly what happened. Our brother started talking to himself. Then he started shouting at himself and knocking his head against the wall. Then he dove into the fireplace. He caught on fire

quickly because he was already wrapped in oiled bandages from previous burns.

“Mother barely managed to smother him in a blanket before he caught the house on fire,” Davis said. “The house was saved, but it was too late for him.”

The net effect of all of these reports is that I have grown up with the disturbing sensation that *I somehow killed the first version of myself*. Whether this counts as suicide or homicide, I don’t really know. But it makes me a murderer one way or another. And it left me wondering what “destiny” was so special that God saw fit to make me have another go at it.

“You are a very gifted boy, John Dewey,” my mother would tell me. “God has chosen you to play an important part in his grand plan.”

So I ask you, dear reader: Do *you* feel that you have a special destiny? Do you feel that you are somehow necessary to the right unfolding of history?

I do. And let me tell you: it’s not the greatest feeling in the world. It’s actually an enormous elephant sitting on my shoulders, this feeling that I’m supposed to do something important, especially since I don’t have any idea what I’m supposed to do.

I suppose it would be worse to feel purposeless—like I were some random flash in the pan, an accidental, inessential lump of flesh that moves around pointlessly for a few years and then rots in the ground. That would be much worse. Because then I really might wonder, *Why not just dive into*

the fireplace and get it over with? But to have an important, God-given, purpose? It really has a way of getting a person out of bed in the morning. As a matter of fact, I think it might be related to my recent conflict with Morgianna. When you're on an important mission and something is standing in your way, you don't hesitate to get rid of that thing, whatever it is.

I'm tired of waiting around to find out what I'm supposed to be doing. It's time for me to start doing it.

High school was a hideous waste of time. It very nearly bored me into a coma, which is why I graduated at fifteen and moved on to the University of Vermont. Unfortunately, college wasn't much better. So many facts and formulas to memorize. All for what? Who knew? Not me. I gravitated toward a career as a high school teacher, simply because I knew I could do a much better job than any of the teachers I'd ever had. Meanwhile, my true destiny remained unclear. Finally, last week, I went to see Professor Perkins about it.

G.H. Perkins was my biology professor at the University of Vermont. His classes were the only ones in my entire education that I actually enjoyed. It isn't so much that I can see myself becoming a scientist—I don't have the patience for measuring and counting things—but I've fallen in love with the scientific method.

It's the idea of relentless inquiry. You open your eyes and observe the world. You see something puzzling. You make a hypothesis. You test the hypothesis. If you prove it