

How To Spend Nine Lives

1. Be the only kitten from your litter to approach the toddler who comes to visit your farm. She likes the look of your siblings better—they're orange and striped, like Garfield, and this excites her—but if you come right up to her and let her pick you up, she'll be charmed. She will pass you around her family to make sure that you like them, too: be friendly. Tolerate her attempts to make you pretty with a My Little Pony brush the whole car ride home.

Spent your first life playing in the yard with your new girl. Climb to the top of the rhododendron bush and watch as she tries to follow you. The higher branches won't support her weight, but that won't stop her from trying. Run around the garden with her, and watch her catch white butterflies in her net.

She has clumsy hands and a strong conviction that what she wants is also what is best for you, so be sure to set clear boundaries when she tries to tug on your tail.

Your first life will end when your girl's father gives you over-the-counter flea medicine. (This will be a recurring theme: they will force medicine upon you many times and you will never be able to do anything to stop them, no matter how insistently you shake your head.) This medicine will make you very sick, just as you suspected. Do not panic: just be the fighter that you know you are. By the time you're better, your girl's father will like you almost as much as she does.

Spent your second life curled on his lap in his shed, the fireplace glowing.

2. Your second life will end one evening when you are sleeping in that very shed. Your girl's father will unwittingly close you in for two days. Do not panic. Your girl will panic when you do not return home for your dinner, but you will not be able to answer her when she calls for you. Eventually,

her father will find you and let you out. Forgive him: it will never happen again.

Spend your third life venturing farther and farther from home. Explore the ravine, the woods, and the railroad tracks. Stay away from the road, especially during the day.

Don't worry too much when your family acquires a puppy: she is blind and therefore cannot catch you. Your girl's parents say that she looks like a drowned rat, all skinny with little stick legs and a long snout, and you will agree. Watch from the shrubs when your girl brings the new puppy outside; there's nothing quite like watching a blind dog play tag.

3. Your third life will end when your girl's father has the audacity to take you to the vet. Doesn't he remember what happened last time you received medical attention? Don't worry: escape will be easy, since he doesn't want to put you in a crate and will instead opt to take you using only a towel and a leash. You will have to find your way the 2.1 miles back home.

Your fourth life won't really begin until you finally saunter down the sidewalk one afternoon seven weeks later. Your girl will shriek; tolerate this, because it will be followed by an hour of petting. Lecture her for her foolishness, and then tell her all about your trip. Meow at her until your voice is hoarse.

You are now significantly more familiar with the neighborhood, but you should spend your fourth life being a bit more cautious about where you stray.

4. Your fourth life will end violently. Your people will never find out for sure what happened to you, but they will have their suspicions: your girl's father tells her one afternoon when she gets home from the second grade that you were hit by a car. Later, she will suspect that one of the frat boys in the neighborhood took a baseball bat to your face. Her father spends an agonizing amount of time each day nursing you back to health when you return from the vet. He places you on the window seat indoors and feeds you nasty medication with an eyedropper, making completely sure that each dose goes down. You'll need to be more careful from now on: one of your eyes is useless to you from that point on, and your jaw will be a little

crooked for the rest of your life. Your girl tells you that you are handsome anyway. Believe her: these features give you character.

Spend your fifth life learning to hunt with one eye. You will notice a marked lack of rodents inside their home, so it will be your responsibility to leave your catches on the doorstep. Bats are a fantastic choice: your girl's mother will be so excited when she sees them lying on the sidewalk that she will scream.

5. Your fifth life will end when you get a kidney infection. Your girl, a third grader now, won't be able to sleep when she realizes that she could lose you for real, this time. She will sit solemnly in the garden petting you one afternoon, watching the white butterflies go past. A religious child, she will try to make a deal with God: if he doesn't take her kitty so soon, she'll never catch one of those white butterflies again as long as she lives. With or without divine intervention, the medicine will do its job this time. Take it, just this once. Your girl will keep her promise (for the most part), and the kidney infection will never come back.

Spend your sixth life sleeping in the sun and keeping a careful eye on the feral cats that the neighbor has invited to his property. You can swat at them when they try to take your food, but eventually, the frat houses will abandon a few cats (since nobody wants to take them home for the summer) and you will no longer be able to chase them from your territory.

6. Your sixth life will be lost over time: the battles that leave scars on your ears, the white hairs that scatter through your pelt like tiny constellations, the winter nights you spend in the shed wishing that your girl's father was still around to light the fire, the times when it storms and you hide somewhere your girl cannot find you, no matter how many times she circles the house in the violent wind and thunder calling your name and begging you to come inside—each of these will chip away at you until you find that you are worn and old.

Spend your seventh life with your girl. She is older, now, a tenth grader, and one day she will come home from a hospital visit and take it upon herself to keep you as comfortable as she can in your old age. She will bring you inside to feed you wet food and read a few chapters of *Pet Sematary* out loud to you as you cuddle on the couch. (She will think that she's hilarious,

and you should humor her.) Nag her to keep petting you: insist that she use both of her hands and become immediately indignant every time she removes one from your head to turn the page. Sniff her idle hand with your cold, wet nose, and ignore her teasing.

She'll cry a lot the first day: purr and purr until she stops, and then keep purring just in case. She won't go to school much that year, so it will be your job to keep her company. Often, she will sit on the bottom step in the foyer and hold the can between her shoes while you eat, because you push the can around with your snout when she doesn't hold it still. On days like this, spend at least an hour in her lap after you are done eating, just to make sure she doesn't get lonely. Don't be afraid to tell her to leave if you get tired, though: a gentle bite to her hand (or face, or ear, or arm) is the best way to do this.

Your girl will joke sometimes that she'd hate to see what you'd look like post-Semetary, since an all-black cat with one eye and a slightly crooked jaw is something out of a Stephen King novel even without the "undead" angle, but you should choose to ignore this. (She and her mother will take to calling you Handsome; decide that this is a more honest assessment of your appearance.)

7. Your seventh life will end when you develop a heart murmur. Your girl will take you to a checkup and they will tell her this. It will be the first time since your kidney infection she will really realize that all those years of stubborn survival aren't actually indicative of immortality.

Spend your eighth life taking it easy. You've earned it. Curl up in the dirty laundry on the floor in your girl's room, get cozy in a nest of towels in the bathroom closet, bother your girl's brother for treats, meow insistently at your girl's mother when you haven't been fed: you have spent thirteen years catching rodents to feed these humans and the least they can do is make sure you don't starve.

The blind, rat-like puppy (now a blind, decidedly less rat-like dog) will be mostly unaware of your existence. Fix this by hissing loudly at her every time she so much as sniffs in your direction. This will baffle her (and also give away your position), but it will also tell her that you are fully prepared to fight her should she try to corner and befriend you. Sometimes, she will be completely oblivious to your presence until you take it upon yourself to

threaten her and speed off down the basement stairs, but remember that this process is necessary. Dogs are inherently untrustworthy.

8. Your eighth life will end when your girl leaves you for two long months. Look for her every day, just in case. Do not panic when you can't find her: her mother won't let you starve, so long as she remembers you are there. To be safe, remind her of your existence by meowing incessantly the instant you start to think about maybe becoming hungry. When your girl returns home, greet her with the loudest, most plaintive meow you have ever managed. Berate her for a little while, but forgive her: she missed you, too.

Spend your ninth life sleeping in the window seat and wishing she would come home more often, since she is back at school now and spends all of her time there. Claw her ankles to get her attention if she walks past you without saying hello. You will no longer have the patience to wait for her to come see you, so sneak up to her room and wake her by climbing into her bed. Breathe in her face for an hour so that she can't sleep, and put your cold wet nose on her hands and in the crook of her neck when she stops petting you. She will keep her door closed at night from that point on, but it will have been worth it. You won't have much time left, now, so you should spend as much of it as you can with her.

When you feel your ninth life ending, remember that it is your last. Your girl will leave for school that morning and will not return until 9:30 PM. Wait for her. She will drop everything when she comes in the front door and sees you lying still on the floor, wrapping you in a blanket and cradling you the best she can while she is slouched against the couch. Her brother will bring milk for you, and a dish of water. Tolerate her attempts to clean your face with a warm washcloth.

You should take your last ten minutes to say goodbye to your girl, and to thank her for all these years of adventure and companionship. She will spend a tearful Sunday morning burying you under the rhododendron.