

There Is Only One Way To Skin a Cat

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"We could get the skeleton of a bobcat."

"Where are we going to get a bobcat? They're not that easy to find, especially a dead one with no bones broken," Tom said, sarcastically.

"Well, we gotta do something! The project is due Monday!" Carlos closed the book on dinosaurs and placed it beside him. "We could get an alley cat. Yea," he added, enthusiastically. "We could get a big alley cat, leave the tail off and say it's a small bobcat."

Tom stood up and faced Carlos who was sitting on the steps and shook his head, "Sister Geralda would know. She knows everything. I think the skeleton of a plain cat would be impressive, especially compared to the other stuff they have in the glass case."

"I don't know that eight foot rattlesnake skin is pretty impressive."

"That'll be nothing compared to a mounted skeleton!"

"Yea, let's get us a cat."

"Do you think we oughta ask her for a pet or do we just take one?" Tom asked.

"We'd better ask. She's kinda weird, and she might have a shotgun."

"Well, you ask."

"No. You do."

"We'll flip." Tom flipped the coin, Carlos called it and lost. Bravely, Carlos tucked his shirt in and walked to Mrs. Cantu's front door with Tom right behind him. Carlos hesitated a moment, then knocked.

"Don't tell her what's it for."

"Of course not," Carlos whispered, slightly irritated. He knocked once more and was about to turn away when suddenly the door flew open. There stood Mrs. Cantu, behind the screen door, tall and lean and with a frown on her face.

"Yes?" she said, sternly.

"M-Mrs. Cantu, uh, you have a lot of cats, don't you?"

"They are not my cats. They are stray cats that no one takes care of, and I feed them." Her tone was not at all friendly.

"Mrs. Cantu, I wonder if I-I could have one." Her expression changed immediately, she even smiled. This was the first time he had ever seen her smile.

"Oh, you boys want a pet," she said, somewhat surprised.

"Yes ma'am," Carlos said.

"Why, sure. Come on in boys." She opened the screen door and ushered them in. "Cats make very good pets. They're clean, quiet and useful. I'm never bothered by rats or mice." She lead the boys through the house and into the backyard. The moment they stepped out, the cats scattered like roaches in every direction. "One of the cats," she continued, "had kittens a few weeks ago. They're usually under the house."

"We prefer a big one," Carlos quickly added.

"A kitten would be better."

"We need a big one," Carlos said.

"Yes, to catch mice," Tom added.

"Oh, very well. You boys go inside and I'll get you a big one." The boys stepped inside and soon she was surrounded by cats. She picked up a big, yellow tom cat and brought him into the house. "I think he'll make a fine pet," she said. "But, you'll have to keep him indoors for a few days until he gets used to you or he'll come right back."

"Yes, ma'am," Carlos said. She handed the cat to Carlos who, in turn handed it to Tom.

"Now you boys take good care of him."

"Yes, ma'am, we'll take good care of him." Carlos felt terrible, but science sometimes requires sacrifices.

The moment they entered Carlos' yard, Wimpy protested the presence of a cat. The cat was not fond of Wimpy. Wimpy barked and jumped at the cat. The cat hissed, meowed and tried to scratch his way to freedom.

"Get the dog out of here!" Tom screamed.

"Go away, Wimpy!" The boys ran to the backyard with the dog at Tom's heels.

"Do something, will ya?" Carlos grabbed Wimpy by the collar and pulled him next to the house. The dog beat Carlos to the scene.

"Do something, the cat is scratching the hell out of me," Tom yelled.

"What can I do?"

"Kill him. Chinneeee! Hurry!"

"The dog?"

"No! The cat!" Carlos knew the cat had to be dead before they got the skeleton, but he had never considered that they'd have to kill it or even figured how they would do it. He looked around for a weapon. He picked up a brick, but that wouldn't do -- it might break a bone. A gun wouldn't do -- for the same reason and he didn't have one. Carlos ran the perimeter of the yard several times, but he couldn't find anything -- his mind was blank. All this time Tom was standing on a bench struggling with the cat and keeping the dog at bay.

"Do something," Tom yelled. "We have to kill this cat!"

"How?"

"I don't know. But hurry! I can't hold on much longer. A knife! Get a knife."

Carlos took out his pocket knife and approached Tom and the cat. He started to knife the cat, but he couldn't do it. He had killed frogs, lizards and birds before, but never at close quarters and nothing this big. Tom let the cat go.

"Why did ya hold up for?" he asked, angrily. "You and that damn dog almost had me killed."

"I didn't want to get blood all over your clothes."

"I already have blood all over my clothes -- mine!" This was an exaggeration, of course. He had some bad scratches on his hands, arms, around the neck and on his right cheek, but none of them were bleeding profusely. "I think you were just too chicken to kill the cat," he continued. "I think you better do a different project -- like picking flowers -- and I'll do my own."

"No, I think this is a good project. We just didn't think it out, and we weren't ready. Using a knife was too crude." "Well, this time you hold the cat." "This is a science project, so we have to be scientific."

Carlos was sitting at his desk with a pencil and paper and Tom was sitting on the bed. "First, we'll need a cat and we know where we can get one," Carlos said aloud and wrote it on the paper. "We'll need some bait for the cat and..." "And an old coat and gloves to hold the cat," Tom interjected. "Right. Now, how are we going to kill the cat without breaking any bones and not hurting him too much?" "We could put him in a sack and drown him." "No. That's not scientific." "How about choking him?" "Na. I once read that if you take a person's blood out, he just goes to sleep and dies without feeling any pain." "You mean stab the cat." "No! I know. We'll get some disposable plastic syringes -- there's always some in the trash can behind the doctor's office. I got it! And this will help in catching the cat. I'll get some ether from the druggist and a piece of cotton. We'll put the cat to sleep and then just take the blood out." "Right," Tom said. His enthusiasm returned. "I'll get the coat and gloves and you go --" "Just a minute," Carlos said, "we haven't planned this all the way. We have to be ready for everything." "Like what?" "Well, for one, we have to fix a place up in the woods to do the operation. We can't do it here -- with Wimpy around. And there are a lot of other things."

About a hundred yards from the house, underneath a big hackberry tree, Tom and Carlos set up their laboratory. A wooden box draped with a white towel served as a workbench. On and around it were all the items they needed for the project. With a clipboard and a pencil in his hands Carlos started to call out the items. "Hammer -- one each." "We got everything we need," Tom said. "You know we got everything." "That's not the scientific way. We have to make sure we didn't overlook anything. I'm going to call out the items and you pick them up and say 'check'." "Oh, okay." "Hammer -- one each." "Check." "Nails -- three each." "Check." "Shovel -- one each." "Check." "Ether -- one bottle each." "Check." "Cotton -- one box each." "Check. What's the 'one each' for?" "I don't know. That's the way it's done." "Syringes -- three each." "Check." "Razor blades -- two each." "Check." "Bucket with water -- two each." "Check." "Coat hanger wire -- four each." "Check." "Coat --" "Check, check, check. I got them on. Let's go. We're wasting time."

Things went a lot smoother this time. As soon as Tom caught the cat, Carlos placed the piece of cotton soaked in ether on its nose and soon the cat lay limp in his hands. With the victim asleep, they ran to their laboratory and placed him on the workbench.

Carlos could hear Wimpy barking safely at a distance, but he ignored it. He quickly got the syringe, wiped the needle with a piece of cotton, and inserted it into the neck of the cat, where the jugular vein is supposed to be. He slowly withdrew the plunger. Nothing came out -- not one drop of blood! Taking out the needle, he searched for the vein with his hands. He felt nothing but the soft furry neck -- He couldn't even find the

puncture where the needle had gone in before. A second, a third and a fourth insertion and all with the same result -- no blood. He was beginning to panic.

"It's waking up!" Tom yelled.

Carlos dropped the syringe and grabbed the ether bottle and some cotton. Just as Tom lifted and held the cat that was beginning to show signs of life, Wimpy crashed through the underbrush dragging a long rope with a faucet and part of a pipe tied to the end of it. In two bounds, the dog was in their midst jumping toward the cat. Tom, who was no longer wearing the coat, lifted the cat high above his head and away from Wimpy and started running around Carlos with the dog at his heels.

"Get the dog! Get the dog!" Tom yelled.

The rope trailing behind Wimpy wrapped around Carlos' ankles and pulled his feet out from under him. In trying to break his fall, Carlos spilled the ether on himself and on the ground. With his feet as an anchor on one end and an insane dog on the other, the rope swept through the "laboratory" knocking everything in its path; boxes, clipboards, towels, buckets of water.

The first part of the cat that became fully alert were the claws. Just as Carlos disentangled the rope from around his ankles, the claws dug deeply into Tom's bare forearm. With a howl, Tom dropped the cat and it quickly disappeared into the woods. With a sudden lunge, Wimpy pulled free and chased the cat with the rope, pipe and faucet trailing behind him.

"Your stupid dog!" Tom picked up a towel and gingerly tamped the deep scratches on his forearm. "You should train your dog! I've must've lost a pint of blood today!"

Carlos got up slowly and surveyed the wrecked laboratory. Tom continued muttering complaints then fell silent, perhaps sensing a change in mood.

"I'm not going to do a project this year," Carlos declared.

"It'll hurt your grades."

"I don't care."

They were quiet for a few minutes, then Carlos picked up the clipboard, looked around and tossed it back down. They started walking back to the house. It was when he crossed the fence to the yard that Carlos noticed that he was standing in mud. His eyes quickly followed the muddy trail to a rivulet of water cascading over the embankment from the upper level of the yard. Scampering up the bank, he came to a lake of water. The whole upper level of the yard was flooded and a fountain of water was gushing from the broken pipe where Wimpy had been tied.

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" Carlos ran to the pipe and tried to stem the flow with my hands. Tom, quickly wrapped the towel around the pipe. This slowed the flow but didn't quite stop it.

"What are we going to do? God, what are we going to do, Tom?"

"Get some string so we can tie it!"

"What'll I tell Dad? -- We got to find Wimpy. Maybe we can put it back!" As he dug around the pipe, a small bone washed up. Carlos picked it up and looked at it for a few seconds.

"Tom, maybe we could get the skeleton of a fish. Yea, we could get the skeleton of a shark!"

"Where are we going to get the skeleton of a shark?"

"A shark would be hard, but we could get an alligator-gar. There are plenty of alligator-gars in the river."