

Gordon the Self-Made Cat

by Peter S. Beagle

(From the author's upcoming story collection *The Line Between*)

Once upon a time to a family of house mice there was born a son named Gordon. He looked very much like his father and mother and all his brothers and sisters, who were gray and had bright, twitchy, black eyes, but what went on inside Gordon was very different from what went on inside the rest of his family. He was forever asking why everything had to be the way it was, and never satisfied with the answer. Why did mice eat cheese? Why did they live in the dark and only go out when it was dark? Where did mice come from, anyway? *What were people?* Why did people smell so funny? Suppose mice were big and people were tiny? Suppose mice could fly? Most mice don't ask many questions, but Gordon never stopped.

One evening, when Gordon was only a few weeks old, his next-to-eldest sister was sent out to see if anything interesting had been left open in the pantry. She never returned. Gordon's father shrugged sadly and spread his front paws, and said, "The cat."

"What's a cat?" Gordon asked.

His mother and father looked at one another and sighed. "They have to know sometime," his father said. "Better he learns it at home than on the streets."

His mother sniffled a little and said, "But he's so young," and his father answered, "Cats don't care." So they told Gordon about cats right then, expecting him to start crying and saying that there weren't any such things. It's a hard idea to get used to. But Gordon only asked, "Why do cats eat mice?"

"I guess we taste very good," his father said.

Gordon said, "But cats don't have to eat mice. They get plenty of other food that probably tastes as good. Why should anybody eat anybody if he doesn't have to?"

"Gordon," said his father. "Listen to me. There are two kinds of creatures in the world. There are animals that hunt, and animals that are hunted. We mice just happen to be the kind of animal that gets hunted, and it doesn't really matter if the cat *is* hungry or not. It's the way life is. It's really a great honor to be the hunted, if you just look at it the right way."

"Phooey on that," said Gordon. "Where do I go to learn to be a cat?"

They thought he was joking, but as soon as Gordon was old enough to go places by himself, he packed a clean shirt and some peanut butter, and

started off for cat school. "I love you very much," he said to his parents before he left, "but this business of being hunted for the rest of my life just because I happened to be born a mouse is not for me." And off he went, all by himself.

All cats go to school, you know, whether you ever see them going or not. Dogs don't, but cats always have and always will. There are a great many cat schools, so Gordon found one easily enough, and he walked bravely up the front steps and knocked at the door. He said that he wanted to speak to the Principal.

He almost expected to be eaten right there, but the cats—students and teachers alike—were so astonished that they let him pass through, and one of the teachers took him to the Principal's office. Gordon could feel the cats looking at him, and hear the sounds their noses made as they smelled how good he was, but he held on tight to the suitcase with his shirt and the peanut butter, and he never looked back.

The Principal was a fat old tiger cat who chewed on his tail all the time he was talking to Gordon. "You must be out of your mind," he said when Gordon told him he wanted to be a cat. "I'd smack you up this minute, but it's bad luck to eat crazies. Get out of here! The day mice go to cat school..."

"Why not?" said Gordon. "Is it in writing? Where does it say that I can't go to school here if I want?"

Well, of course there's nothing in the rules of cat schools that says mice can't enroll. Nobody ever thought of putting it in. The Principal folded his paws and said, "Gordon, look at it this way—"

"You look at it *my way*," said Gordon. "I want to be a cat, and I bet I'd make a better one than the dopey-looking animals I've seen in this school. Most of them look as if they wouldn't even make good mice! So let's make a deal. You let me come to school here and study for one term, and if at the end of that time I'm not doing better than any cat in the school—if even one cat has better grades than I have—then you can eat me and that'll be the end of it. Is that fair?"

No cat can resist a challenge like that. But before agreeing, the Principal insisted on one small change: at the end of the term, if Gordon didn't have the very best marks in the school, then the privilege of eating him would go to the cat that did.

"Ought to encourage some of those louts to work harder," the Principal said to himself, as Gordon left his office. "He's crazy, but he's right—most of them wouldn't even make good mice. I almost hope he does it."

So Gordon went to cat school. Every day he sat at his special little desk, surrounded by a hundred kittens and half-grown cats who would have liked nothing better than to leap on him and play games with him for a while before they gobbled him. He learned how to wash himself, and what to do to keep his claws sharp, and how to watch everything in the room while

pretending to be asleep. There was a class on Dealing With Dogs, and another on Getting Down From Trees, which is much harder than climbing up, and also a particularly scholarly seminar on the various meanings of "Bad Kitty!" Gordon's personal favorite was the Visions class, which had to do with the enchanting things all cats can see that no one else ever does—the great, gliding ancestors, and faraway castles, and mysterious forests full of monsters to chase. The Professor of Visions told his colleagues that he had never had such a brilliant student. "It would be a crime to eat such a mouse!" he proclaimed everywhere. "An absolute, shameful, yummy crime."

The class in Mouse-Hunting was a bit awkward at first, because usually the teacher asks one of the students to be the mouse, and in Gordon's case the Principal felt that would be too risky. But Gordon insisted on being chased like everyone else, and not only was he never caught (well, *almost* never; there was one blue Persian who could turn on a dime), but when he took his own turn at chasing, he proved to be a natural expert. In fact his instant mastery of the Flying Pounce caused his teacher and the entire class to sit up and applaud. Gordon took three bows and an encore.

There was also a class where the cats learned the necessities of getting along with people: how to lie in laps, how to keep from scratching furniture even when you feel you have to, what to do when children pick you up, and how to ask for food or affection in such a sweet manner that people call other people to look at you. These classes always made Gordon a little sad. He didn't suppose that he would ever be a real "people" cat, for who would want to hold a mouse on his lap, or scratch it behind the ears while it purred? Still, he paid strict attention in People Class, as he did in all the others, for all the cats knew that whoever did best in school that term would be the one who ate him, and they worked harder than they ever had in their lives. The Principal said that they were becoming the best students in the school's history, and he talked openly about making this a regular thing, one mouse to a term.

When all the marks were in, and all the grades added up, two students led the rankings: Gordon and the blue Persian. Their scores weren't even a whisker's thickness apart. In the really important classes, like Running and Pouncing, Climbing, Stalking, and Waiting For The Prey To Forget You're Still There; and in matters of feline manners such as Washing, Tail Etiquette, The Elegant Yawn, Sleeping in Undignified Positions, and Making Sure You Get Enough Food

Without Looking Greedy (101 *and* 102)—in all of these Gordon and the blue Persian were first, and the rest nowhere. Besides that, both could meow in five different dialects: Persian, Abyssinian, Siamese, Burmese (which almost no cat who isn't Burmese ever learns), and basic tiger.

But there can only be one Top Cat to a term; no ties allowed. In order to decide the matter once and for all between them, the Principal announced that Gordon and the blue Persian would have to face one another in a competitive mouse roundup.

The Persian and Gordon got along quite well, all things considered, so they shook paws—carefully—and the Persian purred, "No hard feelings."

"None at all," Gordon answered. "If anyone here got to eat me, I'd much rather it was you."

"Very sporting of you," the Persian said. "I hope so too."

"But it won't happen," Gordon said.

The blue Persian never had a chance. Once he and Gordon were set on their marks in a populous mouse neighborhood, Gordon ambushed and outsmarted and cornered all but a handful of the very quickest mice, and did it in a style so smooth, so effortlessly elegant—so *catlike*—that the Persian finally threw up his paws and surrendered. In front of the entire faculty and student body of the cat school, he announced, "I yield to Gordon. He's a better cat than I am, and I'm not ashamed to admit it. If all mice were like him, we cats would be vegetarians." (Persians are *very* dramatic.)

The cheering was so wild and thunderous that no one objected in the least when Gordon freed all the mice he had captured. Cats can appreciate a grand gesture, and everyone had already had lunch.

Gordon had won his bet, and, like the blue Persian, the Principal was cat enough to accept it graciously. He scheduled a celebration, which the whole school attended, and at the end of the party he announced that Gordon was now to be considered as much a cat as any student in the school, if not more so. He gave Gordon a little card to show that he was a cat in good standing, and all the students cheered, and Gordon made another speech that began, "Fellow cats..." As he spoke, he wished very much that his parents could be there to see what he had accomplished, and just how different things could be if you just asked questions and weren't afraid of new ideas.

Being acknowledged the best cat in the school didn't make Gordon let up in his studies. Instead, he worked even harder, and did so well that he graduated with the special degree of *felis maximus*, which is Latin for *some cat!* He stayed on at the school to teach a seminar in Evasive Maneuvers, which proved very popular, and a course in the Standing Jump (for a bird that comes flying over when you weren't looking).

The story of his new life spread everywhere among all mice, and grew very quickly into a myth more terrifying than any cat could have been. They whispered of "Gordon the Terrible," "Gordon, the Self-Made Cat," and, simply, "The Unspeakable," and told midnight tales of a gigantic mouse who lashed his tail and sprang at them with his razor claws out and his savage yellow eyes blazing; a mouse without pity who hunted them out in their deepest hiding places, walking without a sound. They believed unquestioningly that he ate mice like gingersnaps, and laughingly handed over to his cat friends those he was too full to devour. There was even a dreadful legend that Gordon had eaten his own family, and that he frequently took kittens from the school on field trips in order to teach them personally the secret mouse ways that no mere cat could ever have known.

These stories made Gordon deeply unhappy when he heard them, because he believed with absolute conviction that what he had achieved was for the good of all mice everywhere. Whether he trapped a lone mouse or cornered a dozen trembling in an attic or behind a refrigerator, he would say the same thing to them: "Look at me. *Look at me!* I am a mouse like you—nothing more, nothing less—and yet I walk with cats every day, and I am not eaten! I am respected, I am admired, I am even powerful among cats—and every one of you could be like me! Do not believe that we mice are born only to be hunted, humiliated, tormented, and finally gobbled up. It is not true! Instead of huddling in the shadows, in constant lifelong terror, pitiful little balls of fur, we too can be sleek, fierce hunters, fearing nothing and no one. Run now and spread the word! You must spread the word!"

Saying that, he would step back and let the mice scatter, hoping each time that they would finally understand what he was trying to show them. But it simply never happened. The mice always scurried away, convinced that they had escaped only by great good fortune, and myths and legends of the terrible Self-Made Cat were all that spread among them, growing ever more horrifying, ever more chilling. It didn't matter that not one mouse had ever actually seen Gordon doing any of the frightful things he was supposed to have done. That's the way it is with legends.

Now it happened that Gordon was walking down the street one day, on his way to a faculty meeting, padding along like a leopard, twitching his tail like a lion, and making the eager little noises in his throat that a tiger makes when he smells food. Quite suddenly an enormous shadow fell across his path, so big that he looked up to see if he were going through a tunnel.

What he saw was a dog. What he actually saw was a leg, for this dog was huge, too big for even a full-grown cat to have understood his real size without looking twice. The dog rumbled, "Oh, goody! I love mice. Lots of phosphorus in mice. Yummy."

Gordon crouched, tail lashing, and lifted the fur along his spine. "Watch it, dog," he said warningly. "Don't mess with me, I'm telling you."

"Oh, how cute," the dog said. "He's playing he's a cat. I'm a cat too. Meow."

"I *am* a cat!" Gordon arched his back until it ached, hissing and spitting and growling in his throat, all more or less at the same time. "I *am!* You want to see my card? Look, right here."

"A crazy," the dog said wonderingly. "They say it's bad luck to eat a crazy. Good thing I'm not superstitious."

Having given the proper First Warning, exactly as he'd been taught, Gordon moved quickly to the Second—the lightning-swift slash of the right paw across the nose. Gordon had to leap straight up to reach the dog's big wet

nose, but even with that handicap, he executed the Second Warning in superb style.

Instead of yelping and retreating in a properly humbled state, however, the dog only sneezed.

This, Gordon thought, is the difference between theory and practice.

But there was a reason that Gordon's seminar in Evasive Maneuvers was always so well attended. With astonishing daring, he went directly from the Second Warning right into the Fourth Avoidance, which involves a double feint—head looking *this* way, tail jerking *that* way—followed by a quick, threatening charge directly at the attacker, and *then* a leap to the side, which, done correctly, leaves one perfectly poised either for escape or the Flying Pounce, depending on the situation.

But the big dog had no idea that a classic Evasive Maneuver had just been performed upon him, leaving him looking like an idiot. He was used to looking like an idiot. He gave a delighted bounce, wuffed, "Tag—you're it!" and went straight for Gordon, who responded by going up a tree with the polished grace that always left his students too breathless to cheer. He found a comfortable branch and rested there, thinking ruefully that a real cat wouldn't have been so proud of being a cat as to waste time arguing about it.

The dog sat down too, grinning. "Be a bird now," he called to Gordon. "Let's see you be a bird and fly away."

Normally, Gordon could easily have stayed up in the tree longer than the dog felt like waiting below, but he was tired and rather thirsty, not to mention annoyed at the thought of being late for the faculty meeting. Something had to be done. But what?

He was bravely considering an original plan of leaping straight down at the dog, when three young mice happened along. They had been out shopping for their mother. They were really very young, and as they had never seen Gordon the Terrible—though they had heard about him since they were blind babies—they didn't know who it was in the tree.

All they saw was a fellow mouse in danger, and, being at the age when they didn't know any better than to do things like that, they carefully put down their packages and began luring the dog away from the tree. First one mouse would rush in at him and make the dog chase him a little way, and then another would come scampering from somewhere else, so that the dog would leave off chasing the first mouse and go after him.

The dog, who was actually quite good-natured, and not very hungry, had a fine time running after them all. He followed them farther and farther away from the tree, and had probably forgotten all about Gordon by the time the Unspeakable was able to spring down from the tree and vanish into the bushes.

Gordon would have waited to thank the three mice, but they had disappeared, along with the dog. Anxious not to miss his meeting, he

dashed back to the school, slowing down before he got there to catch his breath and smooth his whiskers. "It could happen to anyone," he told himself. "There's nothing to be ashamed of." Yet there was something fundamentally troubling to Gordon about having run away. Feeling uncertain for the first time since he had marched up the front steps, he washed himself all over and stalked on into the school, outwardly calm and proud, the best cat anyone there would ever see, Gordon the Terrible, the Unspeakable—yes, the Self-Made Cat.

But another cat—the Assistant Professor of Tailchasing, in fact—had seen the whole incident, and had already interrupted the faculty meeting with the shocking tale.

The Principal tried to brush the news aside. "When it's time to climb a tree, you climb a tree," he said. "Any cat knows that." (He had become quite fond of Gordon, in his way.)

It wasn't enough. The Assistant Professor of Tailchasing (a chocolate-point Siamese who dreamed of one day heading the school himself) led the opposition. As the Assistant Professor saw it, Gordon was plainly a fraud, a pretender, a cat in card only, so friendly with his fellow mice that they had rushed to help him when he was in danger. In light of that, who could say what Gordon's *real* plans might be? Why had he come to the school in the first place? What if more like him followed? What if the mice were plotting to attack the cat school, all cat schools?

This thought rattled everyone at the table. With a mouse like Gordon in their midst, a mouse who knew far more about being a cat than the cats themselves, was any feline safe?

Just that quickly, fear replaced reason. Within minutes everyone but the Principal forgot how much they had liked and admired Gordon. Admitting him to the school had been a catastrophic mistake, one that must be set right without a moment's delay!

The Principal groaned and covered his eyes and sent for Gordon. He was almost crying as he took Gordon's cat card away.

Gordon protested like mad, of course. He spoke of Will and Choice, and Freedom, and the transforming power of Questioning Assumptions. But the Principal said sadly, "We just can't trust you, Gordon. Go away now, before I eat you myself. I always wondered what you'd taste like." Then he put his head down on his desk and really did begin to cry.

So Gordon packed his clean shirt and his leftover peanut butter and left the cat school. All the cats formed a double line to let him pass, their faces turned away, and nobody said a word. The Assistant Professor of Tailchasing was poised to pounce at the very last, but the Principal stepped on his tail.

Nobody ever heard of Gordon again. There were stories that he'd gone right on being a cat, even without his card; and there were other tales that said he had been driven out of the country by the mice themselves. But only the

Principal knew for sure, because only the Principal had heard the words that Gordon was muttering to himself as he walked away from the cat school with his head held high.

“Woof,” Gordon was murmuring thoughtfully. “Woof. Bow-wow. Shouldn’t be too hard.”

--*@*--