



I.

What are we going to do with all those cats?" my wife would sigh every time she came home to Kersko for the weekend.

I'd try to reassure her. "It's true, we've somehow ended up with five cats," I'd say, "but by spring they'll all be gone. One of them won't come home and we'll be out at all hours calling her, but she won't come. Then the second and the third one will take off, and in the end there'll only be one left, and even she will wander off somewhere for good."

But my wife would not be consoled. She'd look at the animals and continue her lament: "What are we going to do with all those cats?" Yet she always looked forward to mornings, when we'd wake up and I'd open the door and five grown cats would come charging into the kitchen and lap up two full bowls of milk. We'd climb back into bed and the cats would come to warm up in the duvet, and we'd lie there with them and they'd go contentedly to sleep. Renda, Segmyler, and Schwarzwald would snuggle up with my wife, and the two cats with white socks and white bibs would be with me. I called the black one

Blackie and the black-and-gray tabby Socks. Blackie was my favorite. I never tired of looking at her and she was so fond of me she'd practically swoon whenever I picked her up and held her to my forehead and whispered sweet words in her ear. Somehow I had reached an age when being in love with a beautiful woman was beyond my reach because I was now bald and my face was full of wrinkles, yet the cats loved me the way girls used to love me when I was young. I was everything to my cats, father and lover. But the cat with the white feet and the white bib, Blackie, loved me most of all. Whenever I'd look at her, she'd go all soft and I'd have to pick her up and for a moment I'd feel her go limp from the surge of feeling that flowed from me to her and back again, and I would groan with pleasure.

Those mornings, when the five cats would crawl into bed with us, were moments of family bliss. The cats were our children. Every morning, though, when the kittens had got warm and recovered from the chill of the night, they'd suddenly start wrestling and going after each other. They'd swing on the curtains and scramble around the house, back and forth, and you'd hear the sound of little cat heads thumping against cupboards or chairs. They'd race through the kitchen, yanking our clothes and underwear off the chairs, dragging towels in from the kitchen, then they'd pull out our shoes and slippers and fight over them, then dive under the duvet and wrestle about in the darkness, winding themselves into little balls and knocking everything off the table.

This *mesbugge Stunde*, this crazy hour, would go on for half an hour, and in the end the kittens were panting so heavily their little tongues would be lolling out and they'd finally collapse exhausted on the green carpet, or lie down on a chair