



The Case of the Battered Pet

Who would suspect that a family's animals could be pawns in domestic violence? Or that their sad condition might tip off investigators to women in trouble? A shocking report by **BARRY YEOMAN** on the terrifying truth about cats and dogs.

MARCELLA HARB-HAUSER, DVM, WAS DOING HER MORNING rounds at a San Rafael, California, veterinary hospital when she first met Malibu. The gray tabby was hunched in his cage, his face swollen and right eye bulging. His lungs were bruised. His ribs were broken. He had a fractured tailbone. When Harb-Hauser examined the cat's mouth, she says, "it looked like an eggplant inside."

An experienced emergency vet, Harb-Hauser tried to make sense of the medical evidence. The cat had obviously suffered a trauma, but there was no sign of a car accident or fall from a window. "This didn't just *happen*," she told her colleagues. "Something is fishy." The cat's owner, she learned, had brought him in at 5 A.M. and for the past three hours had been sitting quietly in an exam room. Maybe, she thought, the young woman could provide some answers.

Malibu's owner had milky skin and dark eyeliner, with tattoos on both arms. She was barely 30, her face youthful, but her gaunt frame and blank expression suggested a hard life. Speaking in a high, thin monotone, she told Harb-Hauser that she had separated from her boyfriend a year earlier, moving three times to escape him, ▶

only to have him track her down and break into each successive apartment. This morning she'd come home from a trip and found him waiting. Fresh scratches and bite marks covered his arms. The apartment was wrecked, and Malibu was hiding under a glass table, barely breathing.

"I really don't know how to tell you this, because it breaks my heart," Harb-Hauser said. "But someone tried to strangle your cat." For the first time, emotion registered on the woman's face. She looked up and locked eyes with the vet. "Yeah," she said. "My boyfriend likes to do that to me, too."

The 2006 conversation reinforced for Harb-Hauser what researchers are only now starting to understand: With devastating frequency, animals are the collateral victims of domestic violence. Dogs and cats, lizards and rabbits, horses and other farm animals—abusers torture and kill them, or threaten to do so, in order to maintain control of their

only lose the sense of safety and comfort their animals provide but all too frequently feel unable to leave."

THERE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN stories, suspicions. Harb-Hauser's first hint that an injured pet could be an SOS for an owner in danger came just after her graduation from vet school in 1992. At the New York animal hospital where she interned, a middle-aged woman with a downcast face brought in



Vet Marcella Harb-Hauser (here with her dog, Daphne) found the first clue that "Jane Doe" was in danger.

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spouses. And it works. Because most battered-women's shelters don't accept animals, victims are often forced to weigh their pets' safety against their own. According to various studies, between 18 and 88 percent of shelter residents delayed leaving their tormentors for fear that their animals would be injured, or worse. That doesn't count the many women who never escape.

"Pets have become pawns in the battle of power and control that marks domestic violence," says Phil Arkow, head of human-animal bond programs at the American Humane Association. While any victim of battering may be trapped in a landscape of terror, for women with cats or dogs at risk of abuse, "they not

a Yorkshire terrier whose eyes had been glued shut with a powerful adhesive. "I have to have this dog back tonight," the woman told one of the doctors. "We're not supposed to leave the house. If my boyfriend catches us gone, this is going to be trouble." The next time the client returned, the Yorkie's eyes were sealed again; so were her ears and sexual organs. Despite the owner's pleas, the hospital confiscated the dog. "I always wondered what happened to that woman," Harb-Hauser says.

It wasn't until 1998 that the research started catching up. The first published study was small but groundbreaking. Frank Ascione, PhD, a psychologist at Utah State University, surveyed 38 women

at a domestic violence shelter. Of those who reported having owned pets, 71 percent said that their partners had threatened, tortured—even killed—one or more of their animals during the relationship. Abusers had shot dogs, drowned a cat, and set a kitten on fire. "Many of the descriptions sounded like calculated behavior to terrorize the woman in her home," Ascione says.

Since then, a decade's worth of studies have confirmed, and expanded on, Ascione's initial findings. In Atlanta, for example, researchers surveyed 107 battered women who sought help at a family violence center after being indicted for various crimes. Of those who reported pet abuse, 44 percent said that their partners told them they would hurt the animals unless the women joined in the illegal acts. One 33-year-old said her husband punched and choked her during their five-year marriage and forbade her to see her family without him. Two weeks after he lost his job, he robbed a bank and swore he'd kick her dog to death unless she drove the getaway car. "I was sure he would kill my little Terry Terrier if I didn't do what he said," she explained. "I felt trapped."

Experts say it's no coincidence that a man who bullies his spouse also abuses pets—it's part of a methodical campaign to isolate the woman. He will hide the car keys. He'll rip out the phone. He'll ban her from holding a job or visiting neighbors and family. That leaves her with just one companion, the family dog or cat. "The animal is often the sole source of unconditional love and support for the victim, and that is not lost on the abuser," says Melinda Merck, DVM, senior director of veterinary forensics for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). The batterer knows there's no weapon more effective than severing, or promising to sever, that last remaining bond. "The ultimate goal of the abuser is to strip the victim of everything of value," Merck says.

Often batterers will injure animals as part of a threat to do the same to the people in their lives. "I have heard accounts," says ASPCA senior vice president for anti-cruelty initiatives Randall Lockwood, PhD, "from victim advocates in all 50 states of a [CONTINUED ON PAGE 172]

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 170] husband or boyfriend who assembles the family and makes them watch as he bludgeons or beats the family dog, cat, horse, cow, bunny, hamster, gerbil—with the message of, “You could be next.”

AFTER MALIBU’S OWNER blurted out that her ex-boyfriend had been abusing her, Marcella Harb-Hauser knew she couldn’t just treat and release the strangled gray tabby. So she contacted the Marin Humane Society, up the road in Novato, California. Cindy Machado, the society’s animal services director, took firm charge. “Hold this cat as evidence,” she recalls telling the vet. “Do not let it go out the door.” Then Machado invited the victim, who is called Jane Doe in court documents to protect her safety, into her office for a chat.

Machado says. “I felt we had a kindred-spirit connection. Something just said, *Don’t let this woman down. You’ve gotta do whatever you have to do to help her.*” Machado arranged for the Humane Society to pay Malibu’s vet bills, which totaled \$5,400. She found a pet-friendly hotel where Doe and her cats could live, and instructed the staff to call Machado at any sign of trouble. And she visited Malibu, who was still hospitalized. “I saw a spark in this cat that touched my heart,” she says. “It was not just a cat that was sick. It was a cat telling me to help his guardian.” Though Doe was wary of the police—declining in the past to follow through on a restraining order against Huynh—Machado convinced her to press charges this time against her ex. At one point she gave Doe an enlarged photo of Malibu, bandaged and on intravenous fluids. If Doe didn’t do something,

dead.” Though Huynh pleaded guilty to three felonies, his attorney argued that there were no witnesses to the strangling. The lawyer also argued that Huynh would be more likely to seek treatment for his addiction to drugs if he were not behind bars. Nonetheless, in July 2006 a judge sentenced Huynh to five years and eight months at San Quentin State Prison.

As harrowing as Doe’s ordeal was, she was lucky to find an escape route. Without shelters that take pets, many women who do flee wind up living with their animals in their cars. “How are you supposed to work or go back to school when you’re stuck like that?” says psychologist Lori Kogan, PhD, an assistant professor at Colorado State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences. “Then they go back to the perpetrators because they don’t have good options.”

Only in the past decade have many domestic violence professionals recognized the barrier that these no-pet policies create. In Arlington, Virginia, the Doorways for Women and Families Safe-house is developing a plan to house its clients’ pets in kennels on-site. Just four other programs nationwide currently offer this service. “My greatest hope is that when a survivor of violence is ready to leave, there will be no barriers,” says Doorways domestic violence program director Marielle Filholm.

More often, shelters are teaming up with animal welfare agencies to create foster programs for the pets of women fleeing abuse. Sometimes the animals live with volunteers until they can be reunited with their owners. Other times they stay at veterinary hospitals or animal shelters. The Humane Society of the United States (hsus.org) lists about 170 safe-haven programs—a start, but not enough to cover the whole country.

Without a refuge for her pets, Yvonne Creswell would never have been able to leave her abusive marriage. Troubled almost from the start, the relationship bottomed out in late 2004, after the navy wife, then 30, was admitted to a San Diego hospital with complications from her first pregnancy. Because her husband had grown increasingly violent—even warning he’d kill her beagle, she says—she asked him by telephone to stay away. He refused. [CONTINUED ON PAGE 174]

She gave “Jane Doe” a photo of the cat on IV fluids, bandaged, saying if Doe did nothing, she’d end up the same way.

Doe showed up exhausted and withdrawn. “In the first five minutes of the discussion, I realized, *Oh, my goodness, she’s going to have a really hard time telling me what happened.*” Machado recalls. She asked the young woman, who was craving a cigarette, to sit with her at a picnic table outside. “You can smoke all you want,” she said. “I don’t care what you do. Just talk to me.”

Once Doe started speaking, she didn’t stop for hours. She explained that her ex-boyfriend, Danh Phi Huynh, had choked her repeatedly, as he would later do to Malibu. At least six times the woman blacked out from his assaults. Huynh also warned that he would kill Doe and her family, and a month earlier had kidnapped one of her other cats, Monster. No one has seen Monster since.

“I could tell she was a survivor,”



The Marin Humane Society’s Cindy Machado (holding a shelter cat) convinced Doe to press charges.

Machado told her, she could wind up the same way.

A warrant was issued for Huynh’s arrest. He continued to menace Doe. “I guess Monster’s not important to you, is he?” the ex-boyfriend said in one voice-mail message. The following day he warned, “When you least expect it, and you don’t even have the slightest clue, everything you know will be destroyed or

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“I’m coming, and I’m coming armed,” she recalls him saying. “How would it be if I have to hurt people to get to you?” Police arrested him after he showed up at the hospital carrying two kitchen knives and a screwdriver. He eventually pleaded guilty to a concealed-weapon charge and served time in jail.

Until then, Creswell hadn’t left because there was nowhere to take the dog and cat that had provided solace during her three-year marriage. At the hospital, though, someone handed her a brochure that mentioned the Animal Safehouse Program at the Rancho Coastal Humane Society in Encinitas, California. Knowing there was a foster home for the animals enabled Creswell and her newborn to make a getaway.

“It may seem bizarre, even crazy, that we stay in these situations because of our pets,” says Creswell, who has a new partner and a second child. “But we rely on these animals to give us comfort. It’s almost like therapy: You have something you can hold, that you can love, that loves you back. Because those two animals had taken such great care of me, I owed it to them to look after them and not have them subjected to cruelty.

“To know that they were safe meant that I could go forward,” Creswell says. “To know that they were being given love gave me the opportunity to reclaim my life.”

WHEN POLICE AND prosecutors grasp the links between domestic violence and animal abuse, it makes it easier to protect survivors of all species by getting offenders into jail or treatment. An abused spouse might be unwilling to press charges against her partner, “but a dead cat is not going to recant,” says the aspc’s Randall Lockwood. Sometimes, then, the most surefire way to prosecute a batterer is on charges of animal cruelty, which, if severe enough, is a felony in many states. “The abuser has so little regard for the animal that he doesn’t even realize how serious a crime it is,” Lockwood



Susan Walsh (with Lazlo) championed a groundbreaking law to protect pets from batterers.

says. “You may even get a confession right there: ‘Yeah, I killed the damned cat.’”

As far as the pet victims go, the law has traditionally turned a blind eye. “Many jurisdictions say animals are property,” explains Diane Balkin, senior deputy district attorney in Denver. The climate, however, is changing. Until two years ago, no state gave judges the explicit right by statute to protect animals in domestic violence cases. The courts could order a batterer to stay away from his wife and children, but not necessarily from his dog, even if he had threatened the creature. Then, on a snowy day in January 2006, 50-year-old Susan Walsh drove about 75 miles to tell her story to Maine state lawmakers—and helped kick off a reform movement that is spreading across the nation.

Walsh’s ex-husband had never beat her in the traditional sense. “The physical abuse was directed at things that I valued, things that were an extension of me,” she says. First he targeted inanimate objects, she says—smashing a treasured gargoyle and throwing away her personal papers. Then, she says, he progressed to the turkeys and sheep living on their 32-acre farm.

Walsh, a vegetarian, enjoyed watching the turkeys’ antics during what she calls their “awkward teenage years.” But when her husband found the young birds nibbling on some berry bushes, “he went on a tear and killed every one of them,” she says. “Broke their necks and left them in a pile. Later that day, he told me to go down and pick blueberries—and to pick them in the rows where the bodies were,”


so she would find the carcasses. (Her ex-husband didn’t respond to requests for an interview.)

Then, one Easter, Walsh and her two children visited her parents in Pennsylvania. Her husband stayed behind with her blind, arthritic border collie, Katydid. The day after Walsh left, she received a call: He had run over Katydid in their driveway, as he’d promised to do with other pets, she says. He claimed it was an accident. She was certain it wasn’t. “It was his way of saying that anything I have, anything im-

portant to me, he can take away,” she says.

Walsh’s voice trembled as she recounted the ordeal before a legislative committee in Augusta, which was debating whether to protect animals in domestic violence cases. Leaving her husband, she said, would have imperiled not just her pets but all the animals living on the farm. “I might possibly have gotten my dogs out, maybe even the cats,” she testified. “But I knew any animal I left behind would be dead within 24 hours.”

“When she got up and testified, you could hear a pin drop,” says Anne Jordan, Maine’s commissioner of public safety. At the hearing, Jordan was sitting in front of some opponents of the legislation. “When Susan Walsh testified about what her ex did, I heard the [lobbyists] behind me say, ‘We can’t testify against this bill.’” Two months later, Maine became the first state in the nation authorizing judges to include animals in protective orders. Since then, nine states have followed suit, with more on the way.

Walsh says she won’t be content until the law safeguards all women and their animals. “Every state needs to have this protection on the books—and the stronger the better,” she says. “Our message to abusers must be firm and unwavering: Threatening or harming animals to hold a partner hostage in a relationship will not be tolerated.” 

For information on lobbying your own officials, go online to the state legislation pages at the Humane Society of the United States (hsus.org), American Humane Association (americanhumane.org), and ASPCA (aspc.org).