

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

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For weeks I have been haunted in the night by the sounds of distress, the tiny cries of a very small kitten. When I called, they stopped. One night I got a torch and saw its eyes glowing briefly in its beam, then flee as though it was a gun.

Surely, I thought, it belongs to the neighbours: I don't have to worry about it - but after days, perhaps weeks, I realised they had been away for a long time.

There is something about the cry of a baby: something about vulnerability, dependence, and no-one taking responsibility for its needs, that tugs at the heart.

I already have three cats - one blind, one crippled, and one scarred by cigarette burns - all of them strays who came to my door - and two dogs, too, both rejects from other homes. I can't turn them away: I did once, 20 years ago, and the irresponsible girl who wanted a holiday had her puppy put down, because I wouldn't take him, and he haunts me, too.

I am not responsible for this damned cat, I said: it will find another home. The crying continued, weaker. Last week I started putting out food, for an invisible, homeless, feral kitten: climbing a ladder to the fence, plopping scraps into a dish on the neighbours' compost heap next to it, and it went, though I never saw how. But when I called, the wailing stopped.

Last night when I called, a tiny bundle of grey and white fluff appeared: it was matted, skinny, plain, and hardly weaned. He looked at me, without blinking: I froze. Then he rubbed his back against the tree and crept to the dish, still looking. I felt a rush of relief, and a silly sense of achievement. A relationship had started.

And it struck me then that building relationships, even with animals, is intrinsically rewarding, and the same kind of process builds a civil society: accepting responsibility to meet others' needs, without having to, without expecting payment or reward (because society is more than the market); engaging with our neighbour and caring about our fellow creatures, just because they are our fellows. Trust is a two-way thing.

This is a small story, just a sentimental matter but, as they say, somewhat satisfactory.