

THE FRIENDS ON ROCKRIDGE

BY RUTH L. WEISS HOHBERG

On a visit to the east Coast my husband and I were invited to stay a week at the home of our friends Masha and Tom. Weary after flying across the continent in a matter of a few hours on the winged modern miracle of transportation, we were delighted to accept their kind hospitality. Pressing the appropriate buttons on the alarm system we let ourselves into their house as instructed.

It was like stepping through a time warp into a different reality. Dolls are everywhere. They sit on both couches, and on every available chair in the living room. Doll sized baby buggies filled with sleeping baby dolls are standing in several places in this room allowing almost no walking space. Their beautifully detailed, painted faces ranging from infants to wizened old characters are frozen, unchanging. They are decked out in intricately designed and lovingly stitched outfits of rich fabrics that remain forever clean and freshly pressed, living in their pristine motionless splendor, covered by transparent plastic sheets and bags. They don't experience the indignities of the aging body. There's not an inch of space for a person sit down in this living room.

In the bedroom assigned for our use ruffled white coverlets with eyelet borders lie on the twin beds, supporting masses of fluffy pillows in lacy pillowcases. Dolls of many types are nestled among them keeping each other company in an endless silent vigil. Some are swaddled in baby blankets, their sleeping faces serene and positions forever comfortable; others, their

eyelashes curled, their hair arranged to perfection, and their wide blue eyes fully awake, are all dressed up, ready to party.

Every horizontal surface in this room is laden with decorative pieces. Glazed ceramic rabbits, fleecy fuzzy soft rabbits, plastic rabbits, paper rabbits, and other rabbits of every imaginable material, crowd the surface competing for space with photographs of children and other animals. From the miniscule to larger than life size, each has its assigned spot. The collection overflows to spaces on the floor and under the beds. The rabbits are not here testifying to some reproductive ritual, they reflect the nickname of the lady of the house - BUNNY.

The bathrooms are tiled in light yellow and mint green. The double shower curtains, towels, bathmat, the rounded rug that fits around the toilet bowl, and the fluffy rug that lies parallel to the bathtub are all earnestly color coordinated. Cute little three- dimensional shell and fish pieces live on the sink counter where the toothbrush cup should be, and the over-the sink mirror is affixed so high that anyone under five-foot ten gets to see only their forehead and their hair. Yet it all it looks so very feminine.

There are several resident cats each occupying its own domain furnished with a litter box, blanket, feeding bowl and water dish. The water in one bathroom sink is left on at a trickle to satisfy one cat's preference to drink only running water directly from the open faucet.

Mocha, a brown round-eyed Siamese, shorn of most of her fur for the summer, her naked dark beige body with a large plume of dark brown fur on her tail, on her face, and near her paws looks quite comical. Very shy, she spends her days hiding in the depths of a clothes closet. Her mistress places a towel especially for her atop the bed when she leaves for work in the morning.

Her nights are spent sharing Masha's pillow.

Cinder is coal black, hence her name. Her eyes are an electric blue, made more brilliant by the darkness of the fur surrounding them. She is shy too. She lives in the TV room snuggled into an old knitted purple afghan on top of the couch cushions. She waits for Bunny her mistress, to watch her favorite programs in the evening so she can settle on her chest and purr. At the approach of anyone else, she quickly and silently scoots under the couch, and is not seen again for hours.

Tigre is the last and newest member in the household. Katherine, the couple's youngest daughter found him somewhere while she attended medical school. He lived with her in a one room flat for a year. Then she moved. Now he is master of an entire house and a yard. He appears to be to the manner born. As the male of the menagerie, he hastens to assert himself, easily assuming the Alpha male position. He terrorizes Mocha and Cinder, keeping them in a permanent state of anxiety and at a safe distance, while he struts around the entire premises somehow communicating his desires quite clearly. He lets it be known when he wants to come indoors, and when he is ready to go out. In the evening after his supper, he indicates his readiness for the whipped cream - on - paper-plate dessert, or the cat cookies from the kitchen cabinet. With a glance from the top of the steps he makes the squirrels gathered at the backdoor for a peanut handout scamper in all directions up the nearest trees. To prove his worth to his keepers, he brings in the occasional trophy mouse and follows them around until he elicits a verbal reaction of praise.

In addition to getting enough playtime and verbal attention, Masha (Bunny) and Tom see to it that each cat is cleaned, fed, and watered daily. There are also daily backyard feeding visits

for by skunks, squirrels, neighborhood cats, and of course birds in season and out.

With their day jobs, their grown children, grand kids, and their menagerie they are certainly a busy couple.