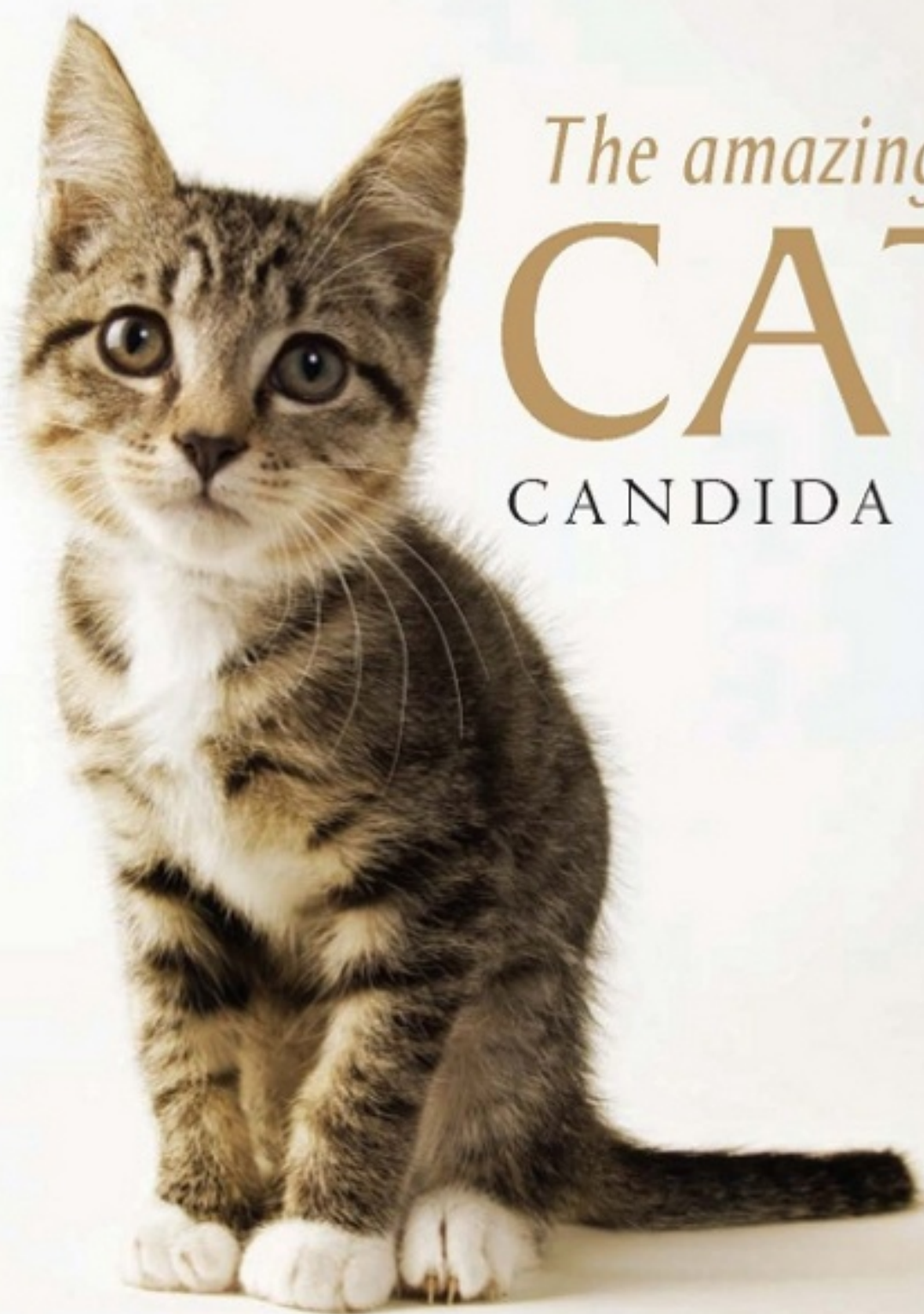


The amazing life of
CATS
CANDIDA BAKER

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Candida Baker is an author and the Director of the Byron Bay Writers' Festival. She has been a writer, a journalist and an animal lover for many years. She owns horses, dogs, and one long-suffering cat, somewhat inappropriately named Tiny.

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Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100

Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218

Email: info@allenandunwin.com

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For Boots, who taught me that walls don't matter

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Introduction



Historians have told us often over the years that domestic cats sprang from Ancient Egypt, where temple cats were worshipped, and indeed, paintings of house cats go back as far as 3600 years. Bast, the Egyptian goddess, was often shown in cat form, and was occasionally depicted as a lioness. But in 2004 a Neolithic grave containing two skeletons was excavated in Cyprus; one skeleton was human, the other a large cat. They were buried beside each other. The grave is almost 10,000 years old, and the cat closely resembled the African wildcat. For a writer the detail is tantalising—why were they buried together? Who died first? Were cats already companion animals by then?

We may never know the social or emotional history behind the gravesite, but science can give us some facts. Genetic studies show that cats were probably first domesticated in Mesopotamia and were later brought to Cyprus and Egypt. There's also evidence to suggest that they were already present in Britain in the late Iron Age. But whenever and wherever the relationship began, like our relationships with horses and dogs—the other four-legged species that have chosen to link their destinies with humans—it's certainly been going on for thousands and thousands of years.

It was during the so-called Age of Discovery, when man set off in sailing ships to explore the world that cats really came into their own. They were carried on board to control rodents and as good luck charms, and thus made their way to all corners of the globe. I like the idea of a cat comforting a cabin boy a long way from home, or cuddling up with a grumpy sailor in his hammock.

So despite cats' obvious independence and occasional apparent disdain for their humans, it would seem that in the same way that dogs made a decision to join us beside our fires, cats too thought their lives might be improved by a connection with people. However, while dogs have generally modified their wild behaviour in order to coexist with us, cats have not altered much since the first wildcat—most likely a jungle cat from southeast Asia, an African wildcat, a Chinese mountain or an Arabian sand cat—threw their natural caution to the winds, no doubt for the same reason a stray can be tamed now: easily accessible food.

What was it that early man saw in cats that meant cats were elevated to a more exalted status than dogs? Many ancient religions believed that cats are higher souls, designed as companions or spiritual guides for humans. The prophet Muhammad himself had a favourite cat, Muezza, and apparently loved cats so much that 'he would do without his cloak rather than disturb one that was sleeping on it

If a theme has emerged from the compiling of this anthology it is the healing power of cats. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that cats are psychic—I've owned a psychic cat myself, as you can see from my story about my black and white cat Boots. Perhaps it was their healing and psychic powers that caused them to be associated with witches during medieval times—or perhaps witches, themselves healers and psychics, recognised these powers in the small felines and adopted them as friends. Unfortunately, the relationship got both sides of the equation into trouble. Searching for reasons as to why the Black Death or Bubonic Plague occurred in the fourteenth century, which was spread by fleas from infected rats, historians have found that when witch hysteria was at its height, hundreds of thousands of cats were killed as well, causing an explosion in rat numbers.

Before the mass hysteria of the middle ages, cats enjoyed a more peaceful symbolic connection with Freyja, the Norse goddess of love, beauty and fertility, who is shown riding a chariot drawn by cats. Indeed, despite what I am sure would be growls of disapproval from tomcats around the world, cats are traditionally associated with the feminine, as dogs are with the masculine. Cats' extraordinary sensory perception—their eyesight, hearing, smell and touch—places them symbolically as 'guides', who can know the way when we don't, when we have to follow our blind instinct.

Is all of this raising the household moggie to dizzy heights?

No introduction to a book on cats should shirk a responsible cat owner's duty, which is to acknowledge how environmentally destructive cats can be. If every cat owner in the world had always had their cats desexed, attached a bell to the animals' collars and kept them in at night then the history of bird species around the world would be very different. Sadly, many people have been wantonly careless, creating an apparently insoluble problem worldwide—there are reputedly around 40 million feral cats in the US alone. Conversely, though, there are responsible and caring humans who are trying to help address this problem, as in the moving story of Lisa, the *gattaro* working with feral cat colonies in Italy.

Stories of remarkable and quirky cats abound. There's Oscar, the nursing-home cat who cuddles up on people's beds when they are ready to depart this world—his accuracy in anticipating death is such that even the home's doctors acknowledge he is often right when they are wrong, and I once knew a cat who liked nothing better than to sit on the backs of the horses in the stables where it lived.

Then, of course, there is purring. Let's face it, there's nothing better in the world than sitting or lying down with a cat on your lap, and listening to that soft throaty noise of happiness and contentment to make you feel that life is good, no matter what else is going on. Scientists have recently found out what any cat owner could have told them—a purring cat has a beneficial effect on its human! Cats as companion animals have been proved to lower blood pressure, alleviate depression and raise serotonin production.

Myths, like clichés, often spring from grains of truth, and the idea of cats having multiple lives has also been around for thousands of years. Most of us know them as having nine lives, but in certain areas of Spain it's said to be seven, while in Turkey and Arabian countries it's six. Cats' ability to land on their feet when falling is legendary, as is their speed—thank goodness—at climbing trees away from their main predator, the dog. Despite that often vexed relationship, however, there are several stories in the book that illustrate how cats and dogs can be the best of friends, and will even grieve into mourning when one of them dies.

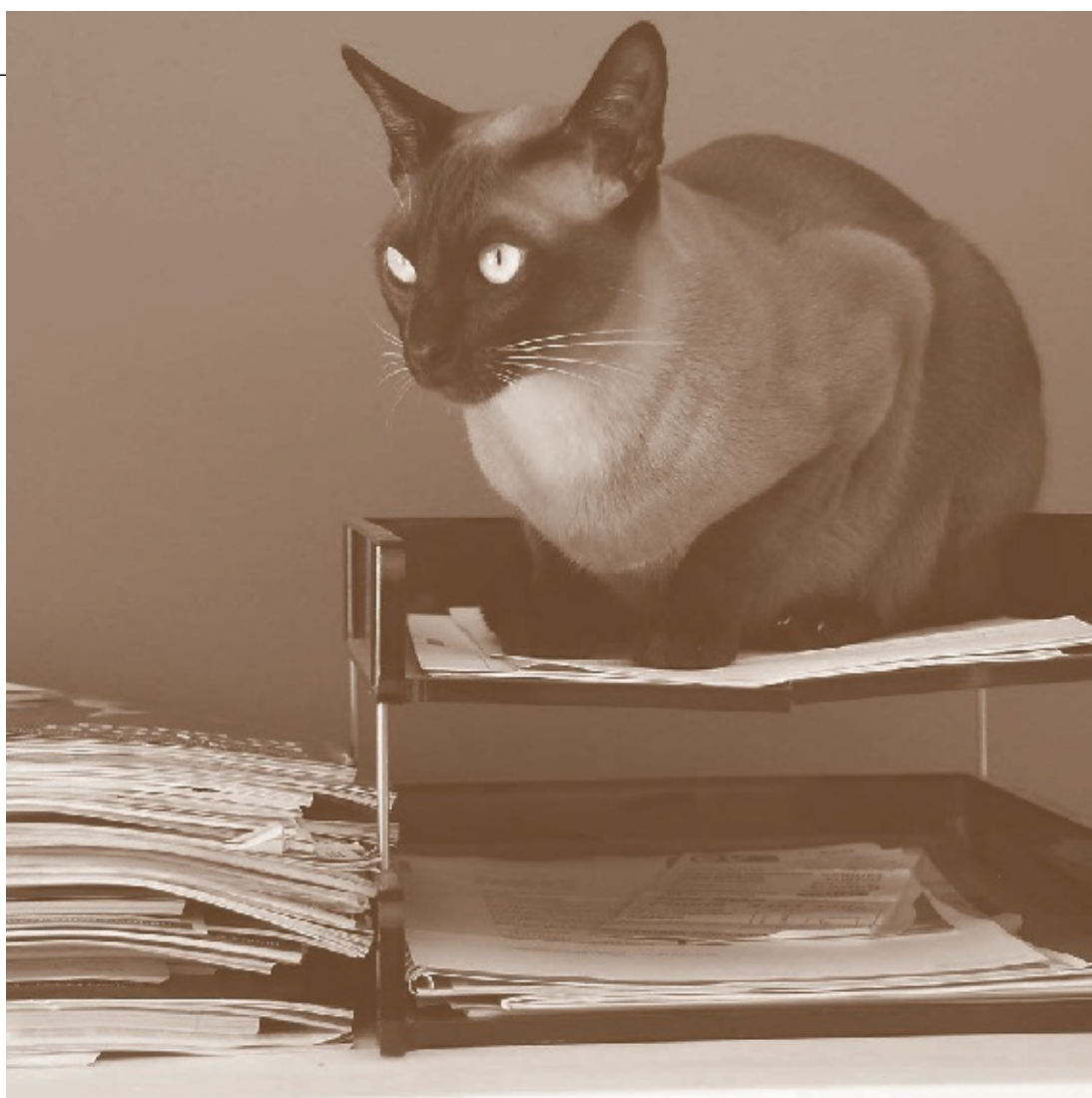
Personally I think a cat's natural grace and elegance demands respect. It's easy to imagine shouting orders at our dogs—*sit, down, stay, get out* spring to mind immediately—but try giving a cat an order and it will look at you with disdain and go about its business. With its air of independence, love of play and ability to curl up and cuddle when it chooses, a cat is a special confidant and companion—you know you've been chosen. Feel honoured, because you are!

It's been a pleasure compiling this collection of cat stories. I hope you enjoy them as much as I did.

Candida Bak

The smallest feline is a masterpiece.

Leonardo da Vinci



The Sly Siamese



My mother was definitely a cat person. If people can be divided into categories—and I for one am a cat, dog *and* horse person—then she was easily categorised, at least in that respect. Not just any cat person, mind you, but a Siamese cat person.

The gift of loving Siamese cats is not given to everyone. First of all there's the noise they make, demanding that you put down whatever you're doing and tend to their needs straightaway. Then there's their killer instinct, and their charming desire to present you with their victims as presents. Last but not least is their intelligence, which they put to good use—for instance, by ganging up and torturing the family dog (*who, us?*) or making sneaky snatch-and-grab raids on food. Whoever wrote 'The Siamese Cat Song' from *Lady and the Tramp* knew what they were talking about, that's for sure.

When my parents married, my mother came armed with two Siamese cats, a blue point called Roo and Roo's son, a seal point called John-John. According to my father, the cats not infrequently went with them out to dinner at friends' homes; carried there in their cat baskets, the cats adopted whatever strange territory they found themselves in for the night with the haughty insouciance that can only belong to a Siamese.

When I was born, my mother refused to countenance that her cats could present any danger to her baby, and so they spent many hours curled up in my crib—she believed they were keeping an eye on me. I think I was about four when Roo succumbed to cat flu and died, and although I don't remember and my mother never spoke much of it, my father later told me that she was inconsolable for a long time.

So from the time I remember, it was John-John who was the family cat. John-John by himself was not a threat to our family poodle, Minnie, and apart from being a deadly killer like all Siamese, he was an easygoing chap. Looking back, though, I do recall one thing—he was my mother's cat, and hers alone, and he knew it. He was an independent, social and friendly cat, but he had one love in his life and that was my mother.

In the later years of his life, we had a new addition to the Siamese family—my younger sister's cat Kitty Car. She had been bred by my mother's cousin, who lived in the nearby town of Oxford, and right from the start she had the most extraordinary amount of character—a little ball of spitting, independent fury much of the time, hell-bent on learning dog-torturing lessons. She also had a loving side to her nature that she mostly reserved for my sister Tessa but would occasionally extend to the rest of us. She and John-John became great friends, and she imbued him with a new-found sense of wicked Siamese purpose.

John-John died at the ripe old age of nineteen, when I was thirteen. He had been getting gradually weaker and weaker, and my mum had been hoping that he would die peacefully at home, but when he seemed to be suffering she decided to take him to the vet's to have him put down.

It's funny as you get older the things you can remember as if they were yesterday, and that day is etched very clearly in my mind, because my mother decided to drive me to school, with John-John in the cat basket on the back seat. I was in my second year of high school, and I even remember what w

had for lunch that day, and that dessert was a form of shortbread biscuit with tapioca and jam, and then when I sat down with my dessert, I suddenly found that I was crying.

The teacher at our table, my long-suffering maths teacher, asked me what was wrong, and I told him that the cat was being put down. He was very sympathetic and understanding, and even though empathy was not an emotion I had experienced from my fellow students up until that point, they too were kind and talked about their own pets.

When I got home that afternoon my mother told me that when she got to the vet's John-John was already dead. We cried and cuddled together, but it wasn't until many years later that I thought about the pain it must have caused her to know that her darling friend of almost twenty years, who had outlasted the best years of her marriage, watched over her four children and been her constant companion, had died in the car while she was driving him to what would have been his final destination.

I had a day off school the next day to recover, but strangely I can't remember whether or not Mum brought him home to bury him. I do remember how empty the house felt without him; it seemed odd that the absence of one small cat could make such a large impression on a household.

Candida Bak

Do you see that kitten chasing so prettily
her own tail? If you could look with her
eyes, you might see her surrounded with
hundreds of figures performing complex
dramas, with tragic and comic issues,
long conversations, many characters,
many ups and downs of fate.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Healer



My husband Steve got back from his week at sea just in time to experience the mayhem our new kitten had caused. While he cleaned and tidied the house, I stood at the kitchen bench watching a seagull glide on the updraft from the cliff. The bird and I were at the same eye level. It swivelled the slash of its beak towards me. We exchanged glares.

Not so long ago I'd liked birds, empathised with their struggle. Around the age of eight or nine I'd found a baby thrush on the front lawn. It couldn't fly. Our cat at the time—Sylvester—was bound to get it if I didn't do something. I scooped the ball of feathers up in my hands. It didn't seem to mind resting its reptilian feet on my fingers. Its beak and claws were too big for its body. It was not yet a functioning bird. I had no choice but to take it inside. A shoebox was lined with cotton wool. Holes were punched in the lid with a knitting needle. The thrush took eager gulps of sugared water from an eye dropper. Certain the bird would die overnight, I closed the lid. The box chirruped. Not a call of alarm. Just a chirrup. The box sat on my dressing table all night. I dreaded what I'd find next morning. But when I scrambled out of bed and opened the lid, the bird was sitting upright. Its eyes shone black and expectant. I closed the lid and took the box outside to the front lawn. When I opened the lid again the thrush hopped onto the grass. It wobbled uncertainly, then with a thrilling whirr of wings flew up onto a branch. It perched there for a while, pretending I didn't exist. I called, but it hurtled across the valley to the pines. I thought it might fly back to thank me. Of course it never did.

The seagull peeled away, swooped down over the ferry terminal and across Wellington harbour. Five weeks had passed since our older son, inside his white coffin, had been lowered into the hills behind my friend Lena's house. We'd visited the grave a couple of times. I found no comfort on the windswept summit of Makara Cemetery, with its soldier lines of plaques. The first few times we went it took a while to work out where Sam's grave was in that mosaic of misery. Steve pointed out it was in line with the toilet block. I could almost hear Sam laughing about that. He'd always had a lavatory sense of humour. With typical incongruity he'd been buried between two people who'd lived well into their eighties. Kneeling above him, my tears irrigating the grass, I searched for something of his essence. There was nothing of him in the gnarled bushes bent permanently against the wind. Clouds wrapped themselves in improbable shapes. Sheep bleated. Sam didn't belong in that empty place.

I felt like an actor wearing someone else's clothes. On the outside we resembled the same people we'd been a month or so earlier. I drove the same car, went to the same supermarket, but my internal organs felt like they'd been rearranged and scrubbed with steel wool. Shock, probably. I no longer trusted the goodness of being alive. Hatred and fury flared easily. I was angry at the people who lay alongside Sam. They had no right to have lived so long.

Even though the new school year had started we'd decided to keep Rob home for a couple of weeks. He hardly mentioned Sam but he still wore the Superman watch every day. Maybe he thought the action figure on his wrist was a hotline to his big brother. Rob needed a superhero more than any boy could think of. If only Superman could jump through his bedroom window with Sam laughing in his arms.

I began to wonder if the point of superheroes isn't so much the extraordinary feats they perform as the fact they have other lives as uncool males struggling for acceptance. Sooner or later most boys can relate to Clark Kent, geeky and rejected by the woman he loves. Like Clark Kent, every boy has an inner hero. His only hope of knowing a real live superman is to become one, a goal that sets most young men up for disappointment. As they grow older the search for Superman continues. Sports heroes, rock stars, billionaires. Yet the real hero isn't so far away. He lies within.

Reluctant as I was to admit it, I was getting help from Cleo. She seemed to know when I was bottoming out, whatever time of day or night it was. A paw would slide down the crack of a door, she'd leap on our bed or sit nearby, not demanding anything. Purring patiently, she'd simply wait until I surfaced.

Even her destructive behaviour seemed to have purpose. It dragged us into dealing with the here and now. During the few moments I was yelling at her about curtain cords or toppled photo frames, I wasn't eating my insides out over Sam. Infuriating, impish and bursting with affection, Cleo pulsed with exuberance. From the point of her tail to the tips of her whiskers she was one hundred per cent alive. There was more Sam in her than there was under the whistling skies of Makara.

But Steve didn't seem to see it that way. Even though I'd explained how Sam had picked her out, I had the feeling Steve associated the kitten with the life we'd had before Sam died, not this surreal existence we were trying to eke out now. Adopting a pet without his consent was hardly a functional family thing to do. Besides, he came from a long line of dog people.

•

Steve unpacked his sea bag under Cleo's watchful gaze. She appeared to be making an inventory of his clothes, noting which might be portable. His eyes slid sideways at her. I could tell he was thinking only one word. Mess.

One of the many differences in our personalities was our attitude to mess. I was, and still am, comfortable with quite a lot of disorder. Amazingly creative ideas can spring from piles of old paper and clothes you forgot you ever had. At least, that's what I tell myself when I can't be bothered sifting through them, which is almost always.

Steve, on the other hand, could have been mistaken for a graduate from the Zen school of the obsessively tidy. As a teenage bride, I'd strived to satisfy his craving for immaculate surroundings. Whenever he was due home from a week at sea, I'd rush around the house dusting skirting boards, straightening curtains and arranging rug tassels in parallel lines. I was a slow learner. It took years to realise that no matter how perfect I thought the house looked it made no difference to Steve's perception. Oblivious to my efforts, he moved like a robot through the same routine every time he arrived home from sea: unleash vacuum cleaner, wipe benchtops, even if I'd cleaned them half an hour earlier, and unpack sea bag.

Just as I launched into a spiel about how much Rob adored the kitten, Cleo dived into Steve's bag and emerged with the toe of a black sock between her teeth. Scurrying away, she tossed it above her head and jumped into the air. She caught it between her front paws with panache, before rocketing away full pelt, the sock trailing between her legs. One of her back legs stepped on it, bringing her to such a sudden halt she somersaulted through the air and landed on her back. I sucked a breath. The

poor creature had surely damaged her spine. We'd have to take her to the vet. She'd writhe in agony. There'd be no cure. Unperturbed, Cleo wriggled to her feet, picked up the sock again and sprinted away.

Unimpressed, Steve trudged out of the room in search of his sock. It generally took us two days to adjust to Steve's routine after he'd been away. His irritation with my inability to fold underwear neatly matched my annoyance with his insistence on checking pots after I'd washed them to see if I'd left any residual circles of goo around their edges. With the additional tension of an unwelcome kitten, domestic harmony was even more unlikely.

I'd read somewhere that seventy-five per cent of marriages fail after the death of a child. I wasn't prepared to buy into that. Defying statistics was one of my specialities. But I was beginning to understand why so many relationships crumble.

Steve's pain was no less than mine, but it was different, more internal. I grieved in wild expressionist brushstrokes, sobbing, wailing, accusing, wanting to be held. His sorrow was more orderly and restrained. Words, when he said them, were as carefully considered as dew drops on an orange in a Dutch master's still life.

While Steve had been able to undertake the tasks expected of a man—identifying the body, the police interview and, tomorrow, an appearance at the court inquest—his ability to convey what was going on behind the fortress of his face had shut down. I was to blame for some of that. I should never have asked him to stop crying that morning after the accident. His gaze slithered everywhere these days, from curtains to carpet to rubber plant. Never into my eyes. When he asked if I'd go along to the inquest with him I refused. The thought of reliving it all in front of strangers was too much. If I'd had the courage to agree I'd have been a better wife. We were both at our most needy, yet neither had reserves to soothe the other.

Rob called us to the living room, where he was crouching over Cleo, dangling Steve's sock. He tossed the sock across the room. Cleo chased it, caught it neatly between her teeth, trotted back to Rob and dropped it at his feet. She then sat neatly beside Rob and waited, staring up at him expectantly.

'See? She can fetch!'

'Only dogs can fetch,' said Steve, swooping his sock off the floor.

'No, you try it,' said Rob.

Hesitantly, Steve flung the sock into the air. Cleo barrelled away and retrieved it, depositing it at my feet this time.

The kitten ensured we were all awarded equal time throwing the sock. She wanted it to be a family game.

'Cleo can play sock-er!' said Rob.

Her enthusiasm was limitless. The three of us were soon mesmerised by the wiry figure dancing to and fro after her sock victim. When it rolled under the sofa's underskirts I was almost relieved. No way would she be able to slide into the two-inch gap between the sofa and the floor.

But I'd underestimated Cleo's yogi-like flexibility. Without hesitation she flattened her haunches and wriggled under the sofa. It was like watching birth in reverse.

The silence that followed was unnerving. She was stuck under there. Seconds later, a single black paw appeared from behind the high back of the sofa. It was swiftly accompanied by another paw. With leverage from two sets of claws a face appeared, much narrower than the last time we'd seen it, the

eyes half-closed, the ears reduced to mere flaps flattened against its skull. Clamped victoriously between its thin lips was the sock.

•

The sun glinted like a giant tiger eye as it sank behind the hills. The sky was turning pink with exhaustion. Slipping on a cashmere cardigan, I chopped chicken breasts. Risotto was bland enough not to offend anyone's tastebuds.

Cleo lifted her nose and, like a connoisseur analysing the aromas of a rare Bordeaux, half-closed her eyes. Following my ankles as I moved about the kitchen, she produced a series of squeaks. Not the mews of a cat begging for food, but the demands of a priestess impatient to have offerings laid at her feet.

Gathering her up, I snuggled her against my chest and sat down with her on a kitchen chair. She strained wistfully towards the chicken but soon became intrigued by my precious cashmere cardigan. Simple sheep's wool was of no interest to Cleo. Fibre removed from domestic goats and then painstakingly dehaired was another matter. She chomped on the wool around the middle button.

I disentangled her and lowered her firmly to the ground. Cleo sprang back onto my lap. Like a famished lion she dug her teeth into my cardigan. I tried to dislodge her. A sudden pain in my thumb as she sank a fang through my flesh. Not only had she ruined my cardigan but she'd drilled a hole in me.

Crying out, I stemmed the river of blood with a paper towel. When Steve saw my injury he was unimpressed: Cleo was doing a good job fulfilling his prejudices against kittens.

When we sat down to the meal the furrow between Steve's eyebrows deepened as Cleo demonstrated how unwilling she was to understand the words 'Don't jump onto the table'. She attacked each of our plates, not to mention the tablemats, salt and pepper shakers and cutlery.

Heat pulsed up the back of my neck. My thumb throbbed. The effort of selling a kitten to a reluctant husband was taking its toll. I grabbed her and shut her firmly in the laundry.

'She hates it in there,' Rob whined.

'She can't ruin our lives!' I shouted to drown out the yowls from behind the laundry door. Something about her jagged cries tipped me over a precipice. It wasn't just the kitten, the thumb and the husband. The inquest was the next morning. Steve would come face to face with that woman. Policemen would prove her guilt. She would go to jail. I would finally have to accept Sam was dead.

Cleo's yelps intensified. My body started shaking. Breaths came in shallow gasps. 'I can't stand it any more! She'll just have to go back to Lena!'

Rob stared into his risotto and swallowed back tears. 'You're. So. Mean.'

Scraping back my chair, I reeled to my feet and ran to the bedroom. Sobbing loudly into the pillow I knew Rob was right. I was mean. And out of control. A bad mother, hopeless wife, a failed human being in general. I longed for sleep to drop its blanket over me.

Instead, a boy's hand touched my shoulder. 'She loves you, Mummy,' he whispered. 'Listen . . .'

A bulk of fur nestled into my neck. The rhythmical growl of her purr roared in my ear. It was the deep primeval sound of waves rolling in on the black sand beaches of my childhood, the noise a baby

hears when it's in the womb. Wise and eternal, it could be the earth's lullaby or the voice of God.

A cat's purr is said to have a profound effect on the human body. Tests have proved purring reduces people's stress, lowers blood pressure and helps mend muscles and bones. The healing powers of cats are increasingly acknowledged by the many hospitals and nursing homes that employ resident cat doctors. Regular doses of purring have the potential to repair heart tissue as well. Listening to her throaty melody, my chest filled with liquid honey.

Cleo nudged her head under my chin, stared at me with maternal concern and to my amazement planted her damp nose on my cheek. It was an unmistakable kitten kiss. Nestling into my neck, she stretched a delicate front leg across my face. I took the paw between my fingers, caressed it and watched the claws gently open and close. No threat of attack this time. The pads of her foot were softer than my fingertips. As we lay 'holding hands', our souls reached across the divide of species and shared a connection beyond words.

I awoke several hours later with Cleo wedged between the sheets, her head resting on the pillow beside me. She felt entitled to be there. Her motionless form, the peaks of her ears against the white cotton, the restful comfort of her breathing made me wonder if we hadn't slept that way, human and feline, side by side, since Earth's first dawn.

From Cleo, Helen Brown

What greater gift than the love of a cat?

Charles Dickens



The Birthday Present



The cat was less of a present and more of an afterthought by my father, who'd forgotten my fourth birthday on the Monday of a bank holiday weekend.

Having fruitlessly scoured Johannesburg for a present he finally found an open pet store with one solitary mangy kitten who was only four weeks old. The owner seemed happy to be rid of her and generously sold her for fifty cents, throwing in a litter tray, a bowl and some food. And so into our lives she came, and in the way only an imaginative four-year-old could, I decided for some unknown reason to call her Kewie (pronounced Q.E.).

She was my cat from the start. And being so young, and surrounded by numerous large dogs, she grew up tough. This toughness is probably what saved her when, only a few weeks later, she was knocked down by a car in front of our house. However, it was the second car two weeks later that really did the damage. She was discovered in a gutter when our neighbour tried to kick the 'dead' cat aside; realising she was still alive, he promptly rushed her to the vet. The accident left Kewie with a broken pelvis, a fractured skull and a motionless tail that had a forty-five-degree kink, her trademark forever after.

Kewie was always at my side, normally slung across my left shoulder with her paws gently supported in my little hands. She could always find mischief, and the following year, on the night before my fifth birthday party, she discovered that we had thwarted her plans to misappropriate the birthday cakes, covering them with cloths. She decided to leave her mark anyway—and spent the night walking back and forth across them, leaving paw prints in her wake.

When we decided to move to Ireland four years later we talked about leaving Kewie behind but it was my mother who decided that you could move the contents of a house easily but that didn't make a home—so the cat came with us. She flew from Johannesburg to Amsterdam, with a brief stop-over for breakfast, and then finally on to London where she would spend the next six months in solitary confinement in quarantine. The huge expense of this mission did not impress my father one bit. But Kewie was a personality and soon became the 'quarantine cat', allowed to wander freely and sit with the workers.

Once her incarceration was over, Kewie was loaded into a truck and driven to Ireland, crossing on the ferry, a harrowing ordeal she would never forget. It was a huge moment of anticipation when we opened the cage door: it had been so long—would she still remember us? Out she came, as if nothing had changed, and greeted us like old friends reunited.

Not much had changed. Her favourite game still remained beating up surprised dogs—she would stand on her back legs and smack them across the face, leaving them completely bewildered. She still stole milk; when we rudely covered it, she quickly learned that if she knocked over the whole one-litre jug she could still lap the desired few sips from the table or the floor where it spilled. As she got older and dottier she started hunting 'mice', which were really just sycamore leaves with long tail-like stalks. She might bring in four or five a day, each held aloft and announced with great pride. And she always remained top cat: we often joked that she ruled the house and that we just lived in it.

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