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Opening Extract from...

CAT WOMEN

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Introduction

I became a Cat Woman the moment I was hit with a thud of love that I'd never realised a creature could produce. I've always loved animals – as a child I attempted to befriend snails and tried to tame mice so they would sit in my pockets. I took my tortoise to school and I even spent hours up to my knees in my local river trying to tickle trout in the hope that one day they would swim behind me like a train of fishy ribbons, in my very own rural Somerset version of swimming with dolphins.

But one day, when I was in my early thirties, following a sudden move that had left me somewhat adrift, I met a cat who changed my life forever. Or rather, I re-met . . .

Dylan was the Cornish village cat I had seen on holidays for years and always admired from afar – I snuck a stroke whenever I could. But now I was living in his little seaside village where I knew no one except relatives. One day, when out walking, I paused by the large flowerpot in which he was sleeping and gave him a stroke, at which point he stretched and climbed down. After a few minutes I turned to walk back up the street to my house and he followed me home. He came in and curled up on my lap.

It got to night time and I wasn't sure what to do. I had to send him home – I couldn't steal a cat – but there was something about him being there that just made everything feel better. I eventually and very reluctantly turned him out.

But the next morning, when I opened the front door, there he was. He trotted in as if he owned the place and wouldn't budge all day. Night fell and again I turned him out. But each day he came back. I had been thinking of getting a kitten, but now that was impossible. I did not want another cat. I wanted him.

Although in theory he belonged to someone else, each day he would show up and, before long, it was quite obvious that he had

decided to move in. I had been a bit of a wreck, but for some reason this beautiful, old, giant tabby cat had chosen me. Soon I belonged to him as much as him to me.

Days turned to weeks, then months, then years. (I hasten to add at this point that his old owners now knew where he was – do not ever actually steal a cat!) The bond sometimes overwhelmed me. He would sit curled up on my lap, sometimes wrap his arms around me as if cuddling, and usually spent the night stretched out down my back. If I went out for a walk he would follow me. He would come to the beach and sniff the seaweed curiously. If I ever bumped into him out and about he would jump up excitedly as if overwhelmed with the adventure of me suddenly appearing.

Those of you who have read Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy will understand when I say that he felt like my daemon – a part of me somehow that it hurt to be away from for too long. We could communicate. If I was feeling ill he would sense the sore spot and curl up on it. If I was sad, he wouldn't leave my side.

Dylan was also a well-known character in the village. I would occasionally hear about his trips to the pub, or how he had been 'helping' at the post office by sitting on the counter. Come summer when the tourists arrived, he couldn't resist sitting outside to be admired (he was very beautiful). But woe betide any dogs who got too close – fluffing up his fur and growling before chasing them away was one of his favourite hobbies.

I guess you could see his kindness and his sensing of when things weren't right as a little uncanny, but how this bond between human and animal, between woman and cat, could be seen as anything but positive is a mystery to me. I felt honoured.

In 2011, partly inspired by my experience with Dylan over the previous year, I began to collect photos of women or girls and their cats. Every time I came across one in a charity shop, junk shop, market or online auction site, I would buy it. It was a strange impulse. Perhaps something akin to the urge to take in a lost cat.

Inscription on back: March 1964
Found in: USA

Woman with Shadow Dancers

This picture is bathed in sun water. The cats are charming the air, capturing the patterns of light to play with, spinning these darkened visual echoes of trees. Jeanie perches in the door of her caravan, knees and heels neatly together, her tidiness a contrast to any preconceptions of her setting. I imagine the concrete block she rests her toes on as a brutalist secret passageway I almost expect more cats to shoot out of.

Tabby the cat stretches and the pole-shaped shadow echoes his moves, as his cat friends, the white and black twins, wreathe the other shadows like a maypole. Shadow folk dance! With strange stretches! Is this their own tradition we can know nothing of?

Yet Tabby's whole fur is shadows – a reverse of dappled light that, when shed, is curiously black tipped and ginger at the root. Oh, to have hair that colour naturally! she thinks. Oh, for the power to manipulate the reflections of trees – the



wall is made river by them and the cats are tempted to pounce and pull and see what happens. If they can catch wall fish, if their claws can peel the shadows and trail them like ribbons of almost bark.

Jeanie smiles. This isn't the life that was expected for her, but she is content here, feeding titbits to her shadow cats, feeling sun patterns tickle and warm her face, making the cats dance, eyes intent on her and paws outstretched in an invitation to take the floor.

Her smile is secret and content. This is the best sort.

The HP cardboard box under her trailer is full of her shadows – she hides them there. The cats stay clear in reverence. But this is a good day, full of light.

Inscription on back: Rosalind 1930
Found in: UK

Rosalind the Nursemaid

Tabby markings swirl like ink marbling, swaddling his chubby form. Rosalind lifts Marmalade out of the pram – her precious patient. They have been playing all morning. He sat so well in the pram and, although a bit bewildered by the movement of the wheels, had not leapt out, even when a leaf blew by like a crunchy moth or butterfly. He could sense that this was important to her. So he sat and groomed his white bib.

And now, paw placed protectively in the crook of Rosalind's elbow, he waits as she poses for the camera. They stand in sharp focus, compared to the damp, not-quite-mud of the garden behind them. Her grey ribbed tights and sensible shoes are not bad, but not perfect for this weather. They are a strange clash with the whiteness of her uniform and the sleekness of his fur.

Marmalade is not sure what to do – should he move yet? When is it OK to jump down? He quite wants to investigate what is going on in the plants behind them, but he does not want to disappoint her – she is his best friend after all.

Some days, as she wheels him or lifts him gently, he catches glimpses of a world beyond theirs, a world beyond the walls of this garden. Birds take off from branches and leave via the sky, squirrels climb away – he can smell and hear things he cannot see here. But he will not go and investigate, he is too loyal. For all his remaining days he will not leave her. When you truly love another creature it is hard to be free.



Inscription on back: December 1955
Found in: USA

Retro-futurism

Standing still, trying not to slip on snow, she shows off her new haircut, and how he can perch on her shoulder, parrot-like and fluffy in the cold. Together their heads make a perfect V to suit the angles of the time.

She checks in with him. Is this quite all right? He is unsure. He's not keen on this white stuff that coats the ground – it is too cold on his paws and he does not have all her extra layers. Her cocoon of a long wool coat.

They are a future that never happened – space-age cars, even the snow carves the roof to the shape of curved fins and imaginary spaceships. The car has eyes and looks like it should be in an old hand-drawn advertisement for the lifestyle you always wanted. Ice-blue paint and old metal curves.

Fashions change, but cats are constant – hundreds of years ago they would have looked the same, while we are defined by the age we are born to.

She smiles. They feel magic together. But not magic of the old kind, just the sort that makes a freezing day feel warm inside. The soft miracle of curled up fur. The perfect timeless companion to her modern architecture.




Back Yard
1921

Inscription: Backyard 1921
Found in: USA

Teenage Dreaming

He's wrapped in arms; she frames him, a tender representation of perfect teenage dreaminess, when the world is vast and full and for the taking. But here, it is a smaller world – her backyard, garden, their special place to sit in sun – a microcosm of freedom on long-drawn summer days, when shoes get lost and hairbrushes are discarded to fly through the air like clumsy dragonflies. They only need the sun and each other. The ground is hard and dry, with scrubby green, like the bird's-eye view of a desert. They are giants in this landscape and the rain has decided to hibernate, which is good for the cat who does not care for getting wet. He loves her arms though. Just sitting there together. Her bare feet outstretched, her simple cotton dress. If she leaves the house she's forced to change – shoes and stockings and unnecessary grooming – while he is left behind to pine for her, to watch her through the window or wooden gate as she disappears from view, not looking like her true self.

In a few years she might leave him to go out dancing – sequins all a flutter of flapper fringes. Not yet, he thinks, hunkering down in her flesh cradle.

The glow of the frame looks like a portal, opening or closing on this snapshot in time. If this were a portal, she would happily stay frozen in this moment. Dreaming of a life of adventure, but sitting still, with her best friend, in her most perfect moment in the whole wide world.

She holds him protectively as their edges blur. The cat smiles and settles down as she strokes him.

Inscription on backs: None
Era: c. 1900s
Found in: UK

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An Edwardian Photo Story

He appeared one day – a teleportation of fluff direct to the perfect cushion they had laid out, should such an occasion ever occur. He waited patiently for his splendour to be noticed.



Then he grew. Outside now. A ring of white stones, house teeth, smile and wait for the moment he will understand the gestures – that it is her hand, not her skirt, that he should follow.



Bay window eyes glint – laugh in their open crow's-feet corners. The ball is a good choice. Almost prey. The white chair has come out to watch as she sits on the grass to encourage him. She has stolen his cushion.

