

Jim Brannin

The White Cat

Dear

I'm writing to you about the cats in the back garden.

Hattie pushed aside the tubes from her oxygen supply¹, and laid the biro and paper on the bedside table. She knew she had to write to someone about the white cat and his family – but to whom? If it wasn't for these damn lungs, she thought, I'd run downstairs, stop the first person I saw in the street and spill the lot². But nowadays it was difficult enough just to get to the loo using her frame³. Struggling down three steep flights and back again was out of the question.

In spite of being infirm, Hattie had few reservations about growing old. The worst thing wasn't the physical part. There were ways to get around a disability and still pull something out of life. You could read a book, watch television, talk to friends. The real pity was the closing of the curtains. When you're young, if one curtain closes, you can usually open another to reveal a different vista. If you break up with your partner, a new person eventually comes along. If you lose your job, a curtain parts sooner or later, and you're back at work. But reach your so-called golden years, and you'll be fortunate indeed to find a new romance. If you're unemployed when the wrinkles deepen, you're not likely to see a wage packet again: "great CV, but too old." And so it goes in later life – curtain after curtain shuts forever. No question about any of them opening for me at my age, she thought. She put these musings aside, and listened to the fragments of the conversation drifting up from downstairs.

"Not fair... don't wanna take Auntie Hattie's breakfast all the way up there again. That's two days in a row. It's Jenny's turn!"

"Not me... not taking it up *or* cooking it... late for school... don't care if *nobody* takes it up!"

"Stop shouting – she'll hear. Jenny! Put the porridge on this instant! Heather, you take it when it's done... collect her laundry... I know she's a chore... she's my mother's sister... we have a duty... stop whining!"

More whining in a discordant unison: "*Hate* it, *hate* it... miss my music lesson... *always* have to do it!"

It did not matter. Soon the white cat and his brood would appear. Any time now Mr. Jackson, the house handyman and cleaner, would bring their food out. They would scramble into the back garden to feed, remaining long into the afternoon. She listened for the squeak of the back door and the clump of his Doc Martens⁴ on the stairs. As always she would turn the curtain back and watch the cats all day from her window, stopping only to fulfil nature's necessities.

She recalled the first time she saw the white one, a snowy spectre with eyes of molten amethyst, and a nose and ears pink as azalea⁵ petals. He stood poised on the back fence, his head high, mouth open and lips drawn back to catch the scent of the place. Then he peered about the lawn and sprang over the rose bushes, landing on shock absorbers of fur and sinew. Where he came from, and why he chose this house from all the others on the street, would always remain a mystery.

At first, Hattie thought he was a female. His face was soft and refined, with cheeks curved as elegantly as the scroll work on her Elizabethan sofa. Yet he strutted about like a courtier, sniffing blades of grass and sticks for any sign of a rival. No, definitely very masculine, that one. Watching

¹ *oxygen supply*: breathing aid

² *spill the lot*: tell people everything

³ walking aid

⁴ *Doc Martens*: brand of footwear

⁵ flower

40 him always made her think of Johnny. Her husband had been so assured, so manly, in spite of his delicate features and feminine green eyes. She remembered how the white cat accosted everyone he saw, meowing at them, rubbing against their legs, ingratiating himself at every opportunity. That's how Johnny was, too. Make friends with anybody, he would. Charm the fish out of the sea if he got the chance.

45 But Hattie couldn't ignore the cat's other side. Whenever he caught sight of Rufus, the house moggie, a peaceful black-and-white Manx⁶, he would sidle up, turn his head sideways and growl, forcing anyone in the garden to shoo him away. Johnny could get like that straight away if he didn't like you. Turn aggressive easy. Probably why he'd been a boxer in his youth and a good one at that. Hattie always wondered how those same hands, so soft, so loving when he caressed her, could
50 bloody a man's nose or knock him down.

It hadn't been long before the white cat turned up with a small tortoiseshell⁷ mate who hung back while the girls played with him. She wouldn't let anyone stroke her or even get near. A lot like herself, Hattie thought: reserved, ill at ease with strangers. She'd always preferred to stay in the background, let Johnny make the running at parties and his family gatherings. Definitely two of a
55 kind, she and the little female.

Soon the tortoiseshell's belly began to swell, sinking almost to the ground as the weeks passed. Watching her, Hattie thought of her own pregnancy and the moment she'd broken the news to her husband late one afternoon. "Johnny," she said, forcing her voice to steady, "Johnny, love, it's for certain now, so I can tell you. I'm expecting." He let out a whoop that must have carried to the end
60 of the street, then broke into a boxer's dance, bobbing, weaving, jabbing. As he flashed back and forth in front of the setting sun, it seemed to dance in celebration too. Then he pulled her close, but quickly relaxed his grip, saying, "God, Hattie, I've got to be careful now. Got to go easy with you, look after you." And so he did, all those years ago.

One morning the cat pair emerged with two tabby kittens following close behind. Mr. Jackson
65 seemed unperturbed by the additional animals, and brought out bowls for all of them. Hattie couldn't help remembering her own twins whenever the group arrived. Her baby boys, Georgie and Max, both beautiful and irresistible, both worth infinitely more than the effort of bringing them up. Things were fine until they reached their late teens. Max, always a reckless driver, died in a collision with a lorry. Georgie... Well, there was that girl's pregnancy, the drugs, the shoplifting. Then the
70 move to Australia, and the falling out with Hattie and her husband. No letters or phone calls. A stranger for so long now. The kittens wouldn't suffer any family upsets, though. Look at the way their father and mother fussed over them, groomed them, herded them up to the feeding bowls. Hattie often wondered if she'd been as good a parent.

The chiming of the bedside clock cut through her reverie. Nine already, and still no door squeaks
75 or footfalls from Mr. Jackson. Usually the cats had finished feeding by now and were taking over the garden. She turned back the curtain and scanned the scene below: nothing but the empty lawn, its lustre deadened by a cast-iron London sky. Never mind, she thought. He's probably having a lie-in⁸, poor man. He certainly works hard enough for *them* downstairs.

Light footsteps trudged up the stairway, slowing as they reached the top. The door opened and a
80 small girl with a pewter tray bearing a cup, saucer and bowl entered. "Here's your breakfast, Auntie Hattie," she said in a near-groan.

"Thank you, Heather. That's very kind of you. You know, I really do appreciate the way you and Jenny look after me."

"OK, then, gotta go. See ya."

85 Hattie stared at the food without picking up the fork or spoon. Just didn't seem right to have her breakfast without the cats enjoying theirs at the same time. That was how it usually worked out, Hattie eating slowly, watching her feline family gulp theirs, sensing their enjoyment. At such times

⁶ breed of cat

⁷ cat with multi-coloured fur

⁸ staying home in bed

she pictured the meals she used to have with Johnny and the children, sharing food, delight, laughter.

90 She hoped the white cat and his mate were young, and would still be there long after the cortisone⁹, the oxygen tanks and breathing mask would no longer sustain her, when her soul would exit soundlessly, like her husband's did one crystalline winter night. Ah, Johnny. Green-eyed, soft-faced Johnny. Did I love you enough, take care of you enough, make those last weeks easier for you?

95 Scraps of the mother's voice drifted up from downstairs and sliced through Hattie's reverie. "Damn cats... had to be done... kept fighting Rufus... killing birds... the RSPCA¹⁰... rid of them, thank heavens." Hattie peered around the curtain again, not accepting, not believing. But the realisation forced itself upon her in ever-stronger waves until denial was no longer possible.

100 "Oh no, please no!", she whimpered to the empty room. But no to what? No to the destruction of innocent animals who were only following their undeniable instincts? No to the racing years that etch their passing into our faces, wreak their havoc on our bodies, take away the people we love? Shouldn't the captors have crept up the stairs and enfolded her in their nets to be carried off, too, another burden out of the way? But the answers eluded her, and she buried her head in the pillows, her tears streaking their covers.

105 All afternoon she lay motionless, ignoring the voices downstairs. Thoughts tumbled through her head like rocks in a landslide. When a thing is lost, you take stock of what is left. You try to compensate, look for something else that can be gained. She'd always prided herself on her resolute character. Even after Johnny's passing she'd managed to keep her life together, run the house and his business by herself. She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Might as well face things in their full desolation, she thought. Instead of turning back the corner of the curtain in her normal fashion, she pulled hard on its drawstring. It refused to budge. Gasping for air now, she raised herself from the bed, and tugged with all her weight against the cord. The curtain squeaked in complaint and eased open. She stared through the window in search of something, but not knowing what. Apparitions of her family paraded through her imagining, returning again and again
110 to stand before her. But one remained long after the others had faded. She picked up the biro and continued the letter she'd started.
115

Dear Georgie

120 *I'm writing to you about the cats in the back garden. They are gone now. I know it sounds silly, but their leaving made me think of you and realise the mistakes your father and I made when we let you out of our lives. Here is what happened today.*

125 She stopped to take a few gulps of oxygen and turned to the window once more. She surveyed the stand of poplars towering behind the garden fence, then the fields beyond, their harvest of grain bundled in tawny sheaves. The landscape was stunning, a Constable¹¹ painting spread as far as she could see. Her gaze reached out farther to the remote horizon, and she fancied she could look over it and see her son half the world away. The realisation came full upon her that she would keep the curtain drawn back¹² always.

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⁹ type of medicine

¹⁰ Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, animal welfare charity

¹¹ John Constable (1776-1837), British Romantic painter

¹² *drawn back*: (here) trukket til side