

Catlady

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A Love Letter to
Women and Their Cats

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Baby Moses

LEAH REENA GOREN

It was decided for me: I was to grow up with poodles. Poodles don't shed, and besides, my dad hated cats. He was allergic, but his distaste for them went beyond the potential for itchy eyes or a runny nose. The sight alone of any neighborhood stray made his face twist in disgust. If it wandered too close, he shooed it away with a loud *pssss*.

Our first dog was Molly, born to be a show dog but rejected for the tiny tuft of black fur on her otherwise white coat. As kids we would search for the black curl under her ear to show off her ruined career. "See?"

After Molly there was Jamie, and then Ellie, and then Tova. Tova is still alive, completely blind in the one eye she has left, sniffing her way around the house we grew up in.

My dad always talked about Homer, his childhood schnauzer, who was trained to sit still at the command, "Treif," the Milk-Bone balanced on his nose gobbled up as soon as someone said, "Kosher." But there had once been a cat in the family who was rarely mentioned. "April, she was snow white—a very sexy, beautiful cat," my grandmother Cherie recalled as she sipped her evening glass of vodka on the rocks. "We had a picture window and the toms would line up outside. She was the neighborhood hussy. She had more kittens than any cat I ever knew. No one thought to get cats fixed in those days. April," she continued, "would stay up in Ellen's room all day long while Ellen went to school. She wouldn't talk to anybody else. When Ellen came home, she would hop off of Ellen's bed and come to the top of the staircase, majestically look down on you, turn up her nose, and go back to bed. She was really a brat."

Ellen was my dad's sister, older and overachieving. "They had the same IQ," my grandmother loves to say, "but he wanted to be the class clown." Ellen grew up to be a corporate lawyer while my dad barely attended college. And though he was allergic, there was no way April would ever be rehomed. It makes sense why he continued to pssss at cats into adulthood. Childhood cat trauma.

Unbelievably, I didn't have a face-to-face encounter with a cat until the summer I was twenty-two. It's kind of like how I hadn't tried a cheeseburger till around then, either. Some things just happened later. I moved into a small, dark two-bedroom apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, with my best friend, Taylor. (It feels childish now to qualify our friendship as *best*, but I still can't not say it.) Our apartment faced a damp alley where mosquitoes were rampant, and without air-conditioning or window screens we were bitten all summer. I don't know why we didn't remedy the situation; we were young and unconcerned.

One day Taylor brought home a gray kitten she had found on the street. Knowing I was allergic and tired of her thoughtless, near-constant antics, she promised it would be gone by the next day, and then promptly left for work. Home alone with the kitten, I didn't know what I was supposed to do with it. I was afraid of sneezing. I wasn't sure how to pick it up. But it was so cute. I cautiously let it roam around my bedroom until it fell asleep at my feet, and together we curled up on my mattress set right on the slanted wood floor. My first day with a cat! Thrilling. I took a ton of photos, tiny and pixelated on my BlackBerry, which I then drew from in wavy black ink.

I loved these drawings and I didn't want to stop. The cat was the perfect symbol. Dogs—I knew dogs. Everyone knew dogs. It may have been my own unfamiliarity, but cats seemed like they could be or represent *anything*, something more in line with human emotions, perhaps. I typed "cat" into Google Images and drew a dozen more, assembling my favorites into a careful square. I added color and had it printed onto my first silk scarf.





I started noticing cats everywhere in art. I found Vera Neumann's cheery mid-century-style cats on linen tea towels and napkins, and Niki de Saint Phalle's mosaic cat sculpture back home in San Diego. I realized I had spent my whole childhood looking at a watercolor of a black cat by my mom, titled *Bootsie at the Egyptian Apartments*. I followed Balthus's fascination, from his childhood cat to his arresting paintings of young girls and theirs. I saw myself in Will Barnet's contemplative portraits: a woman reading calmly in bed, her white cat resting on her lap; a woman dressed serenely in lavender, a calico slung over her shoulder.

And there they were in old photos, too, the companions of artists in a time that looked more perfect. I fell in love with Celia Birtwell's bold florals and also her life—the way she collaborated beautifully with her fashion designer husband and played muse to David Hockney, all the while accompanied in the studio by her cat Blanche. I saw an aged, wise Sonia Delaunay grinning alongside a long-haired cat. In one snapshot, Matisse's assistant Annelies Nelck took a break from installing his paper cut-outs to pet a reclining tabby.

These women were all me. I didn't have a cat, but this was how I felt. The cat was an accessory to a quiet moment. An image of a solitary woman could mean any number of things, but a woman shown with a cat is safe to indulge in her inner monologue. A woman with a cat is safe to be alone. She is home.

I drew more and more cats and found ways to transfer them onto fabric. In my screen printing class I burned a grouping of graceful line drawings onto a screen, and squeegeed them out onto canvas bags. At home, with less equipment at my disposal, I made a stamp out of a rubber block, carving in a graphic cat head silhouette. I painted my screen printing ink onto the raised shape, which gave each print a brushy, textured look, and began stamping it onto fabric. I spaced each cat head evenly, like a classic polka dot pattern. I took the fabric and sewed myself a loose, baby doll dress—sleeveless

with a short, gathered skirt. I shared it online, and it turned out the Internet loved cats, too; I ended up spending so many hours over the next several years selling and handmaking these dresses. I wasn't a fashion designer and I was barely a seamstress, but I was a college student who couldn't say no to an opportunity for self-employment. By the time I graduated, I had licensed the black cat block print to Anthropologie and they had produced 5,500 dresses. Somehow I had become an illustrator who specialized in cat prints, and I wasn't even sure how much I knew about them.

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I saw his photo online first—a low-res rectangle of what looked like a naked mole rat with bat ears, crouched on tiny legs barely large enough to support his weeks-old body, his skin pink and nearly hairless. He was a breed called Devon rex that I sought out for its hypoallergenic reputation; their short, wavy hair allegedly shed very little, allowing lower dander levels.

I named him Moses. *Baby Moses, Prince of Egypt* I thought to myself, finding strange comfort in a biblical reference that brought me back to my loathed days in Hebrew school. Baby Moses, sailing down the Nile bundled in his little basket. I nestled my own Moses into an old sweatshirt, fashioning it into a sling so I could carry him around the apartment while I worked. He would climb into my arms to sleep, insisting nowhere else was as comfortable. At night he nestled between my legs or under the crook of an arm or right on top of my pillow, curled around my head like a fancy turban. I am not a cuddler—I like to be left alone while I sleep—but I learned how to be still with him.

Moses loved my then-boyfriend Dylan, as well as friends who came over a lot. He had a friend of his own, too. Sometimes, if I heard a scratch on the door, I'd let him out to play with Thunder Paws. Thunder Paws was a large tabby with green eyes, a former

outdoor cat who, now confined indoors, spent a lot of time roaming the halls between the second and fourth floors. He belonged to an upstairs neighbor, a friendly Australian woman with tanned skin and a short black bob, whom I perceived as at least five years older than me, especially after she mentioned her husband. In a building teeming with young gentrifiers, any difference in age felt as palpable as it did throughout high school and college. I personally could not imagine ever uttering the word *husband*.

An anxious first-time cat owner, I would hover in the doorway while Moses was roaming the halls. Some evenings my neighbor would come downstairs and chat while our cats chased each other up and down the stairs. Leaning against the wall in the foyer, she'd flip through photos on her phone and show me what she'd spent the day working on as a photo retoucher for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's archive.

Toward the end of winter, Moses and I were huddled on the floor next to the heater. The apartment was terribly cold unless we stayed right there. We spent a lot of time there, me with my back against the bed frame, him on his little patchwork cushion I had sewed for him. Moses sneezed. I wasn't sure I had seen him sneeze before, at least not like this. He lurched, and then his body froze, his mouth open and lips turned up in a snarl. Drool dripped onto the floor. "You OK?!" I exclaimed, laughing it off. And then it happened again.

I threw my loose, gray striped coat on over my T-shirt and leggings and we were in the backseat of a car service, heading to our vet in nearby Queens. I took a long walk through an unfamiliar neighborhood awaiting a diagnosis, learning finally that the sneezes were in fact seizures. Moses was moved to a better-equipped vet nearby, and then to a fancy twenty-four-hour vet in midtown Manhattan. Days passed, X-rays were conducted and tests were run. I jotted down notes onto scraps of paper when the veterinarians called me during the day. I took the train uptown to visit Moses at night. I went



out for drinks with friends to hold onto a sense of normalcy, pushing down the familiar feeling that I alone was falling apart. I gave the go-ahead for an expensive MRI; I spent my mid-twenties savings on him.

The MRI revealed there was something wrong with his brain, but they didn't know what. I could pay to have a sample tested by experts in California, but that would take more days, and more money to keep him alive in kitty urgent care. He was suffering.

Our situation was not unique. In a dim, windowless basement room, we heard the muffled sounds of other families saying their goodbyes through the thin walls. I held him like a baby in my arms, like I always had. He was my baby, my first cat. Baby Moses. I was all he had in this world. His eyes pleaded with me, in pain.

This was it. I wanted so badly to remember him, knowing the moment would inevitably fade into a melancholy snapshot. His body was warm, heavy, and limp. I felt his ripply fur around my fingers, soft as a newborn lamb, and I thought *I will forget this*.

It is very unsettling seeing someone in a way they've never been. Moses, defeated. A week ago he had been racing from one end to the other in my railroad apartment. I have a memory of my dad in the ICU after his car accident, pink and bloated head to toe. Until that moment, he had been a small athletic man, lithe and tanned. My fourteen-year-old self took one look at the pink man in a coma and, bursting into tears, fled into the hallway. I had been taken off guard by my reaction, as if it had happened without my consent.

My dad's death was anything but straightforward. When he woke up from his coma, he was a completely different person. Over the next year, I slowly and silently mourned the loss of his past self. The tracheostomy gave him a new voice, brain damage gave him a new personality, and lingering injuries prevented him from walking. As far as I was concerned, he wasn't my dad. The brain damage rendered him aggressive and violent, even from the confines of a wheelchair, and my mom made the difficult decision to send him to

live with his parents in Philadelphia in order to protect my sister and me. Eventually, when my mom hung up the phone one evening and called my sister and me into the living room to tell us daddy had died, it had felt like little more than a final plot point—the ending of a movie I hadn't felt like finishing. I went back to the den and resumed chatting with a couple of cute boys from school on AOL Instant Messenger.

I lived for the next decade without giving death a second thought. The childhood poodles had passed, of course, but of very old age while I was off at college. I was young, and my own end felt distant, if not impossible. Sitting with Moses in the basement, for the first time I visualized the exact moment between being alive and being dead. It was so tragically, bewilderingly clear-cut.

Dylan wanted to stay and hold Moses while they gave him the injection. I left the room, though I might as well have been there for the amount of times I've sobbingly conjured an image of what his last moments must have been like. Upstairs, under fluorescent lighting, I paid the \$6,000 balance with my credit card and took the train home.

The days that followed had made little sense. I hadn't had a year of separation or the cushion of my teenage mind to help me this time. Setting a glass of water down on my dresser reminded me that Moses wouldn't jump up onto the dresser, drink from the glass, and then knock it over. I placed a couple of plants on the windowsill because there was no one to sit there and watch the birds. I opened one of the storage drawers in my bed frame so that no one came running, eager to bury himself into the soft piles of sweaters.

One day I heard a faint noise in the hallway and opened the door to find Thunder Paws. I let him in, and then went into a kitchen drawer to scoop out a generous handful of treats. "I don't need these anymore," I said, dropping them onto the hardwood floor in front of him. I went back to my room and lay down in the last sunbeam of late afternoon while he searched the apartment. When

he was done, he came and sat facing me at the edge of the bed. “Moses doesn’t live here anymore,” I told him, and then we lay there in silence.

I don’t think about Moses very much anymore, just as I knew I wouldn’t. Enough time has passed that I have to find a drawing to jog my memory. It’s dated 2014. I have two cats now, who have taught me no life lessons thus far. I find joy in watching them wrestle, pounce on rubber bands, and sit atop bits of cardboard—acts I am fully aware would be less than delightful to anyone who has not lived with them. I know they too will leave me one day and my heart will be broken all over again. Luckily it still feels distant, if not impossible.

On Kitten Rescue

AN INTERVIEW WITH HANNAH SHAW AND SONJA LUESCHEN

Some months after my cat Moses died, before I adopted Aaron and Lacy, but after a summer stint cat-sitting a fickle calico named Passiflora, I decided to foster a litter of six-week-old kittens. They were jet black and wildly fuzzy, wriggling around my Brooklyn bedroom like caterpillars on the loose. There were four of them, but I had only two hands, and the more I lost control the more they seemed to multiply. Just as I stopped one from peeing in my large potted rubber tree, two others would climb in and begin digging holes.

In retrospect, I had no idea what I was doing, and I could have used the guidance of someone like Hannah Shaw. You may know Shaw as Kitten Lady, a humane educator who travels the U.S. teaching about neonatal care for kittens and has developed an arsenal of educational media and training resources, all in the service of saving tiny orphan kittens. Shaw is also the founder of Orphan Kitten Club (OKC), a nonprofit rescue and adoption organization, and volunteers much of her time when she's not on the road fostering the kittens in the nursery.

If this sounds like a lot for one woman to take on, well, it is. In perpetually warm San Diego kitten season never stops, but Shaw is assisted by her partner and fiancé, cat photographer Andrew Marttila, as well as Sonja Lueschen, the program manager of Orphan Kitten Club. I was lucky enough to run into them in Anza-Borrego, California, while they were taking a much-needed moment off from saving tiny lives to enjoy the sun and a big bloom of wildflowers.

Shaw: I have been involved in animal welfare since I was twelve years old. I advocated for farm animals, circus animals, and animals

in laboratories, but I wasn't involved with cat welfare until ten years ago—my cat Coco is turning ten next week. She was the first kitten I ever found. I was twenty-one years old, had just graduated college, and moved to Philadelphia. In a park in North Philly, I spotted a kitten in a tree. It blew my mind. I had no idea there were kittens in trees. I couldn't figure out why she was there and I couldn't figure out what kind of help she needed, but I knew that I cared about animals and that was enough to propel me into action. So I climbed the tree. Her little body was so small and limp, and she was so weak. I reached out on a branch, got her, put her in my shirt, and shimmied back down the tree. I felt triumphant for about three seconds and then absolutely panicked. I didn't know what to do or what she needed. But I took her home and now she celebrates her ten-year birthday next week. She was my starter kitten, and I always say it's amazing that out of every cat who could have been my first cat I got the very best one. She's the greatest cat in the world. Coco is my ride or die.

After that day in the park I became more aware of the landscape around me and I started noticing cats all over the place in Philly. I saw kittens everywhere and began rescuing orphaned kittens. People started finding out I was doing this and they would call me when they found kittens. And so I always worked with kittens—I was never involved with adult cats. It built and built until I ended up moving to North Carolina. That is where everything shifted for me. My heart was broken as I became involved in rural North Carolina's shelters, and everything I do now is about trying to piece it all back together. At the time there were eleven shelters in North Carolina that still used gas chambers. Until then, I had only worked with kittens from the street, and it was really disturbing seeing what was happening in the shelters. I would go there and let them know that I had the skill set and ability to help with orphan kittens. If they did get orphan kittens, of course they would never save them. They were not even really able to help healthy adult cats, much less kittens. Through a lot of trial and error and a lot of passion and what little





research I had been able to do, I gained a lot of experience working with orphan kittens.

My career began shifting toward cat welfare. I started working for cat welfare organizations—policy work, national fund-raising, liaising with shelters all over the country on their behalf. I learned that the small rural shelters in North Carolina were just one way of being a shelter; there are also really huge therapy shelters with a different set of issues related to their urban settings.

All this time, rescuing kittens was something that I'd done myself. People would say, "Oh my friend Hannah—she's such a cat lady!" I would correct them and say, "No, not really, I'm a kitten lady! I just do kittens!" If someone found an adult cat I would tell them there are plenty of people who can help. People who are willing to work with neonatal orphan kittens are a really rare breed. I tried to let people know if I was working with shelters or friends or other people in the movement they could count on me for this because it was a niche thing.

Kitten Lady and my ability to do it as a job happened so serendipitously. I was working for a national cat advocacy organization and feeling pangs of wanting to do more kitten advocacy, but there were no opportunities like that. Kittens were really not a priority—and still are not a priority—in a national sense in sheltering. At the time, Instagram was in its really early stages, and I decided to make a page because I thought my friends were probably really sick of seeing me post photos of kittens all the time. I just called it Kitten Lady. To my surprise it started growing. At work, I was beginning to train people in what I was doing with kittens and creating educational materials just for when I was traveling. I put some of that out on social media simply to save time. I'd have friends who would come to me and say, "Hey, I got a kitten—what do I do?!" I would create a video just for them. I made a video for a friend explaining how to make slurries—a mix of formula and wet food—to feed a kitten. I put it on YouTube and all of a sudden it started getting picked up. I