



I Am No Cat Owner

As a child my family home was conspicuously empty of pets. No dog, no cat, not even a single gold fish found refuge under our roof. As a result I grew fearful of dogs, suspect of cats and completely uninterested in supporting fish, gold or otherwise. Although exposed, and often befriended, by the domesticated companions of my various friends, living with any creature was beyond, both my experience and my desires. Until the day I married a man and a dog.

As the years passed, our family changed shape as four cherished, entrancing and devoted canine friends came into our lives. Each disarming and loving association educated me more about the foibles of humanity than about the complexities of

being a dog. But nothing prepared me for the education I would receive through the adventures of living, cohabiting, not only with a single cat, but four felines.

Throughout the years friends with cats would describe themselves as being cat proud. They would share strategies to remove cat hair from clothing. They would share the latest breakthrough in litter box technology. And they would regale with the latest exploits of these small, dignified and gentle housemates, each silently hoping their kitty proved more clever. In turn I would roll my eyes wondering how these usually sane individuals might tolerate similar antics exploited by their children.

On reflection my ignorance was unfathomable. If only I had paid closer attention to these conversations, I may have been forearmed.

Now, I join similar conversations with determination, the voice of a true believer. A fanatic storyteller willing to share often embarrassing experiences with complete strangers. Strangers who tell me they too, are cat owners.

Don't call me a cat owner, I reply. I no more own any of our four resident cats than they contribute to the household income. No, my spoiler-in-crime husband and I are mere retainers. Caretakers who provide a consistent style of living any housemate would love to become accustomed to.

And who could blame the cats. Mesmerized, I willingly clean the litter box, provide daily treats and offer full body massages. Where do I sign up for such treatment? Even the dogs give an evil eye to the nearest reclining feline as they are forced outside in wet, freezing weather "to do their thing."

If I perform my duties satisfactory my yoga practicing housemates will deem me worthy to be sat upon, soothed by the rhythmic purr of contentment. A moment I greedily anticipate. Especially on cold winter nights. I am only human after all.

Sharing warmth, cats lull me into submission. And thus, I remain their abject servant.

No I am no cat owner. I am owned whole-heartedly by Finn MacCool, Lord Gray, Captain Boots and Cowgirl. Luckily I am not alone in this alternate universe where cats rule. Family, friends and strangers move between the simple world of fur-free clothing, scratch-free furniture and the complex world which has us all grateful to scoop odorous piles of darkened sand.

What could possibly drive an otherwise sane, intelligent individual to utter words of gratitude while performing poop patrol? That low, quiet rumbling purr of contentment couldn't possibly be enough. Or could it?

Perhaps my motivation lies in the form of envy. I too would love to follow the sun around the house, always seeking the perfect length of golden warmth. Once discovered I would sprawl, bathed in the momentary glow, falling fast asleep for nap number twenty.

Or maybe my pride of four — more moody than any hormonally driven woman during a full moon — who amuse, inspire and delight, offer insight into how to live in the moment, finessing curiosity, courage and the oft perceived foolishness of human sentiment.

Again I declare I am no cat owner. Instead I have become a reluctant student blessed, and cursed, with four conspiratorial teachers. And they teach with undiluted patience.

These small furry guides have an enormous advantage though: they speak fluent human. Conversely I struggle daily to translate and understand cat. And have struggled for four years. Ever since a crystal clear winter's night when my husband uttered his last wistful words altering, forever, the course of our lives.



A Wish Fulfilled

Be careful what you wish for. These words of advice continually fall from my husband's lips after being asked how we came to live with four cats.

Be careful what you wish for especially during a full moon when the winter's silvery light emboldens the landscape and the human heart. Looking across the sparkling, snow-clad world, no movement, no sound disturbing the prayerful view, a wish whispered softly, gently will be carried with more speed, more clarity to the awaiting ears of angels. And with unparalleled swiftness, the wish will be granted.

She was a wild-eyed, small, two-toned tiger-striped gray creature. He, larger, with blue-gray short hair, was lean and strong. He was very protective of her. Both were shy and hungry.

The pair took up residence under the front porch. My husband was granted petting rights after two days of food supply. With reluctance, similar rights were granted to me after a week.

The mysterious pair of cats prospered outside on the porch. Often I observed them soaking up the cool winter light before heading below stairs for the long night.

She, wildly independent in both appearance and action, brought out a fierce loyalty in the male cat. I christened her Queen Maeve after the mythological queen of Connacht of Ireland. Namesake and cat would have valued mirrored characteristics seen one in the other, intoxicating both man and beast.

He, more regal, thoughtful in his actions, I named simply Baron. The name, as the title, stands for honorable service. And I have never witnessed such service performed by another cat or human as the care Baron gave Queen Maeve.

As winter melted into spring, I observed that Queen Maeve was pregnant. My disbelieving husband sent me straight to the books to prove my conclusion correct. Armed with both book and internet research my husband yielded to my intuitive knowledge.

But what to do? My domesticated animal experience barely consisted of proper dog care. What was to be done for a pregnant cat? I began listening to my cat proud friends. But their advice varied greatly. The more I studied, the more I read, the more fearful I became of leaving Queen Maeve to care for herself and her unborn kittens. Human arrogance? Absolutely. My improvement by cat had yet to begin.

Queen Maeve and Baron were separated. She was ensconced under the desk in the living room. He was left outside. The calm Baron showed much patience with and expansive tolerance of his chosen human companions.

Inside of her dark cocoon of desk, boxes, blankets and wired barriers during mid-morning on an ordinary Monday in April,

Queen Maeve gave birth to a pair of yellow striped twins and a tiny gray tiger. Hidden in the dark and protected from the prying entry of both dog and humans, the small creatures began to grow.

Queen Maeve proved to be a good mother. She took to a litter box, giving the appearance of not minding her indoor confinement. Although as she suckled her three babies her untamed nature radiated out of her bright eyes. She would eat and even seek lap time while the kittens slept, her attention only partially dormant. Any sound from the kittens and Queen Maeve would speedily return to her babies. Her domesticated manners surprised me. My romantic imagination had created a more feral, unappreciative creature than she ever proved to be.

In turn, I proved to be more childlike in my greedy hurry to see the kittens, to touch the tiny creatures, to hold them in my hand. To name them. I was not alone in my curiosity. Our large, ungraceful brown lab mix, Aengus, was smitten by the newly formed family, his big head often leaning into the barricaded enclosure to sneak a peak. But dog and I were forced to wait.

One fine late spring day, two tiny yellow striped twins were sitting staring up at the world beyond their quiet, dark domicile. Mother was not far away, preferring to give the impression of sleeping late. Emboldened, the twins poked about, tumbling and rolling and wobbling. It was an amazing and captivating sight.

Two more days and the younger gray brother joined the daily frolics. All time became playtime. Every reachable space explored. My husband gradually enlarged the birthing compound, always admonishing dog and I to “give the family space.”

Queen Maeve moved easily from the compound to the rest of the house. She never moved outside of earshot and showed no interest in going outside. She grew thinner. The three kittens grew larger. Food was slowly being introduced to the youngsters even as they still nursed with mother cat. Life was on schedule and joyful.

Then a fateful day arrived. The routine had been set, but not this night. Upon arriving home from work the two dogs, Johnny B and Aengus, were attended to first. Outside they went for fresh air and whatever other business the pair needed to attend too. Inside cat family role call was taken. Tragedy. One of the yellow twins was missing.

My husband stepped into the compound and explored all of its nooks and crannies. There had never been any roof, to ease movement for Queen Maeve. Now it appeared something had gotten in, or, someone had gotten out. But what of mother cat. She was contentment itself. So what was going on?

The kittens had not been named. The debate raged as to whether or not they would remain in our household or be adopted out of the family. I had names of reference, so my husband would know who I was discussing. In my mind it was the middle kitten, nicknamed Yellow, who was not in attendance.

Again I turned to Queen Maeve. Where is Yellow kitten, I asked? She of the wild eyes looked at me and then looked up. I followed her gaze. And then I smiled. Yellow was asleep on the edge of the bookcase. Somehow he had climbed the wire wall of the compound and jumped onto the shelf. Characteristics were being brazenly displayed, if only I had taken the time to observe them.

Gently Yellow was replaced next to his lounging mother and prancing brothers. A discussion smoldered all evening about the structure of the cat family compound. How to keep the kittens from climbing out but allow Queen Maeve the freedom of the house? It would be several days before a solution presented itself. In the meantime, several compound breaks were made. Yellow led and his two brothers, one older, one younger, followed. And so it would always be.