

# Pat Mosel



## Into the Eyes of a Cat

Its eyes haunted me. They were wild with an anguish I've never seen before. Not a dull pain. They were alight with the torment of its life, with accusation and anger. They signalled revenge.

*And you tell me you want stories of hope.*

The cat's eyes. Its eyes were blinding. Golden fury.

*'Hope.' You're tired of writers burning you with negatives. 'We all carry around the burden of our own problems,' you said.*

The fur on the cat's back stood up in spikes in the freezing cold.

*'These negative stories have been done so often before. Like painters, writers wallow in gloom and doom.*

As we talked that holiday, you didn't know that I was being plagued by the memory of an abandoned cat which had again appeared on my back doorstep the day before our departure. Its presence that day had had such an effect on me that I felt compelled to write about it. What you didn't seem to understand was that even a humorous writer couldn't change the reality of the suffering I had seen. Yet, a fairy story or an act of will would allow me to bring the cat in to recline on the open hearth like a princess.

*'I don't mean a fairy story,' you went on, as if you'd read my thoughts. When I was satisfied that you hadn't, I slipped back into my inner life.*

The day I moved in to my cottage that cat was already outside my back door. It would be there crouching on the hard ground whenever the removal men had gone for another load.

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“Watch out for the farm cats,” a neighbour had warned me. “There’s something about them.”

“Who feeds them?” I asked.

“Nobody.”

From that I gathered that these neighbourhood prowlers were regarded as a nuisance, if not some kind of foe. Sure enough, a carcass of chicken lay on the kitchen floor one morning, cleaned of meat, the sharp bones cleverly left behind. No knife needed. The silent thief was gone.

*I turned and you were saying to me: ‘When are you going to stop causing others pain because you are suffering?’*

*‘I can’t help what I’m going through,’ I replied lamely, digging my fingernails into my own flesh.*

For some moments there wasn’t so much of fire about those eyes. More of cold, golden light. A laser beam. Or two torches shone by a torturer on a prisoner attempting to escape. Silly that I should be thinking like a victim for the creature hadly came from a master race of cats. One ear was jagged after some sort of fight, and its nose was permanently grazed. Its mouth had the tight-lipped look of bitter women.

When was that cat going to free me? What was I guilty of? What had I done, but intrude on its pain? Was it my doing nothing at all that was wrong? Would it have felt better if I’d chased it away?

Another time it was casserole steak, defrosting on top of the fridge. That went, and it broke the dish the meat was in. I kept forgetting to shut the small back window into the utility room next to the kitchen. I knew the thief had to be that cat, although I never caught it in the act.

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“Careful of the farm cats,” I told the children when they were back from their father’s. I didn’t want them torn to shreds, or something. They didn’t know what I was talking about, but told me the cats were frightened of them.

Maybe they were right because when they were at home the cats kept away from our back door. On a Monday we might find them raiding the rubbish bags at the front and occasionally we’d see them in the hedge or in the wild growth beyond the fence at the bottom of the garden. My cat – the one which eventually came up close – would even stay in the hedge while the children played.

“Who gives the cats their food?” they asked.

“No-one,” I answered, with shame.

“We’re going to give it some milk,” they vowed, but they didn’t.

*On another day of our holiday, you were trying to apologise for accusing me of hurting you by showing my pain.*

*‘I’ve been through it too,’ you said. ‘Divorce. I know what it’s like. I sympathise, but...’*

*‘But, it brings back memories for you,’ I interrupted. ‘However, they are now memories.’ I was annoyed. ‘My pain is now.’*

My cat’s eyes, the day I was packing for our journey, had all the colour of gold and all the fever of a goldrush. I’ve seen human beings with eyes like that, but not very often. What distinguished them when they forced themselves repeatedly on my imagination was the pain... the shrieking, silent pain. And the craving for relief. If I’d been able to cry in the first place, I might have been spared the tension of remembering it.

*‘I want you to laugh. I don’t want you to get sucked in by the divorce. You’ll make it worse. You’re hurting yourself.’*

*‘And you as well.’*

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*'And me.'*

*You encouraged me to laugh and eventually I did. I whirled in circles of hysterical laughter. A three-legged animal would have made me laugh. I fell about... until I arrived at stomach cramps.*

My cat shivered, its fur rising, and then it shifted its position a fraction, moving its sharp claws beneath its crouching body. The yard was ice-cold now.

It became very still, poised for action. Yet I wasn't afraid that it would hiss or scratch, for what lay between us was despair and, at the same time, some small measure of trust. I moved a little closer. I sensed that it wanted something of me that didn't have to be stolen. In return, I liked feeling needed. I put out my hand with nothing but a faint hope of touching and I started to close the gap between us. I trembled with cold and fear of rejection. Its eyes were fixed on me. They seemed to have a hold on all of me at once; my outstretched hand, my body and face. Everything around us was silent as I reached towards it.

And then I stopped, within inches of its stubby, wounded nose.

*I vaguely heard you say something like, 'Love is not the same thing as possession'. But I was deep in my other world and responded by telling you urgently that the cat had been abandoned. The opposite of possession. Neglected.*

*You looked at me and frowned.*

*'Oh, sorry, my mind was somewhere else.'*

My cat was part of a family's life at one time. Stroked and spoiled, it expected its place by the fire. Of occasion it would return the human affection by bringing a mouse or rabbit into the house, proud of its endeavour. Now it had no choice but to hunt for food, or steal.

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What had been a sport had become a means of survival. Bonfire night was the nearest it came to the hearth now.

*I came back to awareness of you, realizing you'd been talking for a while with me not listening.*

*'We all think that we're independent...', you were saying, '...and then, always, eventually, something happens to show us that we need another person, other people.'*

*I didn't altogether agree with that remark because some of the compensations of divorce were being able to stay out late chatting to a friend, choosing my own colour schemes for the house, eating at odd hours, picking my own friends, reading in bed... Financial independence – I still didn't have that.*

My cat, with its gold sovereign eyes, wouldn't know anything about money. It didn't need money, considering the way it fed off the wild and drank the rainwater. Was that independence. Being independent and being abandoned can't be the same thing. Freedom means having choice, a luxury enjoyed by cats which are loved. This one had been kicked out.

If I had gone home after our holiday and started to feed that cat it would soon become dependent on what money can buy. So, I'd have to be very sure of my commitment before I gave it food.

*Now you were telling me that I didn't owe you anything. What you'd done to help me get through divorce, you'd done because you wanted to. 'It's very selfish, in a way,' you insisted.*

Its pain was exorbitant. I doubted I could relieve it of that excess.

I didn't know if it would allow me to drain away its deep-seated mistrust. Suffering had become a part of it, a hissing, spitting part of it. Like with a street-wise child who'd been

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sleeping rough, I could clean it up and make it cosy but I could never blot out its experience. The wariness of expecting more hurt had smothered its potential.

I'd come so close to stroking its repulsive body and then – in theory – I'd turned my back on it to go on holiday, hoping to get away from the knife-edge of my divorce.

*'One of the things I did after my own divorce was get myself a kitten,' ...you were telling me... 'It was a lovable, impossible creature which used to ambush my guests and leap onto their shoulders from behind when they weren't expecting it.'*

*'What about the pain?'*

*'Well, they were only little scratches.'*

Suddenly I started to get angry with my cat. It was a thief and it was invading my holiday privacy. Other cats had other eyes and they could look after themselves. They didn't prey on my mind and they kept themselves clean. They even washed other animals by licking their fur. They took responsibility.

*'Cats are usually very clean animals,' I blurted out, trying to cover my rising emotions.*

This one wasn't. It looked as if it had been through the manure; been searching for living creatures to eat. The spikes of its black and white fur were stuck together by globs of dirt. Its claws were sharp as barbed wire. And the birds. How many helpless, warm, feathered birds had it killed in a lifetime?

*'It was run over by a car.'*

*'Your kitten was run over?'*

*'Yes.'*

*What I felt for your sadness stirred me and made me focus on you. Your eyes were sheer blue, flecked with memories. It was then that I began to rub away the aftermath of*

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*destructive bright light that had been disturbing my vision. At that moment, I hesitantly started to see that your own eyes were talking to me.*

\* \* \*

Our conversations had begun.