

Cat's Whiskers

Jill Webster's bedroom was chock-a-block with stuffed animals and glassy eyed dolls. Jill was ten years old, and not particularly fond of stuffed animals and glassy eyed dolls, though her mother was.

Sitting on the floor, Jill reached under her bed and took out a small tin box decorated with a picture of the Queen. She opened the hinged lid. Inside, side by side, on a cushion of cotton wool, were seven cat's whiskers. She looked at them briefly and then added an eighth. Sunlight flooded through the window and the whiskers shone with all the secret colours of the rainbow. She touched them, one by one, from left to right, not counting so much as remembering. Jill closed the lid, well satisfied, and put the box back in its hiding place.

Downstairs, Jill found her parents spread out on a pile of cushions in the living room, sharing a joint of marijuana grown in their own back garden. They were a couple of aging hippies, dedicated still to the ideas of their youth.

"Have you seen Twinkles?" Jill asked.

"No," her mother answered, the word soaked up in a cloud of exhaled smoke.

The next day, Twinkles still was nowhere to be seen.

"I can't find Twinkles anywhere," she said to her mother, who was making a dress from a piece of cloth she had been given. "He's been gone since yesterday."

"Don't say you've lost another." Jill was good at losing her cats.

"It's not my fault," she said, and returned to her

bedroom with its collection of stuffed animals and glassy eyed dolls. She took out a drawing pad and a vast set of coloured pencils—Jill's parents encouraged artistic expression—and, laying on her bed, scribbled a flying black cat: a super cat, its front legs spread out like wings.

Later, Jill went back downstairs.

"Carol," she began, "can I get a new one?"

"A new what?" her mother asked, already irritated.

"A new cat."

"This one might come back." She never called a cat by its name—not that she had problems remembering, because Jill called them all Twinkles.

"He's gone. He's run away from home."

"I'll talk to Paul," she promised. Paul, her father, was up at the allotment, collecting the chicken's eggs and planting vegetables.

After school, the next day, Jill again brought up the subject.

"Did you ask Paul about the cat?"

"What?"

"Oh, yeah. You should take more care of them, you know."

"Can I get another?"

"On Saturday. Now go play out, or something."

So the answer was yes—Jill's parents were very keen on children having pets: it taught them to love animals—and she sang a happy song on the way back to her room.

It was three days until Saturday, though it seemed more like an eternity: every minute was an hour and every hour a day. Jill was still a small girl, and everything was bigger than her parents believed.

The house was nestled at the top end of the Big Woods. Jill closed the garden gate and walked down the street, with the trees stretching away to her right. She had always been scared of the Big Woods: it was a shadowy go-anywhere kind of place. Next to her school, not far away, was the Little Woods. It was a much nicer place.

She was going to the R.S.P.C.A home all by herself—Jill's parents believed in fostering independence—and was imagining all the cats there and the one she would choose.

The new cat, like all his predecessors, was called Twinkles. Jill was on the carpet, watching it play with a ball of wool. She was looking at its whiskers, shining with all the secret colours of the rainbow.

The circus was in town. Jill had been watching them set up the big top on what was known as the Village Green, even though the village had become a suburb, and cottages had turned into blocks of flats.

She ran all the way home.

"There's a circus on the Green," she gasped. "Can we go to it?"

"A circus?" Her father looked up, busy sorting his marijuana onto racks to dry. "I don't think so."

"Why not?" Jill was ready to cry.

"A circus is like a zoo," he explained. "They keep animals like in a zoo."

"They don't just have that. They have all kinds of things."

"It doesn't make any difference."

Jill knew there was no use arguing—her parents were great advocates of animal rights—but she argued just the same, and then ran crying to her room.

When the circus opened, the following day, Jill was there on the Village Green, sitting on the grass close to the entrance, listening to the music, the roar of a lion, the people laughing and gasping and applauding, imagining what was going on inside; and watching young boys lead the animals—two elephants, a camel, several llamas, horses and even some poodles wearing poodle clothes, but no lion—from tents at the side, into the big top.

After the show was over, Jill walked around the back. A large compound was fenced off, but she could see a cage in the middle, close to the back entrance, with the lion pacing about inside.

When she arrived home, well past tea-time, no-one asked where she had been—Jill's parents believed people should be allowed to do what they wanted to do, and what they wanted to do was their own business—or why she was so late.

That evening, Jill played with Twinkles, pretending he was a lion and she was a lion tamer, and all the stuffed animals and glassy eyed dolls were the audience.

Jill went to the circus every day; and on the third, with everyone inside, waiting for the show to start, the man at the front gate called her over.

"You back again, lass?"

"Yes, mister."

"Got no money?"

"No, mister."

"Want to see the show?"

Jill nodded her head, sadly.

"Come on with me, then," he said, taking her hand and leading her into the big top.

He took her down to the front row and said to a lady,

"Move over a bit, love, let this nipper squeeze in will yer? She's all by her self." The lady moved over.

"Here's a special seat, just for you," he said to Jill, scrumpling up her hair as a parting gesture.

It was a wonderful show. Jill loved the trapeze. She loved watching the men and ladies fly through the air. They were free to fly through the air, but they were always caught before it was too late. She loved the way they were caught, before it was too late.

And she loved the lion as well. He didn't seem to mind being in a cage, because he knew his trainer would take care of him.

After the show, Jill tried to find the man who had let her in, to thank him; but he was nowhere to be seen.

Twinkles was still a kitten, but he was much bigger. He was about ten, in cat years. Jill had found one of his whiskers on a cushion. She picked it up carefully and carried it up to her room. She reached under the bed, took the small tin box decorated with a picture of the Queen, opening its hinged lid. The whiskers shone with all the secret colours of the rainbow. She added the latest, and then gently touched them all, one by one.

Back downstairs, Jill picked up Twinkles and carried him outside. The sun was shining, and Jill's blond hair shone with all the secret colours of the rainbow. Up the street they went, along side the Big Woods; all the time stroking Twinkles and whispering in his ear.

At the bottom end of the Big Woods was a block of flats. Jill knew someone on the tenth floor. Forsaking the lift, she climbed the endless cold cement stairs, still stroking and whispering. Finally she reached the tenth floor. It was

a nine story block, so Jill and Twinkles were actually on the roof. Washing was hanging out to dry, pulling on the clothes-line like a row of kites; pulling to be free. Jill walked to the wall at the edge of the roof.

"You're a nice cat, Twinkles," she whispered, tickling his chin. "You've been a good cat.

"Look over there," she said, lifting him level with the top of the wall. "Do you see the world? You can see all the world from here. Look, that's the Big Woods down there. See our house, next to it? And there's the Little Woods. See?" She kissed the cat.

"Bye-bye Twinkles," she said. "It's time for you to be free." And then she threw the young cat to freedom, over the wall, towards the Big Woods.