

Cat Sharing

I visited the old man who lives along the road. Well I didn't visit him exactly, I was looking for my cat and sort of hovering about and his door was open and it was a sunny day ... Or perhaps it was having my hair cut. I felt like a new person at first, with shortish hair; less self-conscious anyway. Or the fact that I'd chatted with the postman ...

I'm getting bogged down as usual. I don't know what it is sometimes makes you feel more neighbourly, or less shy, a sunny day or a new hair-cut, or a missing cat. Anyway I really was looking for my cat.

I'd seen him of course, the old man, but I'd never really spoken to him before. His conversation was immediately odd, and he ignored my question about the cat.

Are you a local girl? he said.

I said I lived just along the road at number—

But are you a local girl? I was hoping to meet a local girl.

I said I was from Brackley but—

I go to Brackley sometimes, he said. There's a nice lake there.

I started saying I'd lived here since getting ... but petered out. And then repeated about, had he seen my cat.

I've got a ginger cat too, he said. Perhaps it's the same one. I often suspect she has two homes, two owners, she's away so long.

He paused but I probably just gave him a baffled look.

You think she's *your* cat but often strays off, he said, and I think she's my cat but often strays off. One cat, two owners. Involuntary cat sharing.

I said if it was a *she* it wasn't, mine's a tom. Adding that he's neutered so he doesn't usually—

Pity, he said. That would be something to bring us together.

I smiled, then replaced it with a frown when I thought what he'd said. Then said, in a final confirmation sort of way, he hadn't seen my cat then.

I was hoping to meet a local girl, when I moved here, he said. A milk maid or something. Who'd marry me. And have sex.

I'd hovered politely and resumed smiling as he spoke, just to be neighbourly. But when he got to having sex I was a bit taken aback. I didn't know whether it was a joke or ...

But that was thirty years ago, nearly, he said.

He was looking me directly in the eye. I squinted, during his pause, I think it was the sun but it was probably also not knowing what to make of it.

You're the first.

Stupid but for some reason I repeated his, I'm the first, as if it were a question.

Apart from the woman who came about the milkman. And I don't suppose she was local anyway. She wasn't a milk maid – yet (he giggled) I suppose she was in a way. She was recruiting people to have milk delivered.

I should have turned to go, or gone, I didn't really want to prolong the conversation, if that's what it was. But I must have still had my, I'm the first, questioning expression.

You're the first local girl who's spoken to me in nearly thirty years.

I opened my mouth as if I was going to say something, but didn't. I certainly shouldn't have encouraged him, yet somehow, you kind of go along with what they're expecting, when people are talking to you. You know, you sort of nod as if you agree with what they're saying, even if it's nonsense. So although I didn't actually say anything, or nod, I think I may have tilted my head, and *that* in a way probably colluded with him.

The marrying's not important, he said, as if I had, as if something about my manner had indicated I was amenable. But it was worth the wait, you're very nice. *Very* nice. The shorter hair suits you.

I relaxed and smiled again, as if he'd let me off the hook (I didn't have to marry him plus friendly compliment). I began to leave saying, if he does get visited by a ginger tom I'm ... and petered out again.

I was going to say where I lived, just along the road, and almost pointed, but then I thought about my hair, suiting me. He'd noticed it was shorter. Meaning he knew it was previously longer. And not having to marry him – but what about sex? That was still on the agenda then presumably. He'd said I was very nice in a very nice way, *very*

nice, both pleased and complimentary, like you might say it to a blind date – or a prostitute doing a home visit.

Yes I know, he said, acknowledging what I hadn't said, about where I lived, nodding his head in that direction as if he knew. Which I suppose he did. Well obviously. We've been there nearly six years, just a few doors along.



I'd been told he was peculiar. I'd thought of him as a sort of recluse, though his door was often open. I'd seen him occasionally, I suppose we might have smiled and said hello once or twice, in passing. So it stands to reason ...

What I mean is, after a briefly uncomfortable phase of thinking what he meant, the shorter hair, how it implied he'd been eyeing me, spying on me, watching me, I settled instead for a perfectly innocent and natural noticing of me, seeing me about, in an ordinary routine way, as neighbours do. As I had him. And obviously he'd notice my hair, being different I mean, after I'd always had it so long (and hated it). It didn't really mean anything. I suppose it was nice of him to compliment me on it.

But it did of course, it did mean something. He'd hoped to meet a local girl and waited thirty years. I was her. I was very nice, *very* nice, and my hair, he liked it shorter ... Marrying (or not) and having sex were part of it, he'd given it context. Who talks about things like that in a casual exchange of pleasantries with a stranger, or a neighbour looking for a cat?

I'd seen his ginger cat. That was another reason I called, or rather, ambled by, hovered in his gateway, his door being open. Till he came out and smiled at me. I knew he was a cat person. And cats avoid doggy houses (the houses in between us have dogs) but they'll visit other houses with cats, whether for food or for sex.

I upbraided myself for the thought. I mean for making light of it, even in my own head. It seemed in retrospect a very inappropriate thing for an elderly man to say to a young woman. Well youngish. And then I remembered the bit about, if his cat visited someone else, as if shared unknowingly, hoping it was me. Or he didn't say that did he? It would bring us together, was his phrase. The cat would bring us together. Cat sharing.

Did I say he asked me in for a cup of tea? I think I missed that bit out. I can't remember now whether it was before having sex or after, that he said it I mean. I think it was round-about cat sharing bringing us together.

It was all perfectly innocuous ... No it wasn't. I was the local girl he'd hoped to meet and marry, and/or have sex with. And cat share. He was propositioning me ... Wasn't he? Yet although that was inappropriate, or eccentric, or at least premature, it wasn't ... Or was it? You see, I was thinking myself into being affronted by it.

Oh for goodness sake.

I don't know if I was irritated at *him* so much as fed up with myself, getting bogged down in it. In thinking about it I mean. Going over what he'd said. Going through different responses and interpretations. Like I do everything ...

Trivial, trivial and innocuous, just a bit eccentric. If it was trivial why was it worth it? Thinking about it I mean. If it wasn't, if it was offensive ... I didn't in fact feel affronted or offended at the time, not especially, there wasn't anything threatening about him, or lecherous, he seemed perfectly harmless ... Can you be offended in retrospect by something someone's said that neither offended you nor seemed meant offensively at the time? Just because you're the sort of person who gets bogged down in going over things ...

Yes, I suppose you can.

After a while I found myself thinking something different, something more usual, for me. That's how it always goes, the thinking, it narrows towards self-doubt. It always does, it always turns back on myself ... I started thinking, ginger cats or no ginger cats, we had something in common, actually. Except for Jemma I live alone, or rather perhaps, in spite ... In spite of Jemma ...

Presumably, I thought, the old man's lonely too. And bored.

Except for the part-time job I'm home most of the time. The rest of the neighbours seem to lead very busy lives; families and couples, and dogs. I suppose that's what makes them regard him as peculiar; perhaps they think I am too, obviously they wouldn't mention it. To me I mean. Chat to me and remark that he's peculiar; chat to him and remark that I'm peculiar. Perhaps they had.

Perhaps *that* would bring us together ... Match making, pairing off the peculiar, the outcasts. Girl down the road's peculiar, ginger cat and long ginger hair, why don't you ask her round for sex?

Waited thirty years for a local girl to ... And I've been here six ... since ... I don't know if ... Oh dear, here I go again ... my daily blub ...

It wasn't the sex I missed so much as the company, the not mattering being ... being who I am, having horrible hair and ... because he was always so ... Until ... And now Thumpy's left us as well.

I don't know if I'd describe myself as lonely, really. I've got Jemma and ... But I regularly scold myself for tying myself in knots with all this thinking, all this ... and then escaping from it by watching too much telly.

Except for Jemma and my modelling I haven't ...



I didn't answer the door. Jemma was running round with nothing on, and the place was a mess and I hadn't washed my hair and it was only about five minutes till ... Well I'm not ruled by them but I like to keep up with a couple, soaps I mean. I was upstairs gathering up laundry. I don't know, I made various excuses to myself, but I didn't want to.

Can't someone just not want to answer their door?

He knew I was in of course. He could hear Jemma, and probably the telly. He wasn't unpleasantly persistent, like people sometimes are. He only rang the twice. Though he waited a long time. He stood waiting a long time after the second ring. Then eventually sloped away. It had just started raining at that point.

I could have been on the toilet, or in the bath, or out in the back. Or on the phone, or wearing headphones. Or up to my elbows in plaster ... he wouldn't know about that of course, the models. But I mean there's any number of reasons you might not answer the door. It's not fair to just assume you're being rude or un-neighbourly, there's lots of ...

Though he did wait ages after his second ring. He knew I was in – obviously Jemma wouldn't be here on her own. Probably thinking, if it was inconvenient he'd give me time, waiting so long. Time to get out of the bath or wash my hands or ... or come in from the garden ... He probably did think that, then only at the end, only after waiting ages, and it started raining, realised I wasn't going to answer. Realised I was snubbing him, deliberately not answering, hiding behind the curtain ... I wasn't hiding really.

But he wouldn't know I knew it was him. He wouldn't know I saw him coming, and leaned in a corner of the window upstairs, waiting and waiting. And eventually watched him walk away.

He was carrying a parcel.

I thought he'd brought me a present. I suppose he could have left it ... It would have been embarrassing, a present, as though I'd encouraged his weirdness, his flirting, if that's what it was. A local girl to have sex with. As though he'd come courting. I was glad I hadn't answered

when I saw he was carrying a parcel, that would have been just so embarrassing.

Yet people do know don't they? Somehow people know, if you're in, if you're watching them. If you're there but just refusing to come to the door. They do, they know.

I knew, that time – I knew when I finally went to ... the one and only time I tried for a reconciliation after ... For Jemma's sake, I told myself, for her. I steelled myself to do it for *her*. I knew – I knew perfectly well he was in, I even knew he was watching, or anyway his mother was, and telling him. Giving him a running commentary.

It's *her*. Don't answer it. Has she gone yet? She's stopped ringing but she's still there, standing in the rain. It rained that day, it rained all day. I stood in the rain, crying. Ringing his door-bell over and over. And crying ... Then after I stopped ringing, I just hovered till it started going dark. I knew he was there.

Remembering what it was like, the door not being answered, ringing a door-bell and being deliberately ignored, having my heart broken, that way, standing in the rain, my hair matted and soaked, standing there hurting and humiliated ... Oh dear ...

I had a present too, a parcel, I ... I threw it in the bushes ... Oh for goodness sake.

It made me feel guilty. Remembering I mean, guilty about not answering to the old man ... I didn't really pay much attention to my programme, the soap. I got all bogged down in thinking, in analysing it. Then when the news came on I thought how ridiculous, not daring answer the door to a harmless old man, a neighbour, because you're ashamed of greasy hair or a bit of untidiness ...

I washed my hair later.

Next day a little note came through the door. Very quietly – I heard it, but he was being quiet and trying not to be noticed. He didn't ring. He didn't leave a parcel. Just a little note.

I went along the verge & found a ginger tom cat, white triangle on his chest, several days dead I'm afraid, victim of a car. I didn't know what to do for the best. I've buried him just inside my gate, by the little conifer, please feel free to stop by, I shan't bother you.

I read it to Jemma and we hugged and cried for Thumpy. White triangle on his chest was him.

Funny, how he didn't even mention about ringing the door.

Shan't bother you means, we can visit the spot, just inside his gate, he won't come out. Perhaps ... Presumably it means he accepts I don't want to be neighbourly or have ... or even answer the door to him. He isn't going to ask us in for a cup of tea or sex.

Later, because Jemma wanted, we went over with a few flowers. There were already ... He didn't come out, he didn't bother us.

I cried again later. For Thumpy, but also for myself. Or rather, for a kind of disappointment in myself. Or what did I expect? If I thought having my hair cut would make me a nicer person I ...

And I thought of the old man standing all that time, waiting for me to answer the door, holding a little parcel, knowing I was in ... Then going home and digging a little grave in the rain.

