



Translated extract from

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Jutta Richter
The Cat, or How I Lost Eternity

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An old white cat lived in our road.

She used to bask in the sunlight on the wall next to the garden gate. My way to school led through that gate.

I can't remember how often I stood there, feeling her head in my hand. I just know that afterwards my hand always smelled of fish. And I hated the smell of fish because it reminded me of Fridays.

And on Fridays I had to sit in front of my plate until I'd eaten up everything on it. There was either halibut, which made me feel sick, or herring swimming in blood-red tomato sauce.

Of course the old cat wasn't to know that when she purred at me on my way to school. And she purred at me every morning, because it was summer and it never rained. Her fur was so thin between her eyes and ears that the skin showed through. It looked very odd, and I often dreamed of cats without any fur wandering around town, looking all dirty and pink.

I always arrived late for school too, so they called me Dawdling Dolly.

You dawdle, said my father, and his eyes went fishy with anger.

You dawdle, said Mr Hanke my teacher, and he said I was mischievous.

Oh yes, I wanted to be mischievous. Really mischievous.

Mischievous girls were very special, like crowing hens.

I was special. I had a whole world lying there on the road in front of me. With petrol in the puddles, shimmering in different colours. With slimy red slugs. With marbles and raspberry-flavoured sweets. With rusty nails bent all crooked. With coltsfoot flowers and slowworms and that old white cat, who was as immortal as I was.

Eternity belonged to us.

And it began in the flickering mid-day heat when we stood there together, and I quietly told the cat the words I'd learned in the morning.

You're a mischievous cat, I whispered, and I'm a mischievous girl, and really we're under a magic spell and we'll have ninety-nine lives.

Only nine, purred the cat, but who's going to believe us? And ninety-nine is too many to count, as much as that is a million if you work it all out up to twenty.

That's right, I whispered, and I felt scared of the enormous numbers in my head.

Do you know how numbers get into our heads? I asked the cat.
She thought for a little while as she licked my hand with her rough tongue.
It depends on the mice, she said. On the mice you've eaten.
But I've never eaten any mice. Not a single one, I swear!
Swearing is a bad habit, hissed the cat. And she jumped off the wall to disappear behind the dustbins.
Eternity was very large and very slow.
Specially when I couldn't share it with the cat.
The only thing that helped then was the circular saw that Waldemar Buck used to saw up the afternoon.
The circular saw screeched above the rooftops, and I imagined a little bit of eternity falling out of the sky with every screech.
Then the sun set, and my mother threw a sandwich wrapped in greaseproof paper down from the window.
You can stay outside for another half an hour! she called.
The town clerk switched the street lights on.
I stood leaning on a lamppost munching, and heard the electricity humming.
How did the electricity get into the lamppost? But there was no cat to explain it.
My father didn't explain it either. He just said I was talking nonsense and I'd better learn arithmetic instead. But how was I supposed to learn arithmetic if I couldn't bring myself to eat any mice?
My father didn't know the answer to that either. Instead, he just got that angry, fishy look in his eyes again and told me I was an obstinate child.
So I leaned against the lamppost for a long time, thinking, while the old white cat ate mouse after mouse and grew cleverer all the time.
Then I was called in for my bath, and I had to comb my hair and be put to bed.
Good night! said my mother. Sweet dreams!
Good night, Mama, I said.
But I dreamed of cats without any fur prowling around town, and I knew there weren't any good nights.

Waldemar Buck, our neighbour, was a postman. The cat didn't like him.

Perhaps because she thought eternity wouldn't be long enough if Waldemar Buck kept sawing it up in the afternoons.

Or perhaps because Waldemar Buck kept an Alsatian dog. In a rusty kennel behind the building. The Alsatian dog was called Alf, and he whined. Most of all on the Sundays when Waldemar Buck went out courting. Waldemar Buck still hadn't found a wife, and he was much older than my father.

Of course the cat knew just how old he was, because of the mice she'd eaten, but he wouldn't find a wife all the same, said my mother, not least because of his flat feet.

Occupational hazard, said my father, crunching a radish between his teeth.

It was a Sunday evening again, and the Alsatian dog called Alf was whining.

That animal ought to be put to sleep. My mother had a pitying expression on her face.

Just remember, my father told me, an animal is not a toy. An animal can't be left to pine away in a rusty kennel.

The cat really agreed with him, but she made an exception for the Alsatian dog Alf.

It's his own fault, she spat. He licks the hand that hits him instead of biting it. He whines for sympathy, caged in his kennel. He bites to order. He lies down when he's told to.

But he can't help it, I said.

Forget it, spat the cat. He's a victim, but he wasn't born a victim. Nobody is. Every animal is free and strong and the world is always wonderful to start with.

But Waldemar Buck shuts him up all the same, I said.

The cat spat again, jumped off the wall and disappeared.

And once again eternity was too much for me. I sat down on the gutter and tried counting little asphalt stones.

If I could count up to thirty I'd understand what the cat meant.

The sun went behind a very dark cloud, and when I reached thirty-two I saw the pin with the green glass head.

I picked it up and it pricked my finger.

A victim, I thought, a victim, that means pain. Pain of your own free will. A pointless pain, like a prick from an old pin with a green head.

A victim is a dog who lets people order him about because he's afraid he won't get fed otherwise.

And I realized that you can count up to thirty-two without eating a single mouse, and old white cats don't always know everything.

The old white cat was suddenly there again, rubbing against my back and then putting her head in my hand. You see, she purred, you can understand things too if you try hard.

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In the mornings Waldemar Buck wore his postman's uniform.

I woke up when I heard the gate in Waldemar Buck's fence shut at five-thirty in the morning. Then I jumped out of bed, went to the window, and saw Waldemar Buck going down the road on his flat feet, in his dark blue uniform with his postman's cap.

I knew the cat would be lying in wait at the corner of the street to cross his path, spitting. Because the cat knew that Waldemar Buck was superstitious, so she always crossed his path from left to right. That was the best way to spoil his day.

Sometimes, when I was standing at the window like that watching Waldemar Buck in his uniform getting smaller and smaller until he disappeared round the corner of the road, I thought he must be the loneliest person in the world.

And I decided to marry him when I grew up.

I'd learn to cook for him, and I'd wait for him to come home tired at mid-day.

But as soon as I'd thought that I took fright, because I knew the cat would call me crazy and never speak to me again.

Loneliness was at least as big as eternity, and who but the cat knew if anyone could help Waldemar Buck to stand it?

His uniform makes him lonely, said the cat one morning. People in uniform are always lonely.

But my mother says it comes of his flat feet, I replied.

And what do you think? asked the cat.

I'm sorry for him, I said. And I feel sad when I watch him go out in the morning.

That's no way to think!

The cat put her tongue out of her mouth and suddenly looked silly.

No one should ever marry out of pity! And you can learn to cook anyway.

I took fright again.

How do you know I'm planning to marry him?

Because you can't do arithmetic, grinned the cat, putting her tongue back inside her mouth. Girls who can't do arithmetic are overflowing with pity. Girls who can't do

arithmetic fall in love with lonely people in uniforms. You're not mischievous at all, you're just stupid!

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That morning Mr Hanke our teacher had had enough.

He was expecting the big eclipse of the sun at half past eleven, and we were all to watch it. At ten past eleven Mr Hanke sent me to see the head teacher.

The head teacher was sitting in his room behind a big brown desk with feet like lion's claws. He was much smaller than his huge desk, and he looked as if he had to sit on at least three cushions to be able to see over the top of it. At first I thought the lion's claws looked threatening, but then I remembered the cat's paws, and I knew what they were like.

Well, said the head teacher, looking up at me.

In his right hand he had a heavy curved blotter with a marble back. I saw his name twenty times over in mirror writing on the blotting paper, he'd blotted it so often today.

Perhaps he was tired, because it must have been a strain blotting his name all those times.

His hand was much too small for the marble back of the blotter.

Sit down, he said, putting the blotter down on the desk in front of him.

His bald head was cut in half by the marble back of the blotter. His nose was gone, and his eyes were flashing at me over the blotter.

So you're eight years old, he said.

I nodded.

You're in Year Three.

I nodded.

You learned to tell the time in Year One.

I nodded.

Then tell me what the time is now. He held an old silver watch hanging from a chain in front of my face. The watch was ticking aloud in the silence.

Well?

It's thirteen minutes past eleven, I said.

Yes, said the head teacher. And when does the first lesson begin?

At quarter to eight, I said.

Can you explain why you never get to school until eight?

I nodded.

A vein was swelling angrily on the left half of his forehead.

Then kindly tell me! whispered the head teacher.

It was slowly getting darker in the room, and I remembered how the cat had said: when the sun disappears in daylight, time stops.

So it will be the end of the world any moment now, I thought, and if the end of the world is coming you have to tell the truth.

It's because of the cat, I heard myself say. The cat won't let me pass her. The cat wants to talk to me. She needs to talk to me in the morning.

The head teacher slid off his three cushions and planted himself in front of me.

He wasn't much bigger standing than sitting, and now he looked like the angry picture of Rumpelstiltskin in my book of fairy tales.

Any moment now, I thought, when the world ends, he'll stamp his foot and tear himself in two. I'll never be able to forget it and I'll have to dream of it for all eternity.

His voice was shaking angrily when he said: your impertinence defies all description. As a punishment for telling lies you will write out the following sentence two hundred times:
TALKING CATS DO NOT EXIST AND I WILL COME TO SCHOOL PUNCTUALLY IN FUTURE.

While he was still saying that, it went pitch dark. The moon had moved in front of the sun and the world was ending.

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When the world began again I was alone. Waldemar Buck was sawing up eternity as usual, but this time, like the cat, I was afraid there wouldn't be enough of it.

I'd learned one thing: even if time can stop and the world comes to an end, they'll both start up again sooner or later.

Write out your silly sentences if you must, the cat had spat. But you're letting me down, that's what you're doing.

Then she had disappeared, leaving only the fishy smell on my hand.

The punishment lines in my school bag weighed a ton. They were pressing me down into the asphalt the way you sink into high winter snowdrifts. Every step was difficult now.

Don't play with your food like that, said my mother, sounding hurt.

Then I was sitting in my room, feeling frightened of those words for the first time.

I warn you, the cat had said, when you've written it out two hundred times you'll believe it.

Talking cats do not exist, I wrote, and she was right.

I could feel very clearly that something was going to end. Something mysterious and magical. I'd lose eternity if I did this.

And if I didn't do it Mr Hanke would make me.

They would lock me in. They'd lock me into the empty classroom smelling of chalk dust and floor polish. I'd have to sit there without even bread and water, all on my own. I'd listen for the echoing footsteps of the caretaker going down the empty corridors in his grey overall to sell the cleaning ladies milk. Finally even the caretaker's footsteps would die away. And the last thing I'd hear before the endless silence began would be the key turning in the lock after the oak front door of the school was slammed.

Talking cats do not exist, I wrote.

And then suddenly I knew the solution.

As if the old white cat had whispered to me, telling me what to do.

Waldemar Buck's circular saw screeched, and the cat in my head dictated the right words:

TALKING CATS DO EXIST AND I WILL COME TO SCHOOL PUNCTUALLY IN FUTURE.

They couldn't punish me very much for forgetting one word. Even if I had to correct the lines, it would only mean adding three little letters. Three little letters were nothing compared to eternity.