

About a cat

I've been worried about my cat.

Not since today, not since what's been going on lately. When I think about it, I've been worried about him for a long time. Something was wrong from the beginning, that is ever since he has been living with me. Okay, the first signs I didn't take seriously enough, took them for a cat's little whims. And there is this past I don't know of. The little I know I only know through others, from hearsay. What do I care? It's him I care about, I try to make his life as agreeable as possible, let him have his own way most of the time.

And it all started out quite innocuously: minor problems – and only when he met other tomcats. Well, it's true, mine is a tough guy, has been one for as long as I can remember. His threatening snarl, even worse his gnarling with rage makes other cats panic and gives me goose pumps each time I hear it. You think I exaggerate? Then listen to people who know, or even better listen to the tape recording I did recently. Proof for the unbelieving, unbelieving like me when I first saw him, unbelieving still when he looks at me now: expressive eyes, fine features, melodious voice, no other cat's miaow more beautiful than his. What I feel between us is more than mere affection, I'm tempted to say it is a bond by fate – despite all the resentment I've been feeling towards him lately. But when he looks at me, his long and steady cat gaze, then I see him for what he really is: a Holy Birman at his best!

You're asking about his color? He is a gorgeous seal – point, but Holy Birman cats come in all sorts of different colors, like other breeds. What? You aren't an expert when it comes to cats? For you there are only ordinary cats and Persian cats? Well, fine, a few elucidations on that old breed won't hurt. Or you simply look it up: there is a lot to be found about them in books and magazines, about their origins and distribution, also about the fact that they were threatened with extinction a couple of decades back. All right, they are a bit sensitive, that's why I wouldn't recommend them for insensitive folk, but even there, opinions are divided. Aficionados love their intelligence and, well, their sensitiveness. In short: The Holy Birman is a challenge for the dedicated cat lover, who will happily put up with this cat's little foibles in order to win their love. What did you say? A cat is a cat is a cat? Of course you are right. When it comes down to it, Holy Birman cats are like every other breed. Fed with the same food, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means. If you prick them, they bleed. If you poison them, they die and if you wrong them, they seek revenge. Like my cat, who still seems to suffer from his early injuries. Neighbors who've known him for longer tell me that he used to be different: victim rather than villain. That I find hard to believe. Could he be both, victim and villain at once?

Of course there has been crossbreeding and opinions differ on how much remains of the original gene pool, on what is the truly special and distinguishing feature. I must admit, when he won my heart at first sight, questions about breed and his life history were not on my mind. Of course, he already had a past, experiences with people and cats, different animal shelters. I can only guess at how that affected him emotionally.

You ask whether my cat is traumatized? Possibly he is. What else could be the reason for this sudden outburst of violence at the sight of other cats, at an ambiguous sound? A thirst to attack that pays no heed to my soothing gestures and words, let alone respect them. He, who under different circumstances adjusts to my moods, shows patience and

good humor at play, doesn't obey me any more, fights my attempts to hold him back, leaving bloody scratches on my hands, arms and legs, and even afterwards is almost impossible to calm down. My brother, by the way a true cat lover beyond all doubt, doesn't trust him, after having his hand bitten in an attempt to end such fight. "Almost bit off my hand", that's what he always says when we come to speak of it, and "Doesn't he know who his friends are?" You can still hear the shock of that moment in his voice. I have to say he is right, yet – when I hold the worn-out fighter in my arms and, suppressing my own anger, calm him down with friendly words, when I turn him away from the object that ignited his rage, talking him out of it, then I sense, no I feel the trembling inside him: his old fear!

Right now, as I am writing, he is cuddling up to me, is gentle and at ease. He is purring, it seems he's trying to tell me: "This is, what I am really like, when they don't provoke and attack me."

Who is the attacker? Or, like you put it: Who started it? Oh please, ask me another question!

All I know is that my other cats run off, take refuge under settees and armchairs leaving behind puddles and more: That's also a tribute to fear. At first he was only after my peaceable and good-natured Cartusian. A cat made in the image of Buddha, combining strength and wisdom like the esoterics and well-read among my friends – maybe even well-read esoterics – keep telling me. Listen! This exceptional cat once spared his enemy: blind with rage they had rolled off a table, so that the other was completely put out of action because of a temporary neuromuscular paralysis. And instead of finishing him off, as you'd respect from people, he stepped aside after from the fray - and waited. Magnanimous!!! I'm asking: Why does the stronger party hardly ever show magnanimity? Why didn't this comforting experience teach my cat a lesson? But unfortunately the minute he had regained his strength he was back to fighting... Maybe because so many frightening terrifying experiences taught him otherwise? Maybe because in his past he never knew the security that allows a cat to roll over on his back, to drowse and sleep without fear, the vulnerable belly trustingly exposed and totally relaxed. His early years seem to have taught him to be in dread of enemies everywhere, not to expose any vulnerability and not to trust any random and risky magnanimity of the stranger. That must have turned him into a scaredy cat-aggressor, hysterical with fear. Not even my second Birman, who is endowed with all the virtues of a cat and gets along with everybody, is safe from his attacks and avoids him for the sake of peace.

Before his wooing used to be shy and gentle, not really expecting an answer. But unfortunately - I watch this with growing concern – I've seen him attack mine and other female cats, too, when they don't submit to his will. He's losing their affection more and more. Should it be possible that he sees enemies in them, mistakes them for enemies?

When it comes to his territory, the garden, he defends that with the courage of a lion, chases after every intruder, runs across flower-beds and borders to the fence and beyond huffing and puffing like a little bulldozer. Why doesn't he stay within his territory? Why does he have to run off to gardens not his own beyond the fence?

What various observers say is true: he attacks where he feels he has to defend. That's why he doesn't understand my being reproachful. A firm fillip on the nose – well-deserved in my opinion – by an otherwise kind friend of the house offended him immensely without restraining him. I'll never forget the look in his hurt, perplexed eyes. I

admit, his enemies also, both, old and new, don't take pity on him but keep on provoking him. So injuries must happen. When cornered, even the weakest will resort to fighting. Just think of mice. Have you ever watched in what courageous and even death-defying manner these small rodents will defend themselves? – A touching, but ultimately futile effort. Standing on their tiny feet and raising their fragile little paws ready to fight, they look straight into the menacing cat's maw, their death. Rats, their larger cousins – I call them intelligent and social animals - may inflict serious injury even on cats! How much more serious would be a fight with their own kind. Whenever he returns from his hunts and excursions I tend to his wounds. I learn about the fights from neighbors and coincidental witnesses, even though their reports may be contradictory at times, particularly regarding the question of guilt. So what? I am tired of determining the *casus belli*. But each time I am shocked by his wounds, and I wonder how his adversaries may have fared. Those who live in other territories with their families, curious, daring juvenile tomcats, or homeless strays who frequently venture into my garden by scaling the fence. The fence. Almost free from holes, I have reinforced it repeatedly over the past few years to separate the feuding parties. I have raised its height and studied the border fortifications of East Berlin Wall and of other totalitarian states. I even considered electronic sensors, am hesitating because of the considerable costs. But so far they managed to overcome all of my barriers. They studied my latest security measures and easily surmounted them, as if to mock me! Why should it be different now? More and more they are losing their fear of my cat and attack him even on his own turf. There is no denying it: if they maim and kill then it is because they possess the same feline instincts. Same nature, that drives the strong to over-react and the weak to resort to malicious and often unrestrained means of self-assertion.

No doubt, my cat is the stronger one. But were the others in his position, would they exercise their power any less ruthlessly?

You ask the name of my cat and who the others are?

Why?

Names are fleeting and interchangeable, what really counts is their shared feline nature. And it is no excuse for his action - or theirs.

My cat – sometimes I wonder what my memories of him will be like. Will I remember him as my friend and companion throughout the years? As a feared and despised defender of his territory, the unwavering and sometimes furious ruler of his small world? As a creature haunted by fears and memories? Or as the caring being that he certainly is, too. When I watch him I see how careful and gentle he is looking after his young. He cleans their coats and allows them to torment him in playful fight, and he lets them eat before he does.

But I also see him walk in the garden, carefully setting down one paw in front of the other. Until he freezes - like someone who knows himself surrounded by invisible dangers. Like someone who cannot even trust the ground he walks on.

What will be my memory of him? Will the memory be of the violent side of his nature and the fundamental fear that permeates his whole being? Or will I remember him by his eyes, his face, his voice, and by the color of his coat? By that what marks him and at the same time unites him with other felines.

Excuse me, what did you say? I've talked enough about my old fat tomcat, and we should move on to other matters?

That does it! My cat is not fat! Never has been! Fat cat! – How can you even say such a thin?

You are silent. - Are you still listening to me?

Well, I admit, for the longest time I've ignored it. Or should I say I just watched it like an entertaining movie: 'Wild Cats', 'War and Peace', 'The Empire Strikes Back', or whatever you want to call it. I was hoping the problems would just go away over time.

And I did not want to risk other cats inflicting bites and gashes on me. They are none of my business. But problems don't just go away. And certainly not these kind of problems.

On the contrary, they are getting worse. For several days now I've not been feeling safe when I leave my home. I hear threatening hisses, see strange eyes behind fences, I feel their presence in the dark, at the bus stop. I hear about their attacks on innocents like myself. No doubt, they are ganging up; they are attacking, in blind fury, just like my cat. And just like him they are claiming the right of self-defense.

But assuming he does change and becomes peaceful in his old age, will the others do the same? Or is it too late already for the escalation to be stopped?

Please tell me, who will stop the madness, and how will it all end?

I am worried about myself.