

opening extract from the midnight library iv the cat lady

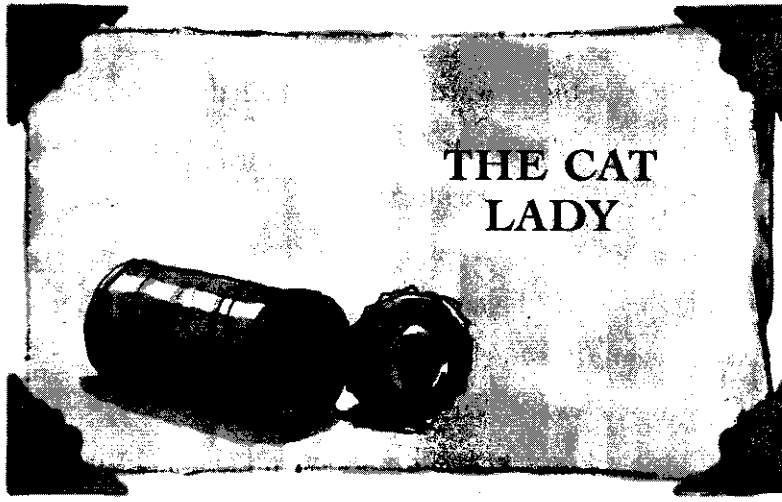
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THE CAT LADY

'Scaredy-cat! Scaredy-cat!'

The taunting voices rang in Chloe Forrester's ears as she pedalled furiously down the alley that divided the new housing development from the old town. Her cheeks burning, she sped along between the high wooden fences until she reached the big open mound of grass known locally as the 'Old Green'.

Chloe shouted defiantly back to Heather and the

rest of the gang: 'I'm not scared! I just don't want to do it!'

'Chloe's a big coward!' Heather called.

'Coward!' Maggie and Emma shouted in unison, taking their cue from Heather.

'Shut up!' Chloe shouted. 'Just shut up!'

Hayley and Megan took up the chant. Now the whole gang was yelling at her. 'Cowardy custard! Cowardy, cowardy custard!'

Chloe gave a heave on the handlebars, lifting herself off the saddle to boost the bike up over the kerb and on to the grass. She pressed down hard on the pedals, struggling to keep up speed on the incline. At the crest of the round grassy hill, she brought her bike to a halt and turned in the saddle. She was thirteen years old, tall and slim with corn-gold hair and a pale, freckled face – except that right now her cheeks were flaming red and her blue eyes stung in the chill wind.

It had all started when Heather had dared Chloe to throw pebbles at the Cat Lady's windows and then

run off. She had refused. Then Heather had called her a scaredy-cat and she'd ridden away, humiliated and angry.

Chloe watched as Heather and the gang rode their bikes to the end of the alley. Heather said something to the others and they all brayed with laughter. Chloe's cheeks burned with embarrassment – she knew they were laughing at her and she hated it.

As she stared down at the jeering gang, she found herself wishing she had never fallen out with Tina. Things had been so much simpler when she and Tina had been best friends.

The bust-up had happened a couple of months ago – it had been a stupid row over a top. Chloe had borrowed it from Tina for a party, and when she gave it back, there was a stain on it that wouldn't come off. Tina said the top had been perfect when she had lent it to Chloe – but Chloe was convinced that she hadn't made the stain. Neither would back down.

Chloe had stormed off, telling Tina she never wanted to speak to her again. Then, to make Tina jealous, she'd started hanging around with Heather and her gang, partly because everyone thought they were cool – but also because she knew that Tina didn't like them. She thought that they were all stupid sheep – blindly following Heather. Chloe didn't like Heather much: she was sarcastic and cruel – and she was a bully, too. But Maggie, Megan, Emma and Hayley were OK. Except for the way they always did everything Heather told them to do. That could be really annoying.

Chloe stared back down the way she had come. The new housing estate stretched out, all neat, clean and orderly in a big crescent to the left side of the Old Green. To the right sprawled the grubby old Victorian part of town. An alleyway was the dividing line between the old and the new. It was paved and had fencing along both sides. To the left, smart wooden doors led into the gardens of the new estate, and to the right were an older, battered set of fences

– decrepit and entwined with vines and long, spiky-looking weeds. It seemed to Chloe as if the people who had put the fences up didn't want anyone from the one part of town getting into the other.

Not that it stopped the cats! There were plenty of cats. They came mostly from Mrs Tibbalt's house, a shabby place tucked in right behind the fence which bordered the alleyway on the old side of town. Mrs Tibbalt was a bit strange. She was known locally as the Cat Lady. Sometimes Chloe and the gang would look over the tall fence into her garden full of cats. And sometimes Heather would bang the fence and shout to scare the animals. Chloe didn't like that – she thought it was mean.

The Cat Lady's house was a sanctuary for what seemed like hundreds of cats. They were everywhere. Black cats and tabby cats, ginger toms and torties, fluffy cats and scraggy cats, young cats and old cats – from sleek and skittish kittens, all gleaming eyes and needle-sharp claws, to ferocious and curmudgeonly old bruisers who hissed and

showed their broken yellow teeth at anyone who came near.

For as long as Chloe could remember, there had been dreadful stories about Mrs Tibbalt.

It had been Tina who had first told Chloe these stories, years ago, when Chloe's family had moved to the estate.

'It's true – it's really true,' Tina had told her, wide-eyed, on that first day at school. 'The Cat Lady *kidnaps children*.'

Chloe had not been convinced. 'Why would she do that?' she had asked.

Tina's voice had dropped to a whisper. 'She takes them down to her cellar and grinds them up to make cat food,' she had said. 'How else do you think she manages to feed all those cats of hers?'

Chloe had stared uneasily at her. 'I don't believe it!'

Tina had laughed. 'Ask anyone!' she had said. 'But you'd better watch out. If you go near her house, she'll come shuffling out and she'll offer you sweets

to get you to go inside. Then, once you're in there, she'll give you a drugged drink to make you feel all sleepy and weak.'

'Then what?' Chloe had asked, her eyes widening in alarm.

'Then she'll drag you down to her dark and smelly cellar,' Tina had said. 'And your head will go bump, bump, bump on the stairs. And you won't be able to do anything about it. She's got this huge old mincing machine down there. And you'll be lying there helplessly while she turns it on. And it will start clanking and churning – and you'll see a big grinding screw begin to turn way down at the bottom of the hopper. And then the Cat Lady will lower you really slowly into it, feet first – and the worst part will be that although you can't move, you'll still be conscious while it chews you up into tiny pieces!'

Chloe hadn't really believed that the Cat Lady turned children into cat food in her cellar, but all the same she had always kept a watchful distance

from the house. The Cat Lady didn't come out very often, but when she did, Chloe would watch her warily as she hobbled down the street on a thick walking stick, all shrouded up in a heavy, moth-eaten old coat and headscarf. And even after all these years, Chloe still crossed the road to avoid going too close to her house.

A little while ago she had confessed this to Heather and the gang.

'I know she's just a sad old lady, really,' she had told them. 'And I know the stories about her aren't true, but she still gives me the creeps.'

Heather had mocked her. 'That's pathetic!' she had said. 'What are you – six years old?' The others had joined in laughing at her, though Chloe was sure that most of them were scared of the Cat Lady too.

'You need to grow up a bit,' Heather had said. 'I know how to cure you of being scared of the Cat Lady.' She had mounted her bike.'Come on, let's all go and have some fun.'

'What kind of fun?' Chloe had asked quickly.

'We can throw stones at her front door for a start,' Heather had said. 'That should be a laugh.'

'I don't want to do that,' Chloe had said. 'What's the point? It's just mean.'

'Please yourself, scaredy-cat,' Heather had said, laughing as she rode off.

The others had followed her, leaving Chloe standing there all by herself. She had been angry at Heather for making fun of her, and irritated by those four stupid girls who followed her about like a bunch of zombies. She knew that Tina was right about them, and this made the feelings of isolation and loneliness far worse. She had felt her stomach turn upside down, and hot tears had prickled behind her eyes, though she was determined not to cry.

And now she was in the same position again, alone on top of the Old Green while the rest of the gang made fun of her.

They're idiots, she told herself as she stared down at them. *But if I don't do what they want they're going to make my life a complete misery*. She frowned. *I'm going to put a*

stop to this once and for all, Chloe resolved, and she turned her bike around and rode back down the grassy slope.

'Look, everyone! Scaredy-cat's back,' Heather mocked.

'What does scaredy-cat want?' Emma chipped in.

Maggie piped up as well. 'You should run home to Mummy, Chloe,' she said. 'The Cat Lady might get you!'

'Oh, shut up,' Chloe snapped.

'Or what?' Hayley said. 'You're brave all of a sudden.'

Chloe ignored her. 'I'll do the stupid dare,' she said, looking straight at Heather. 'It's no big deal. I just think it's totally pathetic, that's all.'

Heather looked slyly back at her. 'You have to go in through the gate,' she said. 'Right into the front garden.'

'Whatever,' Chloe said, trying to sound as if she couldn't care less. *I'll make it look good for this lot, but I'll miss the window and aim for the wall*, she thought. 'I'll do

this one thing,' she said to the group, 'and then no more. It's totally pathetic and immature.'

Heather stared at her, and Chloe met her gaze for a moment.'OK – if you do it properly.' A slow grin spread over Heather's face as she looked around at the others. 'Did I tell you all about the time I went inside the Cat Lady's house?' she said.

'You didn't!' gasped Megan.

Heather nodded. 'Yes, I did,' she said. The others gazed at her in awe. 'She'd gone out shopping and she'd left the front door open. So, I decided to go in and have a good look around.'

'What was it like?' breathed Emma.

Heather looked at Chloe. 'Disgusting!' she said. 'It was all dark and stinky and really filthy. Every single room was filled up with big mouldy heaps of old newspapers and magazines tied up with string. And there were supermarket bags full of rubbish – and black sacks with more rubbish spilling out of them. And there were opened tins of cat food all over the place. And the whole place reeked of cat

pee. It smelled like the cats were using the whole house as one big toilet.'

There were squeals and wails of revulsion from the rest of the gang, but Chloe was suspicious that Heather was making all this up just to try and freak them all out.

Heather continued her ghastly story. 'The carpets were all sticky and squishy underfoot,' she said. 'And the wallpaper was hanging off the walls in strips where the cats sharpened their claws. There were cats everywhere! And they were all staring at me, and some of them hissed at me – but that didn't bother me. If any of them had gone for me, I'd have kicked them good!'

'But the Cat Lady might have come back and caught you!' gasped Hayley.

Heather eyed her. 'So what?' she said. 'What's she going to do? I'm not afraid of her.' She glanced again at Chloe – rubbing it in. 'Then I went upstairs,' she continued. 'I found her bedroom. Only she doesn't have a proper bed like normal people. There was

just a big round wicker basket on the floor, with dirty old blankets in it. That's where she sleeps. And there was a great big box of cat litter by the side of the bed.' She gave the others a significant look. 'And it had been used!'

Maggie's eyes widened. 'You don't mean . . .?'

Heather nodded. 'It was her toilet!'

There were yells of revolted horror from everyone but Chloe.

'That was so disgusting that I just turned around and got right out of there,' Heather said. 'The whole place made me feel sick.'

'I don't believe it can be anything like that bad,' Chloe interjected. 'No one could live like that! And I don't believe for a minute that she sleeps in a cat basket!'

Heather shrugged. 'Please yourself,' she said. 'I know what I saw.' She gave Chloe a taunting look. 'So, when are you going to do it?'

Chloe looked defiantly at her. 'After school tomorrow.'

Heather smirked. 'We'll be waiting.'

'I'll be there,' Chloe said. She pushed down hard on a pedal and rode her bike quickly down the long alley that led to her home. She was well aware that Heather was probably badmouthing her to the others and saying that she wouldn't turn up.

Well, this time Heather was wrong.

But all the same, Chloe felt a just little bit shaky as she cycled along. Mostly it was with anger at Heather and her moronic gang, but there was also a small part of her that really wasn't looking forward to what she had agreed to do the next day.

It was a dull, cloudy and drizzly afternoon as Chloe circled the small roundabout on her bike and headed out of the new estate and into the old part of town. She turned a corner into the street where Mrs Tibbalt lived. She saw Heather and the others standing there with their bikes on the far side of the road, waiting for her.

Chloe cycled up to them and stopped.

Heather stepped forwards. She was holding

something in her hand. It was a chunk of rock – about the size of her fist.

'This is what you're going to throw at her window,' Heather said.

Chloe stared at the big lump of rock. 'You said pebbles!'

Heather shrugged. 'So? It's a big pebble,' she said. She glanced at the others, who nodded at her. 'We've all agreed,' Heather began, 'that if you want us to stop picking on you, this is what you have to throw at her window. But it's up to you, of course. You can always chicken out.'

Chloe knew that a rock that size would smash any window it was thrown at. She looked from face to face. They all had the same nasty, eager expressions. If she refused to throw the rock, the taunts would start up again. If she agreed, they'd get a big kick out of the Cat Lady's window being broken. Either way, Chloe knew right at that moment that she hated and despised the whole bunch of them.