Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

Opening extract from

Catcall

Written by

Linda Newbery

Published by

Orion

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

When did it all start, the cat thing, the lion thing, the time when everything involved Cat or Leo?

With Jamie, it seemed to be the day we went to the Wildlife Park. I'd had it ages before, but that was different. I chose it. I wanted it. With Jamie, *it* chose *him*. And that had to be my fault, because I'm the one who brought it into the house with my Book and my posters and the things I collect, so maybe it started before we saw the lions. Maybe it took us a long time to notice.

1 Js are Us

We'd always been the two Js, me and Jamie. Dad started that, ages ago when we were all together. 'How's my two Js?' he used to say, when he got in from work. But then Mum married Mike, and soon there was the new baby, making us the *three* Js – Josh, Jamie and Jennie.

Jamie and I were at the hospital, and we saw Jennie when she was about ten minutes old.

'Come and meet Jennie,' said Mike, all proud and beaming. Mum had done this before, but *he* hadn't. He was being a dad for the very first time.

Mum was sitting up in bed, holding this tiny pink thing with a screwed-up face. We both peered at it. At *her*. She looked too little to have a name at all. I didn't know how to behave. Jamie went, 'Uhhhh,' and when I tried to speak, what came out was – 'Whooowhh!' We just knew we had to whisper. It seemed wrong to talk loudly near such a small new thing. It seemed amazing that she even knew how to breathe.

'Your brand new sister,' Mike said, reaching out to touch her hand with one finger. 'Jennie. Little J.' Against the miniature baby hand, Mike's finger looked as big as a tree-trunk, and a bit grimy. He wasn't really grimy because he always showers as soon as he gets home, and comes out smelling like a peppermint, but doing all that outdoor work makes his hands rough.

'But *I'm* Little J,' said Jamie.

'Middle J, now, Jamie,' Mum told him. 'You've been promoted.'

'The Three Js,' I said, quite liking it – it reminded me of the Three Musketeers, or the Three Amigos. But Jamie made a sulky face, pushing out his bottom lip.

Jennie was three days early. She was supposed to be born on December 25th. It'd be bad luck to have your birthday on Christmas Day, if you ask me – I bet you'd only get one lot of presents. But, as it turned out, Mum brought her home the day before Christmas Eve. Jamie and I decorated the tree, and Mum said it was the best ever. Nan stayed with us, to help Mum and Mike, even though Mike loves cooking and made Christmas dinner all by himself; turkey, gravy, pudding, the lot, and all Nan needed to do was set the table and put out the crackers and candles and holly decorations, and I helped with that.

Usually at Christmas we went to stay with Gran and Grandad Bryce in Bedford, but it was different this year because of Jennie. *Lots* of things were different.

We'd opened our presents as soon as we got up, but at tea-time we had little extra things from the tree – chocolate oranges or chocolate snails or chocolate money. Mum used to pretend it was the tree itself that had chosen these things and wrapped them up with our names on, and I think Jamie had only just stopped believing it. With my mouth full, I said, 'We haven't got Jennie a present! None of us did.'

'We didn't know she'd be here,' said Mum. 'And she's given *us* a present, a special one. Herself.'

'Littlest J,' Nan said. 'Our little treasure. Our best Christmas present ever.' She lifted Jennie out of Mum's arms and started talking to her in a funny cooing voice.

'You shouldn't have done it,' Jamie said. He'd twisted his shiny green chocolate wrapper into a snake, and twined it round his little finger. Everyone looked at him, and he stared back, startled, as if he'd surprised himself. 'Given her a name that starts with J,' he said.

‘Why not, Jamie?’ asked Mum.

‘Cos Js are us,’ said Jamie. ‘Me and Josh.’

‘Js are us?’ Mike repeated. ‘Sounds like a shop – Jays-R-Us!’

I laughed, but Jamie wouldn’t. ‘It’s what Dad calls us,’ he said. ‘His two Js. Jennie isn’t Dad’s. She belongs to Mike.’

For the first time, I realised that Mike will be *dad* to Jennie, when she learns to talk. Jamie and I don’t call him that, because we’ve got a dad of our own. Dad’s Dad, and Mike’s Mike.

‘She belongs to herself, Jamie,’ Mum said. ‘Or perhaps to all of us.’

Jamie gazed at her, then at the baby. ‘Does she belong to me?’ he asked.

‘We belong to ourselves, and we belong to each other,’ Mum said. ‘All of us. That’s a nice way of thinking about it.’

Mike’s good at drawing, specially cartoons. Mum had tacked some of his pictures on the cork board in the kitchen. He’d done Jamie eating porridge, going at it like a JCB digger, elbows out, sploshing gloop everywhere. He’d done Mum watering her potted plants, and he drew the kitchen windowsill to look like an Amazon rainforest. He’d done me reading a book, leaning over it as if I wanted to dive right in. And he’d done Splodge, our cat, sitting up to wash his tummy, like a big fat panda.

By bedtime on Christmas Day, Mike had done two new sketches. One was called *Jays-R-Us*, and it showed a shop-front, with two big birds perched on top. They were meant to be jays, Mike explained, with their beady eyes and strong beaks and claws. Course, I knew that, only he hadn’t coloured them pink, but used ordinary pencil. In the shop window there were all sorts of things a bird might want – peanut feeders, and nesting boxes, and a dish full of wriggling worms.

The other one was called *Js are Us.* He’d drawn the three Js going up in height, like a graph. First the baby, on the ground, wrapped up in a cloth with only her face showing, like baby Jesus in a nativity play. Next came Jamie, standing proudly with his chest pushed out. Then me, tall and lanky in my Chelsea shirt. Underneath us, Mike had written *Littlest J, Middle J*, and *Biggest J.*

So I’d been promoted, too – from Big J to Biggest J. I liked it, and I didn’t like it. Liked it, because it made me feel grown-up and important. Didn’t like it, because it made me feel *responsible.* That was all right, if it was only when I wanted. I didn’t think I could be responsible *all* the time.

Mum liked the two cartoons. Next morning they were pinned up on the kitchen cork-board.

2 Spare Room

We'd got to the time between Christmas and New Year, those odd few days that aren't special but aren't ordinary either. The weather wasn't Christmassy, but dull and wet. I stared out of the window, hoping for snow. Mike had promised to make us a bird-table, and soon I'd be able to watch birds with the binoculars I was going to buy with my Christmas present money. Jamie and I played games on the computer and read our new books and fought with each other. Brody came round and I went to his a couple of times, and we sent emails to Noori, who was with his grandparents in Lahore for the holidays. Mike was back at work, just for three days, laying hardcore for a cricket club car park in Pinner, and Nan took Jamie and me to Pizza Express and the cinema, leaving Mum at home for a rest. Then on Thursday, Jamie and I went over to Dad's, to stay till the second of January.

Dad came to pick us up. I was looking out of the window for his white van, but instead Kim was with him, and they came in Kim's red Golf.

My mum must have a thing about marrying men with white vans. Dad and Mike have both got one, but Mike's is a Transit and Dad's is a Sprinter. On the sides of Dad's it says *Paul Bryce – Painter and Decorator,* and Mike's says *Bowman Landscaping Services.* Where we lived before, we had our own driveway, and I used to look out of the front window for Dad pulling in when he got home. Here there's no drive and Mike has to park in the street, but still we look out of the window and there's a white van. And when Dad comes over in his, there's *two* white vans, with both our surnames on them, old and new. Bryce and Bowman. It's like we've jumped ship from one to the other.

Mike calls us the Bowmen. Bow*mans* sounds a bit odd, so it's his joke to say we're the Bowmen, like we're old English archers or something. (Bow*persons,* Mum says, to include her and the baby.) Mum used to be Liz Bryce, but when she married Mike she switched to Liz Bowman, and we all wondered what this meant for Jamie and me. Should we call ourselves Bowman-Bryce? Bryce-Bowman? That way we'd keep Dad's name as well as our new one, but it sounds a bit posh, and people might think we live in some huge mansion with servants and a butler, so we settled on just Bowman – 'To keep things simple,' Mum said, 'for filling in forms, and when you need passports and suchlike. Easier if we've all got the same name.'

'Except Dad,' Jamie pointed out.

'Well, yes, except Dad.'

So now we're the Bowmen, or Bowmans, or Bowpersons, and Dad's the only one who's still Bryce, unless you count Nan and Grandad. Jamie and I hardly had to change our places in the register when we changed our name. That bit was easy.

The thing I can't get used to is that when I'm with Mum, I feel as if I belong with her and Mike, and when I'm with Dad, I feel as if I belong with *him.* They're the two halves of my life. Somehow, I expect them to come together again, even though it's obvious they won't.

It was weird at first to think of someone as old as Dad having a girlfriend, but now we're used to Kim and she's basically OK. He met her about a year ago when they were doing the Three Peaks Challenge. Kim's quite easy to be with, not a fussy sort of

person. She's a fitness instructor at a sports centre, and she plays football and cricket better than either of us. She never dresses up in skirts or dangly earrings or shoes she can't run fast in, like Mum sometimes does. With Kim, it's usually jeans and a sweatshirt and trainers. She always laughs a lot. At first, I thought she was younger than Mum and Dad and Mike – she looks it. But that was before we found out she's got a son, Kevin, who's a year older than me. She spends a lot of time driving Kevin to football and collecting him from his friends' houses and going to things at his school.

Course, when Dad and Kim called for us they wanted to see Jennie.

'Oh, the gorgeous little *thing*!' Kim went, so loud I'd thought she'd wake Jennie up. 'She's just adorable, Liz!'

Jennie was lying along Mum's arm, sleeping in her snuffly baby way. Now and then her mouth would open and close again, like a fish's.

'She's dreaming!' Kim said, then laughed, looking round at us all. 'But what can a tiny baby dream about?'

'She dreams about sleeping, I expect,' Dad said. 'I remember when you were like that, Jamie! No bigger than your little sister.'

Jamie looked at him, in a serious way that turned into his funny slow grin.

'Do you remember me, as well?' I asked.

Dad ruffled my hair. 'Course. Wouldn't forget that, would I?'

I looked at all of them – Mike and Mum, Dad and Kim, and Nan and the baby. It seemed there were too many of them, all standing round, with Jennie in the middle, and Jamie and me at the edges.

Mike made tea and brought out some of his special flapjack, and then it was time to go.

'OK, then, Liz,' Dad said to Mum. 'See you on Monday.'

It was the last day of Nan's stay with us. She said, 'Bye then, my loveys. You take care now,' the way she always does, and we got lots of hugs and kisses on our way out of the door.

'See you next year!' Mum called out as Kim drove us away. You'd have thought we were going away for months, instead of just three nights.

'So, what about Chelsea the other day?' Kim said, soon as we'd turned the corner and stopped waving. 'Pathetic, or what?'

'Oh no, not *football.*' Dad slumped right down in his seat and pretended to be sleeping. 'Wake me up when you've finished.' He didn't really hate football all that much, but he always pretended to when the three of us started on about it.

We left London, and headed up the M40. On the way I saw signs pointing to Hillingdon, which is where we lived when we were all together. After our old house was sold, we moved further into London, and Dad moved further out. He'd only just got his new place, in High Wycombe, so we hadn't seen it yet.

Outside the M25 there were fields and woods and glimpses of river, and soon we saw houses and streets spreading over a hillside.

'Is this countryside?' Jamie asked.

'High Wycombe's quite a big town,' Dad told him. 'But we're right on the edge, and there's plenty of countryside around us. I thought we'd go to the Cotswold Wildlife Park tomorrow.'

'Boss!' said Jamie. This was something he'd started saying lately, picked up from his friend Arran.

Kim caught my eye in the driving mirror and gave me a puzzled look, so I translated for her. 'He means *cool*. Cotswold Wildlife? What, foxes and deer and

badgers?'

'No,' said Dad. 'It's more like a zoo.'

'Big cats?' I said quickly.

'Oh yes, I checked that. You can look at the website when we get in.'

Dad's house was bigger than ours, and newer. Most of the front garden was taken up with driveway, big enough for two cars. Inside, everything was tidy – there were no Christmas decorations like ours at home, no tree, just some cards strung up and a few candles on the mantelpiece. It looked a bit bare. The back garden was twice the size of ours at home, with trees and a bird-table and a bat-box and a log-pile for toads to shelter in.

'Typical of your dad,' Kim joked. 'He hasn't got curtains in all the rooms yet, but he's got a bat-box.'

'I'm going to dig a pond in the summer,' Dad told us. 'You can help, if you like. Every garden needs a pond, and a boggy area. Then we'll start to get frogs and dragonflies, maybe even newts.'

He showed us round indoors, downstairs and up. There was a bedroom specially for me and Jamie, with bunk beds, and there was Dad's room, and a very small study with a lot of boxes waiting to be unpacked. There was the bathroom, and another door that Dad hadn't opened.

'What's in there?' I asked.

He showed us. It was another bedroom with a single bed in it and a TV and a desk, but not much else.

'Whose is that?' Jamie demanded.

'Er – well, it's spare, for now,' Dad said.

'Do you live here as well?' Jamie asked Kim.

She went a bit red. 'No. Just stay sometimes. Me and Kevin live in Aylesbury, not far away.'

There was something going on here I didn't want to know about. The spare room wasn't Kim's, that was obvious, only Jamie was too young to know. There were no bags in there, or clothes. But in Dad's room – he'd only shown us quickly – I'd seen a cream dressing-gown and some fleece slippers that were too small for Dad. All I thought, at first, was that Jamie and I could have had a room each. I mean, why keep a bedroom empty, if there's no one to use it? We had to share at home, because the third bedroom, the small one, was going to be Jennie's.

Then it struck me. That room was for Kevin. He'd be staying here as well, wouldn't he? He was at his nan's at the moment, Kim had told us that. If not for that he'd be here now. He'd be here whenever Kim came to stay.

I didn't like that. Kevin's room. Kevin was having a room to himself, in Dad's house. Why hadn't Dad *said*?

But I wasn't going to let Kevin spoil the end of the year, specially as he wasn't even here. As soon as I could get on the computer, I checked out the Cotswold Wildlife Park website and found that they had Asiatic Lions and Amur Leopards. Also White-lipped Peccaries, Yellow Mongooses (or is it Mongeese?), Reticulated Pythons and Scimitar-Horned Oryx. It looked good.

'Have a look at this, Jame,' I said. 'Here's what we'll see tomorrow.' But he was watching TV, so he only had a quick look.

He was still normal Jamie, then. As far as anyone could tell.

But next day, he saw the lion. And the lion saw him.

3 Cats' Eyes

The wildlife park was enormous. There were camels and zebras, reptiles and rhinos. There was a tropical house full of steamy indoor jungle, where birds, all brilliant colours, flitted about in the leaves so close that the air from their wingtips brushed my ears. There were spider monkeys, leaping from branch to branch and swinging on ropes. There were two Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs, fast asleep on a bed of straw, snoring loudly.

Kim giggled and prodded Dad in the ribs. 'Now who do they remind me of?'

'Mike snores, too,' Jamie told Dad. 'Only not as loud as you.'

It was so cold that I quite fancied snuggling in the straw with those pigs. My breath clouded in front of my face and I had to keep wiggling my toes inside my boots to keep them warm. But the cold was making the day special. It was that crisp, bright kind of cold – the grass crunched as we walked on it, and the low sun dazzled.

Best of all were the lions. There was a family of them, out in the sunshine in a grass enclosure. We stood together, Jamie huddled against Dad's legs, and watched the lions through a big pane of glass that was built into the fence. The lioness lay with her twin cubs on a mound, while the male prowled and prowled, walking in a slack, powerful way, his eyes swivelling. He'd worn a path beside a deep ditch that ran all the way round the enclosure, just inside the fence.

'Patrolling his territory,' Kim said. 'Keeping an eye on things.'

'Both eyes,' said Jamie.

I realised how close the lion would come as he padded along the ditch below us. Excitement shivered through me. I stood perfectly still, but he didn't look up. As he passed, I stared down at his rough, shaggy mane, and his tawny fur. What would it be like to push my hands into that thick mane, and feel his hot lion breath? I could smell him, strong and catty. I was close to a real lion, *incredibly* close, near enough to reach down and touch him if the glass pane hadn't been there. Jamie pressed himself back against Dad's legs. He must have stopped breathing, because I heard him let out a gust of air as the lion padded on past.

The female didn't move from her mound. She was clasping a bloody chunk of bone, big enough to be from a cow or a pig. She held it down with one paw, licking it.

'Did she kill it?' said Jamie. 'That bone?'

Kim huffed a laugh.

'No, J,' said Dad, tugging at the zip on Jamie's fleece. 'The park-keepers gave it to them. They don't have to kill, not here.'

The cubs were playing around the lioness, rolling and tumbling and batting, like kittens. When one of them tried to tug at the bone, she gave it a cuff with her big front paw.

'She won't hurt it, will she?' said Jamie.

'Oh no,' Dad told him. 'She's just saying, *this is mine – keep off.* She won't hurt her own cubs.'

'Not like Splodge with that mouse!' I reminded Jamie. 'Remember how fierce he was?'

About two weeks before, Splodge brought a mouse into the front room, where we were all watching TV. Mum let out a shriek and Mike sprang to his feet, but Splodge backed off, with a strange low growl in his throat. I was nearer. I got down on the floor and tried to work out how to save the mouse. If I pulled it away, Splodge would grip tighter with his teeth. Its eyes made me think of apple-pips, and its pink paws were like hands as it dangled from Splodge's mouth. Splodge's eyes glared with

an angry wildness I'd never seen before – usually, he was a big softie. The mouse made a tiny sound, too tiny even to be a squeak, more like a gasp. Its front paws twitched feebly, and then, all in a second, I saw it die. The light went out of its eyes, and it hung quite still from Splodge's jaws, a limp, dead thing.

I saw then how mysterious a life is. How, when it flickers out, nothing can bring it back.

'What, did daft old Splodge-Puss manage to catch a mouse?' Dad said now. 'I'm surprised he could be bothered to heave himself off the sofa!'

'He killed it!' Jamie said proudly.

At the time, he'd been more excited than upset. I'd only thought how terrified the mouse must have been. And of that tiny, quick, heartbeating life, crushed to nothing.

'Can you smell lion?' I said. 'I can. It's strong and catty and furry. That's why lions have to get downwind of whatever they're stalking.'

Dad sniffed. 'You must have a good sense of smell. I can only smell mud and grass.'

'I can,' said Jamie, still clinging to Dad's coat. 'I can smell lion.'

'How about that?' Kim said. 'I wonder how many people can say they've been so close to a real live lion? I took Kevin to Whipsnade a couple of years ago, but we didn't get as close as this.'

'Would he attack us if the fence wasn't there?' Jamie asked.

Dad shook his head. 'I don't know. And I'm glad we won't be finding out.'

The lion broke away from his circuit and loped to the top of the mound. He only glanced at the female and cubs, then stood with his head high, taking in smells and sounds from across the park. Dad passed me his binoculars, and as I focused, the lion turned his heavy head and looked straight at me with his amber eyes. A shock fizzled through me. I couldn't look away from those stern, solemn lion eyes – I was held there, staring and staring back at him. For that second, there was nothing between me and him – no binoculars, no glass panel, no fence. I felt sure he knew me, knew what I was thinking.

Then he turned away.

'Here, Dad.' I handed back the binoculars, and he offered them to Kim. Jamie had slunk round behind Dad, clinging to his coat.

Kim laughed. 'It's all right, Jame. He can't get you.'

'The fence isn't all that high.' >From behind Dad, Jamie tilted his head at it. 'I bet a lion could jump that if he wanted.'

'Not with the ditch underneath,' Dad told him. 'The park-keepers must know what they're doing.'

The lion stared in another direction for a few moments, then gave a sigh and lay down near the lioness.

'Now he's like one of the lions in Trafalgar Square,' Kim said.

We stood looking a bit longer. Kim took a couple of photos with the camera Dad had given her for Christmas. My fingers were going numb, and Jamie was stamping his feet to keep warm.

'I don't like seeing lions in cages,' Dad said.

'Hey!' Kim jabbed his arm. 'It was your idea to come!'

'Yeah, I know,' said Dad. 'I don't mind it so much with monkeys or deer. But lions – it doesn't seem right.'

'Oh, they look quite happy to me.' Kim was looking at the leaflet with the map of the park. 'It's what they're used to.'

I wasn't sure. I'd wanted to come here, to see the lions and leopards in particular, but now I saw what Dad meant. It didn't seem right for them to be penned up for people to stare at. Suddenly I felt ashamed of staring through binoculars. There was something about that lion that couldn't be penned up in a cage. Something fierce and free.

'*I* like them in cages,' Jamie said. 'It's better than having them roam around wherever they want.'

Kim tugged at the brim of his woolly hat so that it went right down over his eyebrows. 'Lions don't live wild in this country, Jamie! They come from Africa.'

'I know *that*!' He pulled away, and pushed the hat out of his eyes. 'I was just *supposing.*'

I just had to put Kim right. 'These aren't African lions,' I told her. 'They're Asiatic. They're from India, from the Gir Forest in Gujurat.'

She could have read that for herself on the notice-board, but I'd already worked out that she was the sort of person who said things without really knowing if they were true or not. Then I remembered something I'd read in the *Wildlife of Africa* book Dad gave me for Christmas. 'D'you know how people first learned to be safe from lions?'

'When they made guns?' said Jamie.

'No! Before that. Ages before guns.'

'When they made zoos?' Jamie tried.

'No! Ages before that, as well.'

'Go on then, Josh,' said Dad. 'Tell us.' We started to walk away from the lions, towards some camels that stood in a bored, sniffy group outside their shed.

'It was when they learned to make fire,' I said. 'Back in the Stone Age. Before, they could only hide in their caves and hope the lions wouldn't find them. But once they learned to make fire, they were much safer.'

'How?' said Jamie.

I thought he meant how did early humans learn to make fire, and I was about to explain how they must have got the idea from seeing trees struck by lightning, but Kim told him, 'The lions would have been frightened off by the flames.'

Jamie frowned. 'I didn't think a lion would be frightened.'

'Survival instinct. They know how not to get hurt.' Dad looked at his watch. 'Come on – only another hour till closing. I'm freezing, I don't know about you lot. *My* survival instinct's telling me to get inside a nice warm building.'

We headed for the insect house and the fruit bats. We finished up in the shop, where I chose some postcards for my Book of Cats. Jamie bought a puzzle, and Kim bought a lion key-ring for herself and a disposable camera for Kevin.

It was already dark by the time we set off home. Kim drove, Dad sat next to her with the map, Jamie with me in the back. Our headlamps lit up the string of lights, one by one, that showed us the middle of the country road.

'Cats' eyes,' Jamie said suddenly. 'They only come on at night, don't they? Who switches them on?'

I gave him a little shove. 'Durr! You really think someone goes round turning on cats' eyes on, along miles and miles of roads? Each one with its own little switch?'

'They're reflectors, Jamie,' Dad said over his shoulder. 'It's the light from our

headlights, shining back. Clever idea – I wonder who thought of it?'

'So why are they called cats' eyes?' Jamie asked.

'Because cats can see in the dark,' Kim explained.

'No! Because cats' eyes *reflect* in the dark,' I corrected her. 'You've seen that, Jamie, haven't you? When we had our torches on bonfire night, and saw Splodge by the hedge.'

'That's right, Josh,' Dad said. 'Cats' eyes are different from ours.'

I thought about lions and fire and darkness. I saw a bright bonfire, with flames snapping and leaping, sparks lifting into the dark. A circle of faces, golden with firelight. People sitting, huddled into their furs and skins, thinking they were safe. And they would be safe for as long as the fire burned, but behind them in the blackness there would be crouched shapes. There would be amber lion eyes watching, waiting.

4 The Book of Cats

I don’t know what it is with cats and me. I’ve been fascinated by them ever since I was little. Lions, leopards and tigers, cheetahs and ocelots. Ordinary cats as well. So I suppose it must have started with Mister, who was our cat till he had to be put to sleep. This was a long time ago, when Mum and Dad were together, but Mister’s still a sort of legend in our family. Mister the Magnificent, we called him. It was Dad who thought of the name Mister, because of the M-pattern Mister had on his forehead. He was a special cat, and he knew it. The way he paraded about, you could tell he thought he was king of the street. He had a few scars, from battles he’d fought with cats who thought they could take him on.