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opening extract from

Cat Tales: Smoke Cat

written by

Linda Newbery

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Simon didn't think about it any more at all, until a few nights later when he woke up suddenly in the middle of the night to hear a voice calling, outside in the garden.



The old lady's voice.

He couldn't hear *what* she was calling, but it went on and on, as if to someone who didn't come.

He tried to go back to sleep, but the more he tried, the wider-awake he became. Eventually he got out of bed and pushed back the curtains.



It wasn't the middle of the night, as he'd thought. It was already starting to get light; he could make out the dim shapes of trees, fences and flower beds. And in the garden next door, the old lady, stretching out her arms and calling.

"Charlotte!" He could hear now what she was saying. "Gloria, there's a good girl. Charlotte, time to rest now. William! Here's your place. Blue! Oh, Blue, won't you come!"

She was calling to the *plants* – Simon recognized the names. It was strange enough to be standing out in the garden so early in the morning, but odder still to be calling out to *plants*. And even odder than that, if she didn't actually *live* here.

She kept bending down to touch something. As Simon's eyes adjusted to the first grey light he could see shapes moving around at her feet, rubbing against her legs – soft, fluid, furry shadows, like cats. Although they were shadowy, Simon could make out the different colours: black cats, white cats, tabby cats, pied cats, marmalade cats. The old lady welcomed each one, stroking it, talking to it in a soft voice, until she was surrounded by a moving carpet of cats, weaving, twining, purring, arching their backs to be stroked. And every few moments she broke off to stand upright and gaze around, and she called, "Blue! Blue, won't you come?"



Simon didn't actually see them do it – one minute they were there and the next they were gone – but the shadowy cats seemed to melt away into the ground, or fade like mist, into the flower beds and shrubbery. The old lady stood alone, holding out her hands and looking up at the fence between the two gardens. "Blue! Blue, please come!"

Simon looked where she was looking, towards the fence. Just for a moment he saw, balancing there but walking away, a large, smoke-grey, plume-tailed cat, faint



as a shadow in the last few moments before the sun goes in.

"Blue!" The old lady's voice sounded despairing now. The cat disappeared into the hollies at the end of the garden, and the old lady turned towards the house. Simon couldn't see her any more.

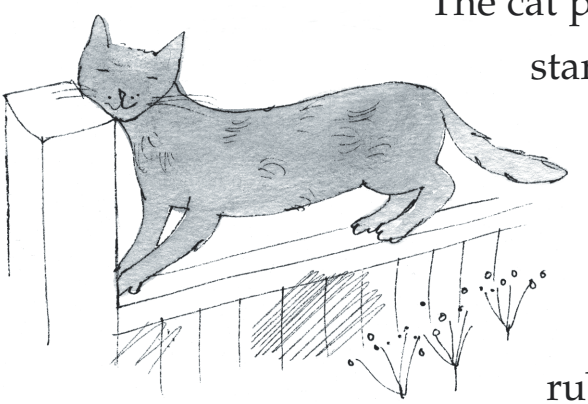


By the time he woke up later in the morning he thought he'd dreamed the whole thing.

But, next night, the smoke cat came back by itself.

Simon had got out of bed for the toilet, and on the way back he glanced

out of the window, just in case.
The moon was so bright that it threw a silvery light over the grass and the bushes. There was no old lady, no voice calling, but on the fence Simon could see the smoke cat, treading softly towards the house, balancing on delicate paws.



The cat paused, stared down into next-door's garden, rubbed itself against a fence post, then turned and walked off slowly, stopping to look back. It seemed disappointed.