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Opening extract from

Magnificat

Written by

Marilyn Edwards

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To Mary, our mother, with love

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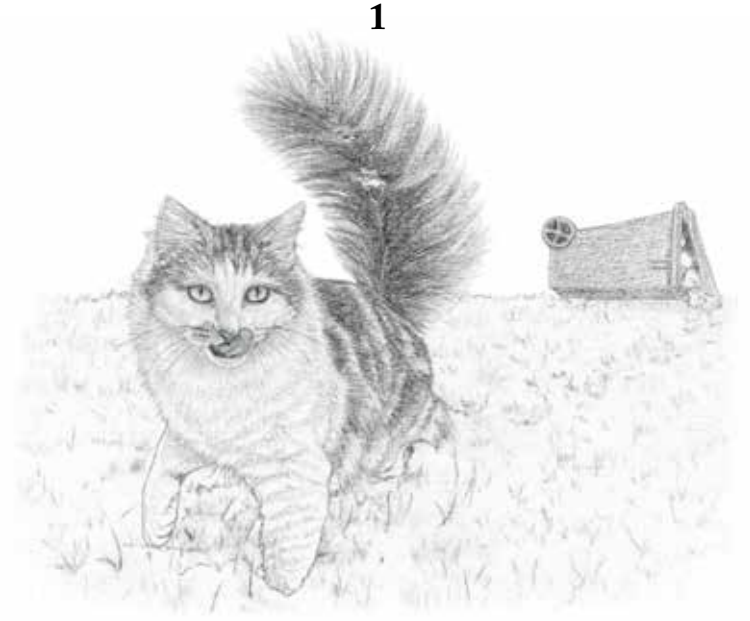
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1



THE TOWN

The little cat picked her feet up high as she stepped gingerly through the snow. As she licked the last trace of gravy from her whiskers, she flicked her magnificent tail back and forth across her back. Cat was unaware of the story that the tipped-over dustbin lying behind her seemed to tell and as she sauntered close to a line of parked cars, the memory of the snatched feast she had just eaten made her huff out a sigh of contentment.

'Oi – you!' A man's voice boomed across the street. 'Yes – YOU! I'm talking to you, you little toe-rag! What d'you think you're doing?' And with that the man started to run straight at her. 'You filthy little scavenger, you're no better than a rat.'

The cat stood still, frozen in fear, her happiness gone. What would this aggressive monster do once he reached her? And

why was he shouting? She cowered down, put her ears back and spat at him to show him how fierce she was. It didn't work. As he lunged out to grab her she gave a drawn-out hiss of fear, and, snakelike, she slunk down low, crawling under the car parked next to her. From there she crept along to the next car and then the next. Cat felt safe close to the warm metal hulk. She liked cars. Ones that weren't moving at least. The ones that raced past on the road definitely didn't make her feel safe. She could see the man's feet two cars away. He had stopped walking. One boot was tapping up and down impatiently and her keen hearing picked up the sound of his fingers drumming on the roof of the car.

The little cat edged backwards until she reached the last car in the row. It was, she decided, not at all a good place to be. This one was really horrible. It was hot and cold all at the same time. It had been driven recently and the pipes were hissing hotly causing great dollops of slushy ice to plop down on her back. As she sat there cars whooshed past noisily on the road, large and fast and very close to her head. The little cat wasn't used to the hustle and bustle of traffic. It felt dangerous – and the air around her was filled with the bad smell that came from cars making her feel slightly sick. As she continued to hide, she licked her nose nervously.

Her mind returned again to the remains of the burger that she had found lying by the side of the bin, half hidden in the snow. She had been hungry and her recent diet of spiders had not been very satisfying. Finding that burger had not only filled her stomach but left her feeling more able to cope with anything life now had to offer. Whatever animal had knocked

over the bin hadn't been at all thorough at rootling through its contents. But it hadn't been she who had knocked it over and spilled its contents, she was far too slight for that. Not that she could explain this to the shouty man, who seemed to think she was the one who had done it. Or perhaps he always shouted at cats whenever he got the chance? Better check where he was.

Cat roused herself to peer anew under the line of parked cars. The boots were no longer visible. She crawled out from under the car and scented the air. The man had gone. She opened her jaws wide and yawned in relief, leaving the ghost of her breath hanging in the air above her head. She stood up and had a long stretch. A sudden flurry of snow borne on the cold November wind stung her eyes and made her shiver as it found a patch of wet fur on her back. She sidled into a sheltered doorway and sat down to give herself a quick lick.

Snow was a new experience for her as she was only half-grown and this was her first winter. Earlier this morning, when Cat first stepped out into it, she had caught her breath in fear. It was shockingly cold and wet, and since its silent fall the scents that she relied on to tell her everything she needed to know about where she was and how secure she was were deadened by this strange covering. She felt unsure of where it was safe to go. She had been walking around in it all morning and the pads of her feet were starting to sting and now, licking herself clean, she could taste the bitter salt mixed up with the sand and grit that lay all around the town on roads and pavements alike.

Having satisfied herself that all trace of salt had, for the moment, been licked away, her good spirits returned to her.

She stood up, quivered her great tail high in the air, scented the wind, and started to trot briskly through the little town to see what delights might lie in store. Her progress was repeatedly interrupted. She kept picking up smells that told her how recently this dog or that cat had passed by and it all took time to absorb. Twice she had to make a quick dive into a doorway as the rumble and sound of the traffic simply became too much, rattling past her head so fast. This was the first time in all her life that she had been in a town and, when she wasn't busy jumping out of her skin from fright, its bustle and odour intrigued her. The thunderous main street, where all the traffic gave off such smells and vibrations, frightened her, but as she turned into the quieter back streets, whose narrow cobbled ways seemed somehow safer, the little cat felt a rising sense of excitement at the prospect of a new adventure.

At the only home she had ever known, where she had lived since kittenhood, there had been one main road with intermittent traffic, but nothing she had ever seen had prepared her for this astonishing townie racket with all these cars and buildings and people. At home there had been quiet fields teeming with small furry creatures just waiting to be caught and – once in a while – a friendly neighbourhood cat would come and pass the time of day full of benign curiosity.

Her thoughts of home were interrupted by the sight of a door opening a few yards ahead of her. A long slim hand came down and placed a bowl of cat food on the pavement, almost in front of her nose. The door clicked shut. The little cat was astonished. Could this food be for her? She stopped and licked her nose nervously, then, slowly, she stepped forward and

smelled it. She started to eat, quicker and quicker until . . . she felt a presence and turned, swallowing quickly. There, a short distance away, was a large female tortoiseshell cat, whose tail was thrashing the ground with a force that spelled nothing but trouble. As the little cat stared, the bigger cat edged towards her sideways, one foot crossing menacingly over the other, while a low growl rumbled from deep inside her.

The smaller cat instinctively flattened herself and collapsed on her side submissively, but too late. The tortie towered over her, tail whipping from side to side, ears back, hissing, before she shot out her front paw, claws fully extended, slashing the younger cat's face, catching her ear and the skin near her eye. Blood ran freely from the wounds and the younger cat shook her head violently to try to throw off the sting. She rolled over to get out of the way and mewled a long '*mnnnnnnn*' in a plea for mercy. As she struggled to her feet, the little cat knocked the bowl over and what little food was left dissolved darkly into the slushy snow. Cat kept her head down and avoided eye contact with her opponent, instinctively knowing that to appear meek would be the only way to avoid further injury.

The older cat instantly recognised that she held the position of strength and drew back. As the tension died down, the door of the house opened and a tall woman bent over to peer at the upturned bowl. She saw the young blood-streaked cat cowering in fear, but the resident tortie had disappeared. The woman stamped her foot crossly making the intruder cower more, and started to shout.

'No, no, no, no, no. That food wasn't meant for you. It's not yours. Go away, go on, scram!' And she picked up a big broom

and started to waggle the bristles right in the little cat's face. Cat backed away in alarm and, turning with her tail arched in a loop between her legs, she galloped off down the cobbled street and round the corner as fast as she could run.

Once round the corner Cat settled down for a thorough groom. Having spent long moments repeatedly licking the side of her left paw until it was quite wet, she gently used her whole front leg again and again, lick, wipe, lick, wipe to sponge away the blood from her torn eye. Having done that to her satisfaction she then gave the same treatment to her ripped ear. As she cleaned the wounds it hurt a little and she purred to herself for comfort as she groomed and slowly she became calm. Satisfied her wounds were clean and the bleeding was no more, Cat rose, ready for action, and started to walk.

The network of cobbled streets finally led her into the Main Square – an area without cars. As she looked around she saw that there were benches around the edge and a small clock tower in the middle. Cat found herself drawn to some steps near a drinking fountain and trough. There she sat down to watch, partly concealed by a large bin. People came and went. Some of them sat on the seats and threw bread for the birds. Cat watched the people, but she felt strangely withdrawn from them and being semi-concealed they took no notice of her.

People here seemed to be quite different from the folk she'd met at home; they were cross and shouted a great deal and waved brooms at her for no reason. Even other cats were altogether less friendly. Cat sat quietly with her thick tail wrapped neatly across her feet. The only outward sign of her concentration was the very tip of that tail, which twitched

with an apparent life of its own as her attention shifted from the people, to following every jump and flutter of the birds as they jostled for food. She licked her nose with controlled excitement. The birds interested her mightily. Later, after the people had moved away, she wandered across and chewed up a small piece of the bread that the birds had missed. It wasn't very satisfying and the taste was dull. Odd that they liked it so much. Some primal instinct told Cat that birds would taste a lot better than the stuff they ate.

As night fell she returned to the empty garage where she had spent the night before – her first night in the town – and settled down to sleep. Her mind was jumbled with the many images and smells and sounds of all that had happened this day. As she curled up in the old armchair with the stuffing bulging out, her thoughts drifted back to how she came to be here.

Cat had arrived in this town in a most uncomfortable manner and completely by accident. It had never been her intention to leave home. Her downfall had been her passion for cars and vans. From the time she had first started going outside she adored to climb into cars, or indeed any vehicle. She liked the smell of them and the warmth and shelter they provided when you got inside them. And that was how she had ended up here. A van had been parked outside her house, with its rear doors invitingly wide open. In the blink of an eye she had leaped up into it and found a large round bucket with a cosy rope curled up in the bottom. After snuggling inside, she was sound asleep when she heard the doors bang shut. As the engine started up she miaowed out as loudly as she could manage, but she couldn't get through the wire grill that

separated the back of the van from the front, where the driver was. She had been trapped in the back for an age, during which she was rattled around and jerked from side to side. Sometimes the van stopped and she kept hoping the rear doors would be opened, but they remained firmly shut.

At long last the van came to a halt and everything went quiet. After a bit of a wait, the driver came to the back and opened the doors and the little cat, giving one long drawn out '*mneowwww*' of relief, sprang out into what had become the dark, cold world of a winter evening far from home. She heard the man yell after her, but she'd had her fill of that van and shot down a side alley. Cat scrambled under a gate and, after checking the driver was no longer in pursuit, she had found this old, damp, smelly garage.

And here she was for the second night running. The garage doors were locked shut, but there was a crack at the bottom of the ill-fitting door and it was through this that she had come and gone. She had made her bed in an old armchair with a strange-smelling squishy sort of cushion that had half its insides spilling out. She had kneaded it fiercely over and over again until she'd made a hollow that was the right shape for her body.

On her first night, while she had slept totally exhausted, undisturbed by anything, great flakes of snow had fluttered down silently all the night long and by the morning everything outside in the Town she had yet to discover was covered in a thick white blanket making it more mysterious still.

Now, as she curled in a tight ball for warmth, she thought longingly of the home she had left by no will of her own. It

had been warmer by far and a lot more comfortable than this garage and the people had been gentle and kind, giving her regular meals. Cat sighed and turned again to try to get more comfortable. Slowly sleep enveloped her, but as she slept, she mewled out, repeatedly, in distress. She was never to remember what it was that was so upsetting her, but if anyone had peered through the grimy windows they would have seen her feet twitching and her whiskers moving frantically.



2



THE DOG

Ben's young face was tense with anxiety and his forehead was etched with deep worry lines as he slammed out of his house. The cold air hit the boy with force, making him gasp. He hesitated and, turning, he opened the door again, remembering the coat on the back of his chair. Immediately he thought better of it and banged the door shut even harder this second time. With his back to the house he balled his right fist violently into the palm of his left hand, moaning loudly in frustration. Ben felt so angry he wanted to cry – not that he would give in like that. But it simply wasn't fair, it really *wasn't*.

Ben started to walk, kicking an already-battered cola can further along the gutter. The wind made him shiver violently and his nose started to run. He wiped it with the back of his

sleeve. Without his coat, gloves and scarf the cold was going to win. All too clearly he could imagine his mother taunting him with, 'And whose fault is that?' He screwed up his eyes, then opened them again quickly and shook his head to reject her imagined chiding.

What Ben needed was to talk to someone. Someone who would understand. Someone like Josh. By now, on autopilot, he had started to cut through the alleyways of the housing estate. But as he got closer to Josh's place he started to think . . . What would he say to Josh? And how would his friend react? Thinking about it made his head throb. But it was impossible not to – think about it, that is. It just kept churning away inside his brain. Ben walked faster. He wanted to get away from all that shouting. Away from home. Away from everything.

It had all started because he'd made the mistake of asking Mum if there was the slightest chance that he might be given a dog of his own for Christmas. He knew it was only the end of November, but you had to start working on these things early. You'd think he'd asked for a herd of elephants, white ones, with diamond-studded toes, the way she went on. She made it seem like it was the most unreasonable and selfish thing anyone in the world had ever asked for, instead of a perfectly normal request. Josh – after all – had a dog. All his friends had dogs, well most of them did and if they didn't they had other things, like guinea pigs – or really cool things, like snakes.

It was after the mail arrived that things went belly up – and then some. It had been *awful*! He shuddered at the memory and took a quick breath to calm himself. Ben had still been trying to list the reasons why a dog for Christmas was a good

idea as his mother opened the post. She had been looking at something when suddenly she stopped and just kept saying the same thing, over and over again. 'What on earth is this? What IS this?' Then she was waving some sort of statement under his nose and shouting at him – really screaming – the same questions over and over again. Not that she gave him a chance to read it. All Ben knew was that he was being grilled Big Time about her credit card.

He'd panicked. His mouth went dry and his brain blanked. She kept waving the sheets of paper under his nose and pointing at one line asking for an explanation but not waiting for one. Then, suddenly, she went quiet and slumped down over the table like all the stuffing had fallen out of her and she sobbed – deep, racking sobs.

The crying was worse than the shouting. And then there had been her voice. It went all low and angry in a way Ben had never heard before.

'You wait. I'm telling your Dad about this. I mean it, Ben. This time you've really gone too far. It's too much. I can't cope.' Her voice caught and she started a long coughing fit. Ben's dad lived miles away, over the hills in Yorkshire, and neither of them had anything much to do with him. He couldn't imagine what Dad would say or do, but the fact she was going to tell him was definitely not good news.

And that wasn't the end of it.

'By rights, I should call the police. You're nothing but a hooligan.' That awful low voice again. 'No, worse! You're a rotten, grubby thief!'

Ben had caught his breath in a shocked hiccup that sounded

a bit like 'What?' He couldn't believe what she was saying, but he didn't know how to defend himself. No words came to him. His mother paused for a long time looking down, then she raised her eyes and stared straight into Ben's. Tears were flowing down her face but she remained silent. Ben blinked as he felt his own eyes stinging. He chewed the inside of his lip. It wasn't like that, what he had done – was it? It wasn't *that* bad. It couldn't be. She'd got it all wrong. She must have, but even as he thought about it now, Ben couldn't make sense of any of it. Not even the angry little knot of guilt he could feel forming in his stomach.

As Ben rang the bell at Josh's house he heard Clueless, their yellow labrador, barking a warning – or possibly a welcome, it was hard to tell the difference with Clueless. There was an enormous hubbub the other side of the door. Ben hugged himself as he heard barks, claws scratching on lino, skidding sounds and shouts as Clueless did his famous skateboarding trick on the rug towards the front door, anxious as always to be the first one there. Sure enough, there was a loud thump as dog and rug hit the door together. Ben heard Mrs. White's voice announcing she'd told him that's *exactly* what would happen and the door was opened with a flourish and Josh's mother stood there, pink-cheeked and laughing.

She had her finger hooked through the dog's collar, but on recognising Ben she let him go free. Clueless sprang up at the boy in front of him and washed him from top to toe with a long wet tongue smelling of hot dog-breath. Ben laughed in spite of himself and, wiping his face dry, he crouched down to put his arms round the dog's neck. He turned his face towards Josh's

mother, mouthing the question '*Josh*?' as Clueless continued to whine and slobber over him excitedly.

'Ben – hello! And the answer to your question is: where else but on his computer upstairs.' Josh's mother grinned and stood back to let Ben pass her. 'I honestly don't know what you lads find to do on those computers all the time, it's not as if you're doing anything useful like the household shop or something!' Ben winced at the mere mention of online shopping and thumped upstairs. He pushed open Josh's bedroom door and flopped on to the bed, followed by Clueless who, panting amiably from the effort of being a dog, jumped up and sprawled out next to him.

'Hey, Ben! Just hang on a sec can you?' Josh threw over his shoulder, eyes fixed on his game. But Ben couldn't hang on and started gabbling about how Third World War had broken out in his house. Josh paused his game and turned to watch his friend, listening, gripped, as Ben got to his mother's accusation about the credit card. By now Ben was petting Clueless for his own comfort, rather than the dog's.

'What made her think it was you who spent the money?' This innocent enough question from Josh prompted Ben to twist the dog's ear, making Clueless whimper in protest. Ben felt strangely unhappy about telling Josh all this, although he wasn't sure why, since Josh already knew most of it.

'Apparently on her bank statement it actually gave the name of the website, which was a bit of a giveaway. But, Josh,' Ben paused, ' . . . well, the thing is, when I was doing it, it was so difficult. I had to try three times before I could make it work, and when it did work I couldn't face doing it again, so

I took a full year's subscription in one go.' Ben's voice went a bit quiet so he was nearly whispering. 'And it came to sixty-nine ninety-nine.'

Josh whistled. 'That's a lot! No wonder she noticed!'

'When you're online doing that stuff, it's so easy once they accept the card. You just click, click, click and everything works.' Ben grinned mischievously, but Josh just nodded.

'It was weeks ago that you joined, wasn't it? You seemed to have had that cyberdog of yours for ages,' Josh said. 'What was the name of the website?'

'Oh, it was called *my imaginary pet dot com*,' Ben replied. He stood up and stretched, yawning lengthily. 'It seems to have taken forever to show in her statement.'

His grin faded and his brows furrowed together. He turned away so Josh couldn't see his face.

'But, Josh, I haven't told you what she's done. It's hideous. I can't bear it.' Josh leaned forward to try to see Ben's expression. Ben moved across to the dog again, keeping his head low. 'She's banned me from the internet. Completely. For ever!' Ben buried his head in the dog's neck. He wanted to cry, but of course he couldn't. In a muffled voice he said, 'As I was leaving the house she shouted out that she was changing the password and when I get home I won't know how to get in any more until she tells me I'm allowed to use it again.' Ben knew it wouldn't be for a long while.

'What you going to do about homework?'

'Dunno. I suppose she'll have to explain to school. I can't bear it. Then everyone'll know.'

Josh said, 'Hey that's rough, that's really rough. But I'm sure

the ban won't really be for ever!' Ben nodded, but it wasn't the schoolwork that was on his mind. He looked across at his friend with a tragic expression on his face. He could feel the wretched tears pricking his eyes again and, turning away, he blinked hard and swallowed repeatedly until he was sure they had gone.

At that moment Chloe, Josh's twin, came into the room telling Josh that their Mum needed them. As brother and sister ran downstairs Ben turned back to Clueless and hugged him until the dog groaned. Ben adored this dog, but privately thought that the name Clueless was a bit unfair, although everyone in Josh's house thought it was really funny since he really was – Clueless, that is. So when Ben finally got himself a virtual pet on the website he had been tempted to call it Clueless before he realised how wrong it was.

He wanted his newly acquired 'pet' to be with him always, to go with him everywhere. To never leave his side. So the name was obvious: Shadow. Ben desperately wanted to explain to Josh why not having Shadow any more really was the end of the world, but he didn't know how to start. Ben felt he actually lived through Shadow. When he was on the website he felt free – he and his dog could roam wherever they wanted. When he so much as thought about Shadow he felt connected in some way. He could imagine the presence of Shadow in the room, almost. But it wasn't the same without knowing that he was there, inside the computer, waiting for him.

He'd known that asking his mum for a real dog for Christmas was always going to be a really long shot. His mum did cleaning jobs, but he knew there wasn't much money and

dogs needed a load of upkeep – feeding, vet bills – as well as lots of looking after. But with one blow, because of that stupid credit card, it looked like he was now going to be without both a real and an imaginary dog. It just wasn't fair. However, Ben consoled himself, at least Shadow would still be waiting for him when his internet ban was over.

Ben heard Josh walk back into the room and he decided to try to make his friend understand.

'The thing about Shadow is that he never says I'm wrong, or complains about things or nags me or anything . . .' Ben's voice faltered and ground to a halt. As he looked up he discovered that not only was Josh in the room but so was Chloe – with a big grin on her face.

'Wow, whoever you're talking about sounds too good to be true!' Chloe said.

'Well he's not!' Ben retorted hotly and Josh threw a pillow at Chloe, pulling a face at his twin to shut her up. But Chloe's interruption made Ben retreat further into himself. Out of nowhere Ben could hear an irritating voice in his head chanting *blood is thicker than water*. With Chloe around, did Josh really care whether Ben was there, or what problems he had?

His thoughts were interrupted as he heard Chloe reminding Josh that their mum had asked if Ben wanted to stay for tea and, if so, they needed to have it now, because she, Chloe, had to go down to the church. With that she left the room and thundered down the stairs. Josh looked across at Ben questioningly as he started towards the door in his sister's wake.

Ben suddenly felt he couldn't face everyone over a happy family meal, so he mumbled vague thanks and explained

he really needed to get home. Much was on his mind and, increasingly, on his conscience and he knew he had to get back, no doubt to face more of the music he so dreaded.

'You go on, down, Josh. I'll just say goodbye to Clueless and let myself out.'

Ben flung himself on the ever-adoring Clueless and gave him a massive hug. The dog wagged his tail and licked Ben's face, with abandoned adoration.

'You're so lucky, being a dog. You don't have to put up with any of this!'



3



THE FRIEND

Cat was finding it harder than ever to scrounge any food. The Town, while bewildering and exciting in turn, was proving to be ungenerous to a small homeless feline. Part of it was Cat's own fault, as she kept herself well hidden and ran if anyone tried to come near her, feeling quite unable to trust people. You just never knew what they might do.

Her early luck in discovering the abandoned burger in the midst of the rubbish was never repeated. On her third day in the Town the wind bore on it the smell of frying fish and, following her nose, she found herself at the far end of one of the cobbled alleyways off the Main Square, standing by a small shopfront with an open door. She stood across the other side of the alleyway and watched.