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That cat's barking

Cat-hatred must be a bankable theme if the success of *Meet the Fockers* is any guide. Robert de Niro set the scene in the original movie, *Meet the Parents*, when he demanded of his prospective son-in-law, a dog-lover: "So you don't like cats, huh? Wouldn't you prefer an animal whose affection you actually have to earn?" Thus did he perpetuate a popular petty antithesis that should have long since had its day.

What is this bestial *idée reçue*? Of the cat, it says, she walks by herself. Her loyalty and affection are hard won, contingent upon not only the provision of food and warmth but also an ineffable "cat-worthiness". To those she does not like she is guaranteed to be arch and generally standoffish.

"I'm not!" yelps the dog of folklore. His is a spate of love to the cat's meagre stream. He lives to play, touse and adore. His love for his master is singular and ineradicable. But he is, in judgmental eyes, also slavish and absurd. Needy and incapable of being alone, he has no self worth. He is indiscriminating, a sycophant and lacking in moral fibre. While puss has an admirable independence, dopey Fido is on a permanent emotional lead.

The philosopher Jacques Derrida might have had fun deconstructing this whole system. For the fact is, there is no way dogs and cats can be opposed so rigidly. We have myriad personalities: our pets have something comparable.

Take Boris. Boris was a Burmese castrato, having been emasculated by our ex-farmer neighbour. Who can say to what extent the surgery affected his character, but he grew up to be one of the most personable cats I have had the pleasure of knowing. He would purr, he would kink his tail, he would fall into an ecstasy of anticipation at the mere sight of a good human leg. He had a presence more solid and memorable than that of many people I have met. I would even say he had a quality of empathy; how else to explain why he would come into my room in my many periods of black teenage misery, jump on to my bed, lick my face and curl up quietly next to me.

And Boris changed and grew as a cat. When we moved city and had to give our animals away, something happened to him (as we later found

out); he effloresced. The woman who adopted him already had five cats of her own. While some cats would have resigned themselves to occupying a lowly cushion in the house's hierarchy, Boris seemed to rise to the challenge. He fought brief and furious battles with the other cats and soon banished them outside. He next moved to unseat his new mistress's lover. As she and her man lay together at night, he would steal into their bedroom, pounce upon the bed, force them asunder with his nuggety crown and then curl up in the trench he had dug between them. Boris had surely been a prince in a previous life and he was not about to let a little castration get in the way of his destiny.

Maybe Boris took all the regal blood in his mother's womb, for his sister, Zenobia, was as mild as water. She was afraid of everything, and became frankly neurotic after giving birth. When her kittens were taken away she escaped into hysterical cleaning. This rendered her semi-bald, and she made an unlovely, if pitiable, sight. No one else wanted her when we moved, and we were forced to send her to the Cat Haven (or heaven, I should imagine, in her case).

I have not lived with cats for some years but I did recently share with a couple of dogs. Molly was tiny, white, fluffy, and sported a cheap, baby-blue harness. To me, she resembled nothing so much as an aspiring starlet all done up for a night out at the disco. She had a character to match, being in turn feisty, playful, devious and come-hitherish. She was also very often dirty.

Like most dogs (and people) of a diminutive physiognomy, she had an overweening complex about it and would not let anything mess with her. Yet Molly held a superabundance of love and had a hard time finding enough people within a day upon whom she could lavish it.

Lester was about ten times Molly's size but disproportionately complex. "Confused" was the word that best described him. He expected the whole world to chastise him and needed constant reinforcement. Although huge, he was only a puppy and, uncertain of his body shape, was forever bumping his long nose on the furniture and knocking glasses of wine over with his excitable tail. He was a basically good fellow, was Lester, but undeniably simple.

Has a scheme for sorting these animals begun to take shape within your mind? Is it as clear to you as it is to me that Molly had far more in common with Boris than she did with Lester; and that Lester and Zenobia were closer in type than they ever could be to the first two? I even suspect that

Molly had a little cat in her, for I often caught her washing. And didn't I once hear Boris bark?

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