

Having Kittens

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Author's Introduction to Having Kittens

Most of the events in this story really happened. When I was about 13 years old my mother decided to try breeding Siamese cats – it was a complete disaster. We ended up with three cats: the original female Siamese, the male with the funny eyes, and the little half-Siamese tabby. It just about broke my heart when we went back to the shop to see if the kitten with the strange eyes had been sold – and there he was, eyes staring madly, wailing his little heart out. Mum didn't need much persuading to buy him back from the pet shop. This story is dedicated to all cat-lovers who think they are smarter than their cats.

Chapter 1

Cat Versus Dog

"I hate cats!" Brian said.

"So?" said Moira, fixing him with a withering stare. Big sisters are good at withering stares.

"Cats are cruel," Brian said. "They kill birds ... and torture innocent mice ..."

"Not all cats hunt," Moira said. "They just need to be trained properly."

"I think I'd like a nice cuddly kitten," Mum said, "with big blue eyes..."

Brian sensed he was losing the battle. "Dad," he said, "wouldn't you like another dog? Maybe a big one this time, like a Boxer?"

"Yuck!" said Moira. "Brainless dribbling beasts!"

"Dad?" Brian begged.

Dad shrugged. "We had Hoover for twelve years, Brian. It was a long time. Especially when I had to take him for his evening walks – in the wind and rain, night after night."

"If we get a new dog I promise I'll take it for a walk every single night," Brian said desperately.

"Yeah, right," said Moira.

Dad just cocked an eyebrow at Brian.

"Susan, she's in my class, her mother breeds Siamese cats," Moira announced. "Susan's mother has a young female cat she wants to sell cheaply. It's got a kink in its tail or something. So it's no good for cat shows." Moira smiled at Mum. "Couldn't we make an offer? Susan says she's absolutely gorgeous."

"Let's go and take a look," Mum said.

Dad winked at Brian. "Sorry, mate, looks like the females win the day."

"Hey, we could have kittens!" Moira cried. "Susan says that female cats always have a nicer nature if they've had a litter of kittens."

Brian groaned.

"Kittens," Mum said dreamily. "Heaps of kittens with big blue eyes..."

"We could sell them," Moira rushed on. "Siamese kittens sell for megabucks these days, specially if they've got a good pedigree."

"Do they? What kind of money are we talking about?" Dad asked, putting down the newspaper.

Brian couldn't listen to any more. He ran upstairs to his bedroom and crashed on his bed. What a nightmare! Kittens! The house would be crawling with cats – cats yelling, cats fighting, cats scratching, cats clawing...

Brian had never told anyone what happened two years ago, when he was eight. Nana's fat old Persian cat, Timbo, had fallen out of a tree on to Brian's head. Brian had got the fright of his life when a screeching, spitting, flailing bundle of teeth and claws landed on him.

Timbo ran away leaving Brian curled in a ball with stinging scratches all over his head. Eventually Brian sat up, wiped his eyes, and swore that he would never, ever tell a soul he'd been reduced to tears by a cat.

Chapter 2

Ling-Ling

Ling-Ling was beautiful. Her fur was soft and creamy. Her paws, nose, ears, and her long whippy (and slightly kinky) tail were a rich chocolate shade. She had blue eyes - and a very loud voice.

When Moira carried Ling-Ling's travelling cage through the front door, Brian could hear the cat yelling. "Woow," she cried. "Woow, woow!"

Brian got up from his desk and shut his bedroom door. But he could still hear the howls as Ling-Ling explored the house from top to bottom.

Eventually the cries stopped outside Brian's door. Brian held his breath.

"Woow," yelled Ling-Ling.

"Don't be a meanie," said Moira from the other side of the door. "She wants to come in and meet you."

"Go away," said Brian.

The door opened a crack. A brown nose shoved its way through the gap.

"Whoops," said Moira, as a lithe shape slithered through. "Sorry about that."

"I bet," Brian said.

Ling-Ling gave Brian a long stare from her blue eyes. She was sizing him up. He glared back. Ling-Ling shot across the room, clawed her way on to his bed, and jumped on his desk. "Woow," she said, right into his face.

"Look at that!" Moira said. "She likes you! I thought cats were meant to be good judges of character."

"Get her out of my room," he growled. "She's your pet. I don't want anything to do with her."

Moira scooped up the cat. "Come on, honeybunch," she cooed. "You don't want to be in a stinky boy's room, anyway, do you? You might get poisoned by the smelly socks under the bed."

"Woow," said Ling-Ling as she was carried from the room. But Brian saw her watching him over Moira's shoulder, and he knew she was sending him a message: I'll be back!

Ling-Ling soon became mistress of the house. She was meant to sleep in a basket in the laundry, but she wailed so heartbreakingly that eventually Moira smuggled her into her own bed. From then on Ling-Ling wouldn't even look at the sheepskin-lined basket. She slept either in Moira's bed or in Mum and Dad's bed.

She also tried very hard to sleep in Brian's bed. He'd come into his room after a shower and find Ling-Ling curled up in a tight ball on his pillow. She wouldn't open her eyes, but Brian could tell from her ears that she was awake. "Moira!" he'd bellow. "Come and get this filthy animal out of my bed!"

Ling-Ling was very fussy about what she ate. Mum tried giving her steamed fish, tinned cat food, chicken meat, cat biscuits, tinned salmon, raw steak. Ling-Ling would eat a bowl of food with great gusto on the first day. On the second day she'd sniff at it, flick her tail, and stalk away. Some days she just sat and stared at the bowl, obviously waiting for the food to transform into something else.

"Are all cats this fussy?" Mum asked anxiously.

"She's an aristocat," Moira said. "She only eats the best."

"I'm spending a fortune on her food," Mum said.

"Those kittens had better be worth it," Dad said with a frown.

Chapter 3

Berserk!

Soon Ling-Ling was nearly old enough to have her first litter of kittens. Moira consulted with Susan's mother. "Ling-Ling will want to mate and have kittens, but she's still a bit young," Moira announced. "It's safer if we wait till the second time round, when she's older. We must keep her shut in the house when she comes into season the first time, so she doesn't get out and mate with any old tomcat."

"How do we know when she's in season?" Mum asked.

"Oh, she'll be very noisy and she'll try to get outside all the time," Moira said vaguely. "It'll happen quite soon, I think."

The first Brian knew about Ling-Ling's condition was when he came home from school one day. The back door was locked. This was unusual. He banged on the door.

"Just a minute," called Mum. Brian could hear a weird howling noise somewhere inside the house.

"What's going on?" he yelled.

Mum opened the door. Her face was red and her hair was messy. "It's Ling-Ling," she said breathlessly. "I had to shut her in the lounge. She's come into season."

"Is that her?" asked Brian, awed by the banshee screeches coming from the lounge.

"She's going berserk. Whatever you do, don't leave a door open," said Mum. "Don't even open a door unless you know for sure that she's locked up."

That night they ate dinner without speaking, watching Ling-Ling as she ran round and round the room, screaming her head off, one minute jumping up to see if a window was open, the next minute rolling on the floor like a mad creature. When she wasn't yelling, she purred as loudly as an outboard motor.

"How long is this going to go on?" Dad asked.

Moira took a deep breath. "Only a few days," she said, trying to sound casual.

"It's going to be a long few days," Mum muttered.

Ling-Ling eventually returned to normal. Another month passed. But then the yowling and the rolling started again, and she was whisked away to the breeder's place to spend a couple of days with a male Siamese cat.

Brian breathed a huge sigh of relief. Peace at last.

But the peace was shattered when Dad examined his bank balance. "That visit to the breeder's cost us a bomb!" he growled. "I had no idea. Those blasted kittens had better be worth it."

Several weeks later Moira made a discovery. "Come here!" she yelled. "I can feel them!" Her hand was resting on Ling-Ling's stomach. "Come on, Brian, put your hand here."

Brian stared at the cat, half horrified, half fascinated.

"Come on," urged Moira. "She won't bite."

Gingerly he rested his hand on Ling-Ling's side. It was warm and furry. Ling-Ling purred and smiled at him. At first Brian felt nothing, then he felt a little lump push up against his palm and subside again. Then another little lump, as if something was trying to kick his hand. "It's ... spooky," he said.

"Who's a clever girl, then?" Moira burbled.

Chapter 4

Brian's Bed

Ling-Ling's stomach got bigger and bigger. Brian could feel the kittens kicking and poking every time he put his hand on her belly. Sometimes he could even see the movement of the kittens under the fur, little waves going up and down.

"We need to make a nest for her," Moira said. "In a quiet place. I'll put a box in my wardrobe and keep showing it to her. She'll get the idea eventually."

She cut down the side of a cardboard box. Then she put some newspaper and an old towel in the bottom. But Ling-Ling didn't seem interested. "Mum, she won't even look at it," Moira complained. "She jumps out as soon as I put her in."

Mum shrugged. "We'll just have to hope she goes to the box when the time comes."

Ling-Ling started having her kittens while Brian was at cricket practice. He came home to find Moira and Mum side-by-side in his bedroom, leaning over the bed.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

Moira moved to block his view of the bed. "It's all right," she gabbled. "Ling-Ling decided to have her kittens on your bed. That's all."

"On my bed?" Brian squawked. "Get her off!"

"We can't move her," Mum said. "Don't worry, your bed will be fine. We've got lots of newspaper and old towels under her. Do you want to watch?"

"No!" Brian felt as if he was going to be sick. He walked down the hall to the bathroom, his knees like jelly. Nasty, evil-minded cat. She was doing it deliberately. He just knew it.

Eventually Mum came downstairs. She looked tired. "She had three kittens," Mum said. "They're all fine, squeaking and wriggling and sucking."

"Where are they now?" Brian asked suspiciously.

"It's okay," Mum said. "We finally got them settled in the box in Moira's room. Why don't you go and have a look?"

"No thanks," Brian snapped.

But the next day he couldn't resist sneaking into Moira's room to have a look at the kittens: three tiny bundles of white fuzz, their ears flat against their heads and their eyes tight shut. They were squeaking and squirming as they nuzzled into Ling-Ling's belly, looking for her teats.

Brian felt a strange lump in his throat as he stroked one of them with his fingertip. They were so tiny, so helpless, yet so full of life. Then he looked at Ling-Ling. She stared back at him from narrow blue eyes. "Pity they have to grow up to be cats like you," he told her.

The three kittens grew very quickly. It wasn't long before they were scampering round the house, pouncing on each other, play-fighting, chewing everything in sight. Two of them, both females, were perfect.

But the other kitten seemed to have something wrong with his eyes. Each eye had a rim of white membrane at the top. He looked as if he was endlessly surprised by everything he saw. The vet checked him out and said that the muscles at the top of his eyes weren't as strong as the ones at the bottom. He could see perfectly well, but he'd never be a pedigree show cat.

Dad groaned when he heard that. "We'll probably have to sell him cheap. We're hardly going to make any money at all out of this whole kitten exercise."

"Should have got a dog," Brian said.

"Don't be such a misery guts," Moira said. "We had a stinky old dog for twelve years. I'm enjoying having nice, clean, sweet-smelling cats round the place instead."

"I think one of your nice clean cats has just done something stinky on the hall rug," Brian said. "Time to get the detergent out again."

"Oh ... rack off!" yelled Moira.

The kitten with the funny eyes was different to the other two. He wasn't as confident. He didn't dash madly round the house and play stalking games in the garden. He spent a lot of time just sitting and watching.

Several times Brian opened his bedroom door and found the male kitten (christened Tigs) sitting on the other side, his chocolate paws curled under his chest. He never cried, so Brian had no idea how long he'd been sitting there. After the third time, Brian said to him, "Well? Are you coming in or not?"

Tigs stared at him with his always-surprised eyes, yawned, and slowly walked into Brian's room. He jumped on the bed, turned in a circle once, and curled into a perfect ball. Brian went on with his homework, finding that Tigs' purring was quite soothing.

When the kittens were old enough, Mum put an advertisement in the newspaper. The two female kittens were bought straight away, but nobody wanted the male kitten with the funny eyes.

"Couldn't we just keep him?" Moira asked tearfully.

"We're not having two cats and that's that," said Dad. "We'll take him down to the pet shop at the mall. They might buy him for a reduced price."

So Tigs was put into the travelling cage and driven down to the mall. He cried all the way in a loud voice Brian had never heard him use before.

The pet shop owner hummed and hahed, but eventually agreed to take Tigs. The last Brian saw of the kitten was a pair of frantically-staring eyes and a wide pink mouth. A lump came to Brian's throat, but he swallowed it down.

Tigs was only a cat, after all.

Chapter 5

Buy Him Back!

The next day after school Brian strolled into the mall, telling himself he just wanted to make sure Tigs had been sold. He could hear the wails before the pet shop even came into view. It was a harsh, scratchy, desperate cat voice that had obviously been crying nonstop all night and all day.

Brian's stomach sank. He knew who was making the noise. Sure enough, there was Tigs, mouth wide open, eyes staring as if his heart was breaking.

Brian couldn't stand it. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream along with Tigs.

He ran home. He crashed into the kitchen. "He's still there," he gasped. "In the cage. Nobody's bought him. Mum, he's frantic! He's been screaming ever since we left him there."

"Oh, no," said Mum. "I had a horrible feeling nobody would want him. Poor little fellow. What are we going to do?"

"Buy him back," Brian said. Then his mouth fell open as he realised what he'd said.

"Your father will have a fit," Mum said, untying her apron.

"Too bad," Brian said. "Come on."

So when Dad came home he found Ling-Ling and Tigs snuggled up together in front of the heater, their long brown tails entwined. "I don't believe it," he said. "Am I seeing double?"

"The pet shop owner only charged us ten dollars more than he paid us," Mum said. "He couldn't stop laughing."

"It's all Brian's fault," Moira said. "He was the one who suggested buying him back."

Dad scowled. "He wasn't the one who wanted kittens in the first place. Looks like there'll have to be a reduction in two lots of pocket money to pay for the extra cat food."

"Aww, Dad," Moira and Brian said in unison.

Chapter 6

One More Go

A few days later Moira began a campaign to let Ling-Ling have one more litter of kittens. "Go on, Dad," she said. "Tigs' eyes are just a fluke. A bit of bad luck. Ling-Ling will probably have more kittens next time – maybe five or six. Just imagine how much money we'll make then."

"No," said Dad. "I want that cat taken to the vet to have her de-sexing operation. No more kittens."

"Just one more try," Moira wheedled. "Please, Dad."

Dad looked at Mum. She shrugged. "It's probably worth another try. Ling-Ling had an easy birth the last time. Second time round should be a piece of cake."

"Not in my bed," Brian said.

"She was just showing you how much she loves you," Moira said.

"Yeah, right," Brian muttered.

Several months went by while they waited for Ling-Ling to come into season again. But nothing happened. She didn't yell any more than usual, she didn't roll all over the floor or purr like an engine.

But one evening Moira came thudding downstairs and rushed into the lounge. Her face was pale and her eyes were as round as Tigs'. "You won't believe this," she said.

"What?" Mum said, half rising from her seat. "You look awful. Are you feeling okay?"

"It's Ling-Ling," Moira said.

"Has she come into season at last?" Mum gasped. "Quick, close the windows."

"Too late," Moira said. "She's pregnant. I just felt the kittens moving in her stomach."

"But she hasn't ..." said Mum.

"But she didn't..." said Dad.

"How?" asked Brian.

Moira ran her hands through her hair. "I don't know!" she cried. "She must have come into season and we just didn't notice."

"Oh, no," said Mum. "That means..."

"The kittens have been fathered by any old tomcat in the neighbourhood," groaned Dad. "They won't be Siamese.

They'll be worth peanuts."

"What will they look like?" asked Brian with interest.

"I don't know!" yelled Moira. She burst into tears and rushed out of the room.

Mum went after her.

Brian and his father stared unseeingly at the TV. "We should have got a dog," Dad mumbled. Brian stroked Tigs, who was perched on his knee, purring loudly. "I guess," he said.

Chapter 7

The Lucky One

The second birth didn't go as well as the first. Ling-Ling had to be taken to the vet. Three kittens were born dead, and only one, a tabby, was still alive.

The next day Ling-Ling and the kitten came home. But Ling-Ling wouldn't let the kitten feed. She kept on getting out of the box and walking away. The little scrap of striped fur scrabbled and nuzzled round the box, squeaking frantically.

"Mum," Moira wailed. "Ling-Ling won't feed the kitten. It'll die! What are we going to do?"

"It's not going to die," Mum said.

She jumped into the car and shot off to the vet's surgery.

Half an hour later she was back, carrying a bulging plastic bag. "What are you going to do?" Moira asked.

"Feed the kitten," Mum snapped. "The vet gave me instructions." She stirred up a bit of formula, poured it into a tiny bottle with a teat, and put the tabby kitten on a towel on her knee. It squealed and wriggled. "Sit still," Mum said.

At last the teat slipped into the kitten's mouth, and the squeaking and the wriggling suddenly stopped. The silence was blissful. "Listen," said Mum, wonderingly. "She's purring. Only a day old and she's purring."

"How often do you have to feed her?" Moira asked.

"You mean how often do we have to feed her," Mum snapped. "I'm not doing this on my own. She has to be fed every two hours, round the clock. For at least a week. Then every three hours for another three weeks. And we have to wipe her bottom after every feed."

Moira gulped. "Oh," she said.

Brian looked down at the little bundle of striped fur on his mother's lap. He could see a set of tiny claws, like miniature needles, holding on to Mum's finger. He could hear the soft pulsing of the kitten's purr.

"I'll help with the feeds, too," he said.

Chapter 8

No More Kittens!

A fortnight later Dad hit the roof when he added up how much the kitten enterprise had cost them. "Thank heavens the vet did Ling-Ling's operation at the same time," he barked. "No more kittens – at last!"

"Sorry, Dad," Moira said, cuddling Ling-Ling to her chest.

"I'm surprised you still like her so much," Dad said. "She's certainly not going to win a prize as Feline Mother of the Century."

"The vet says it's not Ling-Ling's fault that she doesn't want to feed her kitten," Moira said. "She got all mixed up, what with the operation and the anaesthetic and everything. She doesn't even realise the kitten belongs to her."

"Good," said Dad. "Then she won't be upset when the kitten's old enough to go to the pet shop to be sold. We might get a few dollars for it."

"No way!" snapped Mum, rubbing her eyes. She was doing most of the night-time feeds.

Dad stared at her in amazement. "But ... but we can't keep three cats!" he yelled.

"I'm not losing all this sleep just to hand my kitten over to some stranger," Mum growled. "Her name's Lucky, and she's staying right here."

Dad looked like he wanted to tear his hair out. "I don't believe it! Has everyone in this family gone mad? Three cats!" He shot a furious glance at Brian. "Brian, you don't want three cats, do you? You hate cats!"

Brian looked down. Tigs was lying in front of the heater, curled protectively round the tabby kitten, his cream fur pressed against her black and grey stripes. As Brian watched, Tigs gave Lucky a friendly lick on the head. Lucky stretched her little white feet, shook her head, and went back to sleep.

"Brian?" said Dad. "Wouldn't you rather have a dog? Isn't that what you said?"

"Oh ... I dunno," said Brian, sitting down on the floor next to the two cats. "Dogs have to be walked every night, don't they? Bit of a drag, I reckon."

His father stared at him, speechless.

Brian grinned. He stroked the smooth fur on Tigs' flank. "Hey, Dad, remember Nan's old cat, Timbo?" he asked. "Did I ever tell you about the time Timbo fell out of a tree on to my head?"