



Are you kidding? No, I am NOT coming out – yet...

Julia, our ancient resident donkey, is no fool. It's close to 100 degrees (F) in the shade and even though she is a desert animal, the high humidity combined with the high heat here in Virginia is not to her liking. And she is comfortable under her industrial fan mounted high on the wall behind her. I assure you, there is no pushing, bribing, cajoling, or pleading that will get her to move those well-planted front feet, forward.

Oh, I know what you are thinking: She's a donkey! Aren't they, by nature, stubborn, mean, certainly unmovable, and won't listen to reason? I am here to tell you this is all very bad press and neither Julia nor I will have any of it. Donkeys, it seems are not stubborn at all, but cautious, contemplative, studying and assessing each situation before them, and only move forward if they deem it is safe for them, and to their advantage to do so. Unlike so many of us humans who, according to the famous saying are "fools [who] rush in where angels fear to tread," donkeys will study their next move from all possible and necessary angles before proceeding, so in fact, that makes them wise, rational beings. As one who has known Julia (and other donkeys) for over 40 years, I add with enthusiasm that they are also kind, loving, very, very intelligent, steadfast, and loyal. And they love to have you whisper in those amazing, tall ears. I think we can all learn something here. ~

laJoie

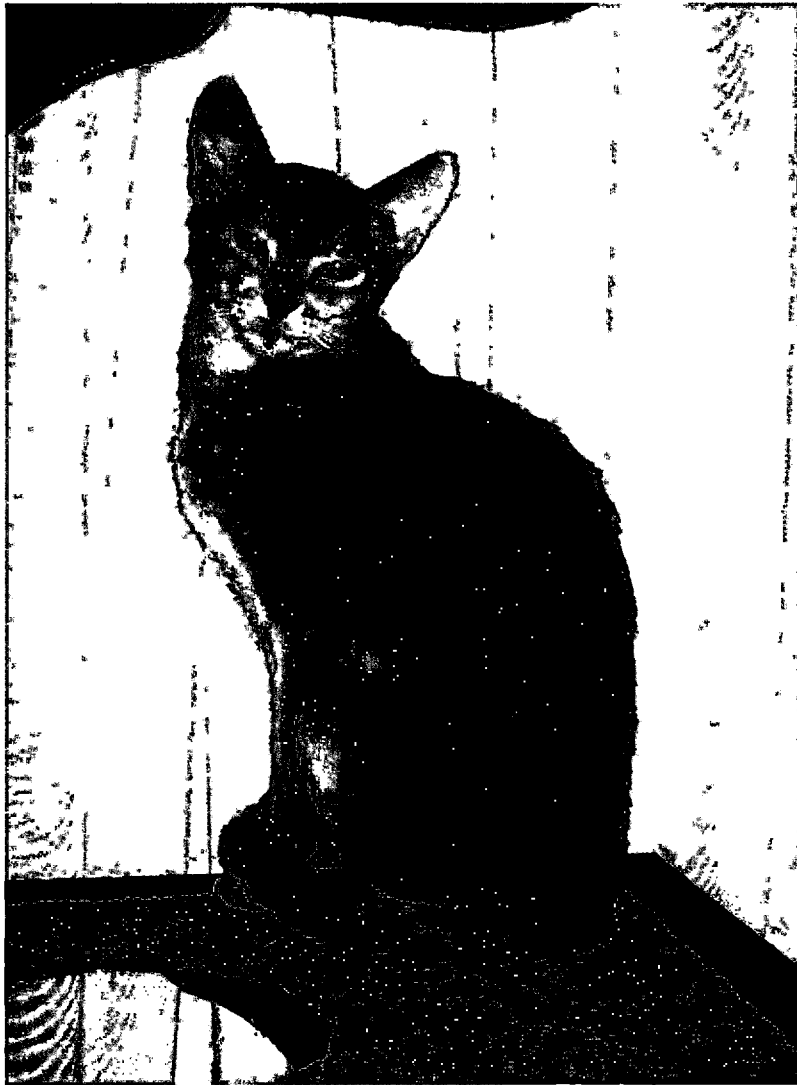
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Moonlight
aka Shimmer Girl

THE LAVENDER CAT

By T.J. Banks

*...The fire that stirs about her, when she stirs
Burns but more clearly. O she had not these ways
When all the wild Summer was in her gaze.
-- William Butler Yeats, "The Folly of Being Comforted"*

"Who's the lavender cat?" my friend Louise asked as we stepped into the kitchen.

Moonlight sat on the kitchen table, her usual imperious and elegant self. She wasn't really lavender, of course: she was a Lilac Abyssinian, and her fur had a sort of smoky-mauve cast to it. Still, Louise's phrase stuck with me, prowling about in the back of my mind..... Moonlight came to me from my friend Susan five or six years ago. She quickly bonded with Dawnie, my beloved Red Aby. She even went after Fey, the Ruddy Somali, who had been picking on Dawnie for several years – partly for her new friend's sake and partly because the Lilac Avenger had taken her own dislike to Fey.

It took Moonlight and me awhile longer to bond. There was a lot going on when she arrived, and I was pretty distracted. One summer afternoon, however, I retreated into the spare room with a bad headache. As I lay there resting, I slowly became aware of a furry presence on the side of the bed. Moonlight's citrine eyes regarded me thoughtfully; then she settled down next to me, staying with me the rest of that long afternoon.

Memories tend to blur along the edges after awhile. But I'm pretty sure that that was the first time I ever heard her signature "mumbledy-purr." It was a purr, a sigh, and a murmur, all blended together as subtly as the shadings in her coat. For me, it was, and remains, one of the most soothing sounds I've ever heard.

Dawnie died that January. There had always been at least three or four Abys around, and now there was just one (two if you counted long-haired Cousin Fey, which Dame Moonlight clearly didn't). The year that followed involved a lot of rough patches and even more losses – Merlyn, Zeke's first cat, and Topaz, Dawnie's Flamepoint Siamese beau. They, too, had been with us for many years, and the house felt woefully empty without them.

Here's the thing about hard times, however: there's usually an unexpected gift, a blessing in disguise lurking in the shadows. In my case, the blessing – or "Benison," as I took to calling her – was Moonlight. She began showing up in my room at night for bedside chats, conducted in that mumbledy-purr of hers. The sound frequently put me into a meditative state. "When you meditate you create an energetic space," writes my friend Mary Alice Santoro in her essay "Meditating With Your Pet: Petitation." Animals "are naturally drawn to this peaceful energy. Energy moves beyond the physical boundaries and we continually exchange it with our 4-legged friends....Animals stay in the present moment naturally. When we are presenting the moment with them, our connection gets stronger and each encounter more meaningful."

Of course, I didn't understand that till later on down the line. But I did notice that all sorts of ideas for stories and poems started coming to me in the midst of her purr songs. Parts of my current novel-in-progress and my poem "Moonlight" were born during these late-night sessions. She had her quirks just like any other cat. She'd suddenly start charging round the house at break-neck speed, only to plow into my ankles or anything else that happened to be in her way. "She's like a race car," I laughed to an old school friend who had happened to stop by.

"Yeah, a race car without a driver," he retorted.

She took to sneaking into one of the kitchen cupboards and making nests for herself there, pushing around the towels and placemats until she got things just *so*. She coned Thor, the big muscular gray kitten, into helping her steal chicken from the fridge. She developed a passion for chewing on brooms. The old-fashioned cobweb broom was her very best favorite: she waited every morning for me to open the cleaning closet, practically tapping her paws on the wood floor in her impatience for a good chew.

And then there were her adventures in hairdressing.

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Now, a few of our cats had tried their paws at this over the years. But Moonlight, being a law unto herself, decided to take it up a few notches. She'd get those claws of hers into my mane and start teasing the hell out of it. The results were not pretty.

"You know, Moonlight," I'd tell her as I worked the big, fat snarls out, "you do many things well. But hairdressing is not one of them."

She'd give me a bemused look and stop. The next evening, however, she'd be at it again. She'd show *me*.

As time went by, Moonlight's hold on my heart-strings grew stronger. She was more than the proverbial pretty face – she was, as Jimmy Durante would've said, an original. Highly intelligent and intuitive, she seemed to see beneath the surface of things with those blazing yellow eyes.

Was it a Lilac thing? I wondered and asked another writer friend, Linda Kay Hardie, who is herself owned by a Lilac Aby named Callie. "Sometimes I think I'm Callie's familiar," Linda replied thoughtfully. "She's the magical witch, and I'm the pet. Lilac magic. Powerful." And there *is* something magical about the Lilacs. Of all the cats who had shared my life, only a few had possessed anything close to Moonlight's third-eye priestess-at-Delphi aura.

Sadly, Moonlight's health was less than magical, and she racked up a lot of frequent flyer miles at our vets'. She had allergies, which led to over-grooming. They subsided after a few years, only to be followed by polyps in both ears: these had to be treated on a weekly basis with a special cleanser. (Surgery was not an option.) Moonlight was not a fan of said cleanser: the first time I administered it, she shook her ears at me and managed to get me squarely in the eye. Whereupon Moonlight looked more smug than usual, and *that* took some doing.

Much later on, there were bouts of stomatitis and dental problems. The latter led to the loss of all but four fangs. She took it hard, and I got the feeling that she was annoyed when Cheshire, her old beau, got to keep nine teeth. It was, her expression said, vastly unfair.

Somehow Moonlight's luck held, though. On the way back from the vets', she'd look at me with all the cheerful insouciance of FDR having just pulled another one over on his political enemies. Only thing missing was the long-stemmed cigarette holder. *You worry too much, human*, her citrine eyes would chide me.

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2020 was shaping up to be my Lilac girl's year. "Moonlight," the poem she'd inspired, was accepted for inclusion in *Chicken Soup for the Soul: The Magic of Cats*, ending up as the book's opening selection. Amy Newmark, the book's editor, read the poem aloud during a podcast. *Chicken Soup for the Soul* didn't usually use poems, she explained to the interviewer, but "there's a really cool poem that we use to start the book, and it's called 'Moonlight.'...And it really encapsulates beauty and elegance and the special magic of a cat and the fact that the cat knows it."

A month later, *Abys Among Us & Other Stories for the Feline-Inclined* came out. It was my first new book in years. Moonlight had two pieces in it: "Moonlight" and "Silver & Gold," the story of her friendship with Dawnie. A photo of her also graced the cover. In it, she was resting against the pillow on the spare-room bed: she stretched her front paws out, then lifted her face instinctively toward the camera. The colored pillowcase cast a soft purply glow over the window framework behind the headboard, complementing what Susan called "her lilac-flavored silvery strands." Moonlight couldn't have staged a better setting, and she knew it.

That following April, Moonlight began logging some serious vet-clinic mileage. She had an off-again on-again appetite, and Tom thought that there might be an underlying cause, such as lymphoma. "She is an old IBD kitty," he said gently and gave her fluids and Mira Taz, an appetite stimulant that could be rubbed along the edge of her ear.

There is a story about King Charles I of England. An animal lover, he had a black cat that he regarded as his good-luck piece: he even insisted on it having a permanent guard. Then, quite suddenly, the cat died. "My luck is gone," Charles mourned. The very next day, he was arrested by the parliamentary forces and, after a travesty of a trial, executed.

Moonlight was my good-luck piece. I couldn't imagine my life without her.

She grew thinner and frailer, and her coat darkened in places. Yet somehow she never lost that breath-taking shimmer of hers. It was, my friend Loretta insisted, Moonlight's super power and as much a part of her as the strong will and determination that had seen her through so many health crises.

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I kept getting the feeling that she was waiting for someone to arrive and take charge, just as Dawnie had waited for her. Another female Lilac Abyssinian in all probability. Cat clans tend to be matrilineal. The hostility between Moonlight and Fey had died down by this time; but Fey was a few years older and had her own health issues. That left Solstice, Tansy, and Lady. Moonlight loathed the first two and had scant use for Lady.

Zeke and I discussed this one morning when he stopped by for breakfast. Moonlight sat on the kitchen table with that listening look on her face. He agreed that none of the three Ruddy girls had what it took to run Abydom. "Well," I remarked half-jokingly half-seriously, "maybe Emrys could serve as regent until the true heir shows up."

Zeke studied Her Lilacness. "I think she likes that idea," he said quietly.

One morning not long afterwards, Moonlight hopped up on my night table to greet me. She jumped onto my chest and stared intently into my eyes: there was a kind of urgency about her, as though she was relaying something terribly important to me. That done, she stretched out on me. Emrys joined us, positioning himself right behind her. To my surprise, she didn't even hiss. Moonlight had no use for stud cats – we had a running joke about her suing her exes for unpaid kitten support – and made a point of snarling at poor Emrys on general principle.

Now, however, sensing that time was running out for her, she was tacitly acknowledging him as a sort of temporary successor. He was, her expression said, the best of a poor lot *and* her old friend Dawnie's great-grandnephew. He would have to do.

By early afternoon, my girl was acting spacey. I'd seen that spaciness in other cats who were in the final phase of kidney disease. And suddenly, I knew what she'd been trying to tell me.

There were visitors. Another friend, Barb Furbish, came by the next morning for coffee. We watched Moonlight wander about the kitchen and breezeway: she even made a valiant effort to jump up on top of the old box T.V., one of her favorite napping spots, but it was clear that she was losing ground. "She's tired," Barb said. Years before, she, too, had received an early-morning visit from a beloved Aby getting ready to transition. Shortly after Barb left, Zeke appeared, ostensibly to visit but really to say good-bye.

Moonlight and I still had the rest of the afternoon and evening to get through since the clinic didn't open till the next morning. I tried to keep busy, but my eyes kept straying over to where she sat huddled by the

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food and water bowls -- neither eating nor drinking, just biding her time. Empathy is about being able to put yourself in someone else's story: something shifted at that moment, and I knew her suffering for my own. I was ready to set that flame-bright spirit free.

That evening, Moonlight rallied a little. She sat next to me on the loveseat and polished off most of the jar of baby food that I was spoon-feeding her. It was one of the last things I could do for her and had an almost sacramental feel.

The next morning saw us at the clinic. "She's pretty," the tech on duty said, and she spoke truly. Moonlight's fire, like that of Yeats's beloved Maud Gonne, burned but more clearly at the end.

Tom and I thought that she would go quickly, there was so little left of her. But she hung on with that willful determination of hers. And that, too, was very Maud Gonne-ish.

There have only been two times in my life when I've hurt too much to cry. One was the night that my husband Tim was killed in a car crash. The other was the morning that Moonlight died.

"It's a sacred walk we make with our little ones to the edge of our physical world," Loretta messaged me later from her home in Oklahoma. "And it's a journey that's not easy." Then she added, "I have the weirdest question for you. Did she leave around 11 to 11:30 your time?"

Yes, I wrote back. Her appointment had been scheduled for 11:30, but they'd been able to take her a few minutes earlier.

Loretta's reply came back within minutes: "I got this panicked feeling that I needed to be home. I thought it was Pixel[, her elderly Abyssinian]. I knew the way I felt, I couldn't get there in time. I went outside and cried. Right about 40 minutes later, I felt calm and at peace...I was expecting to find Pixel passed when I got home." But she found Pixel still pretty much in the here and now when she got there. It had been Moonlight speaking to her...and, oddly enough, Pixel *did* follow her Lilac counterpart across the Bridge a few days later.

When a magical being leaves you, the world becomes very flat, very colorless. I threw myself into my *Moonlight & Grace* novel: the fictional Moonlight is telepathic, but she has the same knowing air, that same mixture of elegance and sass that her real-life counterpart had always displayed.

A few months later, both "Moonlight" and *Abys Among Us* won Muse Medallions at the Cat Writers' Association's Communications Contest. That May, Zeke gave me a tattoo of Moonlight for Mother's Day. Yes, her spirit had remained with me all this time; but now she was back by my side -- or, technically speaking, on my right forearm.

All these things helped, of course. But the sense of profound loss lingered.

Then, one morning, I was taking my usual walk along the brook when I happened to look up. The sun was spilling through the trees, limning the branches with a shimmering breath-taking white-gold light.

Moonlight was with me.

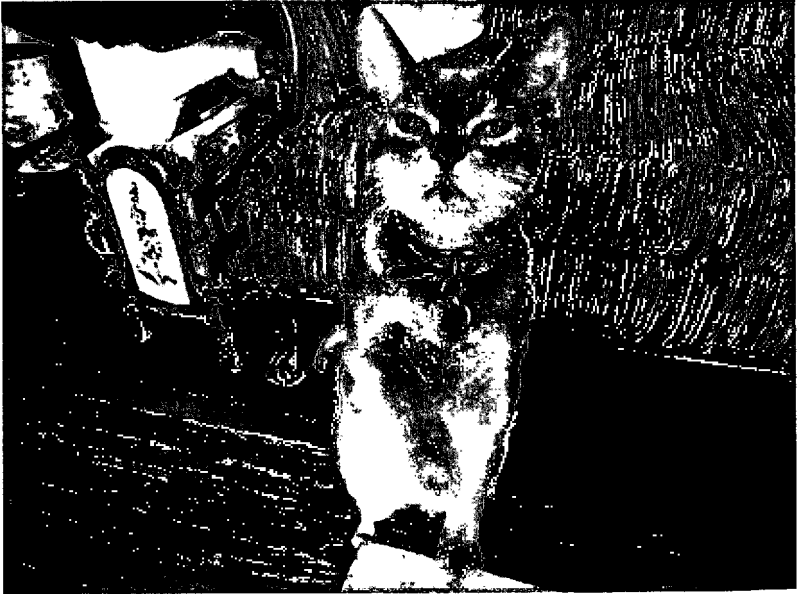
"I like to fancy souls being made of light," L. M. Montgomery's Anne says. "And some are shot all through with rosy stains and quivers...and some have a soft glitter like moonlight on the sea...and some are pale and transparent like mist at dawn." What I was looking at now felt like my Lilac girl's essence -- her soul, her spirit, her energy. Magic is as magic does, and Moonlight's still held true. The light shimmered among the leaves...danced diamond-bright on the brook's rippling water...I walked home, caught up in the beauty of it all. And my Benison went with me.

T.J. Banks is the author of *A Time for Shadows, Abys Among Us & Other Stories for the Feline-Inclined* (winner of the 2020 Cat Writer's Association Muse Medallion for Non-Fiction Books), *Catsong* (winner of the 2007 Merial Human-Animal Bond Award), *Sketch People: Stories Along the Way, Souleiado*, and *Houdini*, a novel which the late writer and activist Cleveland Amory enthusiastically branded "a winner."

Banks has written for numerous anthologies, including *Chicken Soup for the Soul: The Magic of Cats, The Widow's Handbook, Their Mysterious Ways, and At Grandmother's Table*. Her poem "Moonlight" won the 2020 Cat Writer's Association Muse Medallion for Poetry, and

both her fiction and non-fiction have received awards from *ByLine* and *The Writing Self*. She lives in Simsbury, CT.

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Photography of Moonlight courtesy of TJ Banks