

# Nine Lives

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On Saturday afternoon around four o'clock, the cat fell out the window. It did not disturb him much. He had been sleeping in a puddle of light on the windowsill, as any sensible cat would do around four, and the sun so warmed his fur that it was a few moments before he woke and realized he was falling. The window was shrinking to the size of a postage stamp; the cat wriggled his body around so he was falling feet first, out of habit. Here the skyscraper sank like a silver needle into grey cement fabric, with all the little people crawling up and down the avenue like the ants he was fond of stepping on. It was quite mesmerizing, these ants growing so swiftly into spiders, better than watching pigeons. His ears fluttered like pink-lined banners.

The cat, trailing out like a string bean, passed a window. He noted this window, curious despite the wind in his eyes, as his universe had, until this moment, been confined to a single apartment. He saw his own tabby streak shining against the other towers and the sky, and beyond it a room, with squashy comfortable furniture and lots of lace things.

The girl who has been putting on her mother's earrings behind the couch looks up for a moment and thinks she recognizes the cat as the one she has poked once or twice on the stairs.

*Kitty*, she croons, *kittykittykitty*, squeaky-voiced. She has sausage curls the color of rust, a bow, and she wears a dress that is twice as long as she is. The cat sees himself curled at her feet for a moment, his reflection imposed on the room, while she says, *Come kitty*, and tries to force him into a top hat with ear-holes.

*Kitty's going to be a gentlemen and I'm a fashionable lady*, she says. The cat squirms away; his reflection in the window falls across the carpet. *You have to wear the hat or you can't pretend to be a rich prince, kitty*. So many long golden hours in the girl's lap, chubby legs tangled in

the dress that's so much too long for her and not very nice anyway. She pets kitty and pretends that she looks like Cinderella and kitty is a blonde prince in tight trousers.

The girl and the carpet melted away into grey concrete. The cat began to feel the yawning sensation of ground in his stomach. Moments later he met another window, saw himself again flow through the room.

This time he sees a teenage girl hunched over a computer. The cat creeps up to her and he jumps up onto the desk to swat at the mouse.

*Cut it out!* she says. *Stupid.*

She is chatting with someone on the internet. *Tina*, she types, *is such a little b—. She can't act and everybody knows she only got it because she's got an ass and Hennessy is such a perv. I am never auditioning for anything Shakespeare again.*

The cat, batting a futile paw at the mouse behind so many feet of room and vanishing glass, dropped another ten feet.

A college student is quarreling with her roommate in this apartment. The cat falls into the middle of the carpet and sprawls there in the puddle of sun darkening, fading rose-colored for evening.

*He's your cat*, the student shrieks, and brandishes a bowl with a hair thin crack through the green glaze. *You feed him, dammit!*

*You have all the money!* the roommate shouts back. The cat sees her throat yawn and thinks he will fall into it. *You got into that stupid play and what have I got—nothing! They're f—ing biased, that's what. Just because you're blonde. I haven't been in anything big since high school.*

*At least you got that*, the student snarls. *And this is my first, too, and it's only some old Shakespeare rag they're dusting off—As You Like It.*

*Yeah, yeah.* The roommate turns away stiffly. *But you're the understudy for Jacques, and that's not exactly little. You get to do that "Seven Ages of Man" thing if someone dies. I'd kill you for that.*

*It's just some all-female company or something.*

*Yeah, yeah. Tell me. I'm not feeding the stupid cat.*

Window, wall. The cat glanced down for the first time in a while and saw that the ground and the spidery little people creeping along were

twice as large as they had once been. The yellow taxis crawled.  
Wall, window.

Another apartment, another young woman, sitting in the evening window in her underwear drinking a martini. All the furniture is square and Scandinavian; Italian glass flowers cluster in a fluted vase. The cat falls on her sofa. The husband comes in, with brown hair falling all over his face.

*You've really got to stop lying around drinking, he says. You've got a two-year-old, babe. Don't you think it's time we went in to read her a bedtime story or something like that?*

*I've got a monologue to memorize, she mutters, staring out at the sunset. The sun hangs like a mango about to explode with ripe juices. She stirs her martini.*

*The Shakespeare one?*

*Yes. The Shakespeare one.*

*Well, why don't you raise the kid on high culture? Recite it to her.*

*She wouldn't understand any of the words, hon. On second thought, let's have sex.*

*Oh, God. The husband rolls his eyes. We'd have to shove the cat off the sofa.*

The waxed cars, the beetles, red and shiny green and silver, mostly silver, began to shine with lights of their own as the cat fell into the evening. The yawning sensation in his belly opened up and the people grew to be the size of mice. He felt hungry, or perhaps it was just the wind.

In the next window the woman with the ten-year-old shuffles papers and hands them to her daughter.

*Here, take these and these and put them in the closet, the woman says. And get my silver stiletto heels. The silver ones. You know. And feed the cat.*

Her daughter accepts the stacks of papers and tucks them under her arm.

*Thanks, mom, she murmurs. I'll feed the cat. She pauses, takes a deep breath. I think the cat's sick, mom. He's like, barfing.*

*Not on my opening night, he isn't, says the woman. And round up your father.*

The street widened to accept the cat.

In the next room a middle-aged man makes dinner. A woman who has just gotten her nose fixed walks in and smells tuna.

*If that's tuna casserole I'll strangle you,* she informs him.

*I'll call the police before I croak,* he replies grimly.

*Just try.*

The woman stalks out. The cat sees himself fall beside the food bowl, which the man, shrugging ruefully, piles high with noodles and fish—that is left of the spurned tuna casserole. The man then begins to cook spaghetti.

*As she likes it,* he mutters.

A streetlight stretched up, so close to brushing the cat with its wedge shaped head. As the cat tumbled toward it, it winked into life, a ball of cheerless orange.

*I can still do Shakespeare even as an old lady,* a woman screams one floor down. *Because in Shakespeare's day, unlike today, women were still appreciated when their tits were saggy! I was the best female Jacques there ever was; I still have the article in the Times about my "Seven Ages of Man!"*

*Yeah, well, who would you play today?* the husband snarls, throwing a checkbook at her. The checks flutter like green broken birds. *Shylock?*

*I still feed the damn cat,* she hisses, and stalks off.

The cat greeted the streetlamp with a swipe of his paw. He moved so fast, the light fizzled and went out; passersby paused and scanned the gathering dusk in puzzlement. What a glorious fall, thought the cat. The people were bigger now than the pigeons.

On the second floor he passes a woman with a shriveled onion-face, layers peeling off it, standing in front of a mirror, reciting something to herself over and over, clutching a hairbrush. Her eyes are watery blue, staring at nothing, as she recites this one thing endlessly. The cat sees himself twisting past her, past the lovely fluted vases, the expensive furniture, to fall close to this old woman in her rich apartment with her face peeling along the seams.

*That's right*, she mutters, and looks at the cat without seeing.  
*It's suppertime.*

And here the first floor: the sidewalk lengthened, the passers-by stopped and pointed up in awe at this little sack of fur come plunging out of the night, green eyes all ablaze in the streetlamp. The cat noticed nothing, however, but the silence and stillness as he fell through the darkened room.

And there a lady sits in the rocking chair without any face at all but shreds, and she rocks and rocks in her glorious mahogany rocking chair and holds in her wrinkled fist an article from the *Times*, and her hair mats like grey wire. She grins at the empty air and the cat bones at her feet and on the corner of the paper she holds the cat can only just make out the yellowed words, *Sans eyes, sans teeth, sans taste, sans everything.*

A few hours later a couple strolled down the street, arm in arm. They both saw the cat at the same instant and felt a bit ill and certainly disturbed and sorry for the poor little thing. In an attempt to cover the awkward moment, the man snorted and scuffed his heel on the curb.

“Well, there’s one life,” the man chuckled. His fiancée smiled nervously and glanced down at the cat, then up at him. She shrugged.

“I’d say he’s just lived all nine.”