

Guernsey of Bergen Street

Life of a Brooklyn street cat

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By Ashley P. Taylor



Guernsey eating a meal in the Bergen Street lot.

On the afternoon of March 13, 2012, a black-and-white cat sits next to a metal bowl and stares through the iron fence that separates a woodchip-covered parking lot from the sidewalk of Bergen Street. Behind the lot are the backyards of brownstones. But the cat, called Guernsey, is not a pet of a Park Slope brownstonian. At least, not of any one in particular.

At 7:15 p.m. Guernsey and other cats — blond, brown-and-white, calico, black — come out onto the sidewalk, crossing the fence that seemed a barrier before. A man with a brown mustache wearing white pants and a brown bomber jacket lumbers up the sidewalk carrying a clear plastic container of cat food. He whistles a minor third. A woman carrying a bag of food and a water bottle arrives at the same time. “Double dinner again,” the man says. “I think everybody showed up again tonight,” says the woman. They lay out their food in seven piles along the fence. The woman fills the metal bowl with water. Soon there may be only six piles.

On Bergen Street, cats and humans throw their lots in together. The cats depend on their caretakers for food, water and a place to live in peace. The cats give humans something to care for. They also serve as a hub, connecting otherwise unrelated caretakers who know the cats better than they know each other.

“We call him the cat man,” says a young woman who lives opposite the lot. His name is Alan Hodges. “He has the whistle.” The woman, Sandy Kincaid, feeds the cats at night. Despite the occasional “double dinner,” Alan doesn’t know the woman’s name.

The Bergen Street cats are seven among tens of thousands of cats on the streets of New York, according to the New York City Feral Cat Initiative website. These cats are abandoned domestic animals and their progeny. Two of the Bergen Street cats were left on a nearby rooftop when their owners moved away. Street cats have a bad reputation for promiscuity, loud sex and fighting while their more diurnal neighbors, humans, try to sleep.

More than a neighborhood problem, the Bergen Street cats are beloved neighborhood pets. “They’re beautiful,” a lawyer on nearby 5th Avenue commented. “I don’t much of them, but the little I do see, they’re very happy.” These cats are more than numbers; this is Missy, Shadow, Bigfoot and Guernsey.

“Back inside now,” Al says to Guernsey when feeding time is over. “I don’t like her being too friendly with people ... who would just as soon kick ’em as look at ’em,” he explains, in his raspy, Eeyore-ish voice. Guernsey is the oldest and friendliest cat in the Bergen Street lot. No one is certain of her age, but they say she’s about 10 years old — old for a street cat.

“Guernsey needs a home,” Alan’s wife, Martha, tells me that Friday in her apartment a few doors down from the lot. She wears a black satin robe that contrasts sharply with her pale skin and red hair. Seated in a blue chair in front of a stack of pillows, Martha expounds on cats and cat people, as her three inside cats provide a kind of B-roll for her narration.

Martha worries about Guernsey. “He” (“I always thought of him as a male,” Martha says) doesn’t hear well, and an acquaintance, Simone, thinks something might be wrong with his gallbladder. Yet she doesn’t bring Guernsey indoors, “’cause he wasn’t friendly,” Martha says. “I probably wouldn’t be friendly either if I were him.”

Life in the Bergen Street lot is not easy, despite the care of people like the Hodges and the good will of the lot’s owner, Matthew Pintchik, of Pintchik’s Hardware, nearby. “Pintchik had built a little cat house” (here, she laughs). A group of boys, Martha says, coaxed a cat out of the house and beat her to death. Mr. Pintchik got there the same time Alan did, Martha says.

Well-meaning human interventions can be traumatic, too.

“One woman was spayed; she’d had kittens,” Martha says, referring to a cat from the lot. “They took her babies and put her in a foster home. Of course, she went crazy, ’cause she’d had a hysterectomy, and her babies were gone.”

If you think Martha talks about cats as if they were human, it’s because she thinks cats are just as smart. “If people don’t believe that, it’s because they’re fools.”

In Martha's world, there are fools, dog women and cat women. "You can't trust a cat woman," she says. "I'm a cat woman. You seem like a dog woman. But you've got some cat in you," she reassures me, "or you wouldn't be doing this article." Cat women are more interesting, she says.

Martha is "Mumsy" to the cats. At first, I thought Mumsy was the name of another cat. Maybe it is, or was. "God I love tigers," Martha says, remembering a Bengali tiger she had seen upstate. "I must have been one."

Martha's skinny tuxedo kitten, Sammy, plays around the entrance to the sitting room. "I see you. Come in here, you pretty thing," she calls to Sammy, letting her Alabama twang emerge. "How could anybody throw her out?"

The story soon turns from throwing out to taking in. The following Monday, I walk by the Bergen Street lot and notice an opened, untouched can of cat food with a green label near Guernsey's bowl. This is not Al's work: he puts the wet food onto white paper plates. A woman in a green and yellow batik-like shirt and curly gray-brown hair walks up to me and asks if I know about the cats. She introduces herself as Paula and says she has come from Queens to meet Guernsey. She has read, on an animal rights Meetup website, that a cat from a feral colony on Bergen Street needs a home, and she is considering offering hers. Like Martha, Paula has three cats already.

No cats are in sight, so I call Martha, who wants us to come up, quickly, to her apartment. She hurries us through her kitchen window and onto her fire escape. Below us is the lot and the four or five contiguous backyards adjacent to it. Guernsey is grazing in the yellow grass. Martha wears gardening gloves and is maneuvering an aluminum tray of food and water down over the fire escape with a rope. Her red hair blows in the breeze.

Paula and Martha discuss the idea of Guernsey's adoption. "You and I both know that cats are territorial," Martha says. How would Guernsey get along with three other cats?

The last question I hear from the fire escape is Paula wondering if that is a cow skull out in the yard. Yes, Martha says. "Let's hear it for Georgia O'Keefe." I'm inside already, standing near the door, and I notice three O'Keefe prints, two flowers, one skull, on the wall opposite the door. Next to the door hangs a portrait of a red-haired woman with a close-lipped smile. The woman is holding a black cat that seems lively, about to turn its head. "I've been burning at the stake for years," I hear Martha saying.

"The dilemma is to find out what's in the cat's best interest," says Paula, a vegan, as she eats a kale wrap in a nearby restaurant. What's best for a human isn't necessarily

best for a cat, Paula says, pointing out the dangers of anthropomorphism. “It’s like saying that you think a human homeless its whole life would be comfortable in a home at the end of its life ...” She cuts the analogy short. Paula speculates that the cat might like living in the lot. “But she’s an old lady,” Paula says, anthropomorphizing. “Maybe she wants a quiet place.”

A vet appointment is scheduled for Thursday, and if Guernsey checks out, she will go home with Paula.

Tuesday night, I interview Al as he feeds the cats. This could be one of the last evenings Al will feed Guernsey. Guernsey is missing tonight, and Al says she wasn’t there this morning either. “Well, it was cold,” Al explains. “When it’s cold, sometimes she’ll go over on the warm cellar plate over there. I don’t like her crossing the street, but not much I can do about it.” He doesn’t plan to go with Guernsey to the vet. “I keep their bellies full, that’s what I do.” Will he miss Guernsey? “Not if she has a good home. Not at all.” He will “try to help them put the grab on the cat,” he says. “It’s an iffy thing. You can’t always guarantee it.”

Thursday morning, when I walk to the lot before 7 a.m. Simone, a woman in a rainbow-striped jacket, purple sweatpants, what look like Uggs (I later learn that she doesn’t use animal products) and sunglasses is standing in the middle of the sidewalk holding her cell phone. Guernsey sits on a warm basement cover. Simone is an animal rights activist and philanthropist: she will pay Guernsey’s vet bills. If Guernsey ever gets to the vet.

“Need a towel?” Simone asks Al.

“No, you’re gonna need a towel,” he says.

Al picks Guernsey by the scruff of the neck and hands her to Simone. Simone holds her above the carrier and lets go, expecting Guernsey to drop into the trap. The cat runs away and the effort is aborted.

On Sunday morning, another woman, Alice Dietz, is standing next to a stack of four long wire cages and a bigger, square cage with no bottom and a yellow string attached: what’s called a drop trap. To use it, you prop the trap up until the cat walks underneath and goes for the bait, then pull a string to drop the cage onto the animal. She has borrowed traps from Neighborhood Cats, a New York City organization that tries to stop the proliferation of feral cats through the practice of TNR, which stands for Trap, Neuter, Return. “Feral means born outside or living outside,” Alice says, “but what I

mean is whether or not they're socialized to people." Once an organization like Neighborhood Cats spays and neuters a group of cats, they return the feral cats to the street and give them food and water from then on. For those cats that are socialized/friendly, they try to find adoptive homes. It's difficult to socialize a cat more than two months old, Alice says. Guernsey, who approaches people and withstands petting, may be an exception. Or an abandoned pet.

Alice asks me which one is Guernsey. As she baits the traps with tuna, Al walks up, smoking a cigarette.

"If you normally talk to them or coo," Alice tells him, "that would be good."

"I normally feed them," he answers.

Alice tells us to cross the street, but Al can't stand it. He goes back and starts opening his cans.

"I've been feeding the cats 18 years," he says to Alice. "If you wanna do something, you schedule it in advance. I've been doing this a long time, twice a day, every day, and I don't think they need to go to the vet."

"You just wasted my time," Alice says, and carries her cages away from the lot. A cat won't enter a cage to eat when there's food outside. The cats are eating the food Alan has put out. Al whistles, "It's okay, it's alright."

Two Sundays later, Tax Day, Alice goes to the lot at 5 a.m. and catches Guernsey in the drop trap. One of the gray cats walks underneath the trap to eat the mackerel bait first, and Guernsey joins. Then Alice lowers the trap onto Guernsey by its yellow string. "She wasn't that startled. She continued to eat," Alice tells me, in a café later that morning. Next, Alice had put the long trap up against the drop trap, forming a church-like structure, and lined up the doors of the two traps. A cat will go into the long trap just to get out of the box trap, Alice says.

The next day, Guernsey arrives at Park Slope Veterinary. The first thing we learn about 9-pound-10-ounce Guernsey is that "it's a boy." Two smiley technicians draw blood from his back left leg to test for feline immunodeficiency virus (AIDS for cats) and feline leukemia. He is negative. They treat his ear mites. They connect him to an IV and give him 200 milliliters of fluid.

"So he's a keeper?" Paula asks the doctor.

"Definitely," the vet answers. The technicians get out their orange clippers and clip his claws, not needed for a life indoors. This time, the street cat resists.

In Queens the next day, Paula reports via e-mail that Guernsey has found relative escape in the closet, where he is hiding “on the second rung of an old free-standing wooden shoe shelf and hidden behind a home model Pilates machine.” Guernsey hisses at Paula. She puts back the Pilates machine but leaves the closet door open. “It’s still shaded enough in there that he can sleep well.”

The new home fits Guernsey, the street cat, like a tight new shoe. But in the coming winter, I think that the “old man” in Guernsey will come to appreciate its warmth.

Update: September, 2012, from Scienceline.org

Guernsey, the favorite of the feral cats that lived in a lot in Park Slope, Brooklyn, lived out his last year in a home. That is to say, he died on September 13, 2012, five months after a woman from Queens adopted him. He was maybe 14 — old for a street cat.

Guernsey did not die in the cold of winter. Nor did he die a slow indoor death, refusing to eat and wasting away. Kidney failure brought him to the vet, and a lethal injection killed him quickly. He was cremated, and his caretakers will decide what to do with his ashes.

No one knows where Guernsey came from. Though not cuddly, he was the friendliest of the cats in the lot, where he and the other cats lived under the kind, blind eye of the lot's owner. Al, who lived near the lot, fed Guernsey twice daily for something like eight years. He and his wife, Martha, wanted to find an indoor home for Guernsey, because they could see that he was declining, but they didn't take him in. They did not want to bring a street cat into territory that their three indoor cats had already divided. So instead Simone, an animal activist in the neighborhood, posted an online ad saying that Guernsey needed a home. Paula answered the ad, and in mid-April, Guernsey moved to Queens.

At the end, Guernsey was just getting used to domestic life — and that's an optimistic description. He came out of his closet hiding place and stood in the corridor. But he only let Paula pet him after he got sick. Before that, they say, Al was the only person who could pet Guernsey or pick him up, though that would be easy to disprove; Guernsey had many friends on Bergen Street.

After Guernsey left the lot, a construction project commenced, and the gate was hung with black netting. Building permits appeared and a sign saying that an effort had been made to clean up the construction site, that the New York City Department of Health had issued a violation and “expect[ed] no food to be left for our cat friends and rodents to feed on.” When Guernsey died, Simone tied flowers to the gate and put up a sign to tell neighbors what had happened. Someone else added a candle.

Al still feeds the cats.