

In the Dark

I am awake now, in a darkness such as I have never experienced, and we cats are used to dark places. This darkness cannot be penetrated because I am dead and buried underground.

Yet my mind is luminous. All my knowledge, thoughts and memories are crystal clear, and I know that, in seven days, I'll have left this sunlit, moonlit world, together with all my earthly senses, and be truly dead – whatever that should mean. Don't ask me how I know or why it's seven days. I know, just as I knew how to find food as soon as I was born and where to end my life the moment Mum put down that mat in our sunroom last night. Many things can't be explained.

I am now in that transitional period the ancient Greeks called the crossing of the river Styx and the ancient Chinese called the crossing of the Naihe Bridge. Whether on the river or the bridge, this is the final journey of all sentient beings – our last chance to complete our unfinished business on earth.

I know I must sound a little pretentious. The truth is I am no ordinary cat. Of course, there really is no such

thing as an ordinary cat, but even so, I am exceptional.

I am Toby, a resident of 36 Oddly Street, a big house in Sydney, Australia. Mine is a large family. Along with three humans – Mum, Dad and brother Leo – I have shared my life with a number of furred siblings. I am a handsome and affectionate ginger cat who embodies all the very best qualities of the feline species and the best of human intelligence. My learnings came from Dad, who always found a moment to read, whether over a cup of tea or sitting on the toilet. I, on the other hand, never missed a lap to sit on. Dad's nose was always in fat books, dictionaries, encyclopedias and the like, and he liked sharing his knowledge with me. Being curious, I listened ... and learned things normal cats don't really need to know.

The cold river Styx was not my first choice – I am a



Study time with Dad

cat, after all – so it had to be the Naihe Bridge. While we are on this bridge to the netherworld, all beings – humans, cats, dogs, birds, fish, mice, skinks or whatever – retain our earthly senses for seven days. This is not just living on borrowed time, a term I heard a lot while watching tales of crime on TV with Mum. Over these seven days, all beings possess special powers enabling us to realise our final wishes, so that after passing over the bridge, we can enter the netherworld at peace ... I like the sound of that. The netherworld appears to be much more just than the world above!

What is my unfinished business, or my final wish? Those unconsumed gourmet tins in the bottom kitchen drawer? Delicious as they are, I don't fancy them now. Do I have anything to repent of? I don't think so, because I was perfect throughout my life – my family always said, "Toby can do no wrong!"

But it has suddenly dawned on me that, once I cross that bridge, my *perfect* record will be erased and forgotten. *No matter how much you love someone, when they die, they're gone, with nothing to hold on to.* That's what I heard Mum say after one of my siblings died. I've always embraced life and never feared death, so I didn't pay much attention at the time. Oh boy, I've lived my entire life free of confusion and regret, but now I'm beginning to panic at the thought of the blank future that awaits me.

I was just a kitten when I joined this big furry family fifteen birthdays ago, and I alone have had the privilege of living with a full gallery of four-legged beings, the gen-

tle, kind and wise; and the cranky, twisted and mad. All those memories of the lives that unfolded around me, the daily trivia, the memorabilia, will be lost if my memory is erased once I've crossed the bridge. How can I let it all sink into oblivion?

I was quite ready for death after the visit to Kitty, the vet Mum trusts, that Monday. Oh, she was so insensitive! Telling Mum that my days were numbered, as if I wasn't there. She thought I didn't understand English! Humans can be so ignorant. Nevertheless, she prepared me for my last journey – to count my days, measure my actions and eventually lie easily for that final moment. I didn't know then where I would end up, did I?

How can I let others know my story and the stories of my family so that our memories will live on, even if I end up in eternal blankness? What should I do?

Mum talked to me all the time. She'd tell me what had happened at work: "Toby, you'll be shocked to hear this! We just started our lunch break and out of blue ...". She'd interrupt a TV program: "Toby, isn't that detective an idiot? If I were him, I'd ...". She'd say to me at dinnertime: "Toby, try this, Mum's signature beef stew. My secret is ...". According to Dad, Mum is a "bloody good storyteller".

Now I know what I'm going to do. I have found my Bridging Mission and it's my turn to talk, like Mum: my final wish on earth is to share my stories with *you*.

Day One: Friday, 23 November

The Beginning of the End

I

The lonely wattle bird is starting her mournful song. Out of habit, I go to curl up but realise I can't. I am confined in my dark grave. That bird has been singing this same tune at this same time every day ever since my semi-stray brother Tiny killed her partner so many years ago. It's usually just before Mum's alarm goes off, and I used to curse that bird – and Tiny – that my day had to start with such grief.

Morning is my most vulnerable time, Dad always said whenever Mum shared some negative news or ordered him to get something done in the morning. But today I thank the bird for letting me know it is dawn, the start of my mission.

My mind begins to be clear as the day brightens. My dark confinement provides a perfect background to recall and to imagine everything in vivid detail. I'm ready. But how do I start?

It is early summer. The first rays of the morning sun will soon fall on the stones and soil that cover my body. I know why Mum and Dad chose this place to bury me. We cats have all loved this warm and cosy spot behind the bushes since it gets the early morning sun. Sammy used to wait here on cold mornings when he was old and frail. On cloudy days, he would wait for hours in vain. Tiny was also fond of sunlight, but after Sammy's hisses made it clear he did not like sharing his sunny morning spot, Tiny turned to indoor heating and would sit in front of the big heater in the living room even though it didn't come on until evening.

I'm registered as a Persian-cross – what I was supposed to be cross about I don't really know. According to Mum, I had all the good features of a Persian: big head, perfectly proportioned ears, large round eyes and a fluffy coat. But I didn't have their angry pushed-in face. With my beautiful thick fur coat of ginger/beige and white, I never felt the cold. Still, I appreciate this warm spot because it is popular for another reason.

I hear Chelsea squeezing through the dog door, that awful sound of her fluffy golden retriever tail getting caught in the old, splintered frame, then she comes down onto the lawn, which is spotted with yucky yellow patches. Dogs are so uncivilised! They squat wherever and whenever they like – no preparation, no covering up their filth. Disgusting! Imagine if they peed and pooped inside. Well, it's true that I made a mess inside in my last days. I felt the urge and I wanted to go out, but my legs

simply gave way. I was so ashamed and sat in my own filth for hours until Mum came home from work. I wish she had yelled at me, but no, she apologised. *Sorry I'm late and let you down*, she said quietly. I didn't like to see Mum apologise so I snarled at her. Immediately, I felt guilty, and so ungrateful!

I can just picture Chelsea enlarging the yellow patches on the lawn with a big pee, and then she'll bother the goldfish by slurping from the fishpond before going back to the sunroom. The sunroom ... that's the real reason this is the best spot for me to rest in peace. Just the thought of that room makes me homesick – I resent no longer being alive. I imagine I can see through the gap between the big bird's-nest fern and the lush green clivia clump, beyond the black bean tree, the fountain fishpond and the broad timber deck to my beloved sunroom and that bewitching painting.

The sunroom is the cat room. Its walls are covered with paintings. A large painting of a smiling woman with eight unruly cats crawling over and around her hangs on one wall, a birthday gift for Mum from Dad and Leo. On the opposite wall are portraits of Nikki, Tiny, me, and me again. Naturally, the two most prominent portraits – by a famous artist – are of me. This artist has painted two popes, a cardinal, a governor general, a prime minister and a princess. It's not for nothing that he is famous. One of my portraits was nearly spoiled by Tiny trying to push in front of me (as usual), but the artist managed to have my bright eyes catch the limelight. Finally, on the feature

wall, is *the* painting. It's called *Waiting*.

A black girl cat – at least, I think she's a girl – with white chin and neck, sits next to a cane chair. She's waiting. It was anyone's guess who or what she is waiting for. Dad was convinced the cat was waiting for her master. But Mum knew better: *Cats don't have masters. Cats are masters of the world*. Nobody knew who or what would fill that empty chair. The chair is on a timber deck like ours, but butting up against a cliff, with mysterious-looking trees and misty mountains behind them. Rainbow-coloured birds flit through the mist.

This painting was brought home when I was just entering my prime. No longer an ignorant youngster easily surprised by new things, I was experienced, knowledgeable and confident. I was practically the male leader of the house as Sammy had grown old. I was very busy then, climbing trees, stalking birds, jumping over fences and walls and fighting with neighbouring cats. I was too energetic to stay still, let alone reflect on anything. But from the first day that Dad hung the painting, whenever I passed it I would stop and look, as if I was in a trance. I would shake my head and walk away, sensing the black cat's stare following me. Each time I turned to face her, she just sat there stiffly. The older I got, the stronger my fascination with the painting became.

During my last year, I really felt that the cat was trying to tell me something, and I spent most of the day lying directly beneath the painting. (Mum noticed my "old-age obsession" and placed a woollen mat in that spot

just for me). Now, in these final days on the bridge, I am determined to find out what this mystery cat wants to tell me. My current position allows me to face her directly, although at a distance.

The sunroom is perfectly designed for cats, with a low bench covered with soft cushions against the glass wall so we could look out into the back garden. The bench suits every kind of bottom but, more importantly, a cat napping there will miss nothing going on outside. Opposite the bench, under the window to the kitchen, is a leather lounge with headrests where we could stretch out or curl against the back of the neck of the human sitting there. The human felt secure, and we were warm. The headrests also served as a springboard for jumping onto the wide sill of the kitchen window. If the window was open, we could go in and do a tour of the kitchen bench, where I sampled many delicacies over the years. The quality of this lounge is superb; I used to sharpen my claws on it daily, but the leather is so tough I really had to work at it.

There's also a distressed wood dining table which, as a gourmet cat, I claimed as mine. I participated in quite a few afternoon drinks and dinner parties at this table.

When I first walked into the sunroom, I couldn't conceal my delight. I smirked at the stunned dog – Zoe, the suspicious cats – Sammy, Xiehu and Dolly, and Mum, Dad and Leo, who looked on amazed, before I slumped down and fell fast asleep. The family always talked about that moment, wondering how a kitten could be so fearless. It was just because, as soon as I saw it, I knew I had

made the right choice. That's the magic of that sunroom!

Ah, now I know where to start my story: my almost legendary beginning!