

# THE SECRETS OF LOST CATS

*One Woman, Twenty Posters,  
and a New Understanding of Love*

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This is a work of nonfiction. However, the names of certain individuals and their identifying characteristics have been changed to protect their privacy, and dialogue has been reconstructed to the best of the author's recollection.

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The next day, while I was out searching, an earnest young man called and left a message:

“My wife and I saw an orange tabby that looked like yours, around midnight, two days ago, in the garden by the Polish church on State Street. I couldn’t get close because he was wild and snarly. I hope this helps. Good luck!”

Was it helpful? Let’s see. Over forty-eight hours ago they saw a deranged, orange cat at midnight in the garden of good and evil. Honestly, it wasn’t what I wanted to hear, and there was no return phone number. Nevertheless, I hurried over to trespass on the church grounds, afraid that my sweet kitty, who usually said hello by licking my nose, had been transformed into a feral vampire cat. While searching the churchyard, I stopped to gaze at a ten-foot-tall statue of Saint-I-Have-No-Idea and suddenly thought: *Zak is a lapsed Jew with Buddhist tendencies. He is so not here.*

On the walk home I began to wonder about other cat owners. Were they able to laugh at themselves like I was? And how did they end up finding their cats? I was thankful that, as a psychotherapist in private practice, I had a flexible work schedule, but what about cat owners who punched a clock? Instead of searching for their missing cats, they were trapped at work. Were friends and relatives helping them?

How many empathetic phone calls did they get? I had received about fifteen—strangers, each and every one of them—from people who wished me good luck, even though they didn’t have any information to pass along. Each time I hit the playback button, I decided that *this* would be the one pinpointing Zak’s location.

When I finally arrived home, the house felt empty and lonely. Tears rolled down my face. I couldn’t think about other cat owners. I had to find *my* cat.

Searching for Zak changed my life. I became acutely and permanently aware of lost-cat posters. I saw them everywhere—in

my hometown, on the streets surrounding my office in Manhattan, all across the country, even on vacation in Europe. They were on lampposts, in my local deli, at the post office, and on gas station walls. One was even tacked onto a tree outside my living room window.

I lingered in front of them, studying their composition. All of them made me feel empathic, but some posters made me smile, too. A photograph captured the image of a tiny kitten being groomed by her mother's tongue. One man drew a picture of a black cat and wrote, "We love him." I discovered twins. Two brothers both had similar dark markings around their eyes; named respectively, the Lone Ranger and Tonto.

One day, I impulsively took a poster home—it had a picture of a red Abyssinian named Lilly. Soon, there was no denying it. I was out and out collecting lost-cat posters (I'd make sure there were duplicates posted nearby, or I'd Xerox one in a nearby copy shop and put the original back where I found it). In part, I was drawn to their folk art quality, but mostly I was intrigued by the messages themselves. I wondered why some owners included extraneous information. It made sense to list the cat's color or personality traits or home address, but the cat's birthday? What were we supposed to do? Send a card?

Eventually, it occurred to me that each owner—knowingly or unknowingly—felt compelled to tell a story.

*Family heartbroken . . .*

*Owner desperate . . .*

*Cat needs medication . . .*

*Other cats miss him . . .*

Some posters looked like they came right out of the family photo album. You could see young kids in the pictures. A kitchen table. Others seemed put together in great haste. Some were accompanied by beautiful drawings; others were text only. A few read like poems.

Gradually, my desire to collect lost-cat posters came into focus.

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I wanted to find out about the cats but I also wanted to know who the cats were leaving behind. The posters became a portal into the subculture of lost-cat owners; the phone numbers the entry point and the means to pass through. I'd call and introduce myself, ask a few questions, empathize, and say, "Thank you." I'd be an armchair Nancy Drew with a specialty, I mulled over my title—"Lost-Cat Detective," or possibly "Cat-Poster Sleuth."

But when it came to making the first phone call, Nancy Drew's confidence wavered. The last thing I wanted to do was give someone false hope. What if the owner felt intruded upon? Feeling shy, I dialed the number on Lilly's poster. A young woman answered the phone. I introduced myself by saying, "I'm a cat lover who writes about lost and found cats and I hope you . . ." but she cut me off mid-sentence.

"Oh, it's such a *bizarre* story," she said, bursting with enthusiasm.

In those halcyon days at the beginning of my journey, it really was that simple. Most of the stories that I heard were hilarious—even the melancholy ones had their moments of lightness. But as my collection grew, the stories became more complex, and sometimes sadly dark. Lost-cat owners seemed to be like protagonists trapped inside a film noir. Left to rely on dead-end clues, intuition, and guts, how could they escape? Nancy Drew tugged on her fedora.

I realized that cats could vanish innocently or as a result of malice. The animal's character, personality, and temperament influenced the nature of an owner's search—the when, the where, and the how long. My curiosity exploded. Owners were under constant pressure to make the right decision. *Should they exercise caution or take a risk?* "I searched in an area where drug dealers hang out." *Stay patient or be impulsive?* "I was so happy to see my cat that I ran toward her, but she got scared and ran into the woods."

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Conversations with the cat owners and my clients seemed strikingly similar. Although I didn't introduce myself as a therapist, I was startled when owners asked me for advice. ("Do you believe in dreams?") Some of my friends wanted to know if I was doing pro bono therapy. I didn't know what to tell them. The doctor in me couldn't help but notice that talking with owners about their missing (and even found) cats was ultimately a conversation about the loss of control. ("I don't know whether to get my daughter a new kitten, or hold out for Lilly's return." "Even if your gut tells you it's not your cat, how can you *not* leave work, *not* go check out a lead?" "If I stop looking, it's like admitting he's dead." "No one cares, except me.")

The process of searching for a lost cat and the process of therapy can be likened to an odyssey. By definition, an odyssey is filled with darkness, confusion, and obstacles, where turning back is no longer an option. In order to move forward, we must summon bravery, determination, inventiveness, resilience, faith, and forgiveness. Hope matters deeply. At the end of the journey, we see the world—and ourselves—differently.

We may discover that there are many types of happy endings. One cat owner said, "I lost my cat, but gained a community," and I observed my clients addressing similar journeys in their lives—without having lost their cats. ("I lost my dad, but I met all the people he was closest to.")

For seven years, I followed where my curiosity led me. I'd unintentionally discovered—like any heroine searching for something outside of her sunlit and shadowed self—an unfinished epic of my own. At the end of my odyssey I felt changed as a human being, a cat owner, a family member, and a psychotherapist. As Rilke said, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves."

There is a question about love that grips most of us—animal lovers or not. We react to it constantly, although not always

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consciously. When we become aware of its presence we typically feel passionate, if not conflicted, about how well we're answering the question in our own lives. It's haunting us, always slumbering in our consciousness, never leaving our hearts, ever present in therapy.

*What would you do for love?*

Some of us begin by making a lost-cat poster.