

Johanna Ann Tober loves all things cat-related. One night she dreams that she has become a cat, one with orange fur, the exact color of her own hair.

Was it a dream or not?

Follow C.A.T. and her brother on their nighttime adventures as they prowl their neighborhood, prevent a tragic cat-astrophe, and see each other in a whole new light.

Johanna Hurwitz is the award-winning author of more than seventy children's books, including *Busybody Nora*, *Class Clown*, and the Riverside Kids series.



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The Unexpected Adventures
of C.A.T.



BY JOHANNA HURWITZ
ILLUSTRATED BY SAM LOMAN





For the cats on Minot Avenue. —JH

For Annabelle Jolie, my Maine Coon kitten,
who gives me lots of inspiration. —SL

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The New Cat Food

I have loved cats as long as I can remember. My favorite baby toy was a soft stuffed cat that made meow sounds when squeezed. The story goes that I learned to meow when I was hugged tight. Even before I could talk.

“Maybe she’ll be a vet when she grows up,” people would say. Once I found out what a vet was, I agreed that a cat vet was the perfect grown-up job for me.

Then one day when I was just beginning to learn how to read and write, I made an amazing discovery. I *am* a cat. My initials are C.A.T.—short for Chaya Ann Tober.



My parents explained that I was named after my father's mother, who died two months before I was born. Her name was Chaya, and I was named to honor her memory, according to our Jewish tradition. Even though I never knew her, I'm proud to have her name.

What a lucky coincidence that I am C.A.T. I could have been A.N.T. for my mother's aunt Ada Nurit or R.A.T. for my father's cousin Ruth Aviva. Both of them died before I was born. I know my parents loved them. I'm sure I don't have to tell you how I feel about rats.

Except for the coincidence of my initials spelling an actual word, I am very ordinary. When we line up by size in my fourth-grade class, I'm in the middle. When we take tests and quizzes, my grades are in the middle too. At my school we study English and Hebrew, and I'm not the worst student in either language. But I'm not the class brain either.

The only thing that makes me stand out is my hair. Everyone calls it red—I don't know why, because my hair is orange, bright orange, not red at all. I wear it in a ponytail these days, and I'm letting it grow. I'd like my hair to eventually get really long. Then I'll cut it and donate it to Locks of Love. That organization collects real hair to be made into wigs for people who have lost their hair because of diseases like cancer.

I live in New York City with my parents, my brother,

Danny, and my cat, Ollie, on the third floor of our apartment building. Danny is three years older than me, and he doesn't have red hair. He's very serious, very smart. For a long time we were best friends. He taught me all the board games, and we always laughed a lot. Lately, however, he's studying for his bar mitzvah, and he doesn't seem to have as much time for me. Mom promises it's just a phase.

"One of these days you and Danny will be best friends again," she says. I hope I live long enough to see that.

Anyhow, this is my story, and this is how it all began.



One Tuesday in early April, Mom stopped at the grocery store on her way home from work. I was helping her unload the groceries when I spotted the cans of cat food. There were three of them with bright-red labels that said "Cat's Dream Meal."

"Why did you buy these?" I asked, holding up one of the cans. "You know how fussy Ollie is. He only wants to eat hard food."





We picked Ollie at the animal shelter two years ago when he was a kitten. We had never had a pet before. One time my bubbe was visiting us for a few days while she recovered from an eye operation called cataract surgery. She woke in the middle of the night to get a glass of water. Suddenly a mouse ran across the kitchen floor, and Bubbe let out a scream of surprise.

Mom ran into the kitchen and promised to buy a mouse trap the next day.


“Not a trap,” said Bubbe. “You need a cat.”

So even though my parents hadn’t planned on it, they didn’t want to discourage Bubbe from visiting again. And that’s how Ollie joined our family. We never saw the little mouse again. It’s funny that an eye operation with “cat” in its name was somehow responsible for us getting a cat.

Ollie is pure black, with shining green eyes, and he fit into the palm of my hand. But before we knew it, he blew up like a balloon. It happened so quickly I didn’t even notice it. Now he’s full size, and I need two arms to hold him. But he’s still the most handsome, graceful, and glossy black cat ever.

He’s also a picky eater. He used to gobble up Meow Meow Meal, but then one day the cans looked different. Apparently the food tasted different too. Rebranding, Mom said. He’s refused to eat canned wet food ever since.

“The vet said we should get Ollie to eat wet food again



because it has extra moisture, and you know Ollie doesn't drink much water," she pointed out. "I saw this new brand on sale and thought we should try it."


I didn't think that Ollie would change his eating habits from one day to the next. In a way, Ollie is like Danny. Mom and Dad and I are willing to try anything once. Not Danny. He's very fussy about what he eats and has been ever since he was little. Back then, my parents would take a forkful of each new food and make a big show for him as they tasted it, hoping to encourage him. Even now as my parents keep trying new recipes, we often end up with his leftovers. We don't want to waste food.

I put away the Cat's Dream Meal until later. Ollie is my responsibility, and I love taking care of him. I finally have a real cat instead of a stuffed toy.

Danny, on the other hand, is indifferent about Ollie. "All cats do is eat, walk, and sleep," he says. "They have no personality." I think Danny's the boring one.

Ollie usually cuddles up on my lap when I'm reading. I pet him and lean my head low to feel the vibrations of his purrs against my cheek. Purring means he's content, and it makes me feel happy too. I wonder what he's thinking. I suppose if we had a baby in our family, I'd wonder about their thoughts too. Then again, a baby wouldn't purr.

I like to watch Ollie when he sleeps, which seems to be always. (Danny's kind of right about that.) His paws twitch



sometimes, and I wonder if he's dreaming. Does Ollie dream about me? Does he wish he could run outside, or does he really like living with us in our apartment? What does he do all day when he's home alone? My biggest question: Does Ollie have a secret life?

I wonder about this because sometimes Ollie disappears. Our apartment has six rooms and not many places to hide. When I can't find him, I get down on my hands and knees to check under each bed. I look beneath the sofa and under the table where the tablecloth hangs so low that I can't easily see what's underneath. I open every closet and search through the shoes and boots on the floor. Once I discovered my missing slipper. I also found a few pennies and a quarter. But no sign of Ollie.

That Tuesday afternoon, while I unpacked the groceries and put away the new cat food, I hummed a melody I heard at school. I had been surprised to learn that there was a famous composer named Prokofiev who used a clarinet to represent a cat named Ivan in his music *Peter and the Wolf*. My music teacher had asked me a few weeks ago to play Ivan's part for our school recital. I really like the sound of clarinet music, and it's fun to think that I'll be playing a cat. I'm nervous already though. I don't like performing in front of anybody. I worry that I'll make a mistake. And then I do. My teacher says I should relax, but that's impossible. That's the way I am.

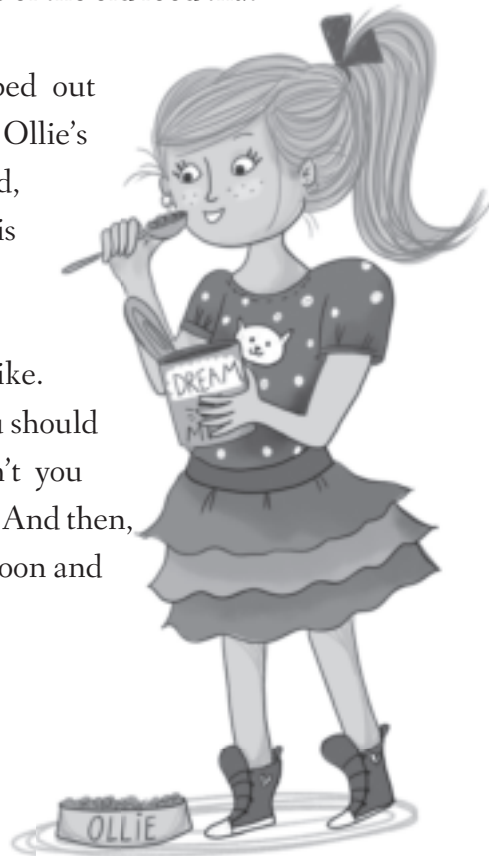
Luckily the music recital was still a long way off, so I told

myself I didn't need to worry so much now. I practiced for only about fifteen minutes. I still had math homework, and I needed to read a chapter in my library book for a report due next Monday.

After my dinner, it was time to give Ollie his. I opened the cabinet and grabbed one of the new cans. I pulled back the top, and the smell reminded me of the old food that Ollie had rejected.

I took a spoon and scooped out some Cat's Dream Meal into Ollie's dish. He came over and sniffed, then walked away, licking his nose. I've seen him do that before, whenever he tastes or smells something he doesn't like.

"Oh, Ollie," I scolded. "You should learn to try new things. Aren't you hungry? C'mon, give it a taste." And then, to encourage him, I took the spoon and





scooped up a nibble's worth from the open can and put it in my mouth.

I froze for a moment. *Did I really just do that?* Also, I surprised myself by not gagging. If the school cafeteria prepared sandwiches made of that stuff for lunch and I didn't know what it was, I wouldn't think it was too bad. Of course, it would taste even better if it were mashed up with a bit of mayonnaise combined with mustard, the way Mom fixes tuna salad. It could use a little chopped celery too. That would give it a bit of crunch.

I looked at the can again to study the ingredients: assorted freshwater fish scraps, fish broth. Vegetable oil, guar gum, vitamin E supplement, sodium nitrate, vitamin A acetate, zinc, sulfate . . . *What was all that stuff?* I wondered.

"Ewww, I saw what you did. That's absolutely gross. How could you do that?"


It was Danny.

I turned to face him. I was sorry that he had seen what I did. "What's wrong with tasting Ollie's food? It won't kill me."

"I thought you were a little weird, and now I know for sure," Danny said, turning away.

"Mom!" he shouted. "Do you know what your daughter just did?"

I shrugged and poured some dry food on top of the mush in Ollie's dish. Maybe that would trick Ollie into eating. I covered the rest of the uneaten canned food with some foil



and put it in the refrigerator. I supposed we would have to give away the two other cans to one of our cat-owning neighbors, just like we've done before.

Mom walked into the kitchen. "Oh, Chaya," she said. "Tell me that Danny was joking. You didn't eat cat food, did you? Didn't I feed you enough dinner? If you're still hungry, eat an apple." She pointed to a bowl of fruit on the kitchen counter.

I wasn't hungry. I was annoyed. My brother was really becoming a pain. I think he lost his sense of humor.

I went to bed at nine o'clock, as usual. And I fell asleep quickly, as usual. But at midnight I woke up. I know the exact time because I have a glow-in-the-dark clock radio. It's like having a night light, since if I wake up in the dark, there's a small bright light that shines out the time. I've hardly ever needed it.

"People with a clean conscience sleep well," Dad always says. We all sleep well in our family. But that night it wasn't my conscience that woke me. I was just too uncomfortable. I turned over and pushed off my blanket. I was hot. And my skin was tingling.

I lay in bed and looked around. I could see everything. It was as if the overhead light was on, but it wasn't. It wasn't the light from the clock either.


My left arm itched. I moved my right arm to scratch it. *Ouch*. I didn't realize my nails had grown so long. I'd have to

remember to clip them in the morning.

Then I looked down at my arms and gasped. I didn't have fingers to wiggle. I had paws instead of hands! And my arms were short and covered with orange hair, the same color as the hair on my head. I inspected the rest of my body. From top to bottom I was covered with the same soft, orange hair. It reminded me of fur.

I sat up in bed. My nightgown lay next to me. It had somehow fallen off. Weird.





Then I heard a dull thumping sound nearby. I looked around and noticed an orange tail twitching against my mattress. I twisted around to get a better look. It was attached to my back! I moved my tail from side to side. I could just do it without thinking. It was like moving one of my arms. It didn't take any concentration. I stared at it, frightened and fascinated at the same time.

The bed suddenly looked huge. I seemed to have shrunk to cat size. In fact, I seemed to *have become* a cat. Somehow the Chaya Ann Tober I'd always been had disappeared. I was C.A.T., for real. Except there was no way it could be real. It was just the strangest, most amazing dream I'd ever had.

I remembered a discussion with some other fourth graders at lunch last week. Someone said they always dreamed in black and white. Others insisted they dreamed in color. I couldn't remember, but now, looking down at my body covered in orange hair, I knew the answer: I was dreaming in color.

I thought of going to look for Ollie. Would he know it was me? My skin was tingling again. I began to lick my hair-fur. That felt better.

I lay in bed for a long time, watching my tail. Then my ears twitched. I wasn't afraid. I knew I'd wake up in the morning. *It's too bad*, I thought, *that in the morning I probably would not remember any of this.*