

# Cat People Are People, Too

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[Townies](#) is a series about life in New York, and occasionally other cities.

I only have the one and she's a rescue so it's O.K.

So goes the party line regarding my cat. Five years ago, her pregnant mother was abandoned and locked in a warehouse in North Carolina where she gave birth to a small litter of kittens. For days, the kittens survived without food or water before being discovered by a friend who knew exactly where the pictures should be sent. By the next week, I had a gray tabby with snowcapped paws peering at me from the laundry basket in the closet.

I named her Mabel after a store that once existed on Madison Avenue. The store — itself named for the owner's cat — dealt exclusively in overpriced feline-themed merchandise. And it did so with no sense of irony whatsoever. There were cat-head mugs and wide-brimmed hats with knit Persians curled on their brims and museum-sized oil paintings of cats lounging in the branches of an oak tree. I know, I can't believe it went out of business either. It was a retail Mecca for crazy cat people. I'm fighting the urge to call it a "Meowca" although, frankly, the store's owner probably would have wanted me to.

There is no such thing as a crazy dog person in New York. Are there people who are completely insane about their dogs? Hordes. But cat people may as well have whiskers and tails themselves. That's because their pets' lack of social need taps straight into our worst fears as the human inhabitants of New York. Cats, after all, don't have other cat friends. You can't take them to the cat run. Cats and their owners are on a private, exclusive loop of affection. Thus cats have become symbolic of a community eschewed and a hyper-engagement with oneself. They represent the profound danger of growing so independent in New York that it's not merely that you don't need anyone — it's that you don't know how to need anyone.

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How did this happen? For as long as I can remember, New York has been set on total canine default with feline being the deviant strain. In other words, if nothing goes wrong and you are, by all accounts, normal, you'd be interested in petting any mutt that crosses your path. Like we do, dogs live their lives on display; they are flashy creatures, status symbols. Their breeds are well-publicized and subject to trend, their owners bear a resemblance to them and vice versa. It's why cat people compliment their cat's personality when they say it's doglike but a dog owner would never flatter their dog by calling him catlike.

The upside to cat ownership is proximity to a sense of dignity, intelligence and lack of garish behavior. The downside is that a cat is something hidden, a secret that needs confessing as the doorknob turns. *By the way, I've been to the doctor and it turns out ... I have a cat.*



Kelsey Dake

Even now, I am a bit hesitant to extol Mabel's many virtues. And they are many. To wake up with her belly-up and demanding affection is to have your heart explode with the kind of joy that compels some people into a life of large-scale oil painting. Alas, I am loath to cheapen her existence and dignify the city's anti-cat stance by creating a dog-like defense for her. What made the store on Madison Avenue so great is how entirely and unapologetically it gave into the notion of cat craziness. For a city that allows for all kinds of passions and interests, we have so remarkably few hot spots of feline tribute.

All one needs for confirmation is to wander into the Union Square Petco. A pet store is a celebration of dogs' existence and an explosion of options. About cats, a pet store seems to say, "Here, we couldn't think of anything else." Cats are the Hanukkah of the animal world in this way. They are fêted quietly and happily by a minority, but there's only so much hoopla applicable to them. If you throw a toy mouse and a scratching post in the ring with the splash and sparkle of designer dog collars and organic doggie bakeries — the kitty stuff will lose.

"Don't talk about your cat," a friend of mine said when I told him I was writing this, "People will think you're crazy."

"I know" — I couldn't argue — "but why? It's just a cat, not a sticker collection."

"Because you're too young to write about your cat."

Or, really, not young enough. As much as cats are unfairly associated with curmudgeonly shut-ins, there *is* something simultaneously sticker-collection-y about them. New York's acceptance of cat ownership is relegated to the bookends of life (I think Mabel's sold those, in the shape of Persians). As a culture we never outgrow the joys of puppies. There is no break in our obsession. If a grown man walks down the West Side Highway with an adorable puppy, it can only mean good things for him. But when it comes to kittens, we're supposed to have cut the cord by age 10 and reattached it around age 100.

As a woman especially, it takes a little self-bolstering to own a cat and be content with publicly adoring it. Did you ever hear the one about the spinster found dead in her pink bathrobe, surrounded by golden retriever puppies? Me neither. I once saw a candid shot of the model Daria Werbowy holding her collection of Siamese and Abyssinian babies and thought: do you have any idea how attractive and cool you have to be to live in Manhattan and own that many cats?

This should all work in reverse. The feline is an ideal lifestyle match for the urban dweller. Cats are compact and quiet. You can leave them be for a night or two and they have a natural skill set which prevents them from urinating on the floor. As if all this weren't enough, their mere presence deters rodents. Yet we opt to praise dog-owners, giving credence to the unnatural existence of a dog in a yardless landscape via leash laws and doggie daycare. Who amongst us hasn't seen a Great Dane trotting across Broadway and said: *Where on Earth is that thing going home to?* Like many of New York's mass suburbanization efforts, such creatures are better in theory than in practice. See also: [swimming pools in dumpsters](#).

What cats lack in retail homage, they do make up for in embroidered quotations and cheesy poetry. In her more flowery days, Drew Barrymore reflected that "if I die before my cat, I want a little of my ashes put in his food so I can live inside him." First of all, this is why the words "crazy" and "cat" are bound tighter than a spool of yarn. Second, unless you're only feeding your cat wet food, it's totally impractical. Finally, dear Drew, what goes in must come out. And there you'd be, stinking up some crazy cat lady's apartment, waiting to be scooped up and flushed away.



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