

Short story by Anthea Fraser Gupta. All characters are fictional.

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Cats' tails

Anthea Fraser Gupta

A group of animal activists today announced the founding in London of CattAck, a society dedicated to the advocacy of cats. Led by "Bastet", who declined to reveal her original name, the group will use non-violent action to advocate the rights of domestic cats everywhere. The name 'CattAck' is intended to call to mind both "Cat Attack" and "Cat Action". Your computer will suggest "catcall" as an alternative spelling.

(The Guardian, April 7 1994)

"Bastet"

The fund-raiser who started to care

Bastet was the Egyptian cat goddess. But this Bastet is no goddess. Instead she is a very real, enthusiastic livewire. With her lithe body, green eyes and flaming red hair, you can almost believe she really is a cat.

When CattAck was founded it was greeted by amused (and minimal) interest in the press. In the year since, it has come to be regarded with more respect.

CattAck has to date 'liberated' a claimed 2,562 domestic cats (precisely) from "servitude, bondage and torture." Laboratories using cats in their research and product testing have found themselves besieged by Bastet and her followers.

Advertisements using cats 'inappropriately' have been erased. Sites of 'cat atrocities' have been marked by vigils and plaques.

The city of York was given special treatment last month when participants in the annual commemoration of the massacre of the Jews there in 1190 were joined by a CattAck group remonstrating against the citizens of 'the evil city' who had hanged five black cats in front of Clifford's Tower in 1495.

CattAck claimed that they were not diminishing the massacres of Jews in Europe by making parallels with the massacres of cats. On the contrary, cats in their 'total innocence' could be seen as symbols of all the persecutions of outsiders.

When Bastet founded CattAck she knew that there were thousands of cat lovers in Britain -- most of them women. But surely even this cat lover supreme could not have guessed at the emotions that her society would release from such wide sections of the community.

Bastet has been adopted by Lesbians, by the New Age

movement, and by Pagans, as their own. But who is she?

She was born plain Susan Humphreys in 1965, in that most unromantic of towns -- Gateshead -- for most people little more than an entrance to Newcastle upon Tyne. Her accent still bears something of the Geordie lilt.

Her father was a skilled tradesman, a cabinet maker in a shipyard, and her mother was a fashion buyer for a department store. She has one sister, who is a schoolteacher in Newcastle. Bastet's activism is said to embarrass her family.

Susan did well at school, and in 1983 went to the University of Leeds to study English Literature, graduating in 1986 with a lower second class honours degree.

But Bastet herself says that the most important thing she learnt at school was that she was a born organiser.

Her school was active in raising funds for the Spastic Children's Association, with which the headmaster was actively concerned. Classes competed against each other to see which could raise the most money.

Susan Humphreys was always the class organiser, and her class won the competition every year.

At university she continued to be active in fund-raising. She was largely responsible for unusually large sums raised in the university's annual charity drive. Journalist Andrew Wittredge, then the President of the Students' Union, remembers that "She was a tornado. She galvanised the whole university. I had never imagined that there were so many ways of raising money."

It did not seem to matter where the money went. Susan had little interest at this stage in participating actively

in charitable work or in activism.

The then president of the Lesbian and Gay Soc at Leeds, Roz O'Hara, says that Susan gave away the money she raised "in a dispassionate way -- I had the feeling she didn't care whether it went to the Social Service Unit or to the Real Ale Society. It was all the same to her."

She says that Susan was "definitely not a lesbian, whatever people say she is now." She adds, "It's my opinion she's not a lesbian now, for what it's worth."

Nor did she seem to have any interest at this stage in matters spiritual. "My view is that after she left university she came to be in touch with the oneness of all creation," said Zelda Wicca, who (as Sandra Ward) was taking a Masters in Women's Studies during Susan's undergraduate years. "At that time, she didn't stop long enough to hear her own pulse or sense her own needs."

At this stage in her life, Susan continued to eat meat and wear leather shoes.

It is not surprising that Susan Humphreys should have sought a career in the charitable sector.

Her reputation as a fund-raiser had gone before her and she found no trouble in getting a position with Oxfam. Those who worked with her there remember, as does everybody, her enormous energy and her capacity for "magicking up money."

Susan left Oxfam after only 18 months and took up a similar post with a new animal activist group, AnimAid.

It would seem that she felt her unique skills would be best exercised in the setting up of a new organisation. Her continued respect for at least some aspects of AnimAid is shown in her repetition of the

peculiarity of punctuation in the name she gave her own organisation later.

The founder of AnimAid was the Honourable David Sutton-Green, who was to be killed in 1991 in the course of preparing for an AnimAid action involving Molotov Cocktails.

In Sutton-Green she met someone as energetic and manipulative as she is herself. He taught her that raising money was not enough -- how it was spent also mattered. Her relationship with him appears to have been platonic.

As long as AnimAid was involved in non-violent action in defence of animals, Susan enjoyed the action as much as she enjoyed fund-raising.

In a Channel Four interview at this time she said, "I have come to realise that animals are the most underprivileged of the world. If we help animals first, we are beginning

with the real underclass."

But when Sutton-Green introduced actions that threatened, first property, and then human lives, Susan wanted out.

She left AnimAid a month before Sutton-Green's fatal accident. Quite what she did before she reappeared three years later as Bastet is not clear.

It is certain that she spent some time in America, where, she says, she "saw cats having their claws ripped out. Cats who had become fashionable accessories subordinated to the decor" and realised that cats were to be her future.

She also studied the history of cats and learnt that "they were our creations, our responsibility, created for our use. And yet we humans, especially in Europe, had persecuted

them, seeing them as the devil for their beauty and mystery, while continuing to value them for their skills in protecting our grain stocks."

She took on the name Bastet as a sign of her determination to return the world to the respect that the Ancient Egyptians had for cats. And came back to protect the cats of her home country, and to remind us of our historic guilt.

Where can this dynamo go from here? Bastet hopes to extend her protective arm to the cats of Singapore, if the Singapore government allows her to enter. "Singapore," she claims, "is notorious for its ill treatment of cats. It is the York of the twentieth century."

Singapore does not know what is about to hit it.

Bastet can visit Singapore

We read with interest your profile of 'Bastet' (Profile, last week)

We would like to reassure Bastet that the people of Singapore do not ill-treat their cats. Acts of cruelty against cats, and other animals, are punishable offences.

As well as being protected by law, the interests of cats are looked after by an active Cat Society, and by the Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Animals.

We would be delighted to welcome Miss Humphreys to Singapore, and hope she will enjoy her stay. She will see for herself that cats are well treated in the Lion City.

Deborah Fernandez

Press Secretary,
High Commission of Singapore,
London.

(The Observer, 23 April 1995)

CattAck Newsletter.

May 1995

Singapore, 17 May. I arrived in Singapore on May 14. The full moon shone huge and creamy over this infamous city state. The airport is as vast and sterile as I had imagined it would be, with wide open spaces and marbled pillars. It oozes money at every pore, but at the same time reflects the poverty of the inner life. How like York, that other evil city, where the beauty of the buildings disguises the corruption and squalor of its murderous past.

My hotel is a modest one (paid for by you, cat lovers!) in an old area of the city. As I got out of my taxi I immediately noticed a group of Singapore's deprived 'drain cats', the tiny cats that hide from humans in the drains. This family (pregnant black and white sister, ginger sister, and tortie sister) had emerged from the drain and was moving cautiously among the parked cars at the side of the road. And I saw that what I had heard was true -- these feral cats, whose every cringing move revealed that they had had no contact with humans -- had nevertheless been mutilated by humans. In the USA cats claws are ripped out -- in Singapore their tails are cut off. Not one of these three poor sisters had a full tail left. Their tails had obviously been hacked at inexpertly -- at least in the USA the mutilation is carried out by vets. The pregnant sister's tail was a crooked eight centimetre stump, the ginger sister had even less, and the tortie sister must have run away half way through the operation as her tail seemed of normal length but was folded double.

When I saw these poor sisters I wept. The taxi driver, in broken English, asked me why I was crying. "Look at the poor cats," I answered. After I understood his reply, I realised he was suggesting that the cats were well off, as they lived in an area with many restaurants and many rats. He laughed callously. I paid him (certainly after that laugh I did not give him a tip), and he drove off.

Next day I walked around the streets near my hotel looking for cats. There were many cats in the area, all skulking in drains and around cars. They were pitifully thin, and could not be approached by humans. They had learnt, no doubt, that humans were the enemy. A few had their tails intact, but most had been accosted by the knife, and bore mangled and convoluted stumps. I watched a man giving a group of cats rice and fish from a brown paper packet. The cats flocked to him -- obviously he fed them regularly -- and their pitiful stumps waved in the air to the best of their curtailed ability. But the kindness of this man is not typical of the attitude of Singaporeans to cats.

I found a mother cat sheltering her babies precariously in an electricity substation. As I crouched next to the fence looking at this doughty mother, a Chinese woman of about my own age asked me what I was looking at. "The cat family," I told her. "Yes," said the woman, "I see them every day on my way to work. That cat has raised three litters in there." "Poor creature," I said, "how badly we humans have treated her!" "In what way?" asked the woman, "I don't suppose she has ever been in contact with any humans." "Her tail has been cut off," I pointed out Then a

shocking thing happened. This woman, who had seemed almost one of us, who had watched that mother raise her three litters, -- this woman laughed just as the taxi driver had laughed. "No," she said, "they're born like that. It's a genetic defect."

I wondered if this was indeed a possibility. That these drain cats could somehow be related to Manx cats and Japanese bobtails. If this is true, then the ill-treatment of cats in Singapore is somewhat reduced. I decided to discover the truth of the tails, and went to the central part of Singapore, Raffles Square, which was thronged with office workers eating their lunch.

I asked everyone I met why cats' tails are short, and received many different answers. Most people agreed that tails were cut off. I should explain that the main races in Singapore are the Chinese, the Malays (who are Muslims) and the Indians. There are also many foreigners living in Singapore.

The foreigners I asked (British, French, American and Dutch) were divided. Most told me that the Chinese cut off cats' tails. "It's appalling," said an American woman, "Originally, they cut them off so that they wouldn't chase chickens. But even now, when there are no chickens left in Singapore, they still chop them off." A few of the foreigners believed that the cats were born with deformed tails. Some of them kept cats themselves, and preferred cats with undocked tails. "They look so ugly with the short tails," said a Dutch woman, "and it makes me feel very upset to think how much it must have hurt when it was cut off."

The Chinese Singaporeans were also divided. Again, most agreed that the cats' tails were cut off, with only a few claiming that the cats were born with mutilated tails. "Malays cut them off," several people told me, "so that the cats won't chase chickens. Malays always like to keep cats." When I told them that I had been told that the Chinese cut them off, they admitted that some Chinese might do so "if they are old-fashioned." No-one admitted to having cut off a cat's tail in person. Very few kept a cat. I was told it is not allowed in government flats, but I suspect that this is an excuse to cover an aversion for cats. One office worker said she though Persians were "very cute, and they always have long tails."

It is not easy to distinguish Malays from Chinese, as they are virtually indistinguishable in appearance. People were willing to tell me whether they were Malay or Chinese, however. The Malays all denied that cats' tails were cut off, and were insistent that cats were born with misshapen tails. Many of the Malays kept cats (some of them added sheepishly that this was in violation of the rules for government housing), and indicate that cats must be well treated by good Muslims. They said they did not object to long tails, but generally preferred to keep cats with short tails, as they made better pets and *did not chase chickens*. The preference for short tails is surely significant. When I told one Malay man that some of the Chinese had told me that Malays cut off cats' tails he said, "That sounds to me like a circumcision myth."

I was able to get little sense out of those Indians I approached. One Indian said "A cat's tail after all is nothing but a tail." Another told me a long story about how a Thai princess had a secret lover. She slipped the ring he gave her onto her cat's

tail for safe-keeping. As a reward for the help, *cats' tails have been crooked ever since*. This is an attractive story, and one we can certainly use, with some adaptation (it would make a particularly saleable picturebook which could raise much-needed funds). However, I do not understand whether it was told to support the cutting off of tails, or to explain a putative deformity.

I think this evidence will show you that Singaporeans do indeed cut off cats' tails, although they are not willing to admit it, in the belief that it will prevent them from chasing chickens. Few Chinese Singaporeans keep cats, but those who do seem to prefer short tailed cats, a clear sign that they do indeed cut off tails in order to give cats the desired appearance.

This unnecessary mutilation must stop!!!

A cat's tail is a vital part of a cat's social life. Only from the movements of the tail can a cat signal subtle intentions to sisters and brothers. Without a tail, a cat is without a smile, without a gentle warning, without a friendly hello.

ACTION

What action should we at CattAck take against this new assault on cat rights? As always, our first action will be a CattAck in the press, both here and in Singapore. CattAckers, you know your duty in the media blitz.....

Cruelty to cats

ON THIS, my first visit to Singapore, I was horrified to learn that Singaporeans commonly amputate cats' tails, in the belief that cats will be tamer if they have short tails.

I implore the Singapore government to put a stop to this appalling practice.

SUSAN HUMPHREYS

(Founder, CattAck, UK)

Singapore 0208

(The Straits Times, May 22, 1995)

Cats born with short tails

THE SPCA would like to reassure Ms Susan Humphreys (ST, May 22) that the short tailed cats she has seen in Singapore are born with short tails. This is due to a genetic peculiarity which is widespread over South-east Asia.

Issues of animal welfare in Singapore are much the same as issues of animal welfare in Britain. Of course, there are some people in Singapore who are cruel to animals. The short tailed cats are not, however, the result of human cruelty.

ELIZABETH MARSH-YEO

(President, SPCA)

(The Straits Times, May 23 1995)

Singapore Cats

WE THANK Ms Susan Humphreys (ST, May 22) for her concern for animal rights in Singapore. We have looked into the question of cats' tails being cut off by Singaporeans, and find that there is no necessity for any concern.

The cats of Singapore are mostly strays which can be a nuisance and present a problem of hygiene in those areas where they are prevalent. The Primary Production Department is engaged in a policy (in conjunction with the SPCA) of keeping cat numbers under control, by means of a humane programme of sterilisation of breeding cats.

However, to the best of our knowledge, the practice of amputating cats' tails is not widespread.

LIM KWEE HOCK

Public Relations Officer

Primary Production Department

(The Straits Times, 26 May 1995)

Cats' tails -- Bastet to protest latest Singapore horror

Manushi Sen
Singapore

SINGAPORE IS better known for the severity of its legal system than for its cruelty to cats, but "Bastet", the founder and president of CattAck wants this to change.

Singapore, she says, is the country where kittens' tails are cruelly amputated.

Few kittens in Singapore escape having their tails cut off, without anaesthetic, by Singaporeans who believe that short tailed cats will not chase chickens.

Bastet dismisses comments from Singapore government agencies and from the SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) which deny the accusation.

"They would have us believe that the cats are born with short tails," she says, "but their protestations do not convince me."

She points out that the SPCA is supported by government funds in Singapore "and would not wish to give offence."

Singapore's Primary Production Department -- the organisation responsible for control and supervision of animals -- responded to her pleas for this practice to cease with an "evasive" letter.

The PPD's response, she says, "diverted the real issue into one of hygiene. This obfuscation is typical of Singapore government agencies."

A representative of the PPD reiterated that cats' tails are not commonly amputated in Singapore.

Elizabeth Marsh-Yeo, the British woman married to a Singaporean who heads the SPCA in Singapore, said that the docking of cats' tails was not an issue in Singapore "because it simply doesn't happen. The cats have a well-known genetic peculiarity. I can show you kittens being born at the SPCA with these short crooked tails, any day of the week."

I spoke to one of Singapore's best known vets, the dynamic Annie Lim. "I have never been asked to dock a cat's tail," she claimed. "This is an urban myth, and an injustice to the people of Singapore. In my practice I see dozens of pampered cats every week. This is not a country of rampant cruelty to cats."

Bastet promises further action to give publicity to this, the latest cruel and unusual punishment to come out of Singapore.

(The Observer, 28 May 1995)

British woman who demonstrated outside parliament expelled

by William Lim

A BRITISH woman protester yesterday chained herself to the railings of parliament to protest against ill-treatment of cats in Singapore.

Her chains were cut by police, and she was later escorted to the airport for immediate repatriation to Britain.

The woman, Susan Humphreys, 30, prefers to be known as "Bastet".

She is a well-known animal rights activist, and is the founder of CattAck, a society for the defence of cat rights.

Miss Humphreys recently wrote a letter to the Straits Times protesting against the

docking of cats' tails (ST, May 22).

Mrs Elizabeth Marsh-Yeo, the spokesman of the SPCA told The Straits Times that it is a myth that cats' tails are docked in Singapore.

"The cats in Singapore carry a gene which means that they often have short or crooked tails," she said.

Miss Humphreys was formerly involved with the animal rights group, AnimAid, which was responsible for violent attacks on butchers' shops and shoe shops in Britain.

Miss Humphreys attached herself to the railings at 12 noon

yesterday, with several thick chains and large padlocks.

To the amusement of the lunchtime crowd, she shouted slogans against the docking of cats' tails, while police locksmiths removed the padlocks and cut through the chains.

Miss Humphreys was released at 3 pm. She was escorted to her hotel and subsequently was taken by police to the airport.

It is believed that she left for London later on a British Airways flight.

A police spokesman said that no charges would be pressed against Miss Humphreys.

(The Straits Times, May 30 1995)

Animal Rights

British Protester Whipped out of Singapore

By SAMUEL WHITE

Special to the Baltimore Times

LONDON, June 2 -- The latest overreaction from Singapore is the expulsion of red-haired British animal rights protester Susan Humphreys, 30.

Miss Humphreys, who prefers to be called "Bastet" (from the name of the Egyptian cat goddess), is founder and president of CattAck, a UK-based society for the promotion of cat rights. CattAck is also active in the US, where it campaigns against declawing cats -- an operation which is illegal in Europe.

Bastet was in Singapore to investigate the ill-treatment of cats there, and was horrified to learn of the widespread practice of docking cats' tails without anesthetic. Singapore is notorious for its ill treatment of cats.

Bastet was packed off from Singapore after she engaged in

a peaceful protest outside Singapore's parliament.

Angry crowds pelted her with rotten tomatoes as police dragged her from her protest site. Singapore's parliament is located on the busy Orchard Street, Singapore's major shopping area, and she chose the lunch hour for her protest.

Later she was driven in a heavily defended convoy to Singapore's showpiece Changi Airport, where she was bundled onto the first flight to London.

Bastet is no stranger to controversy. Last year members of CattAck's Baltimore branch picketed veterinarians' offices in Baltimore and Washington DC in an effort to prevent operations to declaw cats, a procedure Bastet describes as "barbaric".

In Bastet's home country, Jewish groups were outraged when CattAck compared the killing of black cats in medieval

Europe to the Jewish Holocaust.

Oakleaf Waterwoman, of CattAck US, told the Baltimore Times that Bastet had arrived in London, "tired, battered, and shocked to the core." She added that CattAck would not rest until cats were left in peace, "unmutilated in their beautiful wholeness, with ten sharp claws and one long tail."

A representative of the Singapore Embassy in Washington told the Baltimore Times that "this is a storm in a tea-cup. We do not cut off cats' tails in Singapore -- they are born like that."

It is astonishing that Singapore should go to so much trouble to get rid of one slender animal rights protester.

And why should the country that flogs those who vandalize cars want to cover up its cruelty to cats?

(Baltimore Times International, June 5 1995)