

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

Shannon O'Connor

Priscilla

Priscilla's husband Jack told her she had to decide between him and the cats. She chose the cats.

When Jack first met Priscilla she had one cat. After they married they had two. Slowly, she kept picking up more strays, or taking cats other people didn't want. It turned out she could not resist a cat that was homeless. She loved them all like her children.

They had children, too. They grew up in a house full of cats. Jack didn't even know how many cats there were, maybe forty or fifty. The entire house smelled like cat pee. When you were in the house for a while, you couldn't smell it, but it was right when you entered that the stink seeped into you. Jack's mother and sister had to hold their noses when they used to come to visit.

"How can you stand it?" his sister asked.

"I don't know," Jack said. "I just look at Priscilla and everything is okay."

Jack wouldn't have put up with the cats for so long if Priscilla hadn't been so beautiful. She had dark hair, fair skin and blue eyes, like a sparkling September afternoon. She looked like a young Liz Taylor, everybody said so. She was smart; she could play the guitar and sing. But the cats! They had taken over their lives.

But she loved her cats. They would be in bed with them when they made love, their furry bodies rubbing up against him as they were together. He couldn't stand it. He only tolerated it for Priscilla. She would wake up next to him and cats would be all over them.

"Come here sweetie," Priscilla said to the cat, not to him. "Aren't you the most darling thing?"

One morning Jack was eating his cereal, trying to shoo a grey cat away from his bowl, when Priscilla came downstairs in her nightgown.

"Wibbly Woobly is sick," she said, "I think he had a cold."

"Which one is that?"

"You know, the one that falls over all the time," she said, opening the refrigerator to get the orange juice. A small black cat tried to go in, but she picked it up, and cuddled it. "No, no, that's people food, not for kitties."

"I don't know which one that is," Jack said,

"I want to have him quarantined. I don't want him to get the others sick."

"I'm sure he'll be fine." Jack picked up his cereal bowl and put it in the sink.

"Why don't you let Mr. Tubs drink the milk from the bowl?"

"Which one is Mr. Tubs?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

"The one right next to you, silly. Will you take Carol and Bobby to the dentist after school today? I want to make sure Wibbly Woobly is okay."

"What time is the dentist appointment?" Jack said, putting the bowl on the floor.

"It's at 3:45. Carol goes first, then Bobby. Will you take them? It's so far for them to walk. Please? I'll give you some kitty love later."

"If I get out of work exactly at three, I can make it. But sometimes things happen, and I have to stay a little later."

Priscilla always made sure the clothes were properly laundered so her children and her husband did not go out in public and smell like cats. She never told Jack that, but Jack knew she didn't want everyone in the world knowing that she was weird. She didn't want her kids teased at school because she knew how hard it was to be young and different. She didn't want her kids to feel like living in a house with forty cats was shameful.

"Why can't I ever have anyone over to play?" Carol said. Carol was ten. She was at a tender age, Jack knew. She would be growing up soon.

"Not everyone had all these cats, and some people might think it's weird," Jack said in the car on the way to the dentist.

"I think you're weird," Bobby said to Carol, sticking out his tongue.

"Shut up," Carol said.

"Kids, behave. If you're good at the dentist, I'll buy you some ice cream."

Jack and Priscilla were married for thirteen years. He wanted to think it was thirteen years of bad luck, like he broke a mirror, but it wasn't all awful. It was the cats that finally drove him to the edge.

"I can't take it anymore," he said to her. "You'd really rather have all these filthy animals than me?"

"They're not filthy, they're clean. And they're beautiful. Look at Charlie here," she held a white fluffy cat in her arms. "How could you not love him?"

"One would be fine, but forty? I can't take it. You're crazy. I'm leaving." He went upstairs to back his bags.

"Please don't leave," Priscilla said. "You should learn to love the cats. The cats are like life. They're my subconscious. They know everything about me. Please love me and my cats."

Jack left that night and never went back. They got a divorce, and he left Priscilla with the kids, surrounded by furry little creatures crawling under their feet.