

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE...
...TO SUFFER
FROM
PET GRIEF

BRITT COLLINS WAS MORE DEVASTATED BY THE DEATH OF HER CAT THAN BEING ABANDONED BY HER MOTHER AS A CHILD



I am emotionally shattered. It's the same seasick feeling I had after my mother left. When I was seven, she ran off with another man and took our five cats. She'd left a note for my father saying she no longer loved him. "It's not your fault," she wrote. "It's Britt's. I always hated her." My father was heartbroken, although I just felt sad and hurt. I had long come to terms with being motherless — since I was a toddler she'd made it clear how little she cared and I learnt to make myself invisible.

I didn't miss her, but I was crushed about losing the cats. The house suddenly felt as silent, colourless and empty as our flat does now. A few weeks ago, I lost my dearest friend, my cat Honey. I came home after work and found her splayed on the floor outside the bathroom. Her head was twisted to one side, her eyes were open and her still-warm body was lifeless. I wonder if she had been in pain or scared. I am shaking with sobs as I write this.

The television presenter Jeremy Clarkson was recently so devastated about the death of his dog that he wanted to share his loss with the world — although he didn't get the sympathy he was hoping for from his half-a-million followers. When the Conservative MP and diarist Alan Clark was dying, he was consoled by the thought of "joining my dogs in heaven".

Honey, a beautiful, strawberry-blonde Maine coon, had turned 14 the day before she died of cancer, but even so, nothing prepared me for her loss and the cyclone of emotions that followed.

Mickey Rourke recently said that after "the wife had left, the career was over, the money was gone", his dogs saved him from committing suicide. "The dogs were there when nobody else was." Tracey Emin thinks of her cat, Docket, as her child, "because of all the love I have invested into him. I plan my life around my cat".



That's precisely how I feel about my cats. Until recently, my husband, Tiziano, and I shared our home with seven cats, all of whom had either been abused or abandoned. Honey was a huge presence and I loved her with a passion reserved for the greatest love affairs. I know she loved me too — although I realise some people might say she was only a cat. I can't help the way I feel. I miss the quiet intimacies of our daily rituals: seeing her waiting for me at the window and bounding towards me with absolute love and excitement in her eyes; sleeping and snoring beside me with her lion-cub paws stretched across my neck. She even learnt to say "nooo" when she didn't want to be picked up.

Honey did more than anyone to draw my husband and me together. When he posted tributes to Coco, our other rescue cat who died this summer, and Honey on Facebook, he had a staggering response from hundreds of strangers who were moved by the photos and felt the same about their own lost pets.

The vet and animal behaviourist Bruce Fogle explains that pet grief can be so devastating because of "the parent-child relationship we have with them".

In the starkest of evolutionary terms, he adds that "because they have big eyes in the middle of the face, they evoke the same response in us as human infants".

Some people assume the cats may be a child substitute; but one doesn't have to preclude the other. If I had wanted children, though, I would have had them; I'm just not that keen on kids. I've spoken to psychologists, who have suggested that I suffered from unresolved grief about my mother's departure and my feline obsession stemmed from her taking the family cats.

My belief is simply that I come from a long line of cat people: my parents bonded over their shared

love of animals; my German grandmother filled her modest East Berlin flat with injured urban wildlife and strays of every sort; my English granny turned her home into a makeshift refuge and left everything to the RSPCA. I've weathered a lot of deaths. My best mate Nicky died of leukemia when he was 12. He was a tiny, pale wisp of a boy I once defended from bullies and who, from that moment on, clung to me like a vine. I lost my father when I was at university, essentially making me an orphan at 18. He drowned off the coast of Spain. He was 48, adventurous, athletic and looked like the Marlboro man. He did the best he could to raise me and was probably more liberal than any parent should be. I loved him immeasurably, but quickly adapted to being alone in the world.

The summer before starting university, I saw my mother again fleetingly, not wanting anything but friendship. I thought she might want to know that I was going to study literature at Berkeley and offered my address in California. She was stone-cold and said she didn't have a pen, leaving me in the pouring rain on her doorstep. Yet, somehow, losing Honey feels worse than anything, perhaps because an animal's love is pure and wholehearted, their friendship simple and uncomplicated.

In the past three years, we've buried four cats: Halo died of lymphoma at 15. Bobby was murdered by a gang of teenage thugs. They set their pitbull on her while she played in the cemetery that backed onto our garden in east London. We found her the next morning virtually headless. She was a gorgeous six-year-old ginger tabby with orange eyes. That was the hardest heartache of all. I fell apart and had nightmares, night sweats and sleepwalked through London in a daze, nearly dying beneath the wheels of a bus.

Grief is the price we pay for love. I'm focusing on our five remaining felines and will doubtless head back to Africa soon to volunteer as I've done in the past; there's nothing more calming and healing than being around animals. I'm sure, too, there will be other rescues and great loves like Honey who will in their turn take my heart. As Hemingway said: "One cat always leads to another." ●

PAWS TO REFLECT

One in four pet-bereaved people have been too distraught to go into the office, according to research by Direct Line Pet Insurance. But instead of confessing to their bosses why they are off, 12% chose to call in sick, while 42% used their holiday allowance to grieve for their pet.

Nearly one in five didn't feel comfortable explaining why they were taking time off. Of those who forced themselves to go to work, 35% admitted they had been too unhappy to be productive in the office.

The figures aren't to be sniffed at — the survey found that more than one in three owners grieved for their lost dog "as severely as for their best friend or relative", while one in four said that they didn't feel they would ever get over it.

Interestingly, men are more likely than women to need time off work to get over the loss of a pet. In a 2011 survey, the Blue Cross charity for stray animals found that 13% of male owners said they needed a week or more away from the office to deal with their emotions, compared with 5% of women. Psychologists commented that men feel they have failed in their role as protector if a pet goes missing or dies.

Francesca Hornak