

# I AM CAT LADY, HEAR ME ROAR

Produced by Georgia Wright

## [PURRING]

*Hi baby.*

My name is Georgia. And I'm a crazy cat lady.

## [CRAZY CAT LADY SIMPSONS CLIP]

I don't think I'm a crazy cat lady, of course. I resent the label. But the character trope is pervasive, like in that Simpsons clip. And maybe it started with the crazy cat lady, or maybe it started elsewhere, but over time I've formed this theory: society sees cats as feminine creatures. And it hates them for it.

## [CATWOMAN CLIP]

Cats and women are associated relentlessly, whether in the cat lady stereotype, ancient Egyptian goddesses, or catwoman movies. They're even associated in the way we talk. Feline language is used to denigrate women on the regular.

Cougar. Catfight. Sex kitten. Hissy fit. Catty. Pussy.

Even when I was too young to know the alternate meaning of these phrases, for some reason I always thought cats were a more feminine pet, maybe because I had one.

It did seem like girls did like cats better. That was my perception. The cats themselves weren't more feminine, but I did feel like girls were more attracted to them. And did that make me more attracted to, to dogs because I was a boy and I didn't want to be girlish? I don't know, maybe, I don't know.

This is my dad. Growing up, he hated cats. He isn't the only one. I know a lot of people that have a seemingly unfounded loathing for felines.

I can never know what they're thinking. And I have this underlying fear that they'll swipe me at any moment. Like, I like... this instinctual fear that they're evil.

This is my friend and roommate, Katty.

I think it might be the sneakiness. It's something about the way that they move, and that like... also their eyes, for sure. They're glassy but also shrouded in devilish mischief.

Despite her nickname, Katty is one of these cat-loathers. She's a little allergic, sure, but most of her loathing comes from elsewhere. I've never really understood why cats frighten her so much. I love dogs, too, but to me it makes a lot more sense to be afraid of dogs than cats. Cats can scratch, sure, but if a German Shepherd got aggressive, it could kill you.

I honestly think that I just don't like cats because they have terrifying nails.

*But dogs have terrifying teeth, don't they? I mean, physically a dog could do you more harm than a cat.*

That's true, but I would see a dog running at me trying to kill me and then I would run away, but a cat would jump from like the top of a lamp-post and I'd never see it coming.

People who love cats *really* seem to love them, like the so-called "crazy cat lady," and people who hate them *really* seem to hate them. Few people are ambivalent. When I think about self-described "cat people", myself included, most of them feel positively or indifferently about dogs. But when I think about self-described "dog people," many of them feel the same way as Katty.

I don't think they're that nice. But I just also don't think they're that loyal. Like, I don't know. I just want a pet that's just going to have this undying devotion to me that a dog has, and I just, like, cats I don't get that vibe.

Shavon's another cat-hater. There's a lot of them in my life. Here's the thing: people who dislike cats tend to cite the same reasons over and over--reasons that to me, sound a lot like the same reasons people use to dismiss women who don't fit typical standards of femininity. They're aloof. They're mysterious. They're too independent. And, especially, they aren't social or loving enough.

A lot of people do admire that, but I guess I just want my pet to be extremely subservient. Just have this undying love for me. So yeah, cats for me, they just don't do it.

Cats are pitted against dogs constantly. Dogs--they're outdoorsy, outgoing, bigger, unconditionally loving, as emotive as cats are removed. More importantly, for my theory, they're described as MAN's best friend. A rugged hunting dog seems much more masculine than a domestic housecat.

I'm not the only one who thinks like this. A study from Eastern Kentucky University found that participants rated men less masculine when they described themselves as cat people, and more masculine when they described themselves as dog people. Denise Davis, a Brown University scholar and lecturer in gender studies, is a recovering cat hater, but she had some ideas as to why cats were seen as so mysteriously feminine in opposition to dogs.

They're not in the public. If you want to meet someone's cat you have to go to their house. You see people with their dogs all the time. If you had a dog you know all kinds of people who you know their dog's names but you don't know the people's names.

Cats, according to Denise, are confined to the domestic sphere, a sphere to which women have also historically been confined. Dogs, on the other hand, are seen as transparent and straightforward. With dogs,

There's this kind of sense of sociability which I think is associated again with a kind of masculine honesty, transparency, you get what you see. You know? And there's this sense of dissimulation, that the cat is hiding an ulterior motive, and women are always supposed to be hiding ulterior motives.

Even with men who own cats, Denise says, there's this kind of collateral damage that's done by association with femininity. But we hold the cat-man to different standards than the cat-lady. From a man, owning a cat is subversive. From a lady, it's nuts.

3:13 What we expect from men, neurotic men and what we expect from neurotic women are different. Neurotic women we'll call hysterical. Or the problem with the cat lady, she never goes out, right, or she smells like her cats. Or there's a too-muchness, right? We assume that her house is cluttered and tchotchkelated. I don't think that's the assumption of the cat man. The cat man is like Woody Allen or Marc Maron. Their neurosis is intellectual./ But the fear of the neurotic women is that she's hysterical, she's going to become unhinged.

### **[SPOOKY MUSIC + meow]**

The hysteric, cat-owning woman is not a new stereotype. In history, there's a pretty clear parallel for a similar character: The Witch, and her black cat familiar.

### **[Cat history clip]**

In 1800s France, cats were thought to be symbols of vanity, witchcraft, and the Devil. Because of this, they were burned by the dozens as a form of entertainment. Even today in America black cats are less than half as likely to be adopted as gray cats, suggesting that witchy superstition persists.

However, cats were not always symbols of dark magic in history. Sometimes, they were goddesses..

### **[legendary music]**

In Ancient Egypt, there were two powerful goddesses. One was benevolent and good, and one wrought destruction. Their names were Bastet, and Sekhmet. Each took the form of a cat.

Bastet was the goddess of good. She was worshiped as a symbol of the home, and of fertility. She was a protective force, and emblematic of the domestic realm. In her demeanor, she's similar to a tamed housecat.

Sekhmet, on the other hand, was not a tamed housecat, but a dangerous lioness. She was essentially Bastet's evil twin--a destructive, wild goddess lusting for the blood of men. She'd go on rampages, and kill them by the thousands.

They're viewed in tandem, but also in opposition to each other.

This is Emily Drennan. She's an Egyptologist. She tells me that Bastet and Sekhmet's relationship was complicated, and they could metamorphosize into one another. Not only that, they could inhabit the body of a housecat, which is why house-cats were so valued in Ancient Egyptian society.

The animal itself, so your pet cat, is not inherently divine, but it can represent the god, or be sort of a conduit and a way to worship the god through the cat. So it's more of a bridge to the divine than the cat itself being divine.

In one legend, Ancient Egyptians dye an enormous amount of beer red to look like blood in hopes that it will trick Sekhmet, the evil goddess. Sekhmet drinks all of it and becomes drunk and sedate. Once she is calm, she metamorphosizes back into Bastet.

Bastet and Sekhmet are two sides of the same coin. Sekhmet's rampant, dangerous energy can be transformed into the peace of her domestic alter ego, if only she is tamed. In some way, the two goddesses mirror the two extremes of femininity. Bastet is a tranquil and classically feminine pussycat, but she's mysterious, too. There's a fear that she will become the destructive, unacceptably feminine Sekhmet, who strikes fear into the heart of men. And isn't that misogyny, anyway? Fear of a woman gaining too much power? Fear of the lioness she could become?

My younger sister Lily would fit right in to Ancient Egyptian society. She's been obsessed with cats since she was a little kid, more so than anyone I've ever known. Maybe because she's catlike herself. Unlike me, she doesn't really like or relate to dogs at all. The things that seem to drive others away from cats are the things that draw her in. To me, it makes a lot of sense--she's smart, independent, and private. She's not a bubbly type. She's not a big fan of hugs.

Do you relate more to cats than to dogs?

Oh yeah, definitely more than dogs. I don't... I don't relate to dogs at all.

Why not?

Because they're so... I don't know. They seem like they don't have very much depth to their character.

Can you elaborate on that?

Well, they're kinda just... endlessly happy. And excited. And I'm *definitely* not endlessly happy and excited. And cats can have much more complex emotions towards people than dogs can.

A relationship with a cat is a lot more similar to a relationship with a person, because cats have more similar emotions to us. If you were friends with somebody who had the emotions of a dog, that'd be a really unhealthy friendship, because the person would just always be obsessed with you, and you could be as mean as you wanted to them and they would still just like you. That sounds like a terrible relationship.

In Lily's mind, wanting to have a dog is related to a sense of ego, or at least comfort. Owning a cat, on the other hand, requires a level of mutual respect seen more frequently in interpersonal relationships. Not that Lily thinks that all dog owners have big egos. It's just harder to feel good about yourself when you're spending time with a cat.

When you get a pet you want somebody who's gonna be your companion, and cats really naturally don't make very good companions.

Cats, it's hard to accept you're the kind of person a cat doesn't like, you know? Like if a dog, a dog just likes you all the time, so you think--oh, I'm a great person, my dog loves me.

Having a cat makes you think more about yourself as a person because you have to become the kind of person that your cat would like.

It's strange. Even though the perception seems to be that cats are similar to women and dogs similar to men, it's closer to the opposite. Dogs are more like the perfect 50s housewife. They're subservient, obedient, trained and endlessly loving, a perfect companion. They affirm one's status as alpha. They're not inherently masculine, but they make their owners feel masculine, or at least in charge. Man's best friend.

Cats are associated with femininity, but they won't cooperate. Instead of the perfect housewife, they're the stereotype of the controlling wife who wears the pants and pulls the strings in the household, who keeps her husband whipped. Or the moody, duplicitous woman who keeps him guessing about what's really going on. Or the alternative feminist girlfriend who's not going to stroke his ego. That's why Lily likes them. That's why I do too.

### **[DOMINO PURRING]**

### **[DAD CAT TALK]**

This is my dad again, with our little cat Domino. She's black-and-white, pudgy and cuddly, a pillow with a personality. After almost fifteen years of living with her, Dad's cat-hating is in remission. He's even mastered an impression of her.

### **[DAD MEWING + Laughter]**

To clarify, that's my dad meowing.

Just for the record, right now she's staring lovingly at me while I scritch her under the chin. Domi... Oop! She did not like that. She did not like your microphone. Domi, it's okay!

Let's face it. Whether you're a cat or dog person, it doesn't really matter. No matter what species we happen to fall into, we shouldn't be limited by the expectations of others, by barriers set from gender or history or reputation.

So call me catty. Call me hysterical, call me aloof, call me independent and mysterious and a pussy and a witch. And I'll wear it proudly. Because cats and I, we don't need your approval--and you're not entitled to our love.

And if *that* makes me a crazy cat lady, then so be it.

**[MUSIC]**