

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

# CAT MAN

**WHEN JAMIL** was starting school, he told his teacher and new friends he would prefer to be thought of as a cat.

Not a boy, not a son of his father or mother, not a brother of his sisters, not a cousin. And not just another kid who liked to kick a ball around in the dust every day before supper, because then supper tasted better, when your stomach was wide awake and empty and ready for green beans and rice and cheese and bread.

As the kindergarten students introduced themselves, Jamil said Cat because he had to say something. He wasn't even sure where it had come from.

Cats had talents he revered. They slept well. They listened. They stayed calm, mostly, unless a loud sound scared them. They paid good attention, sometimes running into the drainage tunnel where water went after the rains, and didn't drown or get lost in there. They stayed very patient waiting for people to come home. They remembered where they lived. They stared a lot, but never seemed bored. Watchful, that was it. They were watchful. They kept an eye out.

When he introduced himself as a cat, the other kids laughed.

"No way, Jamil, you can't be."

"Yes, I can. I am yellow."

"You aren't yellow! You're brown! We're all brown! You don't have fur, you have skin!"

And then they laughed again.

They used to laugh all the time.

Hanan said, "Then I am a pigeon."

**HE LIVED IN** a place that was hard, but he loved it. How could he know it was hard if he had never lived any other place? Everyone he knew lived in Jabaliya. Sometimes they had no rain, and sometimes the rain came too much, and the heater in their house wasn't very good. But he knew what he saw from the windows. Ever since he was a baby, he saw the house next door and the tower of the mosque and the fig tree and the orange tree and the sky. And the cats walking along the rims of flat rooftops or curled in windowsills.

His dad was a farmer who brought strawberries and oranges to the camp market. He was popular; people crowded around his booth on market days jingling their coins. His mom was an expert at sewing. She could even make a backpack. She sewed dresses for his sisters and pajamas for him. She stitched yellow curtains and a red tablecloth. She had a sewing machine, even though sometimes their neighborhood didn't have electricity, and a small box of thimbles, and a pin cushion shaped like an acorn. His sisters liked to have their hair brushed and braided. This reminded him of cats, who like to be petted. No one brushed a boy's hair the way they did a girl's. If he were a cat, he might get special attention.

**THE STUDENTS LEARNED** alphabets and numbers. Arabic and English. They drew pictures of clouds and colored them in. They wrote numbers in a tall list. They sang songs in a circle. School was easy. Once a boy was trying to kick a ball on the schoolyard, but he kicked Jamil instead. When Jamil cried, a girl who had seen this happen said, "I'm sorry, Cat Man." And the name stuck. Jamil loved it. He felt it gave him superhero status somehow. Super Cat. He didn't tell his family at home what kids were calling him. But one day at the market, a girl called out, "Cat Man, see you tomorrow!" and his dad said, "What did she say?"

**AFTER SCHOOL**, Jamil watched how the cats crouched in the dust under the fig tree or curled in a damp place where his mother had watered. It must feel cool to them. They slept in boxes or behind the bush. They chased each other through the strawberry field. He gave them all names, mostly related to food: Smoky, Mustard, Pumpkin, Peanut. He dreamed of having a tail. He visited the Roman baths with his father, who told him no one was sure where the water came from, so the baths were like a mystery. It was nice to have very old things in your neighborhood; you felt more attached. Soon the baths were going to be declared a World Heritage site. Jamil didn't know what that meant exactly, but it sounded important. There were different cats living around the baths, striped ones, a hissy one, a cat without a tail. Jamil wondered if these cats took baths at night when all the people were sleeping.

Of course not; cats take baths with their tongues. He thought about the Roman baths later when they were gone. Think of it—something that lasts a thousand years can disappear in a day.

**ON THE DAY THE BOMBS CAME**, Cat Man ate white cheese with fresh bread for breakfast and tossed a few crumbs of bread to Smoky, who really liked bread. Peanut wouldn't touch it. Pumpkin was asleep and Mustard had not been seen for a few days. Jamil wondered if Mustard was doing that crazy thing of going away and coming back with a whole family of little mewling ones following her. Or maybe Mustard was a boy, visiting his relatives in another camp or town.

**DID CATS** remember their relatives?

Did they have names for each other different from the names people gave them?

Jamil liked cat voices. Some howled, some purred. Some cried at a high pitch for food or attention, some had low grumbly voices like uncles.

**WHEN THE FIRST BOMB HIT**, Jamil was sitting on the toilet. The terrible noise and the shaking made him fall onto the floor like a baby would do. He howled for sure. He howled like someone had stepped on his invisible tail with the biggest shoe in the world. After zipping up his pants and staggering into the next room, he saw his mother's shelf fallen onto the floor, all her beloved green plates and cups smashed. "Mama!" he howled. His mama was in the kitchen, leaning, with one hand on the sink. His father had already gone to the fields. Her mouth was open; she looked frozen. His sisters were screaming and hiding in the corner next to the broom.

**THEN HIS MOTHER WAILED**, "What should we do?" They always knew this could happen; in fact, it had happened other times too, but the bomb didn't feel as close then. Should they run into the streets? Should they lie down under the beds? Jamil could hear screaming from outside the windows.

His mama said, "We should lie down under the beds!" Jamil's sisters were scared of spiders and thought they lived under beds, so they whimpered even more loudly, but he dove under his own bed so fast, partly because he was terrified, partly because he was a cat.

**MORE BOMBS WOULD COME**, booming and crashing like nightmares in the worst movie, a movie in which thunder was king and it was mean and cruel and didn't care one bit about you. You never imagined how it would sound if your whole neighborhood began toppling down,

the crashing, the screaming, the tower for the telephones smashing onto the school, the hospital crushed, the babies yelling, Jamil covered both his ears under the bed, he screamed for his mama, then realized she was right next to him with his sisters, they were all under the same bed, hugging so tightly it was as if they became dolmades, rolled grape leaves, all tucked into the same pan. The pan was boiling over. There was nothing they could do about it. The food would burn. And he would hear these sounds for the rest of his life.

Later, as they tiptoed out into the changed world, they felt lost, as if they had traveled to another country without going anywhere. Jamil's father would never be seen again. Smoky, Mustard, Pumpkin, Peanut—all of them disappeared. What a strange planet!

Now he was the only cat.