

# Sans Meds: Cats and Tatts

written by Nathan Hansen | June 19, 2015



The other evening, while putting my daughter to sleep, our seven month-old kitten jumped onto the bed to nest at her feet. The evening is always the same. After dinner with my family, I play with the kids, then guide them, seemingly disoriented and distracted into a routine of baths, putting on pajamas, brushing teeth and reading a story before snuggling down deep into the covers. And, like every night, Velvet the kitten comes dashing down the hallway and pounces into bed. We can hear the jingle of the bell on her collar ring faster and faster, louder and louder as she approaches until landing softly with a final tone. I've accepted the routine for as long as we've had our new pet, until finally questioning the entire production very recently.

"What does the cat think about that bell?" I asked my wife.

"What do you mean, 'What does the cat think?'" my wife said. "It's a cat. It doesn't."

For a man such as myself who worries about what inanimate objects think and feel – dolls, toy cars, LEGO structures all have emotions in my book – I didn't hesitate to ponder the reasoning behind the bell and collar. Was it necessary?

We chose a break-away collar, one that will open if caught on a tree limb so the cat isn't found hanging dead like in some tragic John Carpenter film. And yes, the collar has a tiny identification tag. But so wasn't there a smaller tag, a microchip, surgically inserted into the kitten's body just below the neckline between the shoulder blades. On this microscopic chip were everything from the kitten's name and place where rescued to my name and address. I'm sure there's more, especially considering the initiation of the PATRIOT ACT some years ago, but I'm afraid to ask. But the question remained, were the collar and bell really necessary or were they a cliché fashion statement?

"I know it's a cat, dear," I said. "But cats are finicky beasts. I'd hate to piss one off, even if it's making a fashion faux pau."

"Leave it alone," she said. "You're being weird."

I acquiesced to my wife's collar stance only to pull out my smartphone and Google "PETA" and research their side of the argument. In the end, having discovered nothing more than I shouldn't eat gelatin, I was left lying in bed with a sleeping child beside me debating the purpose of a bell. One I heard periodically within the muffled comforter as Velvet licked her ass.

I should mention that my wife suggested the bell so that we might find her at night if she was lost. But wouldn't that high-pitched fairy sound also attract coyotes? Heaven's forbid I give the predator more of an advantage.

And not only may the cat not approve of the dangerous apparatus around its neck drawing the canine species like a tractor beam, what of the message. Yes, the bell works for my family. It's a homing beacon in some cases, disguised with some level of cuteness ... but what about style?

"Does it even like that sound?" I mumbled into my pillow.

"Go to bed," my wife said. "Let go of this fascination. Count sheep and fall asleep."

"Sheep wear bells too," I said. "There's no getting away from this one."

The next morning I woke early to find the kitten had made sleeping arrangements elsewhere – the whore. She climbed into the loft of my seven year-old. She was curled at his feet, seemingly exhausted from the proclivities one has as a nocturnal animal; eating, carousing, batting bugs that bounce against the window seeking the living room light I never extinguish despite calling myself an environmentalist, until finally collapsing from another long night of doing nothing really. What a life. I picked her up, cradling her in my arms and shook the collar lightly again and again.

"Is this you?" I thought. "Is this tiny vibrato a good representation of who you are?"

I refused to accept the purring as the affirmative and instead took the kitten outside to the garage where I stored the Christmas decorations. With one hand rooting in containers of ornaments and lights and the other holding a bewildered pet like a running back might hold a football on a touchdown sprint, I searched for a bell my son had received from a shopping center Santa Claus one holiday season. After several minutes of searching to no avail, frustrated and desperate, I began punching and kicking the containers.

Kick, BOOM! Listen. Nothing.

Next box.

Kick, BOOM! Listen. Nothing.

Next box.

Kick, BOOM! Listen. Jingle, jingle.

Genius.

I found the bell in no time, thinking only temporarily of how I'd deflect the inevitable torrent of blame that would arise come time to decorate next year's Christmas tree.

"How did THIS happen?!" my wife would scream, eye-balling the shards of porcelain and glass that were once shiny balls and elfish figurines.

"Fucking cat!" I'd declare.

The cat stopped purring by the time I discarded the old collar and hung the new bell around its neck, however she looked festive with the garland from the Christmas boxes I used to hang it upon.

"Purrrr-fect," I said, holding Velvet at arm's length.

The tone of the bell was deeper and more sullen. The sound reminded me of a burlesque dancer I'd seen in Paris. She wore bells on her brassiere and panties, using her movements to create music one might hear at a strip club at the North Pole. The memory made me smile that perhaps this sound was ideal for a furry feline named after a sultry material, then I recalled the dancer stripping to nothing, tossing the bell-adorned lingerie aside to gyrate to nothing but a light hum she carried in her head. Unfortunately, the cat's appearance was as pleasant as the stripper's anti-climactic show. The bulk of the larger bell seemed to weigh down Velvet's neck, and she looked like some aging arthritic animal staggering to find a place to die. This immediate realization made me nix the cowbell I grabbed earlier from my children's toy chest. I'd have to wait a few months for that bad boy.

As I untied the large bell from the cat's neck I paced the house in search of the perfect sound. Velvet's perfect sound. I eventually pulled open the junk drawer, after all, it had all the answers. I scattered aside rolls of assorted tape, batteries, super glue and undeveloped film from God knows what decade. At the bottom of the drawer was a set of keys I was once led to believe unlocked a storage locker, which held the belongings of a late aunt. To find out, I had intended to rent a storage container, but instead sold all my aunt's belongings in an estate sale, thus the trip to Paris. So, the keys? Your guess is as good as mine. They probably unlock the same thing your extra keys do. More Christmas decorations.

I couldn't use the garland again to tie the spare keys, so I used a roll of masking tape. A few times around the neck, looping through a cheap keychain, and everything looked all right. Of course, by this time the purrs had turned growls had turned hisses, making any possible allure of sight or sound irreprehensible. Eventually, after wrangling the cat with a clothes basket and a towel, I was able to peel the tape and keys from her neck with hardly any noticeable hair loss.

As the cat retreated under the couch, where it would remain until I left for work, I figured there might never be any sound to fit the family cat. No identifier in any stylistic sense. And if there were, who was I to be the one to define it? Maybe the bell was simply a fancy trinket to go along with the collar and identification tag. But how is that any different than a tattoo? The Tweety Bird laying flat on a young college girl's belly is cute until she has a couple kids, then she has to explain to her friends nursing a baby by the pool why she chose Big Bird of all things to get inked by her navel. While studying in college, tribal tattoos were all the rave. But out of all the guys I knew getting these tattoos, not one was Native American. I don't even think Native American had tattoos like these. Granted, some of my friends declared they were Irish and these bands wrapping their fully formed

biceps were Celtic.

"You're a quarter Irish," I'd say. "If you think you need something Celtic, learn the river dance. Besides your last name is Goldenstein. And you don't want the tattoos they give Goldensteins."

I can't complain or criticize, I have my share of tattoos. To me, each word and symbol means something. Even if I don't agree with the message today, I did during my evolution, and those moments are a part of me. They made me whole. To me, my body is a scrapbook, and I can recall some pretty amazing moments, whether they were on Hollywood's Sunset Strip or in a dark alleyway in Prague. Which might explain why I went to such lengths to create a subtle soundtrack for our cat. She is beautiful with her tan and black speckled coat and sideways gait, but I thought there needed to be more.

As humans, we are obsessed with finding the right fit. Not comfortably in wear necessarily, but in who we are. I tried wearing slacks to work one day and I felt like a geriatric. A tie will crush my esophagus and I won't eat until I get home, choked and starved. But give me a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and I'm fully functional. Some might say it's unprofessional, but so isn't being dishonest with yourself and others. Uniforms might be for fast food employees and night guards, just not me. Having all this said, I also don't carry myself as a professional – in this case, these last few years, a teacher – holding authoritative countenance demanding respect instead of earning it, something adults tend to preach to children but don't practice. Like the pre-dawn escapade searching for the right tone for my cat, so do I each day with every class, getting a feel for their day and finding a formula to institute a plan to foster emotional growth. Try this on for size. How's it feel, I ask.

In the end, maybe it's the purrs and meows I'm not listening to clearly enough. There is a unique message there as definitive as the fleur de lys tattoo I wear on my back, something we've each chosen to use as voice. I feel whole-heartedly that in everything we do, say, create, there is greater meaning. But I can't help but feel sorry for the poor sap with the neck tattoo of a pair of lips working alongside a bunch of guys all day. I've worked alongside men enough in my life to know that, despite any intention, they can be relentless with gay jokes. It's those same men that would read this essay and wonder why I was preoccupied with my pussy. But that's people for you, trying things on for size. Checking out the feel. Some comfortable. Some uptight. Some naked in ignorance.