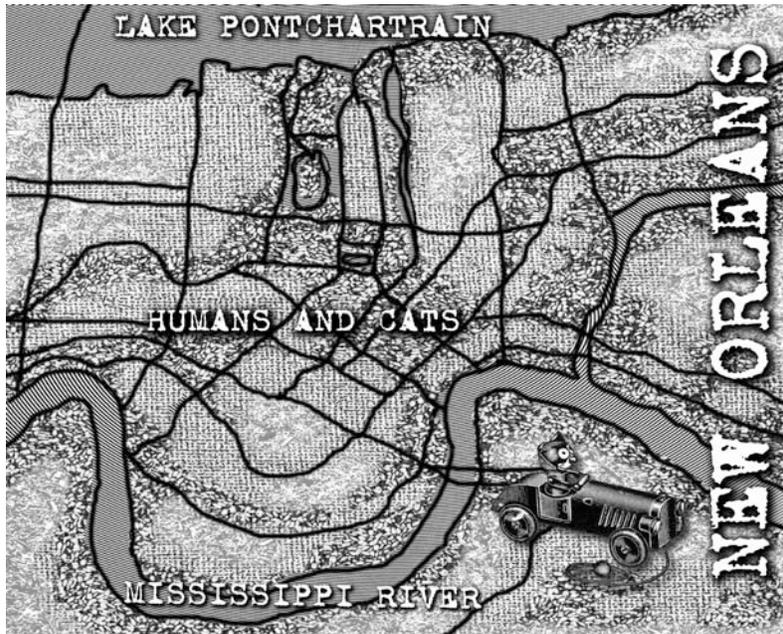




MEOW, MONSIEUR!

The French Felines of New Orleans

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MEOW, MONSIEUR!

The French Felines of New Orleans

Les petites histoires sur les humains et les chats

(Small stories about humans and cats)

First Illustrated English language Edition 2021

Text, Translation, & Illustrations

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Portions of these stories originally appeared in *The Guardian*, and on the openDemocracy.net, Business Week, Wall Street Journal and China Dialogue websites.

M Grant Morris was a source for two cat observations in the *Gato Negro* chapter. Maps are only approximate locations for stories.

Les avocats français have instructed the author to here legally proclaim that most of the characters in this compilation are based on real cats and somewhat real humans, but for the purpose of the story the characters and some places have been revised, relocated, exaggerated, fabricated, compiled from multiple sources, and in any case are all completely fictitious. *Ils sont tout ça, très certainement.*

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Frontispiece illustration: “Writing in Cat Time”



*for Dad
and Minou*

PREFACE



Vermillionville Historic Village, Lafayette LA

Union troops occupied New Orleans in 1862 and quickly banned the use of French, having decided that the “foreign” language was subversive.

Enlightenment was not to follow quickly. In 1921 a full ban on the use of the French language in schools was again instituted into state law, to remain on the books until 1974.

Dozens of generations of New Orleans cats had only been addressed *en français* before the human mandate. But as a rule, felines ignore all rules. They are just not interested.

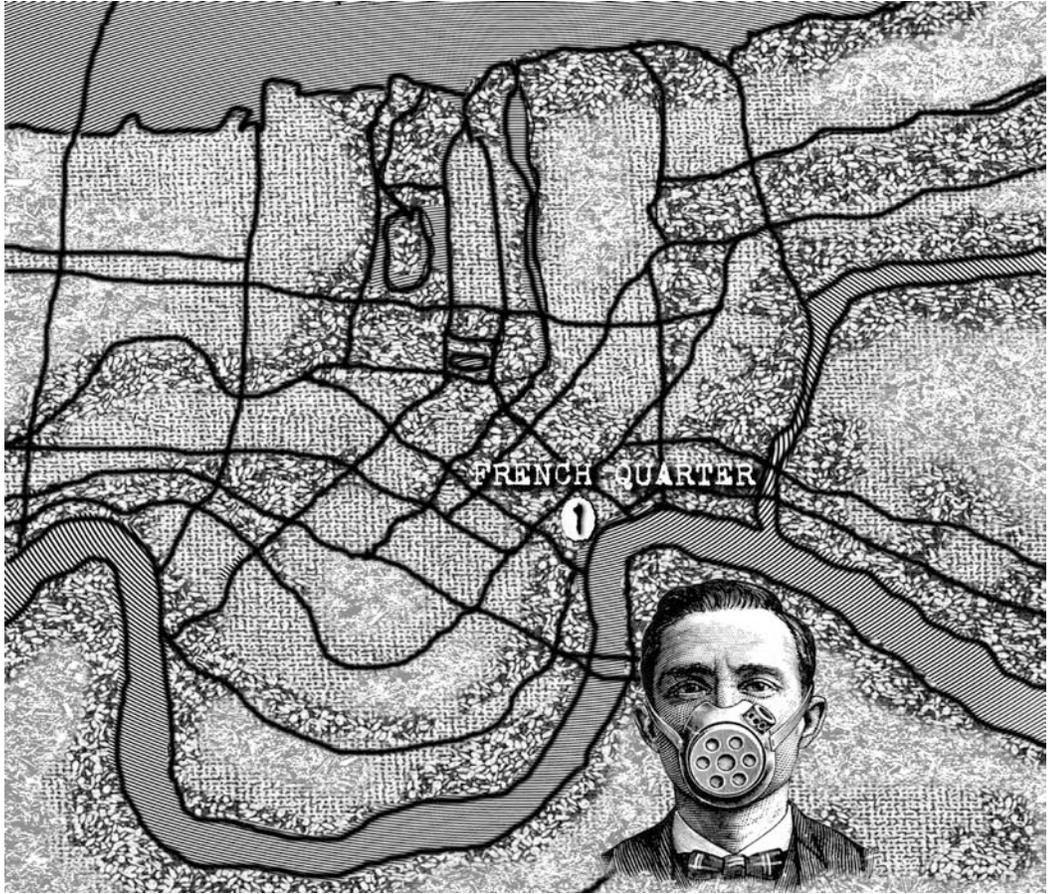
The humans themselves are more pliable to regulation.

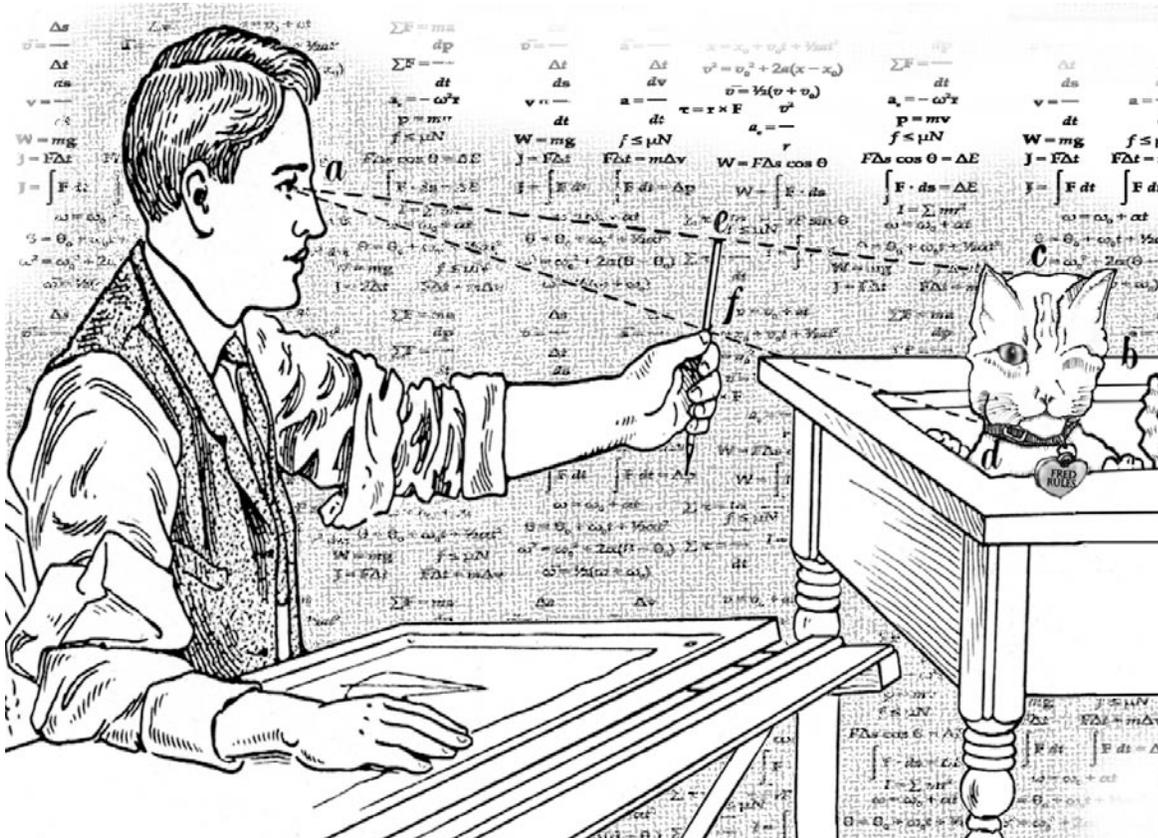
Thus, the last US Census indicates that while in Cajun and Creole areas nearly 20% of the people still speak French, less than 1% of the human residents in New Orleans use the language on a daily basis.

The Francophone percentage is much higher among the city’s Tabbies, Tortoise-shells and Siamese. As observed in these *petites histoires*, among cats the French language is universally recognized – though maybe subconsciously, as felines are also fickle to admit anything – as a direct conduit to the ever-resilient *habitués* of New Orleans.

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Un être humain, en essayant de comprendre le Fred

(A human attempting to understand the Fred)

Upon waking, Fred the cat had a ritual by which he warmed to the world in which he lived. He opened his one (right) eye, licked his right paw and used it to clean any residual sleep sand from the area around his eyelid. He then inevitably executed a mighty stretch with all four paws – and their corresponding sets of mighty, razor-sharp nails – extended. Lastly, he yawned widely, displaying his also-fearsome fangs in the process.

I rule, thought the orange tabby. Je décide.

Fred was angry. Neither of his humans were home. Again. There was nobody with whom he could amuse himself, especially not those other two, older and more complacent cats. Fred was not even sure that he and they were members of the same species. This pair of lesser beasts slept all day and most of the nights, and were content to solicit food and tactile affection from the humans in their few waking hours.

Not so Fred.

Le chat Fred needed to be the center of attention, always. At all hours. He also needed to be amused, and there was nothing inside the house at all amusing this day. So, to show his displeasure, he peed on the stereo and the front of the fridge.

That will show the ingrates.

On second thought, he peed on the stereo again, this time focusing on the shiny tuner buttons, for good measure.

He moved regally away from these conquered bits of humanity, complete in his triumph. And as he exited the cat flap that had been fitted into the kitchen portal at the rear of his house, he maintained a sense of pride, backed up, raised his tail, and peed on the exterior of the door too.

Those two others, they will also have to acknowledge my scent, my superiority, he mused. *If they ever come outside.*

“Outside” was a unique concept for this supremely self-assured cat, though he did not realize it. He did not grasp the implications of his own location, living in the lower *Vieux Carré*, one of the few areas of New Orleans’ French Quarter that could still sustain full-time local residents. In the twenty-first century, only the last few blocks before Esplanade Avenue, the Quarter’s eastern boundary, held onto the remnants of what was once a thriving population of very very unique individuals. However few, the stalwarts remained.

Fred was one of them.

This morning he made his way around the house, slipping by the tiny window in the back bathroom’s WC to crawl under the side kitchen. He emerged in the small yard that ran alongside the traditional single shotgun structure, from the covered porch to the sidewalk fence. He stopped deliberately to sniff each of the various pots that the soft-hearted human female had filled with dirt and weeds, and then had placed in positions eminently suitable for christening.

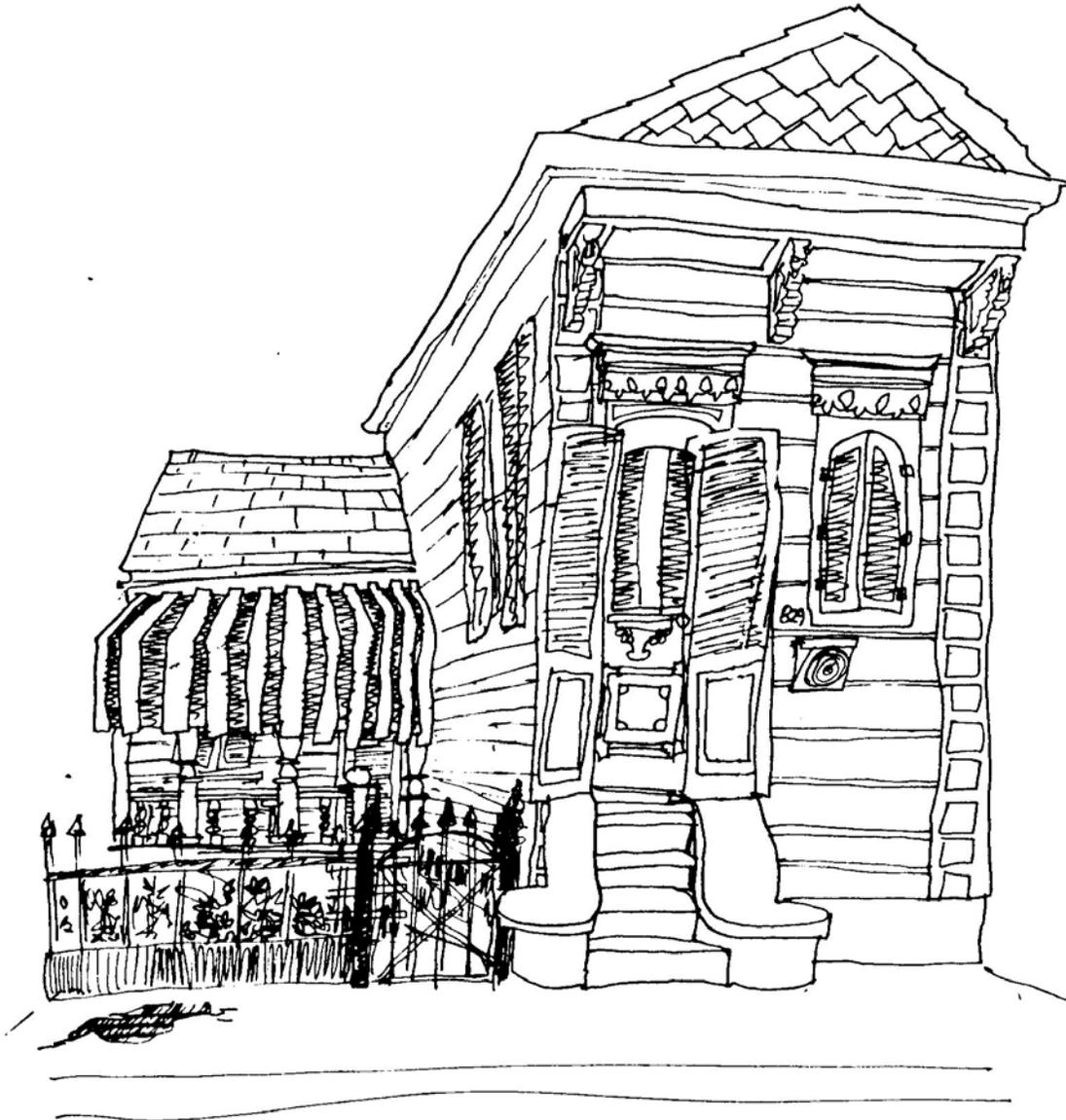
Fred placed his nose close to the pots’ absorbent clay surfaces. Once again the only scent detectable was *eau de le Freddy*. He was gratified. No one else had dared to violate his territory, not even those odd-looking striped creatures with the black masks who came out at night and tried to pilfer the leftovers from his food dish in the darkness.

He thought again how glad he was to be a cat.

Superior creature, Fred mused, superior intellect and looks: it is a good thing.

As he walked toward the front of the side yard and the wrought iron fence that defined its boundaries, he twitched his tail assertively.

I think I'll do a viewing of the zoo this morning, he thought.



The sidewalk outside the fence was an amusing daily parade of local animal life, plus non-local humans – Fred could tell the difference by their vocal inflections. This was the *Vieux Carré*, the Old Square, after all, New Orleans' quasi-French money-making Temple of Tourism. The visitors sauntered by slowly, individuals and groups, and many of them spoke to him. This day was usual.

A female: “Cute kitty, cute... oh my, what happened to your little eye? Lloyd, did you see this poor cat? Only one eye.”

Male: “Shee-yut, Verna, that there is one homely lookin’ cat.”

Luckily, Fred did not understand human talk, except for words that pertained to his comfort and/or feeding. This was a conscious lack of knowledge. But he could instinctively sense a change in emotional discharge, and here it was again, pitiful beings trying to relate to him. They were not suitable for his notice, though he did consider spraying the metal gate, just to ward off the aura of such creatures. Again, luckily for them, they went on their way before he could motivate himself from his comfortable sitting position, turn about and aim.

It was a disappointing outing so far for Freddy, his valuable time wasted without a single human/dog pairing passing by his kingdom.

Dogs. Pitiful.

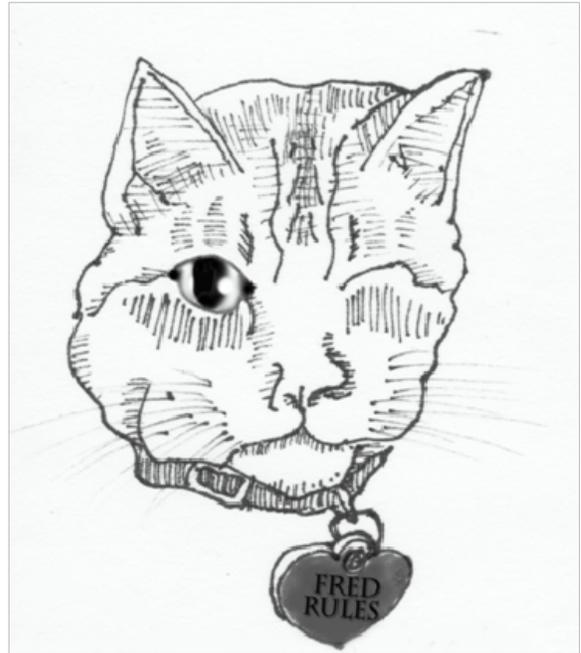
He loved seeing those creatures, bound by a restrictive leashes, with a noose around their necks, strangled into submission by a human “owner.”

So wonderfully degrading.

As it should be, he ventured.

Fred truly enjoyed the opportunity to sit just back of the protective gate, watching the street’s walkway and grooming himself, free of all constrictions, while the canines were paraded by, choked into subservience.

While licking under his tail, he again mused: *It is sooooo good to be a cat. Je suis un roi parmi ces créatures. Yes, it’s good to be the king.*



Finally, he detected a jingling in the distance. The sound of deep breathing and multiple footfalls got louder.

Ah. A prisoner dog. And even better, he thought, it is one of those two horrid bubble dogs, the pair of them not much bigger than me, who occupy the house that abuts my kingdom out back.

Wretched little yap-yaps.

Fred was now in fine mettle, lifting his tail and back leg into a perfectly vertical position, and licking his butt slowly and even more casually. He wanted to be in full display mode when the animal and human passed.

And here the pair were, pale thin human male and tiny blonde poodle, its hair sheared into a topiary collage of balloons and bars, its throat encircled by a wide band of multi-colored rhinestones. The small dog, panting and salivating, fixated immediately on the orange cat sitting only inches behind the fence gate.

Fred, of course, refused to look up. His complete disdain for the fierce miniature dog reinforced its frustration, made it furious, even more so because it could not get through the fence and at him.

Sure enough, the dog had not only zeroed in on Fred, but almost jerked its owner onto his knees with a series of colossal pulls on the lined- velvet leash. It pressed its head partially through the fence's bars, barking shrilly, ears hooked on the inside of the gate, its shoulders trapped outside.

“Yap yap-yap YAAAP!” the dog screamed shrilly.

Fred had calculated the dog's snout penetration to the millimeter, and sat safely licking away within smelling range of the refuse-scented canine breath, not even deigning to look up until he heard the tone of the human's admonition:

“Now, Maurice, you are doing it again. Bad doggy! You get back here this instant! I tell you every day, that is just a crippled little kitty, no threat to you. NOW STOP BARKING, DAMMIT! MAURICE!!! STOP!”

“Yap, yap YAP, YAAAPPP!!!”

Fred slowly raised his head, mid-lick, blinked his eye slowly, and resumed his ritual. Another slow lick.

The human finally yanked the dog's leash so hard that it momentarily cut off its breathing. There was a sudden pause, then a long ragged wheeze from the poodle. He was being dragged forcefully from the fence, but restarted his barking once he regained breath.

“Yap yap YAAAaaappp!”

His protests, ever fainter, slowly faded away as he was pulled by his master down the block and around the corner.

A human “master”! What a concept, thought Fred.

If the dog could have seen the smile on the cat's butt-tilted face it would probably have sacrificed its life to get at him. Fred, on the other hand, was sublimely content. He could go back inside for some lunch now. And maybe a nap.

He was a tad disappointed, though.

Still no worshippers at the Temple of Freddy. As soon as I finish this spot of lunch, I think I will go pee on the entrance rug, just inside the front door, so the moment the humans get home they will know my displeasure.

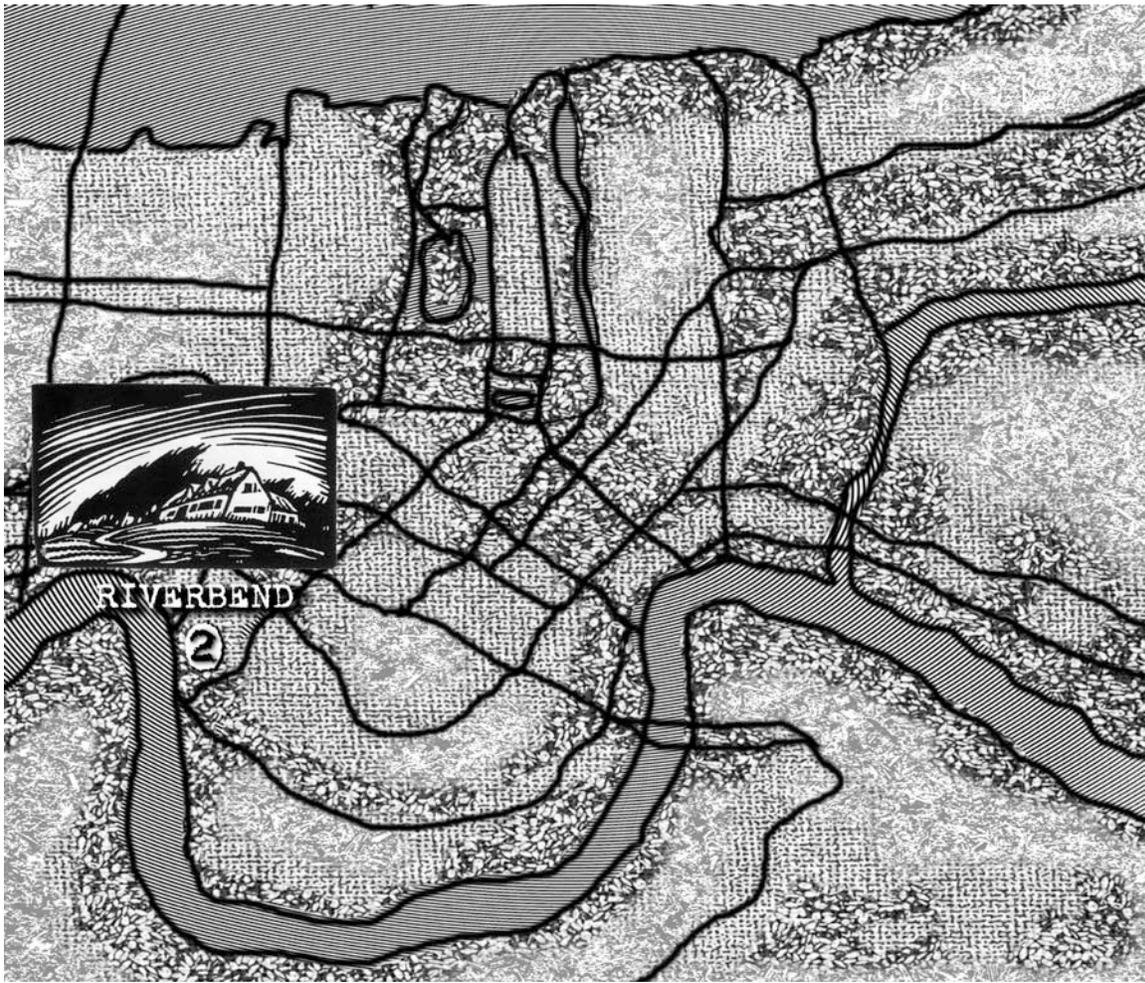
That is it, he figured, I need to let them know once again who is in charge. Je décide.

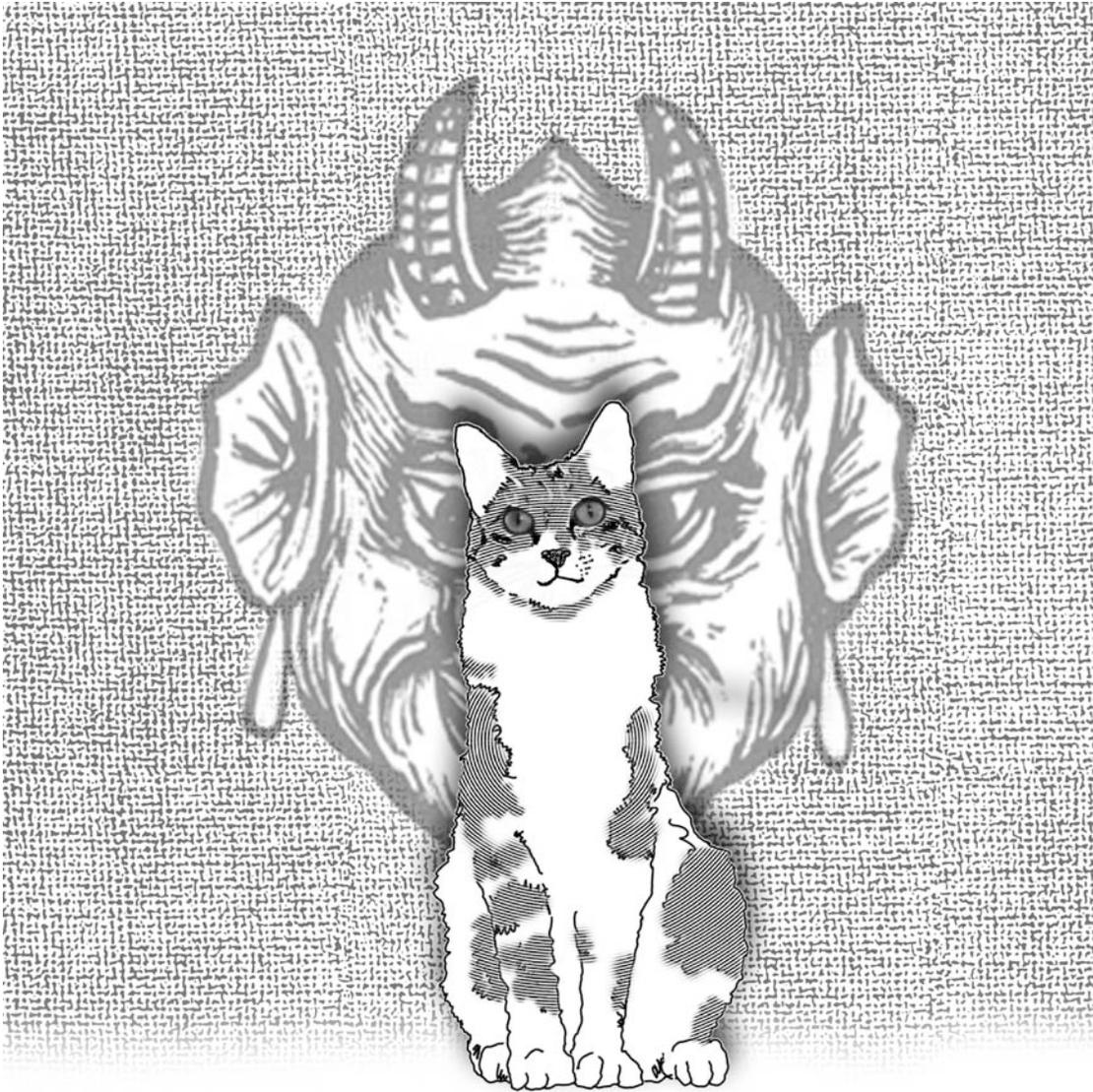
An hour later.

“What’s that smell?” asked the male home-owner as soon as he walked inside.

“Oh no, not again ... Freddddddd...”







Un quelque chose

(A something)

Few cats have ever seemed as much at peace with the universe as *Monsieur le Koko*. From the moment the indigo-grey tabby kitten was found sitting in a communal food bowl at the Westbank Mardi Gras Boulevard rescue shelter, to the next-day discovery that he was a boy – he had been initially named after blues singer Koko Taylor on the premise that he was female – he had offered those around him nothing but a constant, warm joy and trust.

When he was presented with a baby sister, a lovely tortoiseshell/calico named Zoë, he welcomed her and helped reinforce her blossoming personality.

When he was moved to a new house in the Riverbend/West Carrollton neighborhood Uptown, he adapted and accepted the place as his own.



During the day, if the weather was right, he would sleep in the shady back yard, often flipping onto his back while contentedly dozing, and coming in for dinner covered in leaves.

When the weather wasn't as perfect, he would curl up with Zoë on the carpet, wondering what was on the menu for dinner, and the two of them would purr loudly, in concert.

Koko was one happy tabby.

Twelve contented years came and went, each night passed with Koko's sleeping head wedged on his human's shoulder, the cat's extended snores resonating as a soft "Kaaay- *fuuurt*." His human liked the sound, and seemed to sleep better because of it. Koko never moved once he went to sleep at night, his long grey body extended to stretch along the man's right side to below his waist, the cat poised just there until morning.

Koko loved to sleep. *J'aime dormir*, he would say every morning as he awoke. He slept soundly, off and on, for a dozen years.

But during the opening month of the thirteenth, his treasured sleep grew troubled.

There was a *something*, something new traversing the darkness of each night. Physical and spiritual commotions.

Sure enough, he decided, *there are spirits of some sort in the house*.

Koko was quite positive of that, even though he had never experienced *un esprit*. No matter. It wasn't an issue he worried about to excess. They were simply there, like household smells.

Though they could be a nuisance.

He would awake with a start in the middle of the night, knowing that a disturbance that had brought him up out of his comfortable sleep. It was now just disconnected vibrations, and had nothing to do with the bed, the rooms, the humans, his sister, the litter box or his tuna supply, so he would let it go. But Koko did not like losing his rest, no matter the reason, or how ethereal the source of disorder. Even if it was a phenomenon unreal to humans, it was real enough to him.

There was, however, proof: he found that his ears always tingled when he experienced a *something*. True also, the sound, the vibe, originated not in the bed, not in the room. In the house.

A something.

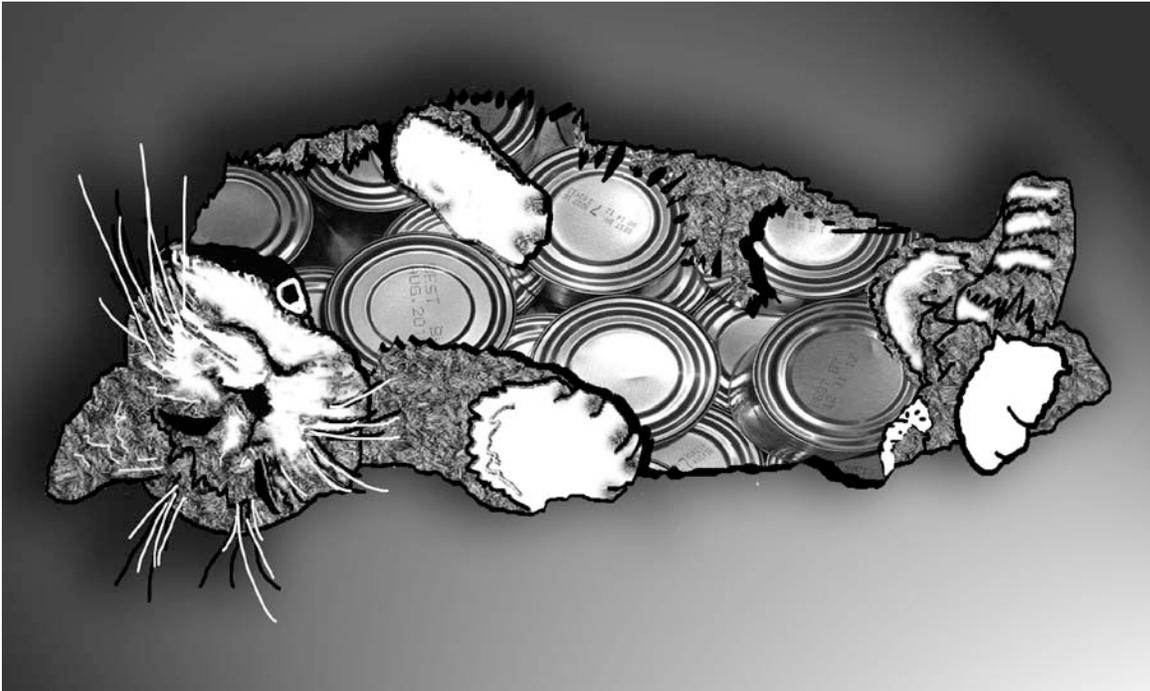
Though the humans never seem to notice.

He thought that the perpetrators might possibly be traveling room to room inside the crumbling old structure's thick, badly-insulated walls. There had been

mice in there once, but he himself had plotted and executed a plan to flush them out. And catch them. He was known throughout the block as a substantial mouser, and not to be trifled with in such matters as hunting intruders.

If they keep waking me up, I will catch these somethings too, he thought somberly. I will catch them.

Je les attraperai, he asserted.



The third time a *something* noise happened, Koko had been enjoying a most pleasant dream about ingesting a vast number of cans of his favorite, light chunks of fragrant *thon*, tuna packed in water. With a picture of a jumping fish on the outside. The humans called it TOO-nah. But he still pictures it as the savory Gallic *thon*. *Why waste an extra syllable on something so basic?* he often wondered.

But losing the happy fish imagery, he awoke in quite a grumpy state.

“*Mrowf!*” he said aloud, jumping down from the bed, and almost waking his human. It was an impolite term he seldom used, and never, ever without provocation. Luckily, his bed companion had not stirred.

“*Mrowf!*” he said again. He was quite angry, for what was possibly the first time in his life.

That’s it. I have had it with these bad manners! Deprive a cat of his peace and quiet, will they? he steamed.

He began to slink, hunting fashion, though the darkness of the upstairs halls, all his senses alert and ready. He was ready for whatever *something* was out there, so content with his prowess that he had to consciously suppress purring.

Down the hall, down the stairs. Seven steps, landing, turn left. Eight steps, landing, turn left. Three and the ground floor. He knew how many stairs there were and their configuration.

He was on the trail, the mighty tracker, his teeth bared, his claws extended.

Then suddenly: “*Mewf.*”

He jumped two feet skyward and three feet to the left, almost knocking over a lamp.

It was Zoë.

He tried to compose himself, regain his dignity in front of his sister. So he licked his butt.

Look what I found, Zoë said. A paper bag.

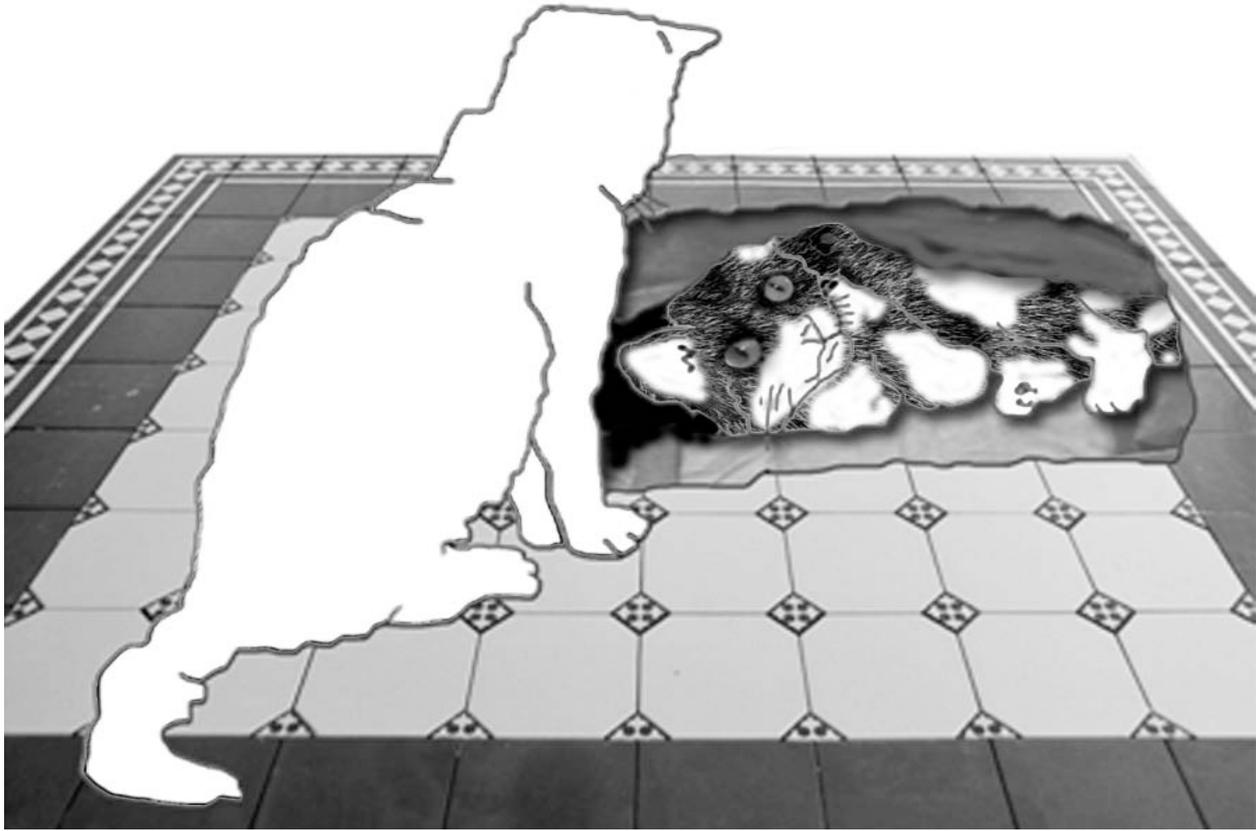
And there it was, fallen to the kitchen floor.

Koko immediately loosened.

He loooovvved paper bags, almost as much as he loved sleeping. He dove inside the large grocery bag and curled up, peering outside. He was very happy, once again.

Zoë stood outside the bag and admired his contented state.

I saw you stalking, she said. What were you after?



Oh, nothing, Koko replied, truthfully. Nothing at all.

Rien du tout.

It was indeed nothing.

And he never heard a *something* again.