

Jemima After Dark

► The first time she transformed, she didn't really know what was happening. She woke in the morning, remembering strange dreams of being in another body, of prowling, hunting... killing.

"I had such a weird dream last night," she said to her mum and brother, over breakfast. "I dreamed I was a cat, prowling the roof-tops at night."

"Wish I had interesting dreams like that," said Sam, enviously. "All I ever dream about is school: it's bad enough to be there all day and then I end up being there all night as well."

"Sounds grim," Jemima laughed. "I'll take the roof-tops any day!"

"You look tired, Jemima," commented Mum. "And do brush your hair. I don't know what you've been doing, but there's a leaf stuck in there."

That night, in her dreams, Jemima became a cat again. She jumped from her window noiselessly, climbing down the tree and slinking off into the night. Despite the dark, she could see everything clearly, making out every shadowy figure moving along the murky streets. She could hear the smallest of noises – squeaks or rustles, and the swoop and flap of wings above her. A mouse ran past her, and suddenly she felt a fierce desire to take it. She stalked silently towards the little animal as it paused to investigate a paper bag. The kill was quick and easy. She sat over the tiny body, feeling intense pleasure, and cleaned herself meticulously, taking care over each whisker. But she noticed that the shadows were shortening and felt a tremor run through her. In the east, the dawn was beginning to break. It was time to return.

"Jemima, you look exhausted," her teacher commented, at lunch time the next day. "In fact, you don't look at all well. Would you like to stay inside? It's very cold out."

"Yes, please," replied Jemima, gratefully. She was exhausted but it was more than that: she felt shivery and itchy, uncomfortable in her skin. She wandered over to the library area, looked at the chairs, then decided to curl up on the large cushions. Her eyes closed... and the next thing she knew, she was waking up to Mum and the teacher looking anxiously down at her.

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“Come on, love, I think we’d better get you home,” said Mum. “Miss Green called me. She said you’ve been asleep for an hour. Off to bed with you, and if you’re still not well in the morning, I’ll take you to the doctor.”

At home, Jemima dozed for a while on the sofa, but as evening approached she started to feel livelier. She wandered into the kitchen.

“Ah, you’re awake, sleepyhead! You look a bit better – you’ve more colour,” her mum said, adding: “There’s pizza, if you feel like it!”

“Not really, thanks,” Jemima replied. “But I fancy a tuna wrap for some reason. Is that ok?”

Jemima settled down in front of the television with her supper and flicked through the channels, looking for something that interested her. A history documentary caught her eye. It was about Ancient Egypt. She watched, transfixed, as the narrator explained that the people of that time worshipped many deities, including a cat goddess named Bastet. This feline goddess was a warrior who defended the sun god, Ra, often against the snake god, Apep – Ra’s deadly enemy. Many of the ancient artefacts depicting Bastet showed her in conflict with Apep. The programme ended and Jemima’s mum insisted she should go to bed. Jemima capitulated; she wasn’t really feeling tired but she figured she could read her book in bed.

The house was completely silent when Jemima woke. She must have dozed off again. She stretched and sat up. Perhaps she’d go and get a glass of milk. She stole quietly downstairs. All the lights were off and the doors were shut and locked. She shivered, feeling again that strange itch in her skin. Outside, the moon was full, drenching the garden with silver light. Jemima felt a sudden urge to go out so she unlocked the back door and stepped into the cool night air.

Without realising it, she had dropped down low, onto all fours. Jemima prowled along the garden path, her senses alert to every sound and every movement. Was she dreaming again? It felt so real to her. She was drawn towards the old shed: its dark shadows looked like a fruitful hunting ground. As she approached silently, she thought she saw two eyes glint from a crevice below the door. She crouched and crept forwards. Her intended prey was ready for her, though: it slithered silently from its hole and raised its body, poised to strike.