**I Love Little Pussy**

Isaac Asimov

George and I were sitting on a park bench on a perfect late spring day when a rather ordinary tabby cat wandered into our vicinity. I knew there were feral cats in the park that would be dangerous to approach, but this specimen had the inquisitive look of a tame pussy. Since I am proud of the fact that cats are attracted to me, I held out my hand and sure enough she sniffed at it and allowed me to stroke her head.

I was rather surprised to hear George mutter, “Wretched little beast.”

“Don’t you like cats, George?” I asked.

“Would you expect me to, in the light of my sad his­tory?” he said, sighing heavily.

“I know your history is sad,” I said. “Inevitably so, considering your character, but I didn’t know that cats had a role in it.”

“That,” said George, “is because I never told you of my second cousin, Andromache.”

“Andromache?”

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Her father [said George] was a classical scholar, hence the name. He also had a little money, which he left to Cousin Andromache on the occasion of his early death and she, by shrewd investment, considerably increased it.

He did not include me in his bounty. I was a child of five at the time of his death and he could scarcely have left me anything outright, but a more generous soul would have set up a trust fund.

As I grew older, however, I realized that Cousin Andro­mache, who was 22 years older than 1, might well prede­cease me. It did occur to me—for I was a precocious lad, thoughtful and far-sighted—that, in that case, I might re­ceive a sizable share of the loot.

—Yes, provided, as you say, that I sucked up to her. Please do not try to anticipate my words, however, for that is not the phraseology I intended to use. What I was going to say was that I realized I might inherit a portion of her estate if I gave her the warmth and affection she so richly deserved.

As it happened, Cousin Andromache needed warmth and affection not only richly, but also desperately. When I was still in my teens and she was approaching forty, I realized that she was a dedicated spinster, untouched by human hands. Even at my tender age, I found the situation under­standable. She was tall and rawboned, with a long plain face, large teeth, small eyes, limp hair, and no figure worth mentioning.

I said to her once, out of a natural curiosity to determine how unlikely an event might be and yet come to pass, “Cousin Andromache, has any fellow ever asked you to marry him?”

She turned a threatening face on me and said, “Asked me to marry *him?* Hah! I’d like to see some fellow ask me to marry *him!”*

(I rather thought she would indeed like to see it happen, but J had early reached the years of discretion and did not put the thought into words.)

She went on, “If any man ever has the *gall* to ask me to marry *him,* I’ll give *him* what for. I’ll show *him* a thing or two. I’ll teach *him* to approach a respectable woman with any of his lollygagging notions.’’

I didn’t quite see what was lollygagging about a marriage proposal, or what might be in it to offend a respectable woman, but I didn’t think it would be wise—or even safe— to ask.

For a few years, I kept hoping that some person, perverse enough to be interested in Cousin Andromache, might in­deed make a suggestion or two because I wanted to see what she would do—while I remained at a safe distance, to be sure. There seemed, however, no chance of that; Not even her gathering wealth seemed to suffice to make her an object of marriageability to the male half of the population. One and all, it seemed, weighed the price that would have to be paid, and one and all turned away.

An abstract consideration of the situation showed me that it was exactly what 1 wanted. A Cousin Andromache without husband and without children would be less apt to dismiss a second cousin as a testamentary possibility. Furthermore, since she was an only child, the vicissitudes of life had left her with no relative closer than I was. That seemed an appropriate situation for me, since it meant I didn’t have to work too hard at supplying affection. A little bit, now and then, to reinforce my position as the natural heir, would be quite enough.

When she passed that fortieth milestone, however, it must have seemed to her that if no human male wished to dare her wrath with a proposal of marriage, she would make use of a non-human companion, instead.

She disliked dogs, because she had the notion that, one and all, they lusted to bite her. I would have liked to reassure her that no dog, however gaunt, would find her a toothsome morsel, but I had the feeling this would not reassure her, and would cripple me, so I kept silent on the matter.

She also thought that horses were too large for comfort, and hamsters too small, so she finally persuaded herself that what she wanted was a cat.

Thereupon, she obtained a little grey female kitten of nondescript appearance and bestowed every bit of her un­gainly affection upon it.

With an appalling lack of even a modicum of wit, she named the kitten “Pussy” and that name was retained by the cat forever after, despite changes in size and tempera­ment.

What’s more, she took to cuddling the kitten and saying, in a revoltingly hoarse sing-song:

*“I love little pussy, her coat is so warm*

*And if I don’t tease her, she’ll do me no harm.*

*I’ll pet her and stroke her, and give her some food,*

*And pussy will love me because I’m so good.”*

It was simply nauseating.

I won’t conceal from you, old man, that I was quite perturbed at first. Thoughts danced through my mind of besotted old maids who left all their money to their pam­pered, uncaring pets.

It did occur to me, as to whom would it not, that the kitten could easily be kidnapped and drowned, or taken to the zoo and fed to the lions, but then Cousin Andromache would merely get another.

Besides, she might suspect me of a hand in the felicide. Considering the paranoia peculiar to spinsters, I knew that it was perfectly possible for her to get it into her head that I was primarily after her money and that she could interpret many things in that light and come fearsomely near the truth. In fact, I strongly suspected that she had already gotten it into her head.

It occurred to me, therefore, to invert matters. Why not display a passionate love of the kitten? I took to playing moronic games with it, dangling a piece of string for it to fight with, stroking it (sometimes, a little longingly, in the region of its neck), and feeding it tid-bits—sometimes even (when Cousin Andromache was watching) from my own plate.

I must say it worked. Cousin Andromache softened dis­tinctly. I presume she reasoned that I couldn’t possibly be after Pussy’s money, for she had none, so she chalked it up to the pure and unalloyed love I had for all of God’s creatures. I helped strengthen that notion by telling her, in fervent tones, of how pure my love for them was. It made her accept my love for her with fewer fears concerning any ulterior motives I happened to have.

However, the trouble with a kitten’s that eventually it becomes a cat.—Oh, did Ogden Nash say that also? Well, my best bits are constantly being stolen. I’m quite resigned to it.

I don’t know, old man, if you have ever owned a cat, but with age, they grow larger, more self-centered, more self-assured, more contemptuous of their owners, more in­ert, more utterly uninterested in anything but food and sleep. The last thing on their contemptible little minds is the com­fort and peace of mind of the person who feeds them.

In addition, Pussy grew rather ill-tempered. It had always seemed to me that tabby cats are comparatively placid and that it is the tomcats who are aggressive. It was clear, however, that Pussy had the disposition of a tomcat, despite her sex,—and an unaltered tomcat at that. What’s more, she seemed quite intolerant of me and would deliberately go out of her path in order to pass near me and scratch me surreptitiously. I tell you, old man, I could almost believe the beast could read my mind.

Considering Pussy’s disposition, it is not at all surprising that Cousin Andromache went into a small decline. I found her in tears one day, or as close to tears as her tough and scraggy temperament would allow her to be.

“Oh, Cousin George,” she said to me, “Pussy doesn’t love me.”

Pussy was, at the time, sprawled in comfort five feet away and was looking at Cousin Andromache with haughty distaste—its usual expression except when it looked at me, at which time the expression became one of settled hate.

I called the creature to my side, whereupon it favored me with a sneer and a bit of a snarl and stayed where it was. I strode to her and picked her up. She weighed 14 pounds of solid inertia and the task was not an easy one, particularly since she kept adjusting her right forepaw (the most dan­gerous one) into a position where a rapid swipe could be made.

I clutched both her forepaws to prevent that, whereupon she hung in such a way as to double the pull of gravity upon her. I believe that only cats and truly obnoxious human infants know the secret and I am constantly surprised that scientists do not investigate the phenomenon.

I placed her in Cousin Andromache’s lap, pointed at the tableau and said, “See, Cousin Andromache, Pussy loves you.”

But I had taken my mind off the malignant devil, so that she had the chance of biting my pointing finger, and promptly did so to the bone. She then got off Cousin An­dromache’s lap and walked away.

Cousin Andromache wailed, “You see, she doesn’t love me!” Characteristically, she said nothing about my mas­sacred finger.

I sucked bitterly at the damage and said, “That’s the way cats are. Why not give Pussy to someone you hate and get a new kitten.”

“Oh, no,” said Cousin Andromache, turning on me one of her censorious looks. “I love little Pussy. Isn’t there some way of training a cat to display affection?”

I longed to make some clever comment to the effect that it would be easier to train Cousin Andromache to be pretty, and was able to suppress the longing only because a brilliant idea had illuminated the interior of my skull.

I had recently formed my friendship with Azazel, whom I may have mentioned to you.—Oh, I did? Well, all right. You needn’t add “ad nauseum” merely to display your knowledge of Latin.

In any case, why shouldn’t I use Azazel’s abilities in this respect? What was the use of having a two-centimeter ex­traterrestrial being of advanced technological abilities on call, so to speak, if one didn’t make use of it?

I said, “Cousin Andromache, I believe I could train Pussy to show you affection.”

*“You?”* she said, nastily. It was a word, and an into­nation, she had used on me before, and I often thought how effectively I would resent it if I were only in a position to do so safely.

But the idea was looking better and better to me as I pictured Cousin Andromache’s gratitude to me if I could pull it off.

“Cousin Andromache,” I said, earnestly, “let me have Pussy for one day—*one day.* I will then bring back a loving Pussy who will ask for nothing better than to sit in your lap and pun in your ear.”

Cousin Andromache hesitated. “Are you sure you will be kind to her while you have her. You know, Pussy is a very sensitive creature, shy and gentle.”

Yes, indeed, about as shy and gentle as a particularly irritated grizzly bear.

“I would take very good care of her, Cousin Andro­mache,” I murmured insinuatingly.

And, in the end, Cousin Andromache’s longing for an affectionate Pussy overcame her uncertainties and she gave her permission with many an injunction to keep the little thing from being harmed by the cruel, outside world.

Of course, I had to buy a cage first, one with bars as thick as my thumb. This I felt might retain Pussy, if she didn’t get too angry, and off we went together.

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Azazel didn’t get as angry in those days as he does now when I call him up. He was curious about Earth in those days.

On this occasion, though, what he was, was terrified. He screamed all but ultrasonically. It pierced my eardrums like an icepick.

“What’s the matter?” I said, my hands over the affected organs.

“That creature.” Azazel’s tail pointed to Pussy. “What is it?”

I turned to look at Pussy. It had flattened itself at the bottom of the cage. Its wicked green eyes stared at Azazel with fixed longing. Its tail twitched slowly and then it launched itself at the bars of the cage, which shook and rattled. Azazel screamed again.

“It’s just a cat,” I said, soothingly. “A little kitten.”

“Put me in your pocket,” shrieked Azazel. “Put me in your pocket.”

On the whole, that seemed a good idea. I plunked him into my shirt-pocket where he trembled like a tuning fork and Pussy, angered and puzzled at his disappearance, spat her displeasure.

Finally, I could make out coherent words from within my pocket.

“Oh, my supple tail,” moaned Azazel. “It is just like a drakopathan—just like. They’re ferocious beasts that bite and claw and tear, but this cat thing is much bigger and more ferocious by the look of it. Why have you exposed me to this, O Excrescence of a Rubbishy Planet?”

“O Fearless Master of the Universe,” I said, “it is pre­cisely in connection with this animal, whose name is Pussy, that I need a demonstration of your matchless might.”

“No, no,” came his muffled cry.

“It is to make him a better cat. I want Pussy to love my Cousin Andromache who owns the animal. I want Pussy to give my cousin affection and tenderness and sweet­ness—”

Azazel poked a frightened eye over the top of the pocket and stared at Pussy for a moment. He said, “That creature has no love in it for anything but itself. That is quite obvious from its C-aura. ”

“Exactly! You must add love for Cousin Andromache.”

“What do you mean, add love. Have you never heard of the Law of Conservation of Emotion, you sub-technological dolt. You can’t add love. You can only transfer it from one object within a creature’s emotional nexus to another.”

“Do so,” 1 said. “Take from the superfluity of love Pussy devotes to herself and fashion a strong attachment to Cousin Andromache.”

“Taking from the self-love of that super-drakopathan is a task too formidable. I have seen my people strain their intensifiers permanently at lesser tasks.”

“Then take the love from elsewhere in Pussy, O Super­lative One. Do you wish word to get out that you failed a challenge so small?”

Vanity was, of course, Azazel’s besetting fault, and I could see the possibility I had mentioned was gnawing at him.

He said, “Well, I will try. Do you have a likeness of your cousin? A good likeness?”

I certainly had, though I doubt that any photograph of Cousin Andromache could be both a likeness and good at the same time. Putting that philosophical matter to one side, I had a large cabinet photograph of her that I always placed in a prominent position when she came on a visit. I did have to take the fig tree out of the living room on those occasions, though, for the photo had a tendency to wither its leaves.

Azazel looked at the picture dubiously, and sighed. “Very well,” he said, “but remember that this is not magic, but science. I can only work within the limits of the Law of Conservation of Emotion.”

But what did I care for Azazel’s limits of action as long as he did his job?

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The next day I brought Pussy back to Cousin Andro­mache. Pussy had always been a strong and malevolent cat, but her indifference to others had induced a customary ap­athy that had kept her evil nature within bounds. Now, apparently, with her sudden wild love for Cousin Andro­mache frustrated by the absence of her object of affection, she had turned into a demon. She made it quite plain that, were it not for the bars of her cage, which gave dangerously under her pressure, she would tear me into shreds, and I was sure she could do it.

Pussy’s mood changed completely, however, when she spied her mistress. The spitting, snarling, slashing devil became at once a panting, purring, picture of delight. She turned on her back, exposing a massively sinewy belly that she clearly wanted scratched.

Cousin Andromache, with a cry of delight, placed a finger through the bars to oblige. I then opened the gate and Pussy went sailing out into Cousin Andromache’s waiting arms, purring as loudly as a truck going over a cobbled road, and striving to strop its rasping tongue on my cousin’s leathery cheek.

I will draw the curtain over what followed, because it will not bear description. Suffice it to say that, among other things, Cousin Andromache said to the vile cat, “And did you miss your loving Andromache-Womickey?’’

It was enough to make me vomicky, let me tell you.

Stolidly, however, I remained, for I was waiting to hear what I wanted to hear and, finally, Cousin Andromache looked up with a pallid glitter in her opaque little eyes and said, “Thank you, Cousin George. I apologize for doubting you, and I promise you I won’t forget this to my dying day and will then make you a suitable return.”

“It was my pleasure, Cousin Andromache,” I said, “and I hope your dying day is far, far in the future.”

What was more, if she had at that moment consented to settle a goodly sum on me effective immediately, I believe I would actually have meant what I said.—Within limits.

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I stayed away from Cousin Andromache for a while, not wishing to push my luck, since my presence in her vicinity had, in the past, always seemed to sour her.—I don’t know why.

I did phone her every now and then, though, just to make sure all was well, and, to my continuing delight, all *was* well. At least, she would each time trill coyly into my ear, “1 love little Pussy”, and then cite nauseating details of the cat’s affectionate behavior.

x Then, about three months after I had brought back Pussy, Cousin Andromache called and asked me to drop in for lunch. Naturally, under the circumstances, Cousin An­dromache’s wish was my law, so I hurried over at the set time. Since she had sounded cheerful on the phone, I had no apprehensions.

Nor did I have any when I entered her apartment, even though I nearly slipped to destruction on the throw-rug she kept on her polished floor near the entrance for what I could only assume were homicidal reasons. She greeted me with what was intended, I imagine, as a jolly grin.

“Come in, Cousin George,” she said. “Say hello to little Pussy.”

I looked down at little Pussy and shied in horror. Little Pussy, perhaps because it was so full of love, had grown still farther, and at a rapid pace. She seemed nearly three feet along exclusive of lashing tail and I judged her to weigh, conservatively, twenty-five pounds of whipcord and gristle. Her eyes were flat, her mouth was open in a silent snarl, her eye-teeth gleamed like burnished needles, and her eyes, as they glared at me, were filled with indescribable loathing. She stood between Cousin Andromache and me quite as though guarding the silly woman against any false move on my part.

I dared make no move at all, for who knew what that monstrous creature might consider false.

I tried to be strong, but there was a distinct quaver in my voice as I said, “Is Pussy safe, Cousin Andromache?”

“Perfectly safe,” said Cousin Andromache, giggling rather in the same fashion a rusty hinge would, “for she knows you are a relative and mean me well.”

“Good,” I said, hollowly, wondering if it were possible for Pussy to read my mind. I decided she couldn’t or I would not at that moment have been alive, I’m sure.

Cousin Andromache seated herself on the couch and mo­tioned me to take the armchair. However, I waited till Pussy had also jumped on the couch and had placed her head in Cousin Andromache’s lap in luxurious abandon, before dar­ing to move sufficiently to sit down myself.

“Of course,” said Cousin Andromache, “my loving little Pussy is just a little unreasonable when she thinks someone is trying to harm me. A couple of weeks ago, the newsboy threw the paper just as I was coming out the door. It hit me on the shoulder. It didn’t really hurt, but Pussy was after him like a flash. If he hadn’t pedalled his bicycle at top speed, I really don’t know what would have happened to him. Now the boy won’t return and I have to go out every morning and buy the paper at a newsstand. It is com­fortable to know, though, that I’m protected from any mug­ger or burglar.”

At the words “mugger or burglar”, Little Pussy seemed to be reminded of me, for she turned to look at me and her eyes blazed with the fires of Hell.

It seemed to me I saw what had happened. After all, hate is negative love.

Pussy had had a mild hatred for everything and everyone but herself and, just possibly, Cousin Andromache. To in­crease Pussy’s love for Andromache, Azazel, following the dictates of the Law of Conservation of Emotion, had to withdraw love from all other objects. Since that love was already negative, it grew more negative than ever. And since Azazel had added love with no sparing hand, the other loves grew *much* more negative. In short, Pussy now hated every­one and everything with an extravagant hatred that had strengthened and enlarged her muscles, sharpened her teeth and claws, and turned her into a killing machine.

Cousin Andromache chattered on. “Last week,” she said, “Pussy and I were out for a morning stroll and we met Mr. Walsingham with his Doberman-pinscher. I had every intention of avoiding him and crossing the street, but the dog had seen Pussy and snarled at the little innocent creature. Pussy didn’t seem to mind, but it frightened me— I don’t like dogs at *all—*and I’m afraid I let out a small shriek. That activated dear little Pussy’s protective instinct, and she fell on the dog at once. There was no hope of separating them and the dog, I understand, is still at the vet’s. Mr. Walsingham is trying to have Pussy declared a dangerous animal, but of course it was the dog that took the initiative and Pussy was merely acting in my defense.”

She hugged Pussy as she said that, placing her face in actual contact with the cat’s canines, and with no perceptible nervousness. And then she got to the real reason for the invitation to lunch.

She simpered horribly and said, “But I called you here to give you some news I felt I should tell you personally and not on the telephone.—I have a gentleman caller.”

“A what!” I jumped slightly, and Pussy at once rose and arched its back. I quickly froze.

I have since thought it out. It seems clear that the sensation of being loved—even if only by a cat out of Golgotha— had softened Cousin Andromache’s sinewy heart and made her ready to gaze with eyes of affection on some poor victim. And who knows? Perhaps the consciousness of being loved had changed her inner being to the point of making her seem marginally toothsome to someone particularly dim of vision and particularly lacking in taste.

But that was a later analysis. At the time Cousin Andro­mache broke the news, my keen mind quickly grasped the vital point—my prosperous relative might possibly have someone else to whom to leave her cash and possessions.

My first impulse was to rise from my seat, seize Cousin Andromache, and shake some sense of family responsibility into her. My second impulse, following a millisecond later, was not to move a muscle. Pussy’s hate-filled eye was on me.

“But Cousin Andromache,” I said, “you always told me that if any fellow came lollygagging around you, you’d show *him\* Why not let Pussy show him? That will fix him.”

“Oh, no, Hendrik is *such* a nice man and he loves cats, too. He stroked Pussy, and Pussy *let* him. That’s when I knew he was all right. Pussy is a good judge of character.”

I suppose even Pussy would have trouble matching the look of hatred I let *her* have.

“In any case,” said Cousin Andromache, “Hendrik is coming over tonight and I believe he will propose that we formalize conditions by getting married. I wanted you to know.”

I tried to say something, but couldn’t. I tell you I felt as though I had been thoroughly emptied of my internal organs and I was nothing but hollow skin.

She went on, “I want you also to know, Cousin George, that Hendrik is a retired gentleman, who is quite well off. It is understood between us that, if I predecease him, none of my small savings will go to him. They will go to you, dear Cousin George, as the person who turned Pussy into a loving and efficient companion and protector for me.”

Someone had turned the sun and the daylight back on again and all my internal organs were in place once more. It occurred to me, in the merest trice, that if Hendrik pre­deceased Cousin Andromache, his estate would be very likely added to hers, and would also eventually come to me.

I said, ringingly, “Cousin Andromache. Your money does not concern me. Only your love and your future hap­piness do. Marry Hendrik, be happy, and live forever. That’s all I ask.”

I said it with such sincerity, old fellow, that I came within this much of convincing myself I meant it.

And then, that evening—

I wasn’t there, of course, but I found out about it later. Hendrik—seventy, if he was a day, a little over five feet tall and pushing a hundred and eighty pounds in weight— came to call.

She opened the door for him, and skipped skittishly away. He threw his arms wide, called out, “My love!”, advanced heavily, slipped on the throw-rug, went hurtling forward into Cousin Andromache feet-first, and bowled her over.

That was all Pussy needed. She knew an attack on her mistress when she saw one. By the time the screaming Andromache pulled the screaming Pussy off screaming Hen­drik, it was too late for any hope of a romantic marriage proposal that night. It was indeed very nearly too late for anything at all that would involve Hendrik.

Two days later, I visited him at the hospital at Cousin Andromache’s hysterical request. He was still bandaged to the eyebrows and a team of doctors were discussing the various possible strategies of skin-grafting.

I introduced myself to Hendrik, who wept copiously, drenching his bandages, and begged me to tell my fair relative that all this was a visitation upon him for being unfaithful to his first wife, Emmeline, dead these seventeen years, and for even dreaming of marrying anyone at all.

“Tell her,” he said, “we will always be the dearest of friends, but I dare not ever see her again, for I am but flesh and blood and the sight of her might arouse loving thoughts and I would then once more be attacked by a grizzly bear.”

I carried the sad news to Cousin Andromache, who took to her bed at once, crying out that through her doing, the best of men had been permanently maimed—which was undoubtedly true.

The rest, old man, is unalloyed tragedy. I would have sworn that Cousin Andromache was incapable of dying of a broken heart, but a team of specialists maintained that that was exactly what she proceeded to do. That was sad, I suppose, but the unalloyed tragedy I refer to was that she had had time to alter her will.

In the new will, she expressed her great affection for me and her certainty that I was far too noble to concern myself over a few pennies so that she left her entire estate of $300,000 not to me, but to her lost love, Hendrik, hoping it would make up to him for the suffering and the medical bills he had incurred because of her.

All this was expressed in terms so affecting that the lawyer who read the will to me wept uncontrollably and so, as you can well imagine, did I.

However, I was not entirely forgotten. Cousin Andro­mache stated in her will that she left me something she knew I would value far more than the paltry dross of cash. In short she had left me Pussy.

George just sat there, staring numbly at nothingness and I couldn’t help saying, “Do you still have Pussy?”

He started, focussed on me with an effort, and said, “No, not exactly. The very day I received her, she was trampled by a horse.”

“By a horse!”

“Yes. The horse died of its wounds the next day. A shame, for it was an innocent horse. It’s fortunate, on the whole, that no one had seen me open Pussy’s cage and shake her into the horse’s stall.”

His eyes glazed over again, and his lips mouthed, silently: Three—hundred—thousand—dollars !

Then he turned to me and said, “So can you lend me a tenner?”

What could I do?