

That Ain't Tarzan

Like most cats, Tarzan was misnamed. This often happens when you let kids name pets. Dogs, given their essential *dogginess*, don't care one way or another what you call them, as long as food appears by the end of the day. Give them food and they will overlook the dullness of the person who unironically calls them Rover, Spot or Sarge.

Cats, of course, are different. They will not respond to *any* name you bestow upon them, mainly because the name will be incorrect. Not only are Fluffy, Puffy and Princess patronizing, they're also unforgivably unimaginative names. A cat may actually feel fluffy or even puffy to the touch, but if you're so insipid to name it Fluffy or Puffy, that cat will then have your number. She will turn a weary eye upon you and know: *substandard*.

I suppose Tarzan is a tad more imaginative than Lucky, Midnight or the brain-dead, Kitty, but it still fails as a name. Why? Because the next-door neighbor's cat, named Tarzan by their five-year-old autistic boy, is in no way connected to Edgar Rice Burroughs' legendary ape man of the jungle, nor remotely akin to the sinewy and—let's be frank—vaguely *louche* actor, Johnny Weissmuller, who portrayed Tarzan in the 1930s and '40s movie franchise.

Observe: *felis catus*, the common house cat. Note how she walks. There are exceptions, of course. There are always exceptions. But in general, the farther domesticated cats move beyond their habitual territory—usually a fairly small area—the more skittish they become. Cats are *extremely* wary, no surprise there. They're highly attuned hunters equipped with ultra-refined senses: infrared night vision; hypersensitive hearing that makes humans, by contrast, stone deaf; scent capabilities that we can't even begin to imagine. If an astronaut opened a can of tuna on the moon, every cat on Earth would halt in its tracks and gaze skyward, drooling. Then there's that "sixth sense" of theirs, the stuff of legend.

With their super-heightened senses humming at full intensity 24/7 it's no wonder that cats

skulk around like amphetamine junkies cranked on dirty meth. The slightest surprise—the sound of a neighbor starting his lawn mower—can trampoline a cat ten feet vertically, or blast it horizontally like a fur cannonball.

Skulking and stalking: two cat specialties. When not torturing mice or small birds, cats often skulk and stalk, searching for mice and small birds to torture. They slink, low to the ground, head swiveling panther-like, always on the lookout for the weak and the unwary.

Tarzan though, refuses to slink. Slinking is not in his repertoire. It's as if he's determined that slinking reveals a wariness that might suggest an element of fear. Fear? Tarzan will have none of it. To watch him patrol his territory is to see a demonstration of devil-may-care fearlessness. He strides up to Rottweillers with body language that says, "Step aside fool, you're in my way!"

Tarzan is a weird looking cat, too. Not your common black-and-white tom or even your all black sleek mini-jaguar. Not an orange or silver tabby, Maine Coon, calico or Siamese, Tarzan's coloration looks more like a cow. Not a black-and-white Holstein as you might guess, but Guernsey-like: white, and mottled with tawny, butterscotch-tan splotches. And his eyes are suspiciously uncatlike. They're not the yellow, green or blue you usually see in cats but are more gray-brown; it's hard to be sure exactly what color they are because he's always glancing around so shiftily you never get a good look at him. And depending on the light, whether it's sunny or overcast, day or night, the color of his eyes seems to shift along with his moods.

If I could speak Cat, I'd like to ask Tarzan, "What do you make of the English expression, 'Curiosity killed the cat?'" I imagine he might reply, "Bullshit. Timidity killed that punk-ass bitch." Because he roams so far and wide, Tarzan's putative "owners" put a collar and tag on him. My neighbor tells me he routinely gets calls from residents and shop owners as far east as Victoria Park, west to Broadview and south to Kingston Road. Unlike common domestic cats, Tarzan's range is similar to that of his much larger cousin, the Siberian tiger, known to cover a hunting area roughly the size of New Jersey.

One hot August afternoon my wife and I were walking back from the Cedarvale outdoor pool. Standing on the curb waiting for a stream of cars to clear Lumsden Avenue, we spotted Tarzan pacing down the sidewalk. Concerned for his safety, my wife suggested I pick him up and carry him across the busy thoroughfare. I was skeptical of making such a move but did so, figuring I'd either get mawled by Tarzan or by my wife if I refused. To my surprise, Tarzan was docile. He hung lax in my arms like he was stoned on cat tranquilizer. The other surprising thing I noticed as I carried him across the street was his weight: this was one heavy cat, inexplicably heavy for his size, like he's made of iron rather than fur and whiskers. And like iron, he felt hard and rugged. This was no soft, fuzzy kitty, but a weirdly dense creature, muscular like a cut boxer pumped on steroids, a mixed martial arts scrapper.

A few weeks later, my wife didn't fare so well with Tarzan. She'd found him down on the Danforth, heedlessly darting among pedestrians, bicylists, skateboarders, cars, trucks and buses. When he cut out between two SUVs and galivanted onto Danforth Avenue—a suicidal move if ever there was one—my wife's protective instincts took over: she scooped him up to escort him across the street. She still has scars on her belly and arms—deep, vicious slashes carved by his high-speed food processor claws.

Beware of Tarzan. He has a habit of darting into people's houses. When you open the door to check the mail there's a good chance that Tarzan has slipped in, stealthily evading your notice, vanishing down the basement steps to terrorize mice or just lurk in the dark until 4:00 a.m. when he starts caterwauling as if in concert with the Devil himself.

Double-check every time you get into your car as well. At odd times Tarzan has been found curled up in a ball under the passenger's seat, luxuriating in the heat from the manifold, listening to Rush Limbaugh on the radio (you swear you didn't tune that program in), or scarfing down your tuna sandwich while you popped into the dry cleaners.

I've seen him poking around neighbor's porches, jumping up and testing the comfort features of various porch furniture, pawing through potted plants, assessing their potential as convenient latrines. Today I saw him climbing the cedar tree in front of our house,

possibly in pursuit of a squirrel. He had backed himself into an awkward position, then appeared to get tetchy with the tree's dense branches because they discourage easy climbing. He backed down, appearing visibly irritated with the tree's uncooperative nature.

After a year of close observation, I have determined that Tarzan is not, in fact, a cat. I now have reason to believe that this "cat" is, in actuality, the incarnation of a transmigrated soul, a human spirit that has somehow entered the physical body of a cat, and now dwells within it in this lifetime. Scoff if you will, but there is a long-established and deep-rooted belief in cats serving as the physical vessels for souls migrating between psychospiritual realms.

Once I was onto his game I dug deeper into his background. A few trips to the library turned up some interesting facts. Some might call them mere coincidences but I think the evidence speaks for itself. After searching for weeks through archival microfiche files, scanning everything from the society pages to the obituaries, I began to see a curious pattern recurring in the "Police Beat" column. Between the years 1922 and 1926 there was a rash of petty crimes attributed to a drifter going by the name, Giuseppe "Chico" Tablioni (though some reports suggest that this was merely one of several pseudonyms).

Tolerated by the generally forgiving residents of the tightknit East York community, Tablioni drifted in and out of various boarding houses, establishments set up to serve a growing group of itinerant day laborers. When not moving from one temporary shelter to another, Tablioni spent some time in the Don Jail, serving out brief sentences for vagrancy and other misdemeanors. Pickpocket, petty thief, scam artist and grifter; these tended to comprise Mr. Tablioni's MO.

In one report, a young lady by the name of Edwina McGillivray posted bail on behalf of Mr. Tablioni. "He's really not a bad man," she told the bail bondsman. "He can be a bit of a rascal, especially when he drinks too much wine, but he'd never hurt a soul." It's tempting to speculate on the nature of scandal such an occurrence might have stirred up in East York in the 1920s. Some of the more unseemly penny newspapers of the day, those that traded in gossip and innuendo more than factual reporting, were not above casting

aspersions on certain prominent community figures, Miss McGillivray, being one of them.

Known for his frivolous harmonica playing, Mr. Tablioni often delighted his fellow vagabonds around the bonfires that burned nightly throughout the summer as they squatted in the flood plain along the east Don River. Often, “Chico,” as he preferred to be called, would delight youngsters with his clownish shenanigans and tricks of *legerdemain* when he entertained at the local farmer’s market.

“Keep your eye on that fella,” Rodney Allen advised his fellow vendors at the market. “He’s as likely to lift your change purse as perform a card trick for you.”

The silver oxide process used to develop photographs at the time, coupled with the quality of inks used in the newspapers of the day, further corrupted by the aging, faded paper and subsequent transfer onto microfiche acetate, has made it very difficult to determine with certainty the extraordinary picture that illustrated a Sunday edition of the now defunct *East York Picayune*. In what appears to be a forerunner of today’s feature articles examining the lives of “street people,” the old newspaper carried a story about the growing encampments of men bivouacked along the east Don River.

When I compare police mug shots of “Chico” Tablioni with the group picture of men posing around a campfire, I’m struck by the uncanny resemblance to the moustachioed man in the floppy newsboy cap, checked flannel shirt and tattered demalio vest. It absolutely *has* to be Giuseppe “Chico” Tablioni.

So? Well, check out the cat he’s holding—its dirty white coat, mottled with tan spots, its shifty eyes—if that ain’t a spittin’ image of Tarzan, I don’t know what is.