One Thousand Kittens

Catherine Sharpe
One thousand kittens

Inappropriately, I am envious of my daughter’s invisible friends—a thousand kittens at one recent caucus. I cannot stop thinking about them even though we already have a cat and he meets most of my needs for intimacy. With all those kitten friends, Phoebe is apparently never lonely, never without proof of her social skills, never lacking companionship. I didn’t even realize that my daughter could count as high as a thousand, although she is certainly very, very smart. One thousand. That’s plenty. I could be friends with them, too—Phoebe wouldn’t notice.

Although it might not be rewarding. Phoebe came to me in the kitchen the other day, almost crying; I was busy making granola because I live in California and that is what we do when we are not making yogurt or fomenting the homosexual revolution. She complained that her invisible friends were using bad words.

I couldn’t help myself.

“What bad words?” I asked.

“Stupid,” Phoebe said. I immediately felt my gut harden and my knees flex slightly in preparation for battle. I put down the rubber spatula and moved the agave syrup out of harm’s way.

“They said you were stupid?”

“Yes. And I told them it hurt my feelings.” Phoebe blotted her nose with her bare wrist and stood up slightly taller, as she does when she anticipates approval.

“Good, yes! I should say so. And then just walk away. That is mean talk.”

I swirled in overlapping feelings—the urge for vengeance against one thousand thoughtless kittens, fear for my daughter’s fragile self-esteem, delight at the mystery of the imagination, relief that she has this forum for her social experiments.

“Make some new friends, friends with good manners, friends that make you feel good about yourself,” I said. I might have said that a little sharply.

Phoebe returned to the rumpus room, her dismay still easily blotted by my indignation. I followed her, but just with my ears. I could hear her in the next room, the tone if not the content—the rapprochement, some reasoning words, some scolding, and then finally the sounds of meows, barks, and neighs that signaled the return to inclusive play.

I am absorbed by my daughter’s development; this is perhaps the problem of the single-parent/only-child household. The two of you are the dynamic, if you discount the cat. The cat is
not very friendly, really, delivering wicked scratches at random, but we both try to appreciate other aspects of his personality. Meanwhile, Phoebe is the recipient of my undivided loyalty and love and fascination.

When Phoebe was born and physically helpless, just learning how to inhabit her body, I awed at the details of her physicality, the sunken ridge of breastbone, the stubborn patch of cradle cap, her clumsy, meaningless kicks and punches. I watched her consciousness grow as she catalogued reality through her senses—here is a bowl with tasty food, this bowl is a hat and cold things drip over my ears, this bowl is a victim of gravity, landing with a plastic thwap against the tile floor. And now I marvel at the way her consciousness defines itself in relation to others.

Real or imagined.

Phoebe's imaginary friends are not always around. At least I don't think so. When it's just the two of us, we watch TV, ride bikes, run to the grocery store for a few things. Or I organize playdates, drive Phoebe to birthday parties, act the goofy Pied Piper all around the playground after school, abandoning any dignity that might accidentally cling to my persona.

Home from school, Phoebe will sometimes hold class for her invisible friends. She'll sit on the seen-better-days khaki twill couch and read aloud from a book, careful to hold the pages facing out, spread wide, arcing the book right and then all the way to the extreme left. Each of her students gets a good view of the pictures. Lately, she's favored a pocketbook-sized version of *Kittens for Dummies*, in an attempt to connect with the interests and concerns of her audience. Just as she loves stories about herself as a baby, she is sure that her one thousand invisible kitten students want to know all about themselves.

At other times when I ignore demands for TV or access to online games, Phoebe will soon drift into her own little world. I say "little" as if I have some sense of its dimensions, but it is presumptuous to guess with such limited data.

Although in her own world, I can catch snippets of her blow-by-blow narration, sprinkled with dialogue, often including the tags—"she said"—and her reportage—"then all the kittens sat in a big circle around me, whiskers touching." Phoebe innately has a sense of responsibility to an unseen Reader as well as to the entertainment of her one thousand kittens.

Eavesdropping makes me giddy with pride; she makes bold the act of consciousness in relation to others, a narrative trinity of myself, you, and them. The psychic complexity of this construction amazes me, delights me, forces me to reconsider friendship—any relationship—as
foreground a construct of self, not simply someone obliged to take your sad all-hours calls. Phoebe, in her lapse into genius, has performed an act of conscious mitosis—one Phoebe has become one Teacher to a thousand kittens and one Narrator to a whole world, including me. And she is clearly experimenting, working things out, testing the edges of behavior, exploring consequences, even invisible ones.

Or this is my imposition of narrative structure on what otherwise might simply be an only child in a quiet room on a rag rug with a plastic pony.

I worry sometimes, find fault with the real world I'm responsible for managing. Phoebe's apparent need for the company of invisible friends—when I had the chance, should I have pressed more for a brother or sister? I could have stood a little more chaos, a little more love spread a little thinner, but I don't think Phoebe's other mother could. She didn't feel like she had enough to spare, ultimately proving herself right, and split from me.

In my own childhood, I don't remember any invisible friends—it was rarely quiet, I was a barely tolerated immigrant in the rowdy world of my three older brothers. And those three were more like a recalcitrant indigenous population than playmates. I craved my own little world but I don't remember ever achieving adequate barriers. Instead I remember over and over the noise, the combat, the frustration of our failed structures—forts that collapsed on my head, the snow plow swinging by to refill the roadside snow cave it took the entire afternoon to excavate, never enough branches, or twine, or beach towels for my own proper teepee.

Phoebe's one thousand kittens wouldn't necessarily be easier to get along with and I shouldn't covet them; I should keep working on my relationships with my own invisible friends. I also have many visible friends, and I should work on those relationships, too, but they often have jobs, or marriages, or kids with bad colds, or mortgages about to adjust, or too many reality TV shows to watch, or a reductive response to whatever problem I'm trying to articulate with some tenderness and care, responses like "Just exercise more," or, "Why don't you go online?" I love my old friends, but if I spend too much time with them, they marshal historical evidence to support their current analysis of my situation—that I am somehow deliberately disconnected from reality, that it is well past time to "move on." They are often too smart for my own good, do not understand that I am trying to work out something new, or at least a new response to an old problem.

I would not want to neglect my own invisible friends just because my visible ones have one good point—or a thousand.

Sharpe
You¹, my friend, never mind the repetition of my dark moments, as regular as planetary rotation. The sameness! The baseness! The crying in my soupness! You somehow lend your mute support to my deliberations, my perplexity, to my own failed experiments in love. You're reliably nice, so I must assume that you're a little slow, a little stupid, more tolerant than I deserve, with little new to contribute to the conversation. This I don't mind because sometimes it is so hard to hear myself think.

Contrast that with you²—an interrupter of the worst sort. Always coming up with a better word for “sniveling” or “procreation” or “invertebrates,” whatever it is I'm trying to work out. You jump in to finish my sentence before I even know what I want to say. Still, you're a great friend to have help at yard sales—you remember the neighbors’ names, you count out correct change. You quip funny little things when I might otherwise be mute about the mismatched oddments I have for sale in my front yard.

When it comes to my Buddhist friends, you³ are the best. You are light yellow, fuzzy like baby chicks. Maybe you are baby chicks. You chirp sweet things: It's going to be okay! It's okay to not be okay! Ten thousand sorrows! Ten thousand joys! Either is okay! Despite your exclamation marks, you³ are a positive influence.

Some of these invisibles I don't consider friends at all and they all look vaguely like my father. Go back where you all came from. Evil spores. I do not need you all to remind me how I'm teetering on the brink of my next failure. Instead, I try to keep it upbeat. I talk to myself, if I do not have a pen and paper handy. You betcha!

When I'm trying to sound confident, and feel kind of tomboyish, lightly self-deprecating in a team-spirit kind of way, I say things like “betcha” and “gotta”—I'll also address myself in a mock-formal way, like “Good going, Sharpe,” or “Way to make positive change, Sharpe!” I don't actually know why sports demand this last name usage—are teams so often made up of characters with the same first names? Or maybe first names are uncomfortably freestanding, intimate, untethered to heritage—when you talk to yourself, you should at least invoke a genealogy, place yourself in a larger context of forebears and afterbears. And it does sound sporty! Which makes me feel tougher, more resilient. To be honest, I don't talk to myself this way often enough—it feels a little false. Way to drop the ball, Sharpe.

Like Phoebe, some of my invisible friends are not differentiated by names, or individual aspects. They act more like herds—licking their paws one moment, neatly in rows, then dispersing like wild cats, feral creatures intent on food not stories, or order, or affection. The beauty of indiscriminate herds! I can say anything, admit anything, to a bunch of cats.
I admit to a new suspicion about friendship, even all shapes of love, even what I feel for Phoebe and the real cat. This is only natural and to be expected. It is my nature to question. So far all of my theories about the purity of family love and the steadfastness of married love have been resolved as a negative proof, where one resigns oneself to mathematical impossibility, like squaring the circle. It doesn't mean there isn't a problem, only that it can't be solved.

I've had a lot of friends over the years and many of them even liked me, I think. But I kept having to make new ones, because of geography, or saturation, or shifting alliances. Once in high school I had to acquire an entirely new group of friends when my two best girlfriends secured boyfriends and drivers' licenses at exactly the same time. I was a year younger than them, but the feeling of betrayal—an accident of birthdate!—was ageless.

Visible best friends are complicated as they are so often married to your ex-partner's best friend. A few years into the split from Phoebe's other mother, this complicatedness is nobody's fault, I should be clear. Well, perhaps it is my fault. It could be.

My grief did go on and on, like a bad actor with a long monologue. My own little domestic unit, busted up into its components, this was tragedy to me, very Greek, flawed heroine suffers reversal, very much worthy of a huge ululating chorus, very Aristotle-y with a "change from ignorance to awareness of a bond of love or hate." So hard to tell sometimes which was which. Extramarital affairs change everything, and it seems unfair that I never got to have one of my own.

During this protracted suffering, my friends were forced to divide the spoils. Nobody could be the best anything. It was unrealistic, besides which best friends are a type of juvenilia. Adults have polite, satisfying connections with other adults, not strangleholds, not hostage situations. Friendships come and go, should be easy like pairing and unpairing white tube socks.

I have spent some time considering the psychology of friendship and reading some intriguing conclusions based on data collected via social media channels: negative correlations between the number of virtual friends and the failed intimacy of real-world contact, marriages that sink in the ether even as love professed via email bounces easily from shore to shore, studies that show that the happier your friends are, the happier you're likely to be. That last correlation is true for your physique, as well. If your closest connections are with big-boned people, you are likelier to be big-boned, or get that way quickly.

If I make new friends, I should direct my efforts to happier, skinny people. Perhaps with money.
Phoebe asked me the other day if I was her friend. This is not the first time her questions have flummoxed me for a short period of time that seemed endless. I can’t believe it’s my responsibility to explain the difference between friends and family. It seemed unfair; and I couldn’t answer right away.

I was fully prepared to explain why Phoebe could not grow up and marry me or her other mother. There were lots of good explanations within easy reach: a) incest taboo arising from maximizing diversity in the gene pool, b) the current legal definition of marriage, c) significant age difference, d) worries about Alzheimer’s and memory loss in general (I wouldn’t mention that people can easily forget marriage at certain work retreats in New York or Denver), e) I was profoundly afraid to remarry or whatever, f) it would unnecessarily confuse the census-taker. I could also explain that when she was old enough to marry, she might want to start a family of her own.

When you discard your old family to build a new family of your own, you’re kept very busy reversing your parent’s errors. This would be even harder to do if you were also married to one of the parents whose errors you were trying to reverse. Better to make a fresh start with someone who just reminds you of your father or mother, or maybe some cunning recombination of both your parents. This is the proper order. If you are in the circumstance where you are discarding your new family for an even newer family, it becomes too complicated. I avoid that by remaining unattached.

“I feel friendly about you, but we’re different than friends. We’re family,” I parsed with an adverb, which was not the same as answering Phoebe’s question, but I hoped it could be mistaken for an explanation.

“But what if you’re my best friend today?” Then Phoebe tacks because she’s not stupid and complete understanding might be a single question away. “Are you and Mama friends?”

After school, we end up in number six, Terry’s checkout lane at the grocery store. She has a big, tall body with thick torso; a true bosom. Her name is always pinned to her left breast, making her vulnerable to direct address from strangers. I envy the perfect, uniform sheen of her unlined skin as it hugs the arcs and ridges of her cheekbones, brow, and the confident flare of her nostrils. Terry always remembers my daughter’s name even though Phoebe is not labeled—this amazes me at Safeway, the likeliest place in the world for the comfort of anonymity. And Terry always acts surprised and happy to see us, always says, "Look at that big girl! How’s my big girl!"
I love Terry, which is slightly embarrassing, so when I can avoid her line, I do. Have you noticed how niceness can hurt sometimes?

“Look at your precious new baby,” she said right after Phoebe was born, scanning the diapers and Similac. Then, “Look at your angel,” when she scanned the teething biscuits and Gerber and applesauce. “There’s my friend! Phoebe’s such a pretty name, why it sounds like a bird, you mention it,” her hands flying as she bagged the Cheerios and turkey dogs and tubes of yogurt.

I am presumptuous to love Terry; I barely know her, couldn’t imagine her weekly groceries even after all these years. Does she like salted butter or unsalted? But Phoebe is easy with her love, has no unnecessary restrictions placed on her friendly feelings, and no worries about reciprocity.

“Terry! This is line six, line number six is the same number as my classroom and the same as how old I am,” Phoebe says, serious as a fortune teller with the same hushed authority—a subtle excitement vibrates her torso, she presses her hands palm down on the sides of her body; it all does fit together, it all makes sense, there are connections to be made everywhere. We could all so easily be true friends.

“They grow so fast,” she says, and stops to look at me. "You look good, you lose weight?"

Then I felt so good.