

**V&Q
BOOKS**

Sally McGrane is a Berlin-based writer and freelance journalist for *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* magazine, and others. Originally from San Francisco, she has worked as a journalist in Russia and Ukraine. She wrote *Odesa at Dawn*, her second spy novel, in Odesa.

Odesa at Dawn

Sally McGrane

**V&Q
BOOKS**

V&Q Books, Berlin 2022
An imprint of Verlag Voland & Quist GmbH

Copyright © Sally McGrane
Editing: Katy Derbyshire
Copy editing: Angela Hiron
Author photo: © Gordon Welters
Cover photo: Unsplash
Cover design: pingundpong
Typesetting: Fred Uhde
Printing and binding: PBTisk, Příbram, Czech Republic

ISBN: 978-3-86391-338-0

www.vq-books.eu

Prologue

‘Well! I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,’ thought Alice;
‘but a grin without a cat!
It’s the most curious thing I ever saw in my life!’

Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

1

Mr Smiley was a fat, dirty cat, with ragged mouse-coloured fur, mottled with a darker shade of rat. His distinguishing mark, and the reason for his (wholly inappropriate) name was an ancient, jagged scar that ran from his left eye to his right jaw. His apparent indolence was, in fact, a highly-developed gift for intuition: Mr Smiley knew what was coming before it arrived, and made sure to be out of the way – or in the right place.

This talent was, in Mr Smiley’s opinion, the key to his success. Of course, there were other important qualities as well. Brutality, the ability to walk away, a gift for the double cross, a keen understanding of the enemy, a keener understanding of your friends. The scar didn’t hurt, either. As he said: ‘You should have seen the other guy.’ Followed by a long, low, rumbling purr.

Naturally, Mr Smiley understood, thanks to various insipid conversations he had overheard in his long life, that there was a general

belief among the human set that cats could not speak. Pure stupidity! But then Mr Smiley had a generally low opinion of humans. There was a saying among cats: 'The bigger the brain, the less interesting it is to eat.' In all of Odesa, in fact, Mr Smiley knew of only one man, a poet, who truly understood that cats could talk.

This poet – his name was Fishman, *what a delicious idea* – lived in a small dacha at the edge of town and was, according to his nameplate, also some kind of doctor. Every afternoon, patients came to see him. Once inside, they immediately lay down on a red velvet sofa. There, under the dusky eyes of the icons peeping down from the walls of the poet's office – now and then, the odd ray of sun induced a quick gold wink – these humans behaved in a most astounding manner. Instead of curling up for an afternoon catnap, they lay rigid, arms at their sides, and affixed their eyes to the ceiling. And talked. They talked and talked and talked. The poet folded his hands across his stomach, tucked his chin to his chest, and listened. After fifty minutes, these humans stood up again. Then, smiling or weeping, they left.

Afterwards, the poet – a large calm man with a head of white hair, a white beard, very intelligent, with the exception of an inexplicable inclination to feed the trio of wild hedgehogs who waddled into his garden each evening – sat at his computer. There, he typed up a kind of diary, which was – Mr Smiley's spies assured him – read all over the city. The cats weren't certain how the diary was distributed. Not via paper and ink, like in the old days. Some sort of scent, was Mr Smiley's guess. Mysteriously out of the range of feline olfactory detection, emitted when the poet pressed the button on the right side of his keyboard.

Sometimes Mr Smiley read over the poet's shoulder as he typed. The diary described the goings-on in the city: boring (in Mr Smiley's opinion) fights over language; can a Ukrainian writer write in Russian? – *pah! Let's see him write in Cat!* – altercations at the Worldwide Club of the Odesites; the question of Ukrainian nationhood; ghostly visitations; what he ate for dinner. In this densely populated literary landscape, the only sane creature was the poet's own black puss, the desultory Miss Kitty, who ruled the dacha garden with an iron paw (when she could be bothered), and whose crackling, well-placed bon

mots made even a scarred, old battle cat like Mr Smiley chuckle. Of course, there were plenty of human women who talked to cats – in every city, women talked to cats – but the poet did more than talk. He listened. And he understood.

*

It was a hot night, late summer, anxious. A thick darkness had descended to just above the streetlights, which were bright in a patchy way – how had Grisha, the new governor, put it? – ‘Like downtown Tbilisi in 1995.’ Of course, cats like shadows. Still, Mr Smiley agreed the city could use some serious spiffing up.

With a swish, Mr Smiley curled his tail. Pressed his body to a tattered brick façade. Listened. Felt. Became part of. The city had a single consciousness tonight. As if every building and every being breathed the violence in the air. Tourists in hot pants were jumpy. From car windows, the tinny beats were lower and louder than usual; from every corner came the sound of tyres screeching. The scent of burnt rubber. Soviet-made brakes wailing, heartbroken by their own demise. Boys were sensitive; of all the humans, they felt the energy first, and strongest. They revved their engines, sped through the cobblestone intersections, faster, more dangerous than usual.

Mr Smiley was among the few who knew exactly where the explosion the whole city felt coming was going to take place. Humans – the mafia, in particular – thought they knew everything. But who could know more, in this city, than the cats? The pretty orange ones who ingratiated themselves in exchange for fish; the louche white ones, sleeping all day on the sidewalks, the dark, ragged night-time spies who gathered in groups of six or seven, here on Gogol Street, eyes matted with gunk and bugs, awaiting instructions. The cats were everywhere, on every corner, under every café table, beside every terrace. No one knew more than the cats, and none of the cats knew more than Mr Smiley. For one simple reason: he was their boss.

Of course, he should have given this assignment to an underling, someone he could trust – like the muscular Tabby-kitty, or the clever,

vicious Boots. But while all cats could talk, not all cats could make themselves understood to the average human. And this wasn't an average human! No, this was Sima.

Even her name! Ser-a-phi-ma. The fiery angel. Sima to her friends. Simochka to him. How long had he loved her? How could an old alley cat like him even think of love? But since the day Mr Smiley had first caught a glimpse of her long legs, her marmalade tresses, her innocent, yet not entirely innocent smile, Sima had been the one for him. If he were a man! Or she were a cat! She would live like a queen among felines with that golden fur, those shapely limbs. He would make sure of that – if she were his concubine.

He had often thought of just what he would do with – and to – her, but it was no use. As it was, Mr Smiley wasn't sure how she felt about him. Sometimes, it was true, Sima chucked him under the chin and gave him an anchovy if she saw him outside the restaurant. But a lot of women did that. And of course, she had no way of knowing how important he was. How many felines would be thrilled if he showed a tenth – a thousandth – of this interest in them! How they threw themselves, quite literally, at his feet, splayed their hind-quarters. But, no. No, he was no fool. Mr Smiley understood that when Sima looked at him, there was no hint of desire – no, for her, he was just another grubby if somewhat endearing stray. Not even good enough to be a pet.

Mr Smiley buried his anger. It wasn't Sima's fault. None of it was. And he knew what was going to happen here, at her mother's restaurant. 'Angelina's.' Quite a cook, that Angelina! She made a wonderful *forshmak*, a perfect combination of herring filet and apples, sugar, vinegar and eggs, mushed to a pasty consistency, ideally spreadable by knife, or tongue of cat – and she wasn't stingy with the leftovers, either. A generous woman with the elegant proportions of old age – as wide as she was tall – oh, Angelina would have made a wonderful mother-in-law for an outlaw like Mr Smiley, who needed the comforts of family life all the more, given the blood he was obliged to spill ... He swished his tail in anger. Pipe dreams, again! It didn't matter. What mattered – what really mattered – was Sima.

Sima was in danger, and Mr Smiley was going to save her.

When it was time, he jumped up with surprising grace, and ran to the restaurant's back door. It was open. He poked his scarred head inside.

He was rewarded with a sight of Sima, her marmalade hair pulled back, her skirt hiked up as she knelt to scrub the floor of the restaurant's dining room. What thighs! thought Mr Smiley, licking his lips. She turned her head, and in the darkness Mr Smiley saw the birthmark, shaped like a heart, just under her left eye – a marking that, in a cat, would indicate pure blue blood.

The plate-glass window reflected the night like a mirror. 'ASS-HOLE!' A loud squawk caught the cat off-guard for an instant. 'ASS-HOLE!'

Where was that horrible bird? That would be a silver lining! If Jacques the grey parrot, that large handsome creature, spoiled, taunting, sleek, healthy, his feathers shining like polished stone, happened to die – but the cage wasn't in the window where it usually was. The parrot's cry pierced the night again. 'ASSHOLE!' No time for settling old scores, thought Mr Smiley. The cat looked hard at Sima. And concentrated.