

ROSA BY STARLIGHT

Praise for *Rosa By Starlight*:

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‘A magical story, beautifully told and illustrated too. With cats and Venice and – at the end – kindness’
Tom Palmer

‘Even in the darkest of times, there are cats and magic and starlight! This is a book to be treasured – I loved it’
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‘*Rosa by Starlight* is magical not least because of Hilary McKay’s magic touch. From the first line, I was under its spell . . .’ Nicolette Jones

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Illustrated by
Keith Robinson

HILARY MCKAY
ROSA BY
STARLIGHT

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*For Rowan and Emily,
because they both love cats.*

H. M.

*For Benny,
who was the cat's pyjamas.*

K. R.





PROLOGUE

Measured by starlight, twenty years is just a moment. A flicker of a comet's tail.

A brief spinning of the coloured, fragile planets and their pale moon toys.

Twenty years is a small twirl in the great dance, measured by starlight.

In human time, in story time, twenty years is halfway back to a long time ago.

More than seven thousand sunrises. More than fourteen thousand tides.

Twice a childhood.

*

Twenty years before this story there was a girl named Sophie, and a small orange cat.

(*Click*, went a camera, catching them in time.)

Sophie was from England, but the kitten was Italian.

At the end of the holiday, it had to be left behind.

‘Take care of her for me,’ begged Sophie, and they said, ‘*Si, si*, yes, yes, *certo*, of course, *per sempre*, always, *si*.’

‘I will come back,’ said Sophie.

But in twenty years of human time, very little stays the same. Plans change and memories fade. Often promises are forgotten.

Often, but not always.

For twice a childhood, more than seven thousand sunrises and fourteen thousand tides, the orange cat remembered.

And so, for a moment, did the stars.



CHAPTER ONE

ROSA AND BALTHAZAR

Once upon a time, there was a girl who lived in a world where she hoped there was magic. She was eleven years old, and her name was Rosa. Rosa-in-the-garden, her father used to call her, because that was where she liked to be best, but her real name was Rosa Mundi.

At least, she believed it was Rosa Mundi.

Rosa was sure that was how she'd learned to write her



name, in the days when she'd never needed to think about magic, in the time before the accident that had taken her parents away.

Rosa had been not quite four.

For a week or so after the accident, Rosa had been cared for by a series of helpful, worried neighbours. They took it in turns to visit, and they worked very hard, brushing Rosa's hair, making her pancakes, folding her pyjamas, and telling her comforting stories about heaven, which was where they explained that her parents had gone. But as the days went on, the neighbours became slightly less helpful and very much more worried. They were all quite elderly, and the hair-brushing and pancakes and pyjamas and stories were becoming too much. Especially the stories. Due to Rosa's constant demands for more heavenly information, her parents had now been given their own little house (on a cloud), several pets (but definitely not another little girl), and detachable wings of all different

colours, like butterflies.

‘What else, what else?’ asked Rosa desperately, because, despite her shining hair and the pancakes and the neatness of her pyjamas, she was extraordinarily unhappy.

The kind, tired neighbours sighed. Their imaginations had completely run out, and they couldn’t think what else. Their worried murmurings at changeover times grew more and more urgent. ‘This can’t go on,’ Rosa overheard, and ‘Are we still searching?’ and, whispered very secretly, one chilly, lonely evening, ‘The . . . er . . . orphanage hunt, any news?’

‘Nobody,’ Rosa remembered afterwards, ‘nobody knew what to do with me. Until the doorbell rang.’

It was all so long ago that, although Rosa knew her parents’ accident had happened, she could hardly recall that time. She’d been told about the worried and helpful neighbours who had so kindly taken care of her, but she couldn’t clearly remember them, either.

The doorbell was different.

Even now, eight years later, Rosa could still remember the moment the doorbell rang.

The neighbour who had been putting her to bed had gone hurrying down the stairs. The door had been pulled open. There'd been a murmur of voices, and then she'd heard the neighbour exclaiming, 'Oh, how wonderful!' and clapping her hands in delight.

'The best possible news for Rosa!' Rosa heard next, and with that she'd tumbled out of bed and rushed to the top of the stairs, completely expecting to see her parents back from heaven.

What Rosa saw instead was a very large unknown man, smiling like a walrus, and a very tall unknown woman beaming like a lamp post, and luggage piled all around them on the doorstep. Behind them, the first stars were staring down from the evening sky. Rosa looked from the stars to the man and the woman, and then back to the shocked and glittering universe, and she felt terribly alarmed.

'Rosa!' the neighbour exclaimed, spotting her.



‘Here are your long-lost aunt and uncle come to look after you! What do you think of that?’

But Rosa was already vanishing, backwards along the landing, into her bedroom, and under her bed.

*

Under her bed was where they found her the next morning.

Rosa's aunt and uncle pulled Rosa out, dusted her down and gave her orange juice and cereal, and toast with thin red jam. Almost as soon as breakfast was over, all the kind neighbours who had helped take care of her visited to say how lucky Rosa was. She could stay in her own lovely home. Also, children were very resilient, and Rosa would soon forget.

'I don't want to forget,' said Rosa, who was having a morning of tantrums, but they said soothingly, 'We understand, Rosa,' and 'Now you have a family again, Rosa.'

'And no . . . er . . . orphanage, after all,' they said.

Lunch that first day was tomato soup, and afterwards a walk to the park. Rosa fell asleep on the top of the slide because her night had not been restful. She was woken up almost immediately, marched home, and sent for a bath, all by herself, aged not quite four. She managed this with some difficulty: the puzzle

of the plug and the coldness of the water, and the struggle to get out of her vest. Forcing the toothpaste to squeeze from the tube was beyond her, and she forgot about soap, but she made it back to her room at last, crawled into bed and shut her eyes for one moment only. When she opened them again, the room was filled with the silvery greyish light that comes just before dawn.

And a large black cat was sitting on the windowsill.

Next, something happened that she could only remember afterwards as a dream is remembered: in a few random images, like a scattering of pieces from a jigsaw puzzle.

Just as Rosa sat up, the cat raised a heavy paw, and pressed it on the glass of the window. The glass didn't break, or even crack, but instead opened into a cat-shaped space, with ears and whiskers and a wavy tail.

The space filled with the blackness of deep fur. Eyes as yellow as sherbet lemons gazed into Rosa's so intently that she blinked. Next came a heavy thump, and the cat arrived on her bed.



Rosa's mouth fell open with surprise, and now she was trembling all over, not with fear, but with an astonished sort of joy.

'The name's Balthazar,' said the cat, dropping something onto the quilt, 'and there's more where that came from.'

His voice was husky and deep and rolling, like the beginning of a purr. He looked down at the thing he'd dropped, and Rosa looked too and saw it was a pink, fish-shaped biscuit.

'Thank you,' said Rosa, 'thank you, B-B-Balthazar,' and she picked up the biscuit and



gave it a very small nibble. The cat looped his tail around his haunches, tucked his paws under his chest and settled down to watch her, looking tremendously pleased with himself.

Rosa ate her biscuit in miniature bites, partly because she wanted this unexpected visit to last as long as possible, and partly because the biscuit tasted terrible. She wondered if she would be allowed to stroke Balthazar, managed to ask, ‘Please can I touch you?’ and was delighted when he lowered his head and allowed her to stroke very carefully between his ears.

This lasted until Rosa accidentally tickled, instead of stroked. Then Balthazar shook his head, stalked to the end of the bed, turned back to give Rosa a forgiving wink, and leaped for the windowsill. In a moment he was gone, leaving nothing behind him but the cat-shaped space in the glass: ears, whiskers and a waving tail.

Rosa rushed to the window, but she was too late. The glass was whole again and there was no Balthazar to be seen. It was still very early, and very chilly, and after a while she crept back into bed. There she quickly fell asleep, but the first thought that came to her when she woke again was, *Magic happened.*

She was extraordinarily comforted and pleased.