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The Cat Story

by Richard K. Weems

An old woman comes to the door to tell me my cat is dead. This After I've spent all morning and a good part of the afternoon getting ready to hang myself. The old woman is at least seventy, nearly toothless, disheveled. She is carrying a paper sack, the bottom rounded at the edges like a curling puck.

"It was a Buick who did it," she says, thumbing over her shoulder toward the street. I look, but there is no Buick. No aura of recent death, no hint of an accident. I don't know why I'm even looking. I don't have a cat. My gaze strays to the neighbors' lawns—manicured, sculpted, very uniform. It's the kind of neighborhood that would get a big, disgusted jolt from a hanging.

"A Buick?" I say. "How do you know it's my cat?"

"Your cat," she says. She puts her hand atop the shower cap on her head and scratches through it. "Got hit in front of your house."

If she has a cat in that sack, it's rolled pretty tightly upon itself. The mouth of the sack is worn in her grip.

"Who sent you?" I ask. I haven't ventured to open the door wider than the width of my face. This isn't even my house—it's my grandmother Peg's, but she's in Florida for the season and I'm supposed to be getting my writing done.

"I got nothing to do with nothing," the old woman says. "Thought I was doing a favor. You can just bury it out back you know." Artfully, she looks around and above me, avoiding my eyes with precise near misses.

Did she walk around, paper sack in hand, looking for recently squashed cats? She must have been walking for days from the looks of her. Her quilted housecoat has grass stains and mud that make it hard to discern the housecoat's true color.

"What if I told you I didn't have a cat?"

"Liar," she says, still scratching her head.

"Maybe it's best you came in." I'm already quite an item of gossip in this neighborhood I'm sure, the equivalent of an idiot-man child locked away in the root cellar. Now, Peg's poor excuse of a grandson, who's given up stability and family for artistic endeavor, is making things worse by humoring a dirty homeless woman on the front step. I can feel the neighbors watching us, their property values sinking into their lower intestines. I open the door all the way.

Her slippered feet slap against the tile floor. She keeps a gentle hand under the bottom of the sack, reinforcing it but reverential about not poking its contents.

I hesitate from offering her a seat. There's the kitchen chair I brought out to do my business with the light fixture, but it's in exactly the right spot and I don't want to go through all that rigmarole again. Being my grandmother Peg's house, the sofa, loveseat and armchair are all covered in plastic, but still I worry that the old woman's grime will seep through. Bad enough I plan to leave behind a swinging body to clean up, but also leave behind the stink of a filthy old lunatic carrying around a dead cat? I motion toward the kitchen chair. "Sit?"

The old woman sits with determination and plops the sack onto her lap. It's more of a thud. The sack has some serious weight to it.

I have a seat on the sofa. Unfortunately, it is directly across from her and there we are, face to face, the coffee table and my rejected book between us like a wall built far too low. I reach for my glass of gin but think better of it. I have no intention of offering her any. The generic rejection letter clipped to my book reads, "Dear Writer." I haven't read the rest; with an opening like that, why bother? I have added to their salutation with my pen so it now reads, "Dear Writer-my-ass."

The old woman is sitting as though ready to withstand military interrogation. She has every intention of protecting the sack in her lap.

"Coke?" she says abruptly. "Coke? You got Coke here?"

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“It’s all warm,” I lie. “It’s sitting in a cupboard.”

“A little ice will do the trick. I can help you dig that hole if you give me a little Coke.”

I’ve sunk deeply into the sofa, the kind of sofa that’s a struggle to get up from again. To the right of the old woman, I can see the red light blinking on the answering machine. Three messages—all from my wife, one every other day for the past week, each one no doubt prompted by grandmother Peg, a new effort to pull me out of my hole. I sat by the machine during every call, watching the machine as it recorded. Each one began with a formal Hello Brad, it’s Marsha. Two Hope you’re doing better’s, two Been thinking of you’s, and only the first closed with Call me if you want. For the third message she said only, “Hello Brad, it’s Marsha,” then hung up after a thoughtful silence.

The book I’ve written is this:

A man, Phil, feels stuck in his life and so decides to take a vacation from himself. First he tries drinking, drugs, extramarital affairs with strippers. Then he runs off to Mexico, beds down two married women simultaneously and tries his hand at bounty hunting, inspired by a mysterious one-eyed midget he meets over a session of tequila. He finds he has a knack for it and on his first time out he brings to justice the head of a notorious drug cartel and steals a briefcase full of drug money that befriended DEA agents discover but let him drive off with in a scene of touching camaraderie. Phil finally comes home, determined to resume his life now that he’s sown his wild oats. But the suburban lifestyle leaves him wanting, and after a well honed and witty speech to his patient but unsympathetic wife, something like the end of *A Doll’s House* with muscle, he goes off into the night, his future uncertain but chock full of potential for gunplay.

“About this cat,” I say to the old woman.

“Your cat,” she says defensively, “out in the road nothing I could do about that. Just sitting there doing what cats do in the middle of the road acting like nothing’s going to happen to him safe as all shit

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and suddenly there's this car this Mazda this brown shoebox thing."

"A Buick?" I say.

"Yes a Buick I said Buick no way you can prove otherwise." The woman scootches up a little, her housecoat crackling. "This here Buick isn't from around here it was obvious speeding down the road in a neighborhood like this a nice neighborhood like this one speeding down the road like that the cat had it coming. You can bury it under a tree in some shade."

Right now she should be pulling the cat out of her sack by the hind legs and laying it out on the coffee table like a butcher displaying a whole plucked chicken. Exhibit A. I move my rejected book aside. I notice how much "Dear Writer-my-ass" stands out along with the doodles I've made around the clean, mock-literary typeface of the company letterhead. The font that suggests serenity and insight. I notice even more drastically the stick figures hanging from gallows I've drawn in all the margins—left, right, top and bottom. I can't remember how many times it's been rejected now, but it seems to come back more quickly every time I send it out. I slide the rejection note from under the paper clip and gradually turn it over.

Meanwhile, the old woman is still talking: "And if you think I blame that Buick that Chevy any you think wrong. But boy was it coming down the road coming down quick cuz he couldn't have known what kind of neighborhood it was not being from around here and Friskie got it all in one shot at least just got run over and shut his eyes and that was that."

"Friskie?" I ask.

"You named him," she says, pointing at me to make sure I know who thought up that stupid name. "All those cats how are you going to find an original name for all of them? He likes Friskies so you call him Friskie. The black and white you call Oreo what else? Sylvester the other black and white. Mittens Cracker Big Balls you can't go not giving them names you know." She looks sentimental and a little misty-eyed talking about my cats.

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“How many cats in all?”

She slumps as though strategic wires have been cut. A look of futility. “Your damn cat mister,” she says.

The sun is coming down. The shades at the old woman’s back glow appropriately. I have one hand on my rejected book; I am considering whether to leave it behind or destroy it before I go.

I’m not the type anyone would have ever taken for a writer, including me—a stable though generally unaffectionate marriage, the promise of a more than adequate inheritance from an aging grandmother, and a good job as Associate Manager of Space for a 40-storey office building, my prime responsibility chair inventory and allocation. I was going over inventory sheets in my office one day, and I suddenly wanted to have Charlie Rose interview me about my novel. I thought what an interesting story my sudden, unprompted calling would make to start off the interview.

I brought home a dozen legal pads that night and stacked them on the piano in the den. All through dinner, as Marsha fished for compliments on her brown rice with wakami, I wrote questions Charlie Rose might ask me so I would have some natural-sounding, thoughtful responses: *How do you know you weren’t just struck by a sudden bout of midlife crisis?* and *Talk about how the position of Associate Manager of Space prepared you to be such a methodical and assertive author.* After dinner I went straight to the den and made a start of it. It was tough, since I had to make things up from scratch. After she finished loading the dishes, Marsha came into the den with a gourmet-cooking magazine. She sat on the edge of the recliner as though in a doctor’s waiting room and opened the magazine, but it was clear she wasn’t reading a thing.

“How long does a novel take?” she asked, looking up at me, her pretty brown eyes trying their best to understand something about what I was doing.

“I write for a while,” I said, stooped over the cover of the piano

keys, "and then it will be finished." I didn't have much yet—a description of some weather, and a guy coming home from work. Marsha said, "Hmm," as though she understood perfectly, and went back to her magazine. The sound of her turning pages was like jelly getting slapped through a ventilation grate.

"It can't be all that long," she said. Marsha didn't read novels. Magazines were more practical and necessary, though she would sometimes admire the layout of the cover on a Clive Cussler or Robert Grisham book I'd pick up on occasion. "I mean, if it took all that long, it wouldn't be worth all that bother, would it?" As she spoke, I could feel my brain numbing, acupuncture on the hypothalamus.

"You need to leave me alone," I said. Marsha looked at me as if I had just told her she had a cancerous bulb on her cheek. "You need to get out and leave me alone," I said. Funny—not once had I asked Charlie Rose to give me a moment to thank my patient and understanding wife.

Marsha closed her magazine carefully and held it to her chest as she left.

When I was writing, it was all think and drink, think and drink, write a little, then back to the thinking and the drinking. I went right to it every day after work, all morning and afternoon on my days off, the evenings sleeping off the heavy drunk I would accumulate. Marsha checked up on me every now and then. I could smell hope, like moldy water, swell up in her when she'd find me slumped uncomfortably in the leather recliner or reading the label on a bottle of Wild Turkey, my messy pages of writing scattered around the piano.

"I'm making dinner," she'd say for instance, her voice tinged with a hint of warning, of her need for things to be normal again. "Do you want me to put lemon in the curry?" Maybe she was counting on me to announce failure so she could comfort me briefly and pack me an alfalfa salad for lunch the next day, our life back to brief kisses

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and semi-annual intimacy. I ignored her the best I could, feeling with her every intrusion a desire to throw pencils at her ankles.

So I started writing at the office, chair requests and locations ignored or handled sloppily to let me focus on my real work. The office building fell into chaos, unclaimed task chairs stranded in hallways, mail sorters sorting in leather executive high-backs. Marsha started hiding my manuscript pages, so I started putting her silk blouses in the dryer on high. She said, "Oh, great," every time she saw me with a pen. I slept on the couch and promised things would be back to normal when I finished. It took three months of note pads and pens and pencils and bottles of liquor that fueled my creative fire, and I lost my job, but I finished my novel. I told Marsha our troubles would be over when I typed my book up and got it published. She did her best to pretend I didn't live in the house anymore, and I looked up the names of agents and book publishers and bought manuscript boxes. As I sent my novel out, I imagined the letter of acceptance, rife with compliments. I planned my book tour, practiced my mannerisms, invented witticisms to sign my name under. Late at night, I could sometimes hear Marsha crying on the phone. I imagined literate groupies, bodies tingling in my presence. With each rejection, I moved my book from one envelope to the other, sure that this time someone would see the light.

My grandmother Peg lent me her house when Marsha finally asked me to leave mine. Marsha never asked me directly, to tell the truth. She told grandmother Peg, and grandmother Peg told me. Marsha and I had not spoken to each other directly in a month. She had started pulling open the zippers on my best pants, and I had started cutting into the straps of her bras with a nail file so they would break while she was wearing them.

Grandmother Peg's offer was not one of kindness. It was to get this 'writing thing' out of me, to let it run its course like a stomach virus. She sent me the keys express mail. That night, she called from her larger house in Florida.

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"The summer house is yours," she said. "Send out your book. See how no one wants it and for God's sake go back to Marsha.

"And also for God's sake, Brad," she added. She paused to let her next statement sink in. "Brad. Brad. Dry out and give up and go back to your life." This was four months ago, and she told me she was going to need the house again in four and a half.

None of this sounds like good justification for a hanging, but I've given up on finding a good reason. I spent most of the morning making sure the chair was in the right place, so I could stand on it comfortably with the belt around my neck and kick the chair away easily to give me no way of backing out. Then I started doing dry runs, swinging by my arms to make sure the light fixture would hold me up long enough to kill me, each run separated by an hour on the couch, drinking and getting my courage up. It's one thing to practice your death, another to get yourself off the couch to practice it again. Just before the old woman came knocking, I was wondering if I was up for a dress rehearsal.

She suddenly pulls a faded pea green scarf from the pocket of her housecoat.

"I make these myself," she says, the silk scarf crumpled in her hand, a far cry from any kind of lucrative presentation. "You got four dollars? I could use four dollars right now. Four dollars and a ride."

It's not what she says or how she says it, but something about the old woman inspires the perfect idea in me, an idea that can only be explained in a novel.

"I write," I tell her.

She glances sidelong at me, the first time our eyes have met. She rubs her cheek with the scarf, and she clutches the paper sack a little tighter, as though I've just told her I'm a rapist of old women. "You make money with that?"

"I just write," I tell her.

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“Not buying no damn story,” she says. “And I’m not taking one for this scarf. Don’t need that shit. Don’t need to be carrying around no story I got nothing to do with,” she says.

“But you do,” I tell her.

Again, the brief meeting of the eyes. If we go on like this, we’ll be married by nightfall.

“You drunk?” she says. “All I need is a dollar.”

“It’s a story about cats,” I tell her. “Cats and scarves and grandmothers who wrap everything they own in plastic. It’s got all the reasons why you can’t go home anymore. It’s about being down to dill pickles in the fridge, about the last days of the siege. Coke with no ice and the wives who leave their men because their men like Coke that way. It’s about the clarity that happens sometimes right before the end.” All this is coming together like particles orbiting a gravity well, collapsing into the inevitable brilliance of a new star.

“That’s a weird book,” she says.

“I’ll send you a copy.”

“Don’t read no damn books.” She lifts the sack to her chest and stands. “Don’t got no goddamn books cuz I don’t need no goddamn books and they got nothing to do with me I ain’t in no goddamn goddamn book.” She makes for the door. “Fucking books no ice this house smells like pork like a fucking pig.” Before she’s out, she pauses a moment in the doorway. “Great stinking pig is how it smells I don’t give my tits to know how you keep your pecker up in here!”

I sit up. The couch creaks like couches in a grandmother’s house do. I hear the old woman heading down the street, still yelling out about my pecker and all.

It’s a beautiful ending—the perfect idea that doesn’t get written, its only living vestiges rolling in pieces around the head of an old woman trying to find her kitty’s final home. I rise and take my novel out back to throw it out. I’ll leave nothing behind but a half bottle of gin, some Cuervo and a little apricot brandy. Let them

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admire nothing but the strength of the knot in my belt, how I chose the stem of the light fixture rather than the paltry branches to swing from. An artist's death. Grandmother Peg will shudder in disappointment at the thought of me. Marsha won't be able to contain her anger. I am past needing their affirmation for my work. I feel more ready now than I have all day.

Out back, I pause over the trashcan. I consider digging a hole in the yard, but some birds nearby distract me. They're small, brown birds, I don't know what kind. Quick and electric in movement, but deceptively preoccupied. They seem too easy and inviting to reach out, grab and crush. My manuscript lands with a loud slap on top of yesterday's trash.

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