

Ghost Cat

I was awakened by the creaky mew of a cat. Something like fur brushed along my hair and neck and I felt tiny sandpaper licks on the side of my face. Perhaps this doesn't seem so out of the ordinary, except I didn't own a cat.

The lamp light hummed and I searched the room for signs of the cat, but found nothing but dirty bras and socks under the bed and snotty Kleenexes piled up next to the trash can. My door was closed, so it would have been impossible for anything to get in or out.

Ghost cat, I thought.

A friend, Gina, had informed me of the presence of the ghost cat during her last visit from Austin. She'd come to San Diego to stay with me for a while, supposedly to help me through the final stages of my pregnancy since Joseph, my husband, had recently passed away—hit by a drunk driver during his morning jog. I'm almost certain that Gina was also concerned that, out of grief or desperation, I'd try to do something stupid and wind up hurting myself or the baby.

One night, as she brushed her teeth in my bathroom, Gina saw a tabby cat licking its paws, perched on the tank of the toilet. At the time she thought nothing of it. But the next morning, when she asked where the cat treats were, I explained to her that I didn't own a cat. She thought I was joking at first, but then she rationalized that what she'd seen must have simply the ghost of a cat.

Gina was big into new age remedies and spiritual healing, and she often spoke highly of salvia as a means of cleansing the chakras. Salvia is a known hallucinogen, so naturally I took her theory with a grain of salt. I never saw the ghost cat myself.

After nearly two months, I was tired of having her in the apartment. I appreciated what she was trying to do and everything, but I wanted to be alone. She protested, saying it was her duty to stay until I had the baby. But she'd missed so much work already that convincing her to go home didn't take all that much smooth talking. Honestly, I knew I would go into labor any day, and I felt a deep need to be alone when it happened. I don't know why, it just felt right that way. If Joseph couldn't be with me, squeezing my hand and telling me I'm doing a great job, I didn't want anyone to be with me.

But it didn't work out that way. The biological parents insisted on being present in the hospital room when they learned I'd gone into labor. Joseph and I had been struggling to make ends meet, so we decided I should be a surrogate. We didn't want to have our own kids just yet, and it paid pretty well. Besides, were helping another couple achieve their dream, so it seemed like kind of a

righteous thing to do, something God would want me to do. But now, as I straddled the cold stirrups, my vision of how this day would go was quickly dissolving into a nightmare.

The surrogate parents didn't want me taking the epidural because they feared it might damage the baby. So I concentrated on the buzzing fluorescent lights above me, trying to ignore the pain of the contractions and the fact that everyone in the room was staring expectantly at my completely exposed lower half. The doctor hovered in between my legs, telling me not to push yet, my hospital gown riding up to my belly button. The biological father kept buzzing around me, pointing his video camera in places that under normal circumstances would get him locked behind bars. The biological mother stood in the corner, arms crossed, constantly brushing the greasy bangs from her forehead, as if she were ashamed that it was me on the table instead of her.

After the cord was cut and the baby was cleaned up, the surrogate parents were at least kind enough to give me a moment alone with him. He looked a little like Joseph, I thought, even though I knew it was a silly thing to think. I'm ashamed to admit it, but for a brief moment I wasn't sure I'd be able to give the baby away. He wasn't a second-hand purse, after all, he was a person. I wondered if the baby had a choice, who it would choose: me, the mother who had lodged him while he formed into a human; or them, the strange couple who he didn't know, but were technically his parents. If only the baby had a vote in the matter—the baby who stopped kicking when Joseph's soothing voice used to chant fairy stories through the wall of my belly.

For many weeks after the birth, I felt like a wrecking ball had shattered my bones. I lost my appetite. Lost weight. Grew deep purple pools under my eyes. Without my monthly surrogate income, my nest egg was drying up fast, and I did nothing to find a job. Most days, I cried. Gina offered to come back, but I insisted that she didn't. It repulsed me to even consider putting on a happy face, being social, or pretending like nothing was bothering me. No, it was better to be alone.

That's when the cat's mews began to wake me. At first they woke me about once a week, precisely 5:45 am. It was an abrupt, creaky mew, as if it had smoked too many cigarettes, or was working up a hairball. As soon as I'd turn on the light the noise would stop. Then I'd searched my room, throw open the window, and scour the rest of my apartment, but never did I see a cat. Gradually I was awakened more frequently, until it happened every morning, always at 5:45 am. I stopped looking for it, knowing it was useless. 5:45 was early for me. Joseph used to get up at 5:15 every morning to go running, and he was a self-proclaimed night owl. If he could train

himself to be an early riser, why couldn't I? I stopped setting my alarm clock and relied on the cat to wake me up. Most mornings, I woke up bleary-eyed and sat catatonic in the big chair by the kitchen window for a few hours, sipping coffee, slowly making my way through the newspaper. And even though it usually took my mind several hours to get going, it felt good waking up early. It was a small accomplishment, even though I accomplished nothing else of much value during the days.

It was only after being awoken by the sandpaper tongue and the cat fur on my neck that I began to honestly believe that a ghost cat was prowling around my apartment. And ironically, after that encounter, all traces of the cat seemed to disappear. It made no more physical contact with me. No longer did it mew in the mornings. Just like a real cat, I thought, it bugs you for attention until you finally agree to pet it, then it shies away.

About a week went by and I was beginning to think I'd seen and heard the last of ghost cat. I was in the bathtub one afternoon, with the bathroom door wide open as always, when I saw a tail flick and disappear around the hallway corner. Nearly tripping over my robe as I wrapped it across myself, I darted into the hallway. I'd searched my apartment so many times, turning the place upside down for this elusive cat, I hardly expected to find him in the entry hall, licking his privates. He looked up at me, a tabby with one green eye, one blue. He looked startled at first, then he played it cool by looking away and shutting his eyes. I approached the cat, wanting to touch it to prove I wasn't seeing things. But he leapt away and out the front door.

I hadn't left the front door open. I specifically remembered locking it, in fact. But here it was, cracked open enough for a cat to slink out.

Barefoot and covered only in a terrycloth robe, I followed the cat outside. It lay on the concrete sidewalk near the street, rolling in a streak of sunlight. I approached and it darted off again. It was a fast cat, too. I chanted, *Heeere, kitty kitty kitty kitty*, but the ghost cat wouldn't be lured. The cat was fast, rubbing itself on the pole of a stop sign one moment, zipping across the street to roll in a pile of leaves, then zipping away again. It could have easily outrun me, but I had a feeling it wanted me to follow.

The cat led me down six city blocks and I started thinking where it would lead me. To the church? That was up and over another few blocks. Perhaps the graveyard, where Joseph was buried? That was a little further away, a dozen blocks or so. But I was willing to follow the ghost cat anywhere, certain that it would lead me somewhere important.

Where it led me was down an alley. A few homeless people sifted through overflowing trashcans, collecting cans and bottles into their grocery carts. The alley dead ended at a brick wall. The cat looked at me as if to say, see?

Nothing in these surrounding held any significance for me. Or Joseph, as far as I knew. Suddenly I felt exceptionally dumb. My bare feet were sore from the concrete and asphalt. One of my feet was bleeding. I sat on the cold concrete next to the brick wall and carefully plucked a shard of glass from my big toe.

The cat made its creaky noise that passed as a mew. I held out my hand. Purring, it slowly glided within touching range. It felt like a real cat, my hand didn't pass through it or anything. The cat looked at me, eyes half-closed, back arched. After some ear-scratching, it let me pick it up and draw it into my bosom. Being cradled in my arms seemed to relax it even more. It closed its eyes, its purrs like a thumping bass drum, a drum so deep I could feel the vibrations quiver through my chest. I told the cat I would adopt it. I didn't care if it was a ghost, that sort of thing didn't turn me off. For some reason, it had chosen me, and now I would return the favor by giving it all the love in the world I had to give.

A pigeon cooed somewhere and the cat's ears opened up like radars. Its tail flicked, then it leapt from my arms, scratching my wrist with its back claws. Flying down the alley, it scared up a flock of fluttering pigeons. Other stray cats had gathered to prey on the birds, but now all of them were left watching the sky. The ghost cat approached one of the strays, a mangy black thing, and licked it behind the ear. The black cat returned the favor by licking the tabby's side as it walked on. Together, the cats sauntered around the corner of the alley and out of sight.

The ghost cat left me there with a bloody toe, clothed only in a wet robe in that filthy alley, and hasn't returned to visit me since.

Just like a cat.