

## THE CAT

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I hate cats. Millie, my wife, was very clever when she brought the kitten home. She placed him on the floor directly in front of me. He crawled up onto my shoulder and fell asleep. I wavered. Then it began. He peed pretty much everywhere except his designer box. He played the piano at night so I'd come out and swear at him. When I covered the keys he sang to provoke me. He followed me around the house talking cat smack. He belonged on cat talk radio. Just not in my house. The cat loved Millie and she loved him. Millie died, leaving me alone with the cat.

We are not religious people so I didn't know what to do for her funeral. I rented a restaurant for two hours and we had a pancake service. At the onset my mother announced to the small group of family and friends that the entire proceeding was blasphemous. I had bought butter and real maple syrup to supplement the restaurant's margarine and Log Cabin syrup. Most people chose the margarine and Log Cabin. I hate people.

I love my wife. I ignored the gathering and stared at the smiling photo of Millie on the counter. She always said I was like Linus in the Peanuts cartoon. I loved humanity but couldn't stand people. As proof she said that my economics book on microloans had improved the quality of life for thousands of young families despite the fact I had no friends and never talked to anyone. "You're like one of those great philosophers or spiritual leaders who detach from the world in order to think deep into the heart of Being." She immediately corrected herself, "No, you're not like them at all. You're a wonderful father and husband. Did you know that the top ten scrolls in 55 CE all had titles like, "My Dad's A Prophet. Why Am I So Screwed Up?"

Millie loved people but was severely anxious around them so we stayed home with the cat. We had three defined areas in the house. The bedroom and my study were off limits to the cat. The hallway was acceptable as long as the cat didn't sing or howl to annoy me. The third zone was the remainder of the house. Millie, the cat and Millie's friends congregated there. This worked.

Millie was always laughing about something. I thought *she* was infinitely amusing. Especially when she decided I was going to run off with Oprah Winfrey. I think the idea started when my agent said she would get me on Oprah's show to discuss my book on job creation in local markets. That same week Millie read a Cosmopolitan survey for husbands at the doctor's office. She

interrupted me at work to get my responses. My results said Oprah was my soul mate. I protested. Millie would not let the matter drop. For two months I listened to her suspicions but since I also noticed a concomitant increase in our amorous interactions I decided her wacky behavior was to my liking. When my agent called and said I wouldn't be on Oprah I asked Millie if I were once again trustworthy. She said she was keeping her eyes on me then she laughed. That was the last book I wrote because Millie got sick. The disease came hard and fast. My Millie.

I tried to go home after the funeral but I was detained by family members and forced to eat King Ranch Casserole and listen to stories from Millie's youth. The message of the stories seemed to be that once upon a time Millie had been a joyful, outgoing, creative member of the community then she met me. I might be exaggerating. I am not close to her family. Knowing my feelings about the cat, several of Millie's family offered him a home. I said 'no' perhaps too hastily because I don't like them.

I got home late, poured myself a glass of wine and sat down at the kitchen table. The cat jumped up onto the table and stared at me. "What do you want? She's dead."

"Meow."

"Do you want to eat?"

"Meow. Meow."

"Two meows? Why not just one meow? Does that have some significance?"

"Meow."

"Speak to me, Lassie. Is Timmy okay? Is Millie okay?"

"Meow."

The cat now had my full attention. Being a social scientist it was not difficult to suspend reason. I poured a second glass of wine.

"Is this a ploy to get me to keep you?"

"Meow. Meow."

"Is that you, Millie?"

“Meow.”

“You’re communicating through the cat?”

“Meow.”

“So I have to keep the cat?”

No answer.

“Very clever.”

No answer.

“I miss you.”

No answer.

“Are you waiting for me?”

“Meow.”

I was caught off guard. “You always said you would.”

The cat waited patiently for my recovery. A third glass of wine encouraged me to press on.

“Are you a spirit?”

“Meow.”

“Are there other spirits nearby?”

“Meow.”

“Do you communicate with them?”

Long pause. “Meow.”

“Are they nice?”

“Meow.”

“Do you have some sort of body?”

No answer.

“Do you have emotions?”

Long pause. “Meow.”

“Sort of?”

“Meow.”

“Have you seen Jesus, Buddha or any of the other big names in the male firmament?”

“Meow. Meow.”

“How about your personal favorites? Your mom? Grandparents? Myrna Loy? Ann Richards?”

“Meow. Meow.”

“Do you have any special powers?”

“Meow. Meow.”

“Were you rewarded for all of your good deeds on Earth?”

No answer.

“Will I be punished for my absolute lack of interest in my fellow man?”

No answer.

“Do you know any more than I do about the meaning of all this?”

Long pause. “Meow. Meow.”

Do you have any regrets?”

“Meow.”

“Do you regret that we didn’t have more children?”

“Meow.”

“I do too. Do you regret that you didn’t let me buy that 57 Corvette?”

“Meow. Meow.”

“That was your fastest answer yet. Are you laughing?”

No answer.

“Do you still have your sense of humor?”

No answer.

“It might be too early to ask that.”

No answer.

“Can you visit me in dreams for sex?”

No answer.

“Well, it’s not a ‘no.’”

No response.

“Can you and Albert and Leonardo teach me secrets of the universe?”

“Meow. Meow.”

“Can you confirm lottery numbers so I can leave the kids something?”

“Meow. Meow.”

“Can you read my mind?”

“Meow. Meow.”

“That’s a relief. I’m not a saint.”

“Meow. Meow.”

“Very funny.”

Feeling almost collegial I offered the cat a chicken-flavored treat and poured another glass of wine. With what seemed like undo diligence he savored the treat then forced me to wait while he cleaned both front paws. Finally he looked up at me.

“We had a nice life together.”

“Meow.”

“You’re sure I’ll be with you again?”

Long pause. “Meow.”

“Pretty sure. Is it interesting there?”

Long pause. “Meow.”

“But not thrilling?”

“Meow. Meow.”

“Would you rather be here with me having scones and clotted cream?”

“Meow.”

“Are you crying?”

Long pause. “Meow.”

“I love you, Millie.”

“Meow.”

The cat yawned.

“Your medium is tired.”

The cat jumped down off the table and settled on a pillow in the corner.

“I’ll sleep awhile and think up some more questions for you. This metaphysical twenty questions stuff is difficult. Do you sleep?”

No answer.

“I’m not going to kiss the cat goodnight.”

The cat watched me leave for the bedroom. He didn’t follow even though I had graciously left the door open. The next day I woke up with a terrible headache, no wife and a cat who wouldn’t talk to me.

“Was it the wine?”

No answer.

“Was it the grief and the wine?”

No answer.

“I’m just losing it?”

No answer.

The cat sat on Millie’s rocking chair. It occurred to me that he might be sad. I pet him and immediately broke into a rash. I washed my hands.

What to do with this tumult of emotions. Millie couldn’t be dead, dead. What would divert me from falling into that abyss? I needed a solid empirical methodology to an, albeit unusual inquiry. I settled for a few guiding ideas and the questions they evoked.

1. I love Millie. I want to be with her forever.
  - a. Even if she is dead and out of reach? Yes. I will live alone in a bee-loud glade.
  - b. Wouldn’t Millie want me to fully live my life and if that included a new love wouldn’t that be okay? I began to laugh before I finished writing the question. Clearly, no.
2. Millie talked to me through the cat from wherever it is she is.
  - a. How do I know the cat spoke to me? Faith? My senses?
  - b. Would one more chat with the cat decrease my skepticism?
  - c. Should I live a better life in order to increase my odds of rejoining her? Perhaps volunteer in the community?
  - d. Are good works really necessary?
  - e. How long should I wait for the cat to resume the conversation? One week? A month? Forever?
  - f. What if the cat doesn’t resume the conversation? (See 1.a)
3. Millie has left this realm we call life and I don’t know where she is or if I’ll ever see her again. I did not talk to her through the cat.
  - a. I am understandably delusional in my grief.
  - b. I need grief counseling and lots of time.

- c. Over time my feelings will change. I will miss her but I will be okay alone.
- d. Oh dear.

I tore up my guiding ideas. Hang on, Sloopy.

Two weeks passed. The cat remained silent. I tried not to think or feel. Three weeks after Millie's death the doorbell rang and unnerved me. My Millie had been found wandering in the north woods. No. Susan, a friend of Millie's who worked at the bookstore down the street, stood awkwardly in the doorway. She is a gangly woman missing a prominent tooth. I have always been distracted by the void in her mouth and probably would pay a dentist to fix it if she were to ask. She is a very sympathetic person.

"Hello."

"Hello, Susan."

"Millie said that I should come and take the cat because you aren't a cat person and might be glad not to have the bother."

"When did she say that?"

"A month ago. She called."

"A month ago." She could hardly talk.

The cat jumped down from the chair and walked over to greet Susan. We both looked down at him. I was conflicted.

"You seem hesitant."

"Three weeks ago I thought that Millie talked to me through the cat. Only yes-no questions. One meow meant a 'yes' answer and two meows meant 'no'. Have your cats ever done that?"

"Meow. Meow."

I gave her a look.

"A little cat humor."

"It was."



“Maybe you need some more time.”

I considered keeping the cat for a few more days. No. I had not talked to Millie. I had been distraught and drunk. Did I want to perpetually clean cat litter? The smell? My allergies? The pricey cat food? The big-ticket vet? The night howling? No. If Millie wanted to contact me she could use television, dreams or Whoopi Goldberg, from Ghost.

“Millie was right. He should go with you.”

The cat rubbed against Susan’s leg and purred.

“He’s met my cats and likes them.”

I looked surprised because Millie didn’t normally visit other homes.

“They have the run of the bookstore. Millie brought him over to visit.”

“When?”

“Several months ago.”

She could hardly walk to the bathroom.

It didn’t take but a minute to load the cat and his things into her car. I bent down to say goodbye. I must admit I hoped the cat would say something. Nothing. The car drove away. For a few days I returned to the daily schedule Millie and I had shared. I set the table for both of us but I only cooked for one. I pretended she was taking her time in the shower and her food would get cold. Poached egg and toast. Fruit. Coffee. Walk around the block. Newspaper. The market. Salad for lunch. Small dinner. A movie, television or a book. One morning I dropped her plate and it smashed into a hundred pieces. I desperately wanted to apologize to her for breaking our wedding gift but I couldn’t. She was dead. I went back to bed and wept.

I started writing again though I think words are overrated. When I was a young writer I felt like a god imposing order on the chaos of experience. Now they’re just words. I wrote to Millie. It passed the time. It amused me to tell a story. For a few moments a day I wasn’t so painfully alone. I didn’t know what else to do.

A year went by. My children visited and convinced me that I had become morbidly depressed. My doctor put me on a low dose of testosterone rather

than an antidepressant. He thought it would have fewer risks and improve my outlook on life. It worked. I started going for walks and even visited my former colleagues at the university for lunch. The problem was that I also started noticing women. I had never noticed other women, except Oprah. Just kidding, Millie.

I went to the bookstore for the first time in years. Millie's cat sat in the front window and glanced over at me as I entered. I thought about petting him but decided against it.

"Hello."

No answer.

I had coffee and a cinnamon roll. Read the Times. Not unpleasant. An attractive gray-haired woman sat down at a nearby table. She fidgeted with her bag and phone then proceeded to watch me. I could tell that she wanted to start a conversation.

"Hi, I'm Sally."

I put down the paper. Before I could answer I felt something rub against my leg. The cat was purring at my feet. I started to laugh.

"Is that you, Millie?"

"Meow."

The woman laughed at my apparent joke.

"He likes you."

I reached down to pet the cat.

The woman also leaned forward to pet the cat and allowed her blouse to fall forward. I could smell her intoxicating perfume. The cat looked at me.

"Meow. Meow."