

*Winky the Cat*

Despite the calendar officially ringing in the New Year, the aging man stretched his legs with last year's aches and pains. Recently, he decided to wake up before the sun, figuring he could do his best thinking while everyone else in the world was still fast asleep. Besides, he had certain chores to do before he drove his daughter to school.

All of the morning tasks that his wife used to do, now, he had to do. He could remember that it was not much longer than three months ago that he used to sleep in and continue the dreams that were too innocent, too fleeting to remember past the morning commute. Rolled up in a ball and taking up the entire bed, the husband would feign this sort of sleep; maybe even pretend that he was so deep under that he could not hear her huffing about, or feel her "accidentally" tugging at the sheets. Her one-eyed cat, the pathetic looking one-eyed cat he chose not to notice sometimes, would lay sprawled on top of him, despite the echoing rattle of kibble hitting the feeding dish, or the husband's overall disapproval and condemnation.

He did not do morning chores back then, because he thought his job was more important, more stressful than hers. How could he have time to bring the garbage around the front, how could he possibly find the time to fix lunch for their daughter when he knew that the end of the world did not depend on it, that the world, his crummy job, and his wife would still just be there in the morning?

She had left him—left *them*, a few months ago. It was actually a funny sort of situation, really, they were so much alike. They had argued for months about who would get the kid until they finally decided to duke it out in custody court. He never actually thought that he would ever wind up with her. He had always

just assumed that the courts would rule that kids went with their moms, and that was it. He wasn't a bum, he'd do his part—visit her softball games, brag about her in the stands, maybe treat the entire team to Dairy Queen. That's what good divorced fathers did.

He remembered standing in the lobby, practicing all the ways he'd plead with her to just agree to joint custody without all the ugly lengthiness of court proceedings. As he waited, he drank from the water fountain. He glanced into a window reflection to check if his pant hem was too short. He power-walked around the intimidating oak doors of the courthouse with some false destination in mind, not wanting to appear like the other silent, dejected, and miserable divorcees who waited to be taken to the cleaners by world-weary women who embellished the facts.

By mid-afternoon he was contacted by their lawyer and informed that he had won sole custody of the child, the car, and Winky, that pathetic, one-eyed cat.

Later that day inside the car he now claimed as his own, the husband cried. He wondered if his sudden surge of emotion it had something to do with the anger of being left at what seemed like the opposite of the alter, the fear he harbored for his daughter growing up without a mother, or the song on the radio wailing about the memories of loves lost. When he pulled into the driveway it felt all so real. He choked back on those tears and pulled the garbage cans from the side of the road back to the porch in the backyard.

“Wednesday is garbage day,” he remembered. “Wednesday is garbage day.”

When he entered the house he was greeted by the feeling that the place was now haunted, a frequent for disturbed memories when, now when he thought about it, weren't so bad after all.

The lyrics from that stupid song played through his head once more, and he was about to feel that swell of tears when he felt something rub up against his left ankle. He looked down to spot that one-eyed tuft of fur. The cat looked at him in a way that made it seem like an omnipresent sort of thing. The cat blinked its one eye before it wisely communicated to the new cat owner that things would go on. Things would go on and be okay.

For a moment he and the cat shared a certain outlook on life that no one could ever take from them. There was wounded pride, sure, but also a sense of mutual camaraderie. They could relate to one another for the first time, and the cat sprawled himself over the man's lap when he sat to think about how, or if, he would break it all to his daughter.

Now, the cat became a part of the morning routine that got him out of bed everyday. These certain chores were a form of short-term motivation that ended one stage of the day and then began another. After feeding the cat and changing his litter, he would get the morning paper and transport or remove either garbage cans or recyclable bins—depending on which day it was. Soon, he would find himself fixing his daughter's lunch and maybe writing her a secret note on the napkin that she would uncover before diving into her pudding snack.

On this particular morning, the cat was no where to be found. Perhaps he had forgotten to let the little guy back in after a long night of prowling, pouncing, and pattering up the incline of someone's inverted roof. The life of a cat is hard,

when he thought about it. Imagine just walking through the street when all of a sudden some primal instinct takes over you and forces you to bound on some quick moving agent and rip its eyes out.

These were the unchained thoughts that served as filler when he wasn't planning and plotting the next move of his daughter—so goes the mind of a single father. If it wasn't filling out forms for field trips or wondering what the intentions of the little boy who stood too close to her at the school recital were, it was “how much water does the cat have in its bowl,” or “I hope that brain-curdling shriek isn't the cat in another stupid fight again.” He had done the math and the final tallies were in: he was now 83% concerned and over-protective father, 17% cat lover.

There was just something about that sorry looking son of a bitch that he would never be able to get over.

He shook the box of kibble (that was only ever really used as a dinner bell) in the kitchen window and made a *tsk-tsk* sound with his mouth. No creature stirred.

He walked around to the backyard with a tin of Friskies in one hand, and a spoon in the other, and banged the rhythm section to some popular cat hymn sung in the tune of the popular radio jingle “Don't Give Your Cat...THE CLUMP.”

When that didn't work he went about his other menial tasks while never forgetting to take his daughter to the orthodontist later that afternoon. He assumed the cat would enter and reveal itself the way it normally did--through the shady underbrush of the backyard woods, splashing onto the scene as if to

save the day, skipping through the doorway with that little bounce, before devouring a king's feast of what could only be described as "Tender Vittles."

Without the slapping and tapping of the little tongue on processed egg and tuna-meal, the man just couldn't find his "normal-morning" satisfaction while reading "Tropical Storm's Annoying Cousin" or "More Famine Among People in the Desert" headlines.

"Shit," he thought. "This is depressing."

Before taking one more search through the house he heard his daughter stir upstairs and ask him "if there was a snow day." She had done this every day for the last week, even though she had just gotten off a holiday vacation.

"No," he answered, while lifting up couch skirts and opening closet doors that had no use ever being open. "Do you need help with the shower?"

The lack of answer had meant, "No, Dad—I'm becoming a woman now and even if I can't figure out the shower, I'll still thank you to stay out of the bathroom while I am naked." He listened closely until he could hear the pathetic dribble of the upstairs shower run.

The man figured that it couldn't hurt to take one last look around the yard for the cat. When he opened the front door and was greeted by the visceral image of the cat, flattened and gutted in a cartoon sort of manner, lying in the middle of the road.

It took a minute to move from the door. He was sickened by his own guilt. Sure, accidents happen, but this one felt like his fault, and not on the early morning motorist who made sure that there would be no way to ever really identify that this new hunk of road kill was ever somebody's pet.

As the man walked up to the mound he felt himself saying out loud “Ahh Jeez,” before identifying the little remains of his best and pathetic best friend. Family can always tell, can always feel it.

The man looked around to see if some neighbor was watching or waiting to give him some sort of explanation. There was no one, just the cackling caws of old crows, finally relieved to see the demise of their most fatal foe. He went and grabbed some other garbage piled up in the gutter, as if to make some sort of makeshift splint or dustpan where he could spoon the corpse into a catacomb of refuse.

When that didn't work he ran back into the house like a deputy on kindergarten crowd control, hoping to prevent his daughter from being subjected to the horror-rendering sting of reality.

When he could feel her footsteps leave the bathroom and go back down the hall, he rushed back out and went into the garage to find something to scoop with. Luckily, he had borrowed a shovel some while back, and he emerged from the garage like a knight with pointed lance.

As cars whizzed by he couldn't help but wonder if the little guy had felt any pain, but he was sure that the impact of the blow prevented it from feeling anything ever again. A car slowed down to look, but the man bowed his head as if politely to say “Please, I think I have this under control.”

The shovel made a crude scrape against the road as he jittered the mashed frame into its orange mouth. Inside the shovel, the cat was no longer a cat, just an anthill of mashed fur and sorry futility.

When he had a good part of the cat wiped into the shovel, he looked around to make sure that the remnants would never be identified. Now at the scene of the crime, it resembled the curious pattern of some bum who furiously shook out the residue of an old, moldy can of soup in preparation to leave some cryptic message or line of delineation.

He jogged with the stinking mound to the back yard where he shrugged the cat into a compost heap, like shoveling coal into an outdated engine. While burying his friend, he never took his eyes off the back door. If his daughter came out to look for him, he would have to tell her he was doing yard work or preparing soil for a would-be garden at 6:30 in the morning.

Meanwhile, his undetected daughter watched curiously from the window in her room and said a silent, little prayer in Winky's honor. She bit her lip and swallowed back the tears as her father had unconsciously and unbeknownst to him, taught her to do.

Back inside the kitchen, the man washed his hands and stared out the window, trying to make sense of all the senselessness. The cat, the wife's cat, now their cat, was dead. It was the final piece of the wife's decoration that had stayed in the house; he was so careful to ritualistically rid the place of everything else.

The man found it somberly therapeutic and equally maddening altogether. He heard his daughter come up behind him and put her tiny hand on the small of his back.

"I have to get to school, Dad," she squeaked.

The father said nothing, but nodded gently, remembering that he had a few more things to do that morning before they could start their day.