

The Black Cat's Message

Retold by S.E. Schlosser

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I came home late one night after work and found my wife Ethel puttering about the kitchen with a big yellow cat at her heels.

"And who is this?" I asked jovially.

"This is our new cat," said Ethel, giving me a hug and a kiss to welcome me home. "She just appeared at the kitchen door and wanted to come in. None of the neighbors know where she came from, so I guess she's ours. It will be nice to have some company around the house."

I bent down and scratched the yellow cat under the chin. She purred and stretched.

"Well, I think our income can stretch far enough to feed three," I said.

My son had taken over my job at the mercantile and my wife and I were enjoying a leisurely old age. I liked to keep busy though, and so I spent a few hours every day cutting and hauling wood to be used at the mill.

I went out to milk the cow, and when I came back in, Ethel gave the cat some cream in a saucer.

We sat on the porch after dinner, and the cat sat with us.

"You are a very nice kitty," I said to her. She purred loudly.

"Donald," Ethel said. She sounded worried. I turned to look at her. "The neighbors acted rather oddly when I told them about the cat. They seemed to think she was a ghost or a witch of some sort, transformed into a cat. They told me to get rid of her."

"A witch?" I asked, and laughed heartily. "Are you a witch, little cat?"

The cat yawned and stretched. Reluctantly, Ethel started to laugh with me. It seemed such a ludicrous notion. We sat watching the beautiful sunset, and then took ourselves to bed.

The cat quickly became an essential part of our household. She would purr us awake each morning, and would beg for cream when I brought in the morning's milking. She followed Ethel around supervising her work during the day and would sit by the fire at night while we read aloud.

The days became shorter as autumn approached, and often I would work until nearly sunset, cutting and hauling wood. One night in October, I didn't finish hauling my last load until dusk. As soon as I had piled the last log, I started down the road, hoping to get home before dark since I had not brought a lantern with me. I rounded a corner and saw a group of black cats standing in the middle of the road. They were nearly invisible in the growing dark.

As I drew nearer, I saw that they were carrying a stretcher between them. I stopped and rubbed my eyes. That was impossible. When I looked again, the stretcher was still there, and there was a little dead cat lying on it.

I was astonished. It must be a trick of the light, I thought. Then one of the cats called out, "Sir, please tell Aunt Kan that Polly Grundy is dead."

My mouth dropped open in shock. I shook my head hard, not believing my ears. How ridiculous, I thought. Cats don't talk.

I hurried past the little group, carefully looking the other way. I must be working too hard, I thought. But I couldn't help wondering who Aunt Kan might be. And why did the cat want me to tell her Polly Grundy was dead? Was Polly Grundy the cat on the stretcher?

Suddenly, I was confronted by a small black cat. It was standing directly in front of me. I stopped and looked down at it. It looked back at me with large green eyes that seemed to glow in the fading light.

"I have a message for Aunt Kan," the cat said. "Tell her that Polly Grundy is dead."

The cat stalked passed me and went to join the other cats grouped around the stretcher.

I was completely nonplussed. This was getting very spooky. Talking cats and a dead Polly Grundy. And who was Aunt Kan? I hurried away as fast as I could walk. Around me, the woods were getting darker and darker. I did not want to stay in that wood with a group of talking cats. Not that I really believed the cats had spoken. It was all a strange, waking dream brought on by too much work.

Behind me, the cats gave a strange shriek and called out together: "Old man! Tell Aunt Kan that Polly Grundy is dead!"

I'd had enough. I sprinted for home as fast as I could go, and didn't stop until I had reached the safety of my porch. I paused to catch my breath. I did not want to explain to Ethel that I was seeing and hearing impossible things. She would dose me with castor oil and call the doctor.

When I was sufficiently composed, I went into the house and tried to act normally. I should have known it wouldn't work. Ethel and I had been married for thirty years, and she knew me inside and out. She didn't say anything until after I'd finished the chores. Then she sat me down in front of the fire and brought me my supper. After I'd take a few bites and started to relax, she said, "Tell me all about it, Donald."

"I don't want to worry you," I said, reluctant to talk about what I had seen and heard on the way home.

The yellow cat was lying by the fire. She looked up when she heard my voice, and came to sit by my chair. I offered her a morsel of food, which she accepted daintily.

"I'll worry more if you don't tell me," said Ethel.

"I think maybe something is wrong with my brain," I said slowly. "While I was walking home, I thought I saw a group of black cats carrying a stretcher with a dead cat on it. Then I thought I heard the cats talking to me. They asked me to tell Aunt Kan that Polly Grundy was dead."

The yellow cat leapt up onto the window sill. "Polly Grundy is dead?" she cried. "Then I am the Queen of the Witches!"

She switched her tail and the window flew open with a bang. The yellow cat leapt through it and disappeared into the night, never to return.

Ethel had to dump an entire bucket of water over my head to revive me from my faint.

“The good news,” she told me when I sat up, dripping and swearing because the water was ice cold, “is that you have nothing wrong with your brain. The bad news is that our cat has just left us to become the Queen of the Witches. We’ll have to get another cat.”

“Oh no,” I said immediately. “I’ve had enough of cats.”

We got a dog.

SOURCE: THE BLACK CAT’S MESSAGE. (N.D.-B).
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