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Jim Ketchum
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THE BIG CAT

Jim Ketchum

It was colder than any day in recent memory. The sun, still rising over the eastern trees, hung as if frozen in a blue and white eskimo pie. The whole neighborhood lay quiet. Everything seemed to emit steam, like a moist, warm human breath leaking out between hard, fragile lips. The sound of a door from down the block echoed its closing, cracking its way through the white air. Under a bent metal hood a cat lay purring softly, her white, warm body snuggled against the dying heat of the engine.

Buzz walked out of the bedroom fast, throwing his coat on as quickly as he could, his boots landing hard down the hallway. He walked into the kitchen and started stuffing a handful of change into the vending machine, each coin swan diving to the changebox.

"She's going to love this," said his wife with delight while ladling large spoonfuls of hot, creamy catfood into a deep china dish. The dish was inscribed "The Lovely One" and ornately depicted felines towering over cowardly dogs, chasing them away or torturing them with electric cattle prods.

"That damn cat," said Buzz, "that's all you really care about."

"That's so silly. What silly notions men can get into their heads."

"I think I'm working to support that damn cat. Those gourmet meals cost a fortune. Don't you know it's the big cat food companies that are running this country? You're making them rich."

"Oh posh," she replied, beginning to warm a pot of milk on the stove.

"It's true. Without Ralston-Purina there never would have been a Viet Nam."

"Oh please, spare me. Stop bringing your work home with you." Buzz was currently an editor for "*Conspiracies Today*" magazine.

"It's true, it's all true!"

"Oh posh."

Buzz made his choices. He jerked back three red levers. Lumps wrapped in plastic fell into the tray.

"Sometimes I think you married me just to give your cat a father." "The Lovely One" was her cat from a previous marriage.

"You can be so cold," said his wife. "I don't know how you could have thrown her out into the cold like that last night."

"She makes me sneeze my brains out!" shouted Buzz. "I'm allergic, or don't you care?"

“She’s a harmless little cat,’ she replied. “She wouldn’t hurt a mouse.”

“Heaven forbid. I wouldn’t want her to chip a nail or anything.”

“Here’s your lunch, honey.” His wife kicked his lunchbox at him across the floor. Buzz dumped the lumps into the empty lunchbox and left out the back door.

The door slammed hard, and echoed its way through the early morning silence of the neighborhood. Buzz quickly danced his way across the ice-covered driveway and landed his hand on the door of his car. In a second he was in, shivering on the stiff vinyl seats. The engine started with a bang and roared like a warm summer day.

Suddenly, an inhuman scream ripped the air, and died to the rapid rumbling of the hood, which shook like a volcanic blender. The surprise took a second to register, but when it did Buzz quickly reached for the key, and felt the engine stop between his thumb and forefinger. He raced from the car and hurriedly flung open the hood.

Several dents the size of baseballs had been smashed into the hood from within, caused by the smashing of the cat’s skull as she spun through the fan belt. Her head had completely broken apart; pieces of white bone scattered like eggshell across the engine. Clumps of white fuzz stuck to the inside of the hood and motor, plastered there with sticky red blots. Part of the cat’s belly layed exposed and bleeding from the splintering of her ribs. The stomach had been separated from the rest of the body, steam rising from it in the bitter cold.

Buzz looked up as he heard the slamming of the kitchen door. There, standing rigid and gaping was his wife, her eyes locked on the slaughtered cat. Her eyes were wide like saucers of milk. Her long bony fingers swept upwards through her hair, palms fastened tight to the sides of her head. Anger and despair raged hard through her face, blood squirting from her ears. Her eyes spun through her head and then threw themselves from their sockets, landing with a squish on the driveway. Blood burst from her face in slow motion and cascaded to the ground.

She fell to her knees on the ice and raged her head backwards, exploding into a primitive scream of anguish, her skull cracking in half at the jaw, hair bursting into blue fire. Her body lifted itself from the ground, then smashed as if thrown into the side of the house, then the car, then again the house. Her blue skin tore, pieces of warm flesh sailing across the lawn. Her bones broke and cracked and splintered.

She screamed and screamed as her body relentlessly continued to throw itself against the aluminum siding, cold sheets of blood running smoothly down the indentations. Her body crashed to the icy driveway, separating one of her arms at the shoulder. She lay like a broken window, a ghastly jigsaw puzzle, her gruesome face a shapeless purple and black sack of mashed potatoes. A shard of her left cheekbone protruded through her mouth.

“Honey, we can get another cat,” said Buzz.