

This story comes from two sources. The first in time is a dream I had a long time ago of successfully fighting the devil with litanies and prayers in a church, to stop it sacrificing someone in a black mass, and thinking "I don't believe in this stuff, but it does."

Then, after many years, I happened to read the short story *The Price* by Neil Gaiman in his collection *Smoke and Mirrors* (1998). I hope he won't mind my posting it here (it is freely available online anyway) with my dreamlike sequel.

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The Price

by Neil Gaiman

Tramps and vagabonds have marks they make on gateposts and trees and doors, letting others of their kind know a little about the people who live at the houses and farms they pass on their travels. I think cats must leave similar signs; how else to explain the cats who turn up at our door through the year, hungry and flea-ridden and abandoned?

We take them in. We get rid of the fleas and the ticks, feed them and take them to the vet. We pay for them to get their shots, and, indignity upon indignity, we have them neutered or spayed.

And they stay with us, for a few months, or for a year, or for ever.

Most of them arrive in summer. We live in the country, just the right distance out of town for the city-dwellers to abandon their cats near us.

We never seem to have more than eight cats, rarely have less than three. The cat population of my house is currently as follows: Hermione and Pod, tabby and black respectively, the mad sisters who live in my attic office, and do not mingle; Princess, the blue-eyed long-haired white cat, who lived wild in the woods for years before she gave up her wild ways for soft sofas and beds; and, last but not largest, Furball, Princess's cushion-like calico long-haired daughter, orange and black and white, whom I discovered as a tiny kitten in our garage one day, strangled and almost dead, her head poked through an old badminton net, and who surprised us all by not dying but instead growing up to be the best-natured cat I have ever encountered.

And then there is the black cat. Who has no other name than the Black Cat, and who turned up almost a month ago. We did not realise he was going to be living here at first: he looked too well-fed to be a stray, too old and jaunty to have been abandoned. He looked like a small panther, and he moved like a patch of night.

One day, in the summer, he was lurking about our ramshackle porch: eight or nine years old, at a guess, male, greenish-yellow of eye, very friendly, quite unperturbable. I assumed he belonged to a neighbouring farmer or household.

I went away for a few weeks, to finish writing a book, and when I came home he was still on our porch, living in an old cat-bed one of the children had found for him. He was, however, almost unrecognisable. Patches of fur had gone, and there were deep scratches on his grey skin. The tip of one ear was chewed away. There was a gash beneath one eye, a slice gone from one lip. He looked tired and thin.

We took the Black Cat to the vet, where we got him some antibiotics, which we fed him each night, along with soft cat food.

We wondered who he was fighting. Princess, our white, beautiful, near-feral queen? Raccoons? A rat-tailed, fanged possum?

Each night the scratches would be worse -- one night his side would be chewed-up; the next, it would be his underbelly, raked with claw marks and bloody to the touch.

When it got to that point, I took him down to the basement to recover, beside the furnace and the piles of boxes. He was surprisingly heavy, the Black Cat, and I picked him up and carried him down there, with a cat-basket, and a litter bin, and some food and water. I closed the door behind me. I had to wash the blood from my hands, when I left the basement.

He stayed down there for four days. At first he seemed too weak to feed himself: a cut beneath one eye had rendered him almost one-eyed, and he limped and lolled weakly, thick yellow pus oozing from the cut in his lip.

*I went down there every morning and every night, and I fed him, and gave him antibiotics, which I mixed with his canned food, and I dabbed at the worst of the cuts, and spoke to him. He had diarrhoea, and, although I changed his litter daily, the basement stank evilly. The four days that the Black Cat lived in the basement were a bad four days in my house: the baby slipped in the bath, and banged her head, and might have drowned; I learned that a project I had set my heart on -- adapting Hope Mirrlees' novel *Lud in the Mist* for the BBC -- was no longer going to happen, and I realised that I did not have the energy to begin again from scratch, pitching it to other networks, or to other media; my daughter left for Summer Camp, and immediately began to send home a plethora of heart-tearing letters and cards, five or six each day, imploring us to take her away; my son had some kind of fight with his best friend, to the point that they were no longer on speaking terms; and returning home one night, my wife hit a deer, who ran out in front of the car. The deer was killed, the car was left undriveable, and my wife sustained a small cut over one eye. By the fourth day, the cat was prowling the basement, walking haltingly but impatiently between the stacks of books and comics, the boxes of mail and cassettes, of pictures and of gifts and of stuff. He mewed at me to let him out and, reluctantly, I did so. He went back onto the porch, and slept there for the rest of the day. The next morning there were deep, new gashes in his flanks, and clumps of black cat-hair -- his -- covered the wooden boards of the porch. Letters arrived that day from my daughter, telling us that Camp was going better, and she thought she could survive a few days; my son and his friend sorted out their problem, although what the argument was about -- trading cards, computer games, Star Wars or A Girl -- I would never learn. The BBC Executive who had vetoed *Lud in the Mist* was discovered to have been taking bribes (well, 'questionable loans') from an independent production company, and was sent home on permanent leave: his successor, I was delighted to learn, when she faxed me, was the woman who had initially proposed the project to me before leaving the BBC. I thought about returning the Black Cat to the basement, but decided against it. Instead, I resolved to try and discover what kind of animal was coming to our house each night, and from there to formulate a plan of action -- to trap it, perhaps. For birthdays and at Christmas my family gives me gadgets and gizmos, pricy toys which excite my fancy but, ultimately, rarely leave their boxes. There is a food dehydrator and an electric carving knife, a bread-making machine, and, last year's present, a pair of see-in-the-dark binoculars. On Christmas Day I had put the batteries into the binoculars, and had walked about the basement in the dark, too impatient even to wait until nightfall, stalking a flock of imaginary Starlings. (You were warned not to turn it on in the light: that would have damaged the binoculars, and quite possibly your eyes as well.) Afterwards I had put the device back into its box, and it sat there still, in my office, beside the box of computer cables and forgotten bits and pieces. Perhaps, I thought, if the creature, dog or cat or raccoon or what-have-you, were to see me sitting on the porch, it would not come, so I took a chair into the box-and-coat-room, little larger than a closet, which overlooks the porch, and, when everyone in the house was asleep, I went out onto the porch, and bade the Black Cat goodnight. That cat, my wife had said, when he first arrived, is a person. And there was something very person-like in his huge, leonine face: his broad black nose, his greenish-yellow eyes, his fanged but amiable mouth (still leaking amber pus from the right lower lip). I stroked his head, and scratched him beneath the chin, and wished him well. Then I went inside, and turned off the light on the porch. I sat on my chair, in the darkness inside the house, with the see-in-the-dark binoculars on my lap. I had switched the binoculars on, and a trickle of greenish light came from the eyepieces. Time passed, in the darkness. I experimented with looking at the darkness with the binoculars, learning to focus, to see the world in shades of green. I found myself horrified by the number of swarming insects I could see in the night air: it was as if the night world were some kind of nightmarish soup, swimming with life. Then I lowered the binoculars from my eyes, and stared out at the rich blacks and blues of the night, empty and peaceful and calm. Time passed. I struggled to keep awake, found myself profoundly missing cigarettes and coffee, my two lost addictions. Either of them would have kept my eyes open. But before I had*

tumbled too far into the world of sleep and dreams a yowl from the garden jerked me fully awake. I fumbled the binoculars to my eyes, and was disappointed to see that it was merely Princess, the white cat, streaking across the front garden like a patch of greenish-white light. She vanished into the woodland to the left of the house, and was gone.

I was about to settle myself back down, when it occurred to me to wonder what exactly had startled Princess so, and I began scanning the middle distance with the binoculars, looking for a huge raccoon, a dog, or a vicious possum. And there was indeed something coming down the driveway, towards the house. I could see it through the binoculars, clear as day.

It was the Devil.

I had never seen the Devil before, and, although I had written about him in the past, if pressed would have confessed that I had no belief in him, other than as an imaginary figure, tragic and Miltonian. The figure coming up the driveway was not Milton's Lucifer. It was the Devil.

My heart began to pound in my chest, to pound so hard that it hurt. I hoped it could not see me, that, in a dark house, behind window-glass, I was hidden.

The figure flickered and changed as it walked up the drive. One moment it was dark, bull-like, minotaurish, the next it was slim and female, and the next it was a cat itself, a scarred, huge grey-green wildcat, its face contorted with hate.

There are steps that lead up to my porch, four white wooden steps in need of a coat of paint (I knew they were white, although they were, like everything else, green through my binoculars). At the bottom of the steps, the Devil stopped, and called out something that I could not understand, three, perhaps four words in a whining, howling language that must have been old and forgotten when Babylon was young; and, although I did not understand the words, I felt the hairs raise on the back of my head as it called.

And then I heard, muffled through the glass, but still audible, a low growl, a challenge, and, slowly, unsteadily, a black figure walked down the steps of the house, away from me, toward the Devil. These days the Black Cat no longer moved like a panther, instead he stumbled and rocked, like a sailor only recently returned to land.

The Devil was a woman, now. She said something soothing and gentle to the cat, in a tongue that sounded like French, and reached out a hand to him. He sank his teeth into her arm, and her lip curled, and she spat at him.

The woman glanced up at me, then, and if I had doubted that she was the Devil before, I was certain of it now: the woman's eyes flashed red fire at me; but you can see no red through the night-vision binoculars, only shades of a green. And the Devil saw me, through the window. It saw me. I am in no doubt about that at all.

The Devil twisted and writhed, and now it was some kind of jackal, a flat-faced, huge-headed, bull-necked creature, halfway between a hyena and a dingo. There were maggots squirming in its mangy fur, and it began to walk up the steps.

The Black Cat leapt upon it, and in seconds they became a rolling, writhing thing, moving faster than my eyes could follow.

All this in silence.

And then a low roar -- down the country road at the bottom of our drive, in the distance, lumbered a late-night truck, its blazing headlights burning bright as green suns through the binoculars. I lowered them from my eyes, and saw only darkness, and the gentle yellow of headlights, and then the red of rear lights as it vanished off again into the nowhere at all.

When I raised the binoculars once more there was nothing to be seen. Only the Black Cat, on the steps, staring up into the air. I trained the binoculars up, and saw something flying away - a vulture, perhaps, or an eagle -- and then it flew beyond the trees and was gone.

I went out onto the porch, and picked up the Black Cat, and stroked him, and said kind, soothing things to him. He mewled piteously when I first approached him, but, after a while, he went to sleep on my lap, and I put him into his basket, and went upstairs to my bed, to sleep myself. There was dried blood on my tee shirt and jeans, the following morning.

That was a week ago.

The thing that comes to my house does not come every night. But it comes most nights: we know it by the wounds on the cat, and the pain I can see in those leonine eyes. He has lost the use of his front left paw, and his right eye has closed for good.

I wonder what we did to deserve the Black Cat. I wonder who sent him. And, selfish and scared, I wonder how much more he has to give.

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The Price Paid Back

mazaher 2021

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I already wrote about the Cat. The black one, who came some time ago, a middle-aged, successful warrior, muscled and sleek, whom we just took to calling the Black Cat. His eyes had the wisdom of a long life lived with awareness. I remember writing that he moved like a patch of night.

I wrote about how I found him wounded and exhausted after I had been away for a short time. How we took him to the vet and took care of him with antibiotics and ointments and soft cat food. How he seemed to be fighting often at night, getting bloodier every time. How he only for a few days accepted to stay in the basement, a safe place to try and recover. How he demanded to be let out on the porch at evening as soon as he could stand. How the adversary he fought turned out to be the Devil, a shapeshifting Devil which the Black Cat bravely came out to fight with whatever strength and agility he had left.

Once again that night the Devil flew away, at the price of the Cat's left hand and his right eye, and I wrote that, selfish and scared, I wondered how much more he had to give.

Well, you should know that things have changed. Whatever we did to deserve the Black Cat, it would have been treason to let him fight for us alone.

So in the next few days I brushed up on my long-left-behind Catholic education. Things you learn by heart as a child never really leave your memory. And for eight nights I waited on the porch steps while the Black Cat curled on my lap, asleep but alert as only feral cats can be.

The eighth night the Devil came, rolling up the drive and into the yard with a swagger in its shapeless gait. The Black Cat jumped off my lap and I stood up. A hiss came from it as it saw me and changed into a huge dark snake with silver stars on its back, head risen to the height of my head.

"Sssso you believe you can fight ussss?". The golden eyes were mesmerising, the flicking tongue cobalt-blue and shining wet in the moonlight.

"I do not believe, I *know*," I said in a voice as steady as I managed. And as the Black Cat growled at my feet, I began saying out loud all the litanies and the invocations and the prayers I never thought I would say again.

The Devil recoiled with a wail as scalded by hot water.

"You don't even believe in what you are sssssaying!"

"I may not, but you are the Devil so *you* do," and I kept chanting, and at each word the Devil stepped back as the Black Cat and I stepped forward.

"Sssssooner or later you will get out of that gibberissssh," the Devil snarled.

"Cat and I can go on until dawn," I interjected between a *Rosa mystica* and a *Hortus conclusus*.

"But what about nexsssst time? What then, you ssssstupid living beingssss? Look around. Doessss it ssssseem to you that the Other caresssss a half thought about you?"

"Next time, every single next time, you will be helpless against us. And do you know why? ...Because of a thing that we have and you do not," I said as I stepped forward. "A thing that goes further and deeper than any string of words can go. A thing you are never ever going to have, and which spells destruction to you and yours."

The Devil now was half-way back across the yard, and somehow sprouting four clawed legs. Snakes are not really engineered for reverse gear.

"A thing called compassion. For each other and the other stupid living beings. Even for your own wretched existence." I kept pressing on, and the Black Cat staggered forward at my side. "If you kill our bodies like you injured Cat's here, it will be your defeat, because you can never have our spirits. You can only bring our bodies to safety forever and release our souls to the freedom of nature."

The Devil wavered at the edge of the wood, uncertain.

"And now go away and do not come back."

There was a second of silence, then a muted whoosh. The trees at the end of the yard murmured as though a gust of wind had gone through them. An owl cried once in alarm. Then all was quiet.

The Black Cat bumped his head on my knee and managed a hoarse purr. I picked him up and we went back inside.

All has been quiet since. The Black Cat is healing well and putting up lost weight. He can even touch the ground with his left paw now, and he seems to be working on his own brand of rehabilitative exercises. I am sure that he will come out of the next shedding as shining and sleek as he used to be, his scars invisible unless my tentative fingers search for them under his coat.

He has nightmares sometimes, when his sleep is really deep. I hear him growl and howl and I stroke him lightly until he curls tighter and his breathing slows to normal. His head leaves a scent on my jumper when it happens, an acute perfume like old leather and musk and marjoram and sage. A scent like a blessing.

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Oh, by the way: I did have a cat once who, like the perfumed panther mentioned by Aelian, at times in winter left a magical scent on the jumpers she slept under.

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