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**BRINGING BACK SNOW**

One morning, they woke up and the cat wasn’t there. He wasn’t sprawled on the couch, as he usually was, gleaming white against the faded gray of the living room. He had not infiltrated his way under the children’s covers and had not even secreted himself under the marital bed, in whose shadow he habitually crouched, only his phosphorescent eyes betraying his presence.

For five days they had searched the yards, scouring the small, silent street, mornings and evenings, the children repeatedly crying out his name, inflamed, convinced they would locate the prodigal feline at any moment, the parents following behind in tense silence. The wife carried a flashlight. An occasional “Psss…” escaped her lips, dying away into silence.

Every night, since the day the cat had vanished, she would wake up of her own accord in the middle of the night, put on something warm and set out into the deep-layered darkness, at three or four in the morning. “There isn’t a soul in sight,” she suddenly heard herself muttering on one such night as if an involuntary utterance had escaped her mouth. Two blocks away, she saw some bushes softly swaying, and her gaze clasped onto them, hoping a ghostly white cat would emerge. After a few tense moments, she realized it had been nothing but the wind.

“It’s hopeless,” her husband told her. “He’s not coming back. He’s lost. Who knows if he’s even alive.”

Their son, her firstborn, echoed his father’s certainty. “We’ll never see him again.”

The girl, their daughter, returned to her weeping, same as every morning, noon and evening, every time they returned empty-handed from searching the neighborhood, “He ran off because he wasn’t happy with us – he didn’t want us,” she reasoned. No one had a reply and the girl refused to be comforted.

“He’ll be back,” the wife protested. “They always come back. Even if we don’t find him, he’ll just show up one day. Sometimes it takes a month, even two.” But her reassuring tone had gradually whimpered into uncertainty.

The boy chortled. “Yeah, sure, one day he’ll just come knocking on the door and say, ‘Hi, I’m back!’”

His sister glared at him, “You’re an idiot!” She ran to her room and slammed the door. The wife went to the locked door to try to coax her into coming back out.

“He didn’t mean it, he was just being silly.” She was pleading now. “We’ll find him, you’ll see – I’ll find him, I have ways. I asked people who know how to coax cats out when they’re hiding. He must be somewhere close to the house, just waiting for us to find him.”

Nothing but silence behind the locked door. The boy and his father exchanged grimaces instead of using myriad words of mockery and disbelief. The wife suddenly noticed it, that petrifying resemblance of her son to his father. People had always said he was a copy of her. Now he was a younger version of the father, and she shuddered under the wave of hatred that welled up in her. She recalled how one evening, the whole family had been called to the living room, each from their room where they would usually spend most of their evenings. The girl had happily announced: “I’m going to marry Snow, and you’re all invited to the wedding.”

A golden crown had adorned her head, a short dress wrapped her body, and the neck of the cat she held in her hands was adorned with a black dress-up bow tie. She had decorated the living room with gold ribbons saved from her birthday party. And they had all laughed together when Snow, the cat, struggled free and ran off in a panic, trying frantically to release the bow tie from his neck.

That night, she woke up on her own again. It was three in the morning. A thin, end-of- September chill filled the night air. A sort of aggressive silence had settled over everything, within and without. She held her breath. Six days had passed, each of them elapsing to her disadvantage. Since they had lost their cat, some nameless thing had moved inside her, wrapping around her thoughts. And those thoughts cried out feverishly – ‘his loss will put a curse on your house’. The order had unraveled with the cat’s departure. The comfort he had brought them was gone. The cat had softened their hard edges, relieved suppressed tensions. It had been an anchor that prevented them from drifting into the emptiness that was their routine. And it all manifested from an animal that measured no more than eight inches in length. An animal that spent its days licking its fur, chasing flies, without ever catching any, and, mostly, sleeping.

She decided to go on with the search and marched down a street she hadn’t been down before, two streets over from her own. Her husband had said he wouldn’t go that far during their nocturnal searches. “Either he’s close-by, or he’s gone. Cats never go far, they stay close to home. I know lots more about this than you do.”

The silence loosened, and she imagined the darkness had become airier and thinner, allowing her to discern the clouds and their various shapes. She began to wonder if it was really her, walking there, awake. Quite suddenly he stood before her. She hadn’t even seen where he had come from, his white fur standing on end, radiant in the dark. She shuddered, frozen for a moment. Then she recovered, went to him and picked him up in a decisive motion, just as she had always done back home when she took him to her room during what the girl called one of her ‘gray moods’. The cat did not protest, nor did he utter a sound. As she held him, she could feel his heart beating through his fur. She ran home with him.

When she woke up in the morning he was still there. The children were ecstatic to see him. “Snow, Snow, where have you been, cutie? It’s so good to have you back.” They stood over his regular gray armchair, stunned and excited, while he, curled up like a bagel, lay half-asleep.

When he saw the cat, her surprised husband asked, “I woke up and thought I was seeing things. How did he come back?”

“I found him down on ‘Longing’ Street, she answered in an openly ‘I told you so’ tone.

The boy looked at her with appreciation.  “I’m crazy about you, Mom,” he said. “You’re the best mother ever.”

The girl ran to her, wrapped her arms around the purple nightgown, then ran back to skip around Snow, who looked at them all with a stunned look glazed with melancholy, then closed his eyes.

A minute or two later, they were arguing about which of them would take the newly found feline to their room, and which of them would serve him his food. The cat rose, stretched luxuriously, then leapt lightly to the floor, tail aloft. He turned and padded swiftly to the cold, dark comfort of the bathroom.

“Why is he so silent,” the boy wondered aloud. “When do you think he’ll start meowing again?”

It was one of those endless vacation days, each identical to the last, running into each other to nullify all sense of time. The heat-wave had been blazing for four days, and, finally, the air conditioner faltered. The hours passed like a series of desperate grunts, and they all waited for the cat to entertain them as he had done before with his funny, feline ways.

“Come here for a second,” the husband suddenly said. “Look at what I found.” The cat stretched, sprawled on his side on the carpet, exhausted by the oppressive heat. She went to him and looked into his eyes. “No, look here,” the husband insisted. “At his tummy. He has a black spot on it. It wasn’t there before. You’ve brought home another cat; similar, but different. A cat with a black spot. Snow didn’t have a spot like that, right children?”

The children stood in front of him, embarrassment clear on their young faces. They looked at her, then at him, then leaned down to see for themselves. They saw a coal-black spot the size of a plum on the lower part of the cat’s tummy. When the boy touched it, the cat seemed suddenly incensed, lashing out with an angry paw to scratch his hand. Blood welled.

“Ouch!” the boy shouted. “It’s not him,” he cried. “The one we had never scratched. You’ve brought a stray cat into our house.” The girl started weeping in a heart-pinching silence which slowly grew to an unsettling howl.

“Have you lost your mind?” The wife glowered at her husband. “Of course he had a spot, you just don’t remember.” She was fuming. “You hardly ever stroked him, why would you? But you remember, don’t you …” She turned to the girl, “How he never liked to be touched on his tummy? You all forgot, but I didn’t! He definitely had a spot.”

“He did? Yes, I think he did have one,” said the girl pensively. “I’m sure he did, yes. He just didn’t like to show his tummy to anyone.”

She looked confused. She had already had an unfortunate, even aggravated, history with pets. A kitten had dropped dead in their house. Her mother hoped she had forgotten, but she herself remembered, remembered how the night before she died the little kitten had snuck under the sleeping girl’s blanket and lay beside her, its eyes open. In the morning, when he had gone to wake the girl for school, her husband had called her over. “Come here, come see this,” he had urged her. The girl and the kitten lay covered by a thin, woolen blanket, “What a creature she is, such a curious animal,” her husband had chuckled, but it seemed to the wife that his hair stood on end. A few hours later, when he came home, he found the kitten slumped diagonally in the sandbox they had bought three weeks earlier when they had first brought her into the house. The small, black body was limp and silent.

They had been unable to sleep that night. They hardly spoke and said nothing about the kitten. The husband had driven the tiny body to the dunes by the sea where he had buried it. Constantly changing images of the kitten had churned in her mind. She saw the tiny animal, no more than eight inches long, on the gray, sandy stones, surrounded by droppings. The image blurred and became the memory of the kitten’s anthropomorphic cuddling under the blanket beside the girl, possibly knowing those were its last hours.

The cat gave a loud purr and turned on his belly. Now he was pure Snow. Her husband still seemed skeptical, “I really don’t remember a spot. Perhaps we have pictures that would help us compare?”

“How can there be any pictures if he didn’t like to show his tummy?” she replied gruffly.

“All right, if you two say so,” he muttered. “Come on Snow.” He suddenly seemed happy again as he called the cat. “Let’s go to my room.” The cat turned his behind to the husband and gently settled onto his cushions.

“He doesn’t act like Snow,” the boy said, and a thin smile of satisfaction curled the corners of his lips.

“Let’s call him ‘Make-Believe Snow,’” his father said.

Over the next few days, tension seemed to thrive under the floorboards of the house, like a waiting shark. She gazed rebukingly at the cat, scolding him in her heart. “Show him, show him it’s you already.” She clasped at frail signs and indications; “This is the very same way he used to stretch, or round his back, or scratch,” she repeatedly claimed. “It’s a sign.”

Her husband and echoing son mocked her. They claimed this cat’s face was much wider, and he ate three times as much as the real Snow.

She noticed the cat had become more aggressive. He no longer allowed anyone to stroke him, which provided the husband with a winning argument. “He was cuddly!” he repeatedly argued. “Not like this one! You’ve brought a new, much less lovable cat into our house. One that won’t even let anyone touch him,” he complained resentfully.

“The time he spent on the street must have made him aggressive,” she replied. “He’s been through a traumatic episode and we need to give him time to recover.”

One morning he said, “You could have taken any cat and decided he was Snow. This is almost insulting. Next thing you’ll bring a short, black-haired man into the house and decide that he’s me!” He laughed and went on shaving his stubble in front of the mirror, the blade that scraped his skin making an irksome rustling sound. “Yes, you’ll replace us too one day,” he chuckled.

After he left for work she took a sponge from the cupboard. She knew cats detested water; Snow had detested it as well. She soaked the sponge with liquid soap and moved closer to the cat. He was curled up in his favorite bagel position, fast asleep. She reached a cautious hand toward his belly. She began to rub with the sponge, up and down, right in the center of the cat’s body. The purring sounds he produced, and the fact that he had remained motionless, encouraged her. She went on scrubbing at the furry stomach. A few seconds later the cat opened one eye, then the other. He was looking straight at her. The speed of his strike was almost invisible, his paw hitting the back of the hand holding the sponge. She screamed, the sponge fell, and the cat instantly seized it in four claw-drawn paws. Holding the sponge against his belly in a death grip, he ripped and clawed at it until nothing remained of it but crumbs. It had all happened so fast the woman had had no chance to see whether or not the sponge had changed color.

During the ensuing days, they all spoke of only one thing – Snow’s identity. They were divided into two camps, the mother and the daughter defended, with insult-drenched passion, the identity of the original Snow. They wrangled with the father and the boy, who repeatedly pointed out the differences in the cat’s behavior. The father began to mockingly call him ‘Pseudo-Snow,’ or ‘Make-Believe Snow’. His belittling laughter chilled the woman’s blood.

At other times, doubts rose in her own heart, and, when they assailed her, she felt an existential instability, as if she was suddenly hearing a voice in the back of her head, her dead mother’s voice, calling like she used to: ‘Deborah, close the windows, there’s a terrible draft!’ Her reaction was to immediately go back to passionately searching for signs that would prove the cat’s authentic identity.

On the tenth night after his return, just before dawn, she had a dream. The window was open and a fierce wind gusted into the room. Suddenly Snow emerged, the original, lost, spot-less Snow. He stood on the window ledge. Instantly, the new Snow, the spot-stained impostor, pounced on him and they began sparring with feline ferocity. Angry meows and hisses filled the dream with menace. She saw, in the dream, the spectacular whirling in the air of furry, feline, snowy bodies. ‘They’ll kill each other,’ she shuddered, as the yellow-tinged moon hung above them