

The Black Cat by Edgar Allan Poe

I don't expect anyone to believe the wild story that I am about to tell. I barely believe it myself. But tomorrow I die, and I need to get this awful story off my chest. I want to tell you about a series of events that took place in my house. These events have terrified - have tortured - have destroyed me. But I will not attempt to explain them. To me, they have presented nothing but horror - to many people they won't seem as bad. Afterwards, perhaps, someone may be able to give a simple explanation for my fears - someone more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than myself, who will think that these events are natural causes and effects.

Since I was a baby I have been quiet and well-behaved. I was so good natured that my friends even made fun of me for it. I was especially fond of animals, and my parents gave me a great variety of pets. I spent most of my time with them, and was most happy when feeding and stroking them. As I grew up I enjoyed it more and more. To those people who have loved a faithful and clever dog, I don't need to explain how enjoyable it is. There is something in the unselfish love of an animal, which makes you appreciate how mean and spiteful humans can be.

I married young, and was happy to find that my wife loved animals as much as me. Seeing that I liked pets, she bought me many of them. We had birds, goldfish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and a cat.

The cat was a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and very clever. Because of his intelligence, my wife, who was a little superstitious, often mentioned an old wives tale that all black cats were witches in disguise. She was never really serious - I mention it because it has just sprung to mind.

Pluto - this was the cat's name - was my favourite pet. Only I fed him, and he followed me wherever I went in the house. If I had given him the chance he would have followed me around the streets.

Our friendship lasted for several years, during which I started to drink more and more. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more selfish. I even swore at my wife. In the end, I even used to be violent towards her. My pets, of course, noticed the change in my moods. I not only neglected them, but I treated them badly. Pluto, however, I still liked enough to stop me from mistreating him, though I had no trouble in mistreating the rabbits, the monkey, or even the dog, when by accident, or through affection, they got in my way. But my disease got worse - drinking is a disease! - and in the end even Pluto, who was now becoming old, and sometimes annoying - even Pluto began to experience my bad moods.

One night, returning home, drunk, from one of the bars I went to, I felt that the cat was avoiding me. I grabbed him, and because he was frightened he bit me on the hand. I was so angry! I wasn't myself. **My soul seemed to fly out my body and be replaced by evil**, brought on by drink. I took from my pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor animal by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket! Even writing this now makes me ashamed!

In the morning - when I had slept off the alcohol - I was ashamed and horrified by what I had done; but it didn't last. I started drinking again and soon forgot about it.

In the meantime the cat slowly recovered. The socket of the lost eye looked awful, but he didn't seem to suffer any pain. He prowled around the house as usual, but, as might be expected, ran away in extreme terror when he saw me. At first I was upset that the animal that once loved me so much now hated me. But this feeling soon changed to anger. Then rage. I am sure that rage and anger are buried within every man. What person has not found themselves doing something bad just because they know they shouldn't? Aren't we all tempted to rebel and break rules just because we know that they are rules? This spirit of rebellion and anger led to my downfall. It was this unexplainable need to do wrong just for the sake of it that led to me to want to hurt the cat more. One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose around its neck and hung it to the branch of a tree; - hung it with tears streaming from my eyes, and feeling deeply sorry in my heart; - hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason to hurt it; - hung it because I knew that in doing it I was committing a sin - a deadly sin that might mean that even God could not forgive me.

That night I was woken up by the sound of fire. The curtains around my bed were in flames. The whole house was blazing. It was with great difficulty that my wife, a servant, and myself, escaped. Everything was destroyed and I sunk into depression.

I won't attempt to make a link between the fire and what I did to Pluto. But I am giving the facts - and don't want to leave out any possible links. On the day after the fire, I visited the ruins. The walls, apart from one, had fallen in. One wall, not very thick, which stood in the middle of the house survived. It was the wall which the head of my bed stood against. The plastering was new and so had resisted the fire. Around this wall were a crowd of people, and many of them seemed to be examining a particular part of it. I heard the words "strange!" "unusual!" and went closer out of curiosity I approached and saw, on the wall, the image of a gigantic cat. The image was very accurate. There was a rope around the animal's neck.

When I first saw the image I was terrified and thought it wasn't real. Then I started to use my common sense. The cat, I remembered, had been hung in a garden next to the house. When the fire started, a crowd had gathered in the garden - and someone must have thrown the cat through the window into my bedroom. This had probably been done to wake me up. When the other walls fell they must have pressed the cat into the fresh plaster; the chemicals in the plaster and liquid from the cat's body must have created this image.

Although I thought I had explained the cat's image on the wall, I couldn't stop thinking about it. For months I could not forget the image of the cat; and I almost began to miss him. I looked around for another similar animal to replace him and get the image out of my head

One night as I sat, drunk again, in a bar with a bad reputation, I suddenly noticed some black object, sitting on the top of a huge barrel of gin. I had been looking at the top of this barrel for a while, and I was surprised I hadn't seen the object earlier. I approached it, and touched it with my hand. It was a black cat - a very large one - as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him apart from one fact. Pluto was completely black; but this cat had a large splotch of white, covering nearly the whole of its chest. As I touched him, he immediately got up, purred loudly, rubbed against my hand, and seemed glad of the attention. This was the animal I had been looking for! I offered to buy it from the landlord; but he said he had never seen it before.

I continued stroking him, and, when I prepared to go home, the animal tried to accompany me. I let him follow; occasionally stooping and patting it as I walked. When it reached the house it made itself at home straight itself away, and my wife loved him.

However, I soon started to dislike the cat. I didn't expect it, but the fact that this cat loved me started to annoy and disgust me. Slowly, these feelings turned to hatred. I avoided the cat; but shame at what I did to Pluto stopped me from hurting it. I did not, for weeks, hit, or otherwise hurt it; but gradually - very gradually - I came to loathe it, and to avoid it like the plague.

What added to my hatred of the cat, was the discovery, on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also was missing an eye. This only made my wife love it more, and reminded me of what I used to be like before I started drinking.

The more I avoided the cat, the more it tried to find me. It followed my footsteps constantly. Wherever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or jump upon my knees, rubbing against my chest. If I got up to walk it would get between my feet and nearly trip me up, or, dig its claws into me and climb up onto my chest. When it did this I was tempted to hit it, but didn't, partly because of shame for what I had done to Pluto, and partly because, I admit, I was scared of the cat.

I wasn't exactly scared of the cat hurting me. I am almost ashamed to say that the fear came from one of the silliest things. My wife had called my attention, more than once, to the patch of white hair, of which I have spoken, and which was the only difference between the strange beast and the one I had killed. At first I had thought nothing of it, but as time went on the mark seemed to take shape. It was the shape of the hangman's noose!

By now this cat had scared me so much that I couldn't sleep. During the day he wouldn't leave me alone; and at night, I woke from horrible dreams to feel it sitting on my chest, making it difficult to breathe, and feeling the cat's own hot breath on my face.

Under the stress of not sleeping and not escaping the cat, the last shred of goodness in me disappeared. I only thought the darkest and most evil of thoughts. The moodiness changed to hatred of all things and of all mankind; usually, it was my wife who suffered from my outbursts of anger.

One day she accompanied me into the cellar of the old building which our poverty forced us to live in. The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly tripping me up, annoyed me to madness. Lifting up an axe, I aimed it at the animal's head, and had I managed to hit it, the cat would have died instantly. But my wife stopped me by holding my arm. Annoyed, by the interference, into a terrible rage, I pulled my arm away and buried the axe in her brain. She fell down dead upon the spot, without a groan.

Having killed her, I tried to hide the body. I knew that I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being seen by the neighbours. Many ideas entered my mind. At one point I thought of cutting the corpse into little pieces, and destroying them by fire. At another, I decided to dig a grave for it in the floor of the cellar. Then, I thought about throwing it in the well in the yard - about packing it in a box, as if it were a parcel, and getting a courier to take it from the house. Finally I hit upon what I considered a far better idea than either of these. I decided to wall it up in the cellar.

The cellar was well made for this. Its walls were built loosely, and had recently been plastered throughout with a rough plaster, which the dampness of the atmosphere had prevented from hardening. Also, there was a gap behind one of the walls where an old fireplace had been bricked up. I knew that I could take out the bricks at this point, insert the corpse, and wall the

whole up as before, so that no one could detect anything suspicious. I easily dislodged the bricks with a crow bar, and, having carefully placed the body against the inner wall, I propped it up in that position, while I replaced the original wall. I prepared plaster which looked the same as the rest of the wall, and I very carefully went over the new brickwork. When I had finished, I felt satisfied that all was right. The wall did not have the slightest appearance of having been disturbed. The rubbish on the floor was picked up with care. I looked around triumphantly, and said to myself - "Here at least, my work has not been for nothing."

My next step was to look for the cat which had been the cause of so much pain; for I had, decided to kill it. Had it appeared just then there's no doubt I would have; but it appeared that the crafty animal had been frightened of me and had stayed out of my way. It is impossible to describe the wonderful sense of relief at not seeing the cat. It did not make its appearance during the night - and for one night at least, since its introduction into the house, I soundly slept; aye, slept even with the burden of murder upon my soul!

The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor didn't come. Once again I breathed easy. The monster, in terror, had fled the house forever! I would never see it again! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed only disturbed me a little. Some few inquiries had been made, but these had been quickly answered. Even a search had begun - but of course nothing was discovered. I believed my luck would continue.

Four days after the murder, the police came, very unexpectedly, into the house, and proceeded again to search the house. I felt no embarrassment whatsoever because I knew I had disguised the cellar well. The officers asked me to accompany them in their search. They left no nook or corner unexplored. At last for the third or fourth time, they descended into the cellar. I didn't shake one bit. My heart beat calmly. I walked the cellar from end to end. I folded my arms upon my chest, and walked easily to and fro. The police were thoroughly satisfied and prepared to leave. The happiness in my heart was too strong to be restrained. I wanted to say just one word, in triumph, and to make doubly sure that they knew I wasn't guilty.

"Gentlemen," I said at last, as the police walked up the steps, "I am glad to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all well. By the way, gentlemen, this - this is a very well constructed house." [In the desire to say something easily, I didn't know what I was saying.] - "An excellently well constructed house. These walls... Are you going, gentlemen? - these walls are solidly put together;" and here, through pure arrogance, I banged heavily, with a stick which I held in my hand, upon that part of the brick-work behind which stood the corpse of my wife.

But no sooner had the echoes of my banging stopped, than a noise came from within the tomb! - a cry, at first muffled, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, completely inhuman - a howl - a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that enjoy the damnation.

Light headed, I staggered to the opposite wall. For one moment the police on the stairs remained motionless, in terror and shock. In the next moment, they were all breaking apart the wall, which fell down. The corpse, already decayed and clotted with blood, stood before the eyes of the police. Upon its head, with wide red mouth and one fiery eye, sat the hideous beast who had led me to murder, and whose voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb!