

Something to Grin About

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When the doorbell rang Melody dropped the phone, tossed the stack of bills on the table, and ran to answer it, expecting to see Todd there in the hallway with some new argument. She'd had the last word before he stormed out—she already regretted that, and he wasn't likely to let it stand. Sooner or later he'd be back to shout at her some more.

But it wasn't Todd; it was a uniformed deliveryman, not UPS or FedEx or any she'd seen before, but some courier service with a fancy, unreadable red-and-blue logo that was blazoned across the man's breast pocket and the back of his clipboard. On the floor by the deliveryman's feet was a large plastic box.

"Melody Duke?" he asked. Before Melody could reply, he held out the clipboard. "Line 8," he said. She signed, and while she did he lifted the plastic box by a handle on the top and set it inside her door. When she was done she handed the clipboard back and looked down at the box.

"Where's it from?" she asked, but he had already turned away and gotten halfway down the stairs.

She shrugged, started to bend down for a look at the tag wired to the handle, then remembered the phone. She gasped, ran back to the kitchen, snatched up the receiver, and said, "Mother?"

The line was dead; her mother had hung up.

"Oh, *poop*," she said. Not that the discussion had been going anywhere; her mother still didn't like Todd and still didn't think she was safe living there, and Melody had been through all that with her parents any number of times without any minds changing.

She glared at the phone for a moment, then hung it up. Then she realized she had left the apartment door standing open with the mysterious package just inside, and despite what she told her parents, this was not *really* a completely safe neighborhood, especially with Todd gone for the moment...

She dashed back to the living room, hauled the plastic crate inside, and slammed the door. For good measure she threw the deadbolt, then flopped down cross-legged on the floor to look over her new acquisition, whatever it was.

The tag on the handle had her name and address in the TO portion; the FROM read, "Abigail Duke, 7 Little Moreton Lane, Chester CH6 5LL, ENGLAND."

Her British grandmother.

Her grandmother who had just gone into the nursing home.

Her grandmother who owned a cat Melody had promised to look after, a promise that Melody, eight thousand miles away, had not until this moment taken seriously. Now, however, she looked at the plastic crate and realized that yes, this was a pet carrier.

"Ohmigod," she said. She turned the crate around, and yes, there was the door, with rows of little airholes punched in it. She bent down and peered through the holes.

The crate was empty.

Melody blinked and sat up.

Had her grandmother's cat *escaped* somehow? How could it have? The door was still latched. Had someone stolen it? She'd heard about people who stole cats and sold them to testing laboratories. Or had Grandma Duke maybe gotten confused and sent the crate empty? She'd always been a little dotty, as Melody's father put it, and now she was so old...

Melody had only met her grandmother three or four times, but the old lady had never seemed *that* dotty.

Of course, Todd would never stand for a cat around the place, so it would be just as well if there *was* no cat, but maybe the cat had just found some corner to hide in. Maybe if she took a closer look...

Melody untwisted the wire from around the latch and popped the door open—and out stepped the

cat.

It was a very *large* cat, with splendid stripes and a long graceful tail that swayed elegantly as it strolled daintily away from the pet carrier. It was rather plump, but not actually fat. Dark tufts projected from the tip of either ear, and it moved in utter silence, its broad and well-furred paws soundless on the well-worn carpet. When it was well clear of its prison it turned, settled to the floor, wrapped its tail about itself, and grinned up at Melody.

She blinked at it in surprise. She'd never seen a cat grin before, and how in the world could a cat that size have hidden from her in that carrier? She looked from the cat to the carrier, then back again, and the cat simply grinned at her.

It was unquestionably a magnificent animal, but still...

"I can't keep a cat!" she said, to no one in particular.

The cat tipped its head and looked at her. "Whyever not?" it asked.

Melody blinked again. The cat's expression had been so easy to read, she told herself, that she almost thought she'd heard it speak.

"It's not allowed," she said, not sure why she was saying this aloud. "My lease says no pets. And anyway, Todd's allergic to cats and he hates animals. And my mother would complain about how much it would cost to *feed* a cat. She thinks I'm wasting my money trying to live here instead of staying home with her, and if I were feeding a cat..."

"And how is it your mother's business?"

"Well, that's what *I* keep saying," Melody agreed. "It's my money, and I can spend it any way I like, can't I?"

"I don't know," said the cat. "Can you? You certainly *may*, for all of me, but I wouldn't be sure you *can*."

It was at that point that Melody realized she was holding an actual conversation with a cat.

"You can *talk!*" she said.

"So can you." The cat had a pleasant voice, either a tenor or a low alto, Melody couldn't decide which, with the same lovely British accent as her grandmother.

Which made sense, in a way, if you admitted a cat could talk in the first place. She stared at the cat for a moment, and it grinned placidly back.

"I must be mad," she said at last.

"Oh, we're all mad here," the cat replied.

"I know that line," Melody said, staring at the cat. "I know *all* of this... a talking, grinning cat? A Cheshire Cat?"

The cat licked the tip of its tail thoughtfully, then remarked, "Your grandmother *does* live in Chester, after all; what *other* sort of cat ought she to have?"

"You can disappear," Melody said accusingly. "That's why the box looked empty!"

The cat did not deign to reply to that.

"This is crazy," Melody said. "That was in a story, it wasn't true. I *must* be mad!"

"Oh," the cat said, "is *nothing* one reads in stories true, then? How curious."

"I didn't mean *that*," Melody said. She stared at the cat.

It wasn't disappearing. It did talk, and it did grin, though.

"This is crazy," Melody said again.

The cat did not bother to reply to that.

"Listen, I really can't keep you here!" Melody said. "The landlord won't stand for it. No pets, it says so in the lease. It's right there in... what are you doing?"

The cat's tail had gotten shorter, she was sure of it—and as she watched, more of it vanished, followed by the animal's hindquarters, and then the rest of it, until nothing was left but the grin.

Melody was not a calm person. She had been known to lose her composure over a misplaced can of soup or a crooked shower curtain. Ordinary catastrophes such as a missed train or broken heel could reduce her to hysterics. Todd's tantrums and invective had brought on tears for *months* before she had gotten used to them. Even so, watching a cat disappear inch by inch, until nothing remained but the grin, when a cat had no business grinning in the first place, was beyond question the single most unsettling thing she had ever seen in her life. It was all she could do to keep from screaming, and a small, strangled squeak did escape, despite her best efforts.

The cat's head reappeared.

"I don't think your landlord would notice me, should I prefer that he not do so," the cat said.

"I guess not," she said weakly.

"I don't suppose you'd have such a thing as a piece of liver about?" the cat asked. "I spent a very long time in that box. I'm hungry." As he spoke, the rest of him abruptly reappeared.

Melody stared at the cat for a moment, then resigned herself to it—the Cheshire Cat was real, it was here, it was hungry, and it was her responsibility, at least for the moment. "I'll see," she said.

She stumbled to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, and then, for no reason she was aware of, glanced up.

The Cheshire Cat was sitting on top of the refrigerator, curled up with its head on its forepaws, watching her.

Melody screamed.

The cat blinked lazily and continued to stare at her as she caught her breath and, hand on her heart, tried to calm down; then it grinned.

"Did I startle you?" it asked.

"You scared me half to death!" she said. "I left you back in the living room!"

The cat didn't reply to that, but instead looked down and asked, "Is there any liver?"

"No," Melody said as she rummaged through the refrigerator's drawers and compartments. "There's some hamburger—would that do?"

"That would certainly be better than nothing," the cat said. It vanished.

Melody stared at the spot where it had sat for a moment, then turned and cautiously looked around.

The cat was standing on the counter, just under the phone, the tip of its tail brushing the receiver.

That seemed as good a place to feed it as any, Melody decided; she pulled out the tray with its leftover lump of ground beef, peeled off the plastic wrap, and put it on the counter.

"Thank you," the cat said. Then it began eating.

By the time Melody had closed the refrigerator and turned back, the hamburger was gone.

"Is there any more?" the cat asked wistfully.

"No," Melody said, very definitely. "No, there isn't. And you can't stay here. Even if you *can* hide from the landlord. My mother would nag me about wasting money, and Todd would be sneezing all the time—if he came in at all! If I kept a cat he might not come back!"

"Who's Todd?"

"My boyfriend. Sort of. I mean, he is, but we fight a lot, or sometimes, when he gets mad about something or I get mad, so he keeps leaving me, but he doesn't really, I mean we don't really break up, because then he always comes back, sooner or later, after he's over being mad or if he gets mad at his new girlfriend, if he has one, which he did twice, the rat, and I apologize and promise not to do whatever it was again, if I can figure out what it was I did. And I make him dinner and we'll be back together until he gets mad again."

The cat stared at her for a moment, then said, "Would you care to reconstruct that statement so that it makes sense, or shall I simply accept the intelligible portions as they stand and ignore the rest?"

"Oh, shut up. I don't know why I'm talking to a *cat*, anyway."

"Perhaps because *I'm* speaking to *you*" the cat suggested.

"Which you have no business doing! Cats can't talk!"

"I can. And I'm quite certain I'm a cat."

"Well, you're not *my* cat. You can't stay here!"

"And where am I to go, then? Your grandmother sent me here because she believed you had promised to take care of me when she could no longer do so; it wasn't *my* idea."

Melody frowned, and looked about helplessly. She could hardly take her grandmother's cat to the pound; she would have to find it a new home.

"Maybe one of my friends could take you," she said.

The cat considered that.

"I'll ask around," she said.

"And for now?"

"You can stay for now, I guess," Melody reluctantly conceded.

"In that case, might I trouble you for some more food? Fish, perhaps, if there's no liver to be had?"

Melody shuddered. "I hate seafood," she said. "Look, I'll go down to the market and buy some cat food, okay? Liver flavor, if they have it."

"Being a cat, I can't honestly say I would be grateful, but I would very much enjoy being properly fed."

"All right, then," Melody said.

When she returned to the living room, Melody noticed the now-empty cat carrier and took a moment to tuck it away out of sight in the coat closet before she prepared to go out.

She didn't want Todd seeing it when he came back; he hated pets. He might hit her again; he hadn't lately, but if he found out she had a cat, he might.

As she put on her jacket and collected her purse she had the distinct feeling that she had lost her debate with the cat—but that was hardly new; she lost arguments with Todd and with her mother all the time, and she'd probably have lost arguments with her boss and her coworkers at the shop if she'd ever had the nerve to argue with any of them in the first place.

Losing to a cat seemed somehow a bit worse, though, and in retaliation she slammed the door on her way out, which did not trouble the cat at all. It watched her go, then washed itself and settled to sleep on the kitchen counter.

It was awakened a moment later by a loud ring from the telephone. Annoyed, the cat uncurled and glared up at the device.

It rang again.

The cat got to its feet, stretched up a paw, and knocked the receiver from its hook. It fell rattling to the counter, then lay still, the receiver directly in front of the cat.

"Hello?" a voice said. "Melody?"

"I'm afraid Melody isn't here," the cat said into the mouthpiece.

For a moment there was silence, and the cat considered resuming its nap; then the voice said, "Who am I talking to? That's not Todd's voice. Who are you?"

"I'm Melody's new boarder," the cat replied. "Most people just call me Cat."

"Boarder? You mean a roommate? Melody didn't tell me!"

"I've just arrived," the cat said.

"Oh! Well, I... well, that's wonderful. I'm Melody's mother, and I've been telling her for *months* that it wasn't safe living there alone, that it was too expensive... Are you splitting the rent?"

"I expect to do my share, Mrs. Duke," the cat answered.

"And... well, what about Todd? I know Melody denied it, but I thought he was living with her, and there isn't *room* for three, is there? *Todd* never paid any rent, of course—I think that's why he kept coming back."

"I haven't met Todd, Mrs. Duke. I believe he's left."

"For good, I hope. I know I shouldn't say such things, but really, Melody can do better, I'm sure, if she'd once get rid of him!"

"I wouldn't know. I do know Todd isn't here, and I am."

"Well, that's wonderful. You have such a lovely accent— is it English?"

"I'm from England, yes. From Cheshire."

"What an interesting coincidence—my mother-in-law lives in Cheshire!"

"Yes, I believe Melody mentioned that."

"You said your name is Catherine?"

"Just Cat will suit me fine, Mrs. Duke."

"Melody isn't there?"

"She stepped out to the market just now."

"Oh. Well, when she gets back, you tell her that I called, okay?"

"I'll do that, Mrs. Duke."

"All right, then. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye." The cat reached up with one paw and pressed down the hook.

Unfortunately, it had no way to hang the receiver back up—that was more than mere paws could handle. The result was a dial tone that was not particularly to the cat's liking, even before it changed to the phone-left-off-the-hook warning. The cat eyed the noisy receiver with distaste. It decided a nap was no longer practical; it hopped down from the counter and ambled into the living room.

The doorbell rang. The cat stopped, midway across the living room, and glared at it.

"Melody?" a male voice called.

At this new intrusion on its privacy the cat wondered whether perhaps this place was insufficiently peaceful to be a suitable residence—but it was, as yet, unfamiliar with any better alternative in the area. With a flick of its tail, it vanished.

A key scraped in the lock, and the apartment door opened; a young man stepped in.

"Melody? It's me—I came back for my stuff!"

The cat watched, unseen.

"Come on, bitch, I know you're here!" the young man shouted.

The cat considered that. It did not much like this loud, ill-mannered person. Furthermore, if this was Todd, he was an obstacle to the cat's remaining comfortably settled here.

Something would have to be done about that. Ordinarily, the cat preferred to simply watch humans going about their foolish little lives, but in this case intervention seemed appropriate.

"Is that anything to call her?" the cat asked.

The young man—Todd, the cat supposed him to be— looked about, but was unable to locate a source for the words he had just heard, and concluded that he had just imagined them, or perhaps overheard something from another apartment.

"Damn," he said. He marched in, leaving the door standing wide open, and peered into the kitchen.

No Melody.

He tried the bedroom—also vacant. The bathroom was dark and empty.

He returned to the bedroom and began collecting his belongings from the nightstand and dresser into a laundry bag—and incidentally pocketing a few dollars Melody had left in the bedside drawer.

"Is that money yours?" the cat asked; its head had appeared, floating in midair just behind Todd's ear.

He whirled, but the cat's head had vanished again.

"So you're a thief, as well as an exploitive scoundrel?" the cat asked from the other side.

"The bitch owes me!" Todd protested.

"Oh? For what? For putting up with months of abuse? For apologizing when you demand it? For cooking your supper and paying your rent?"

"What is this?" Todd demanded. "Is this place haunted or something? Is this someone's idea of a joke?"

"I suppose it would be too much to suggest this is the voice of your conscience," the cat said musingly.

"I don't have a goddamn conscience, Jiminy Cricket," Todd said sneeringly. "Who *are* you?"

Then he sneezed messily.

"Damn," he said, as he groped for the box of tissues on the dresser.

The cat chose that moment to rematerialize, back on the floor just behind Todd's right leg. It stretched out one large, well-furred paw, extended its claws as far as it could, and then dug them firmly through Todd's sweat sock into his ankle.

"Aaaaugh!" he screamed into the tissue he had been using to wipe his nose.

The cat retracted its claws and vanished.

"What the..." Todd's sentence was interrupted by another sneeze. As he bent over, the cat applied a pawful of claws to Todd's left ankle.

The noise Todd produced in response was a fascinating combination of scream, sneeze, cough, and choke. He staggered back and sat down heavily on the bed, both fists clenched, a soggy tissue dangling from one of them.

"*Who did that?*" he demanded, looking about wildly.

The cat, of course, had vanished again; now its head reappeared behind Todd's right shoulder and spoke.

"I did it," the cat said. "And I'll do more of the same as long as you're here, or if you ever set foot in this apartment again."

"Fine!" Todd said, flinging down the tissue. "That's just goddamn fine, whoever you are! The bitch isn't worth it. Hey, Melody, you hear me? You ain't worth it. I can find another girl who'll treat me better!" He looked down at his ankles and saw blood seeping through his socks.

"Oh, Jesus, I'm bleeding," he said. "Damn it, look at that! Look what you did! Jesus!" He dabbed at the blood and only succeeded in spreading it further. He snatched a handful of tissues from the box and stuffed them into his socks as makeshift dressings, and was interrupted several times by sneezes as he did so.

"Doesn't she ever dust in here?" he grumbled. "What the hell am I sneezing at?"

The cat considered the sight of Todd, sitting on the edge of the bed and bent down to stuff tissues in his socks, and was unable to resist.

Todd felt a sudden weight on his back, and the mysterious needles that had gouged his ankles suddenly scraped across the back of his neck.

"*All right!*" he said, jumping up. He whirled, but saw no sign of his attacker. "All right, I'm going! Jesus, give me a minute!"

"No," the cat said.

"Oh, crap," Todd said, grabbing a final clump of tissues with one hand and his nose with the other as he fought back a fresh attack of sneezing. He snatched up his laundry bag and fled, hobbling.

The cat watched him go.

When Todd was out of sight, and his footsteps had faded to inaudibility, the cat pushed the apartment door closed.

The phone was still making its annoying buzzing noise, but the bedroom was reasonably quiet; the cat jumped up on the bed, curled up, and went to sleep.

Several minutes later Melody returned, and discovered, as she fumbled for her key, that the door was unlocked. Worried, she opened it.

"Todd?" she called.

No one answered. She stepped in and looked around.

Nothing was out of place, so far as she could see. The phone was buzzing, though; she went to the kitchen, put her bag of groceries on the counter, and hung the receiver up.

She didn't remember leaving it off the hook. "Todd?" she called.

"He isn't here," the cat replied. "He was, though. He collected a few things, and then left."

"He did?" Melody frowned. Todd almost always left a few things behind; that was one reason she always expected him to come back eventually.

"And your mother called," the cat said.

"She did? How do you know?"

"I knocked the phone off the hook," the cat admitted.

"Oh, she's probably furious!" Melody snatched at the receiver and dialed.

A moment later, as Melody was making frantic apologies, her mother said, "Oh, that's all right—but why didn't you *tell* me about that lovely Cat?"

"Cat?" Melody said, horrified.

"Your new roommate! She sounds wonderful; I'll have to meet her sometime."

Melody glanced at the cat, which stood in the kitchen door, grinning at her. "Roommate," she said weakly. "Right."

Five minutes later Melody hung up the phone and glared at the cat.

"I don't know how you did that," she said.

"Your mother doesn't seem to object to my presence here," the cat remarked.

"No, she doesn't," Melody agreed. "You said Todd was here?"

"Well, a young man who had a key was here."

"That was Todd. Did he see you?"

"No, I don't believe he did."

"Well, *that's* something, anyway."

"Did you buy food for me?"

"Oh, yeah." Melody fished a can of cat food out of the bag of groceries and slapped it into the electric can opener.

She watched thoughtfully as the cat ate.

"All right," she said at last, as it licked its paws after finishing, "you can stay until Todd comes back. But the minute he's back, out you go."

The cat curled up and began to purr. "That," it said, "will suit me just fine."