The Black Cat

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Abstract

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HARVEY'S youthful form slipped from shadow to shadow in the moonlit alley. His ragged jeans moved loosely with his thin legs. His deeply set eyes, in a freckled, pinched face, searched for any observer. The night was silent but for the breeze that played with the fall leaves.

The last shadow fell behind him as Harvey crept to the rear door of Herb's Radio and Television Shop. With his back pressed against the building, his eyes searched the shadows. Then he turned and set to his job of picking the lock on the door.

He pulled a short piece of wire from his hind pocket, twisted it to the proper angle and worked it gently into the lock. A few deft manipulations, a muffled click, and one hand reached for the knob. The door creaked softly as it swung open. Harvey shot a quick glance over his shoulder as he stepped inside.

Cheez, this was a snap. Success welled up within him as he eased the door shut. He turned to search the pattern shadows caused by the streetlight shining through the windows. He had admired one of the radios on the west shelf for several weeks and now it was to be his. His hands reached for it, lifted it tenderly from the shelf, and held it in a patch of light for a moment's admiration.

Cheez, what a beauty. Hmmm — wonder if Herb left any dough in his cashbox.

Just as he reached for the drawer a bang of the door behind him made him freeze. His heart leaped as the beam of a flashlight nailed him.

"Vot choo doin' dere, Harvey?" It was Swede, the town's night watchman.

"Unnh — I ain' doin nothin — unnh — I'm just lookin aroun," he whined. Cheez, now he was stuck.

"Now, py kolly, Harvey dis here is serious stuff — You was swipin dat radio an' you can't lie out of dis one." Harvey had bluffed his way through when the Swede almost nailed him
other times but he knew it was no use this time. "Now py kolly," the Swede continued, "you bedder see de mayor in de mornin! I'm gonna tell him about dis and you bedder be dere!"

Harvey was still shaking with fright as he placed the radio back on the shelf. As he shuffled toward the door the Swede called after him, "You bedder git home to bed, and don't try no more funny stuff, Harvey!"

It was just two blocks to his shack at the edge of town but he couldn't seem to run fast enough. The dogs were barking at him, and he imagined that one was chasing him. He slowed to a walk as he approached the small buildings across from the dump grounds.

Dammit, why did he do it? If only the Swede hadn't seen him. If only Hank Clark, the poolhall owner, hadn't shown him how to pick a lock. He'd have bought it if he'd had the money.

The cold moonlight glinted on a tin can as he kicked it. The deserted filling station that he called home was a somber shadow. He glanced at the small house beside it and noticed that Maw had her lights off — probably in bed.

As he opened the door and fumbled for the switch he felt something rub against his leg. Even before the light filled the room he knew it was Blackie, the only friend he had. He picked up the black bundle of fur and hugged it close as he moved to the battered army cot against the wall.

The cot and most of the other meager furnishings in the small room had been rescued from the dump grounds — a bench along one wall with a few tools and cans of paint that he had found in someone's car trunk, a small table and homemade chair in the middle of the room, an apple basket in one corner with his clothes, such as they were. At least this was better than living over there with Maw — she was so damn dirty.

Maw hadn't resisted when Harvey had told her that he was going to fix up a room over here. Maw never argued anyhow — she was kinda dumb.

Harvey petted Blackie absently until the cat began purring. Harvey wished he could be at ease like that — wished he had a dad to get him out of this mess. Other guy's dads did things for them. This time it looked like he was in for it
unless — naw, there was no place to run to — no friend or re­
ative to hide him.

Though he wasn't sleepy Harvey knew there was nothing
to do but go to bed. He slowly undressed and turned back
the rough blankets on the cot. There was one cigarette left
in the pack on the table, so he lighted it and turned off the
light. He would have to swipe another quarter from Maw's
relief money and have Berge, a local farmer, buy him an­
other pack.

He snuffed the butt out on the floor and turned on his
back. He usually had bad dreams and dreaded going to sleep.
For a few minutes he stared at the dim cracks in the ceiling,
wondering what would happen tomorrow. He heard Blackie
padding toward the cot and reached over to pick him up.

On the cot, Blackie curled up, uttered a few soft purrs and
fell asleep. The slow, rhythmic breathing put Harvey at ease
and he, too, drifted off with his dreams —.

Part II

Walking down the endless street it — was — bare but for
the middle-aged women and their offspring in each door­
way — as he passed they drew the children to them — they
were whispering — softly in the small ears, don't play with
Harvey, he's bad, it ROARED in his ears.

At the end of the street — no — just in front of him he
spotted a huge truck loaded with toys, books — radios and
money — on the back of the truck was a banner saying TO
HARVEY FROM 268 PEOPLE — he walked down the street
full of whispers toward the truck but it kept moving away
from him as fast as he walked — then he ran, ran, ran, ran, —
but it was always out of reach — then he was falling behind
breathless and the truck with the banner saying to Harvey
from two hundred-sixty-eight people was moving out of sight.
Just as it was about to disappear a huge black cat leaped from
a doorway and Harvey climbed on its back and they rode to­
ward the truck like the wind, and the people in the doorways
threw stones at Harvey and the huge black cat, and they mis­
sed. Now alongside the truck Harvey reached out and grab­
bed a radio from the load. He was just reaching for a wom­
an's stocking filled with greenbacks when the cat stumbled
(thou shalt not steal, said the cat, but I wasn't said Harvey it was mine) and he was sliding on his face along the street.

Then he wasn't sliding, he was being dragged along the ground — the rope was cutting his ankles — the rope that was being pulled by a pony. The rider and the kids running alongside were chanting — gonna hang Harvey gonna hang Harvey — just when he thought he would faint from the pain and fear the huge black cat, bigger than the pony, darted from behind a tree, snapped the rope with one bite, picked Harvey up by the seat of his torn trousers and bounded back to the shack with him. Harvey was so thankful that he squeezed him until the cat became smaller and smaller and smaller — he became so small that he yowled at the last hug — the cat scratched but Harvey kept hugging.

Part III

A sudden pain on the back of his hand brought Harvey awake with a start. Blackie was beside him and he realized that he must have squeezed the cat in his sleep. The sun was streaming through the window. A nice day, he thought — guess I'll — then he remembered last night. He soothed Blackie for a minute, then got up. As he reached for his jeans he noticed they were torn, and he shuddered. There was a newer, cleaner pair in the basket so he put them on. He then pulled on a clean T shirt and felt well dressed.

The Swede was in his garage, peering under the hood of his car. Sheepishly, Harvey approached him. The shuffling behind him brought the Swede's head out for a look.

"Morning, Harvey. Pi kolly, de mayor sez fur you to be in de liberry at nine. Hit's almos dat time now, so py kolly, you bedder gid up dere."

"Okay," Harvey mumbled as he turned to go.

"Py kolly, Harvey, mebbe you learn a lesson dis time, eh?" Harvey slammed the door behind him.

The library was a new building that had been built from funds donated by the two Ladies Aids and the local W.C.T.U. Harvey had never been in it before but he knew it was used for town council meetings.

Cheez, maybe the whole council would be there. He hoped not.
He didn't knock — just opened the door and walked in. The murmuring of the group of men ceased, and seven pairs of eyes turned to glare at him. God, he wanted to run but—

"Come in, Harvey." It was the mayor, Chris Larsen. He didn't have his usual grin. "We're not quite ready for you, Harvey. Would you wait in the other room?"

As he moved to the door leading to the other room, Harvey noticed the stranger in a suit and wondered what he was doing here. He closed the door behind him and the voices resumed. Cheez, there were a lot of books in this room. If he could read better he would try one but — hey, what were they saying in there — something about a first or second plan. With his ear to the door, he could make out most of the words.

"Now, if we send him to the reform school it'll give the town a lotta bad publicity." It was Hank Clark. "He'd be okay if he only had someone to kinda keep him under control. That's why I suggested we kinda parole him out to someone." Cheez, a parole. He had often heard that his ol' man was going to get one of them, whatever it was.

"No, I'm definitely for sending him to the reformatory." Let's see — that must be ol' man Jurgens. He always had a "better than you" attitude. "We don't want him around setting a bad example for our kids." Hell, it was his son, Lennie, who showed Harvey how to swipe the empty pop bottles from behind the grocery store.

"Well, I agree it's hard telling how much stuff we'll have stolen if we keep him around." That tight ol' bastard, Abe Katzen! Nobody liked him but he had a lotta money.

The mayor interrupted the debate. "Well, fellas, let's hear what Mr. Jenkins might have to suggest." Hmmm, Jenkins. He'd heard that name before. He must be the stranger.

"Gentlemen, the boy has probably been blamed for many things that he was not responsible for, but he is enough of a problem to warrant correction." He sounded like a nice guy. "As I understand it, his mother is not able to control him. Unless one of you would volunteer to take the responsibility for his actions, I see no alternative but to place him in the reformatory."

Harvey wondered which was worse, the reform school or the fourth grade here. It didn't make much difference — he'd get shoved around either place.
“Is there anyone who would volunteer to take Harvey on parole?” It was the mayor again, pushing for a decision. No one seemed to be willing to take the chance. What a bunch of chickens. “All right then, I guess we’ll have to turn it over to Mr. Jenkins. Hank, will you have Harvey come in?”

There was a movement of chairs and Harvey backed quickly away from the door. He was sitting nonchalantly in a reading chair when Hank stuck his head in. “Okay, Harvey, we’re ready for you.”

He walked back in casually and took a seat at the end of the table. He’d show these old fogies that he wasn’t scared.

The mayor nodded to the stranger who began, “Harvey, I’m the county sheriff.” Harvey’s heart stopped for a minute. Cheez, a real cop! “These gentlemen on the town council have brought you to my attention. Now, I understand that several times in the past year or so you have been in trouble of one kind or another.” The sheriff droned stiffly through what the men on the council had probably told him. “And now after your episode last night these gentlemen have suggested that you be placed in a reform school.” He’d already figured that much out. “Since you are only fourteen, you cannot be taken before a regular court or placed in jail. We hope that in the reform school you’ll learn that you can’t do things your way but in the way society permits. Do you have anything you’d like to say, Harvey?”

“Cheez, can I take Blackie?” he asked.

“Yes, I’ll go with you to get the things you’d like to take along. One of the men on the council will explain this to your mother, so she won’t be upset about it,” he explained.

The meeting broke up, and Harvey walked out the door without a word to any of the councilmen. The sheriff had a new car and motioned for Harvey to get in. Cheez, he’d never ridden in a new car before.

In the shack Harvey gathered his belongings and put them in the basket. He thought about leaving a note for Maw, but she couldn’t read anyhow.

As they pulled away from town, Harvey didn’t look back—he held Blackie on his lap and admired the dashboard on the new car.

—Robert Koepp