

About 4280 words

Mother Cat

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When I am almost eighteen, getting ready to graduate from High School, my mother and step father are buried in the hill out back and I don't tell anyone about it. Later, I am labeled an unfeeling monster and other things, but the Judge says I am a 'dumb kid'. People always want to know why. So, I'll skip all the little kid stuff and go right to my 10th birthday. It gives you a good idea of how things were.

Middle of the summer, I am dropped off at Mrs. Hanson's before seven. Mrs. Hanson has a nice party for me, she does stuff like that. Says I am like having another kid, except, of course, she gets paid. Mom picks me up at the usual time, after six, Mrs. Hanson's cut off is six.

We get in the car and I start telling Mom about the party, she says, 'Not now, I have something on my mind.' I am used to it. She is a Receptionist/Writer, Receptionist during the day and Writer any other time, I hear 'Not now.' a lot.

We get home, she dumps her purse on the counter and says "Plenty in the fridge" and starts down the hall talking. "I've been writing all day." Goes into her bedroom.

Writing all day?

I follow and stand there watching her type with her back to the doorway, she is a beautiful woman. She told me once she did modeling in Philadelphia then moved to Indianapolis with a guy. The guy was my father who took off once I came on the scene, she never told me much more about him. She was stuck in a big, strange city with a new baby. One night she met a lawyer at a nightclub and caught on a job as a receptionist in a law firm. Putting this striking young woman out front was their thing, but not much her thing.

Mom, aka, Barbara aspired to be a writer of mysteries and thrillers. Not a receptionist and not a great deal of a Mom. All the time I am a kid, she kept at being a writer.

I stand there looking at her, she turns. "What?"

"It's my birthday."

She looks off for a moment. "Yeah, we can do that another time. I'm in the middle of something." She turns back to the computer.

I stay in place, after a moment she looks around. "You have something to say?"

“You won't like it.”

She makes a hand motion.

“You might be mad.” I continue.

“When was I ever angry with something you said? Speak your mind.”

I give her that one, it is true. She seldom gets angry or upset, she gets exasperated and tired. If she does get angry, it is at a publisher over a rejection. OK, if she wants it, she can have it. “I want to go back to Mrs. Hanson's to live. You don't want me here anyway.” I stare at her.

Mom doesn't blink, motions me to the edge of the bed and swivels her chair around. She brushes a lock of hair from my forehead. “Look kid. You know how it is. It is not that I don't want you here. It's that I need you to do your kid thing and let me do what I need to do.”

I don't back down, I have learned something from her. “Mom, you were home all day. You didn't even go to work.”

“So? Something struck me this morning and I came home. I called in. I've done it before. You were fine. You were at Mrs. Hanson's.”

“I know. All the time. Maybe I get tired of being there. Maybe I want to be home sometime too.”

She studies for a time. “You think I leave you there too much.”

I shrug.

“Say it.” She insists.

“Yeah.”

“A good Mother wouldn't do that.” She says, thinking about it.

“I wouldn't know, Mom.” Even at 10 I am good at twisting the knife but I might as well stick it in a rock.

She thinks a minute. “Here's the deal, Ty. I'm maybe not that great a mother, but I make sure you have everything you need. You are older now and don't require all of my attention, so, I'll make you a deal. I don't leave you over there so much and in turn you let me write. How's that sound?”

“OK I guess.” I sigh.

“Good. Now go away. I need to get my train of thought.” She turns her back on me.

I don't move.

“What?” She asks not turning.

“Birthday.” I say.

“Yeah. I'll get back to you on that one.” She is typing.

I suppose I remember this because it is how things went and I mean all the time. She did her thing and I did mine, as long as I didn't ask too much, everything was smooth.

Sugar Daddy Chet came on the scene a few years later. A friend of mine called him that once and I like it, so I use it. To his face, to her face, who cares? Chet did. Barbara, I haven't called her Mom for years, doesn't blink.

Chet Harper is a big shot of something about investments and funds. He has a dead wife and two grown kids, who don't like him and hate me and Barbara. Chet has a big old house in rich people land, three or four cool cars, and tons of cash. He and Barbara are a match. She, a Receptionist who wants to be a writer and he, an investment whatever who wants to be a sculptor. Did I mention that he is at least twenty years older than Mom and can be a major butt-wipe?

We move into the big house in Carmel, Indiana. He calls it an 'almost a mansion' with a maid and cook. My room is about the size of our old apartment. Chet says one thing, at their wedding, be a good boy and don't cause trouble. In return, I can have whatever I want, within reason, whatever that means. All I hear is 'whatever you want'. I take it from there, I'm no idiot, I stay out of the way.

In Junior High I discover basketball and the French horn, not half bad at either. Later, in High School, I make the varsity basketball team and the Orchestra, both are big deals. Mom is writing full time now, Chet is doing his financial business then his sculpture stuff. They have parties and other crap rich people do.

Sugar Daddy Chet is true to his word. Whatever I ask for. They buy me a car and Chet gets all cute about it. I am cleaning it out and working on the back seat, they come home from some golfing thing.

“See any girl action in that back seat Ty?” He leers.

“Why girls?” I counter and keep cleaning.

“Huh?” Chet says. “What's that supposed to mean?”

I stand up, turn around, have to bend down to stubby Chet, and look him in the eye. “Why does it

have to be girls?" Barbara gives me a look.

"Hold on a minute!" Chet fumbles, getting all red. "Are you saying...?"

"Come on Chet, he's putting you on. Trying to get Mommy's attention." Barbara says.

I'm quick on the comeback. "If I thought that would work, I'd do it for real."

She lights a cig and raises an eyebrow. "It might, go for it."

Chet gives a nervous laugh and shrugs it off. "Course he's joking." He has to reach up a long way and tries to drape an arm around my shoulders. Now I'm not big on that sort of thing, I push his arm off and pull away. "Who do you think you are?"

Then, I ain't kidding, he marches right up in my face, all red. As much up in my face as he can manage anyway, I'm a head taller. "I'm the one who paid for it."

"Mind your own business."

Mom pulls him aside. "Knock it off Chet." She says.

"He can't say that to me." He says.

He sputters and stomps away. She turns back to me. "I'm not playing referee and that's final."

"Tell him, Barbara." I counter. "Anyway, what do you play? You haven't played Mom since I can remember." Another good one, bounces off her like always.

"Now I'm telling you."

"Fine." I turn to the car and start working again.

"Use protection with your boys." She says, her heels click on the obscene expensive cobblestone drive. I hate her sometimes.

After my junior year at Carmel, they drop the bomb on me, we are moving far away. They decide it is time for Chet to retire and be a full time sculptor. We are going to Jefferson, Indiana where all the artists live. Jefferson is a burg if there ever was one. Small town, small school, small life. And get this, none of this is new to them; they planned it and never said a word to me. What a surprise.

They bought the place in Jefferson a long time back and spend a fortune renovating it. I throw a protest of course, Chet walks out and Barbara sits there. When I'm all done she promises I will like the new place, doesn't come off with anything else, other than all of us going down there on

Saturday.

Fantastic, now it's a road trip with them. Did I mention that they are sickening to be around? All lovey and pawing at each other. But, my whole Saturday! And she says it again on Saturday when we get in the Lexus, I will like the place. In the car, Barbara hooks up her cell to the radio and her book comes on, read by her. I forgot to mention, she got published. She won some newcomer mystery writer award and the go ahead to write more stuff. Big deal.

“Aw, man, do we have to listen to this?” I ask.

“It's your mother's' book.” Chet says.

Like I didn't know. “So?” I counter.

“You ever read it?” He asks.

“Why should I?” I grumble.

“Because your mother accomplished something. It's important.”

“Not to me. Has she ever sat through one of my games or concerts?” I look out the window.

“You need to show some respect. She's an up and coming writer and more than that, she's your mother.”

“A cat's a better mother than her.” Bullseye! Thank you Clark Gable.

She gets in the middle of it. “Enough. Ty, what do you want to listen to?” I dial up some music I know Chet hates and hand her my phone.

After a long time we pass through Jefferson in like 30 seconds, then onto some country road for a while and into the hills. We start seeing houses and signs; they announce that so-and-so artist has a studio. Back in Jefferson they play up the whole artist thing with shops and galleries and the like. People flock there on weekends and spend money on all kinds of art junk.

We hit a driveway and go up a hill and the house is at the top. Not as big as the 'almost mansion', but it's good sized and real modern looking with a glass front. Very artistic and perfect, should be, it cost a pile of money.

I get the tour and it's cool; a studio for him, writing room for her, exercise room, and hot tub, the works, big deal. I like it OK, show me my room and let's get out of here. They take me outside and follow a flagstone path around a stand of trees. and come up on another house, a one story job with garage, we go in.

“What do you think?” Barbara asks, Chet stands there red faced and grinning with thumbs in belt.

I look around and admit to myself that it is impressive. But all I say is “It's OK.”

“Glad you like it, welcome home.” She pulls my hand up and plops keys in it.

“What?” is all I can say.

“Your place.” She waves. “I had a decorator design it to your tastes.

I wander around. “Wow.” Is all I can manage, then, because I can't help myself, “How do you know my tastes?”

“Mother Cat's intuition, you might say.” She smiles.

“So, let me get this straight. You live in the other house and I live here on my own?”

“With conditions.”

Of course conditions.

“No drugs. No drunken parties. Nothing illegal. Graduate. Go to college.”

I walk around again, Chet chimes in about the construction and how they knocked out walls and vaulted the ceilings, put in skylights, countertops, and all that stuff. We go to the bedroom and it's a sight better than the one at the almost mansion.

“What are you now, 6'2”, 6'3"?” He asks.

I shrug.

“We got this bed special. It's a king size with extra length. Your mother had the sheets made for you.” He explains.

“Nice.” I say.

“Yeah, got you a king size workbench with plenty of room for company.” He jokes and starts to slap me on the shoulder and thinks better of it. He reddens up and says that he is going to the house.

I go back into the kitchen and notice the items on the table. “He likes you, more than like, but you wouldn't know that. You see how his own son is. He was hoping with you...” she says.

Something I didn't know. I'm more than a little surprised. "For me to know anything, you might have to talk to me." I say.

She smiles and gets out her cigarettes. "OK, then. How about this? Have you ever considered that I love him and don't want to see him hurt?"

No actually, it never occurred to me that she loved anyone other than me and I only know that from the few times in my life she managed to mention it. I don't say anything for a minute then look her over and make some decisions. One, I'll give the old guy a break now and then. Two, "My house, right?" I ask.

"Right." She agrees.

"No smoking in here." I say. She puts the cigarettes away.

"What's this stuff?" I look at the items.

She picks them up one by one and hands them to me. "A spare key. Bank card. Groceries and cooking are on you. Cookbooks in the pantry. Garage door openers."

"OK." Is all I can manage

Silence for a moment and I look at her. She is beautiful, my breath catches in my throat and I look away.

"Like it?" She asks at last.

Pause, another decision to make. "Yeah, I really do, thanks."

"Guaranteed you would." She smiles reaches up and brushes a lock of hair off my forehead.

"I still don't like leaving Carmel. What about the basketball team? We have a chance at state next year. It sucks letting them down." I say.

"You may not believe this but I attended some of your games and concerts. I don't know anything about sports. Chet says you're pretty good, but only good enough to sit the end of Carmel's bench. He says in Jefferson you are good enough to start." She turns to face me.

"Which is better? Not playing at Carmel or star at Jefferson?" They have a point.

"What about the orchestra?" I ask.

"I leave that one for you to figure out. Bloomington is close. They might have something. You know we will pay for whatever comes up."

Money solves everything.

“One more condition.” She turns back to me and stares me down. “This one is not negotiable.”

Here we go.

“You check in at least once, maybe twice a day. I need to know you are alright over here.”

“Why?” I shrug.

“Say that even a mother cat checks up on her kittens.” She smiles.

That's twice now with the cat thing. Wish I'd never said it, I hate Clark Gable.

That is how we go for the next year. I attend Jefferson and star on the basketball team, check in most of the time. They drop in once in a while and even have me over for a meal now and then. I give Chet a break and he turns out to be decent, we even go places together, everyone is happy. I read a book or two Barbara wrote.

My kitchen windows look out onto a kind of cliff or overhang, whatever you call it. It is this place on a hill that hangs out over a ravine with a creek running through it way down. It gives me the creeps to go out there.

Chet makes me a sculpture that we put on the patio, some kind of thing of poured concrete, painted metal disks, and steel rods. Pretty cool.

I am within a few days of graduating and turning eighteen, sitting out back on my perfect flagstone patio on a Friday night. A Friday night and me sitting out back alone. It works out that way, everyone is doing something else. I don't have a girlfriend at the time, much to my disappointment, don't want to go hang around at the usual places waiting for something to happen. I watch a little NBA playoffs on my 60 inch flat screen while making dinner. Shrimp Creole out of a Paula Deen Southern cookbook, then sit out back and chill. I'm there drinking a water and Barbara walks up, sits down on one of my designer Brookbend patio chairs, she's in workout clothes drying her face with a towel.

“Hey neighbor.” She says.

“Hi.” I answer.

“Got another one of those?” She asks and points to the water.

“Sure.” I get up and find one.

“Thanks. We've been working out an hour.” She explains and downs a third of the water.

“Need a crash cart for Chet?”

“Funny.” She smiles. “I thought you two are good.”

"We are." I shrug.

“Supposed to storm. Don't leave your windows open tonight.” She looks up.

I notice something now and say so. “You aren't lighting up.”

“Quit. This time for good. We got serious about exercise and you know diet, nutrition, all that. And we still have that one thing you don't like to discuss.”

That one thing is their beliefs. They say they are followers of Yeshua. It isn't the Christian church thing like they have done off and on. It's hard to explain, I went to a few of their gatherings and didn't hate it. If you can believe it she actually discussed it with me, a little bit anyway. I think Barbara and Chet are serious this time.

“OK.” I answer. We sit in silence.

“No plans on a Friday?” She asks. I shrug. “Seeing anyone?” She continues.

I study on an answer a moment. “I thought you gave up asking me those things a long time ago, Babs.”

Not fazed, like always. "Babs?" She chuckles. "Take it as a friend asking."

“We're friends now?”

“Rather be enemies? I don't see much future in that.” She smiles.

“Always with the word games, Barbara. What's wrong, Chet can't keep up?”

“Never could.” We say nothing for a bit, I wait her out.

“So? Friends or enemies? You are almost an adult. Do you want to continue being angry and snarky with me every time we see one another? Or do we go the adult route?”

I've thought about it, thought about it for years. The decision I came to is not be miserable, it is lost on her anyway, so what's the point? “I don't want to fight.” I say.

“OK.” She replies. We watch the thickening clouds and the increasing sway of the trees for a while. “What's the plan for college?” She says.

“Barbara...” I say with mock impatience.

“Look, I may not be much, but I want you to succeed in whatever it is. Believe it or not, I want you to be happy. Maybe it's tough on you but you had a lot of advantages too, education is one of them. I'm concerned, call it the mother cat in me coming out.”

She brings up the cat, it's become one of her favorites. Of all the remarks I made over the years that one struck a chord. So I'm a little ashamed for hurting her. I'm silent for a minute then force it out. “I shouldn't have said that about the cat. I'm sorry.”

We don't talk for a minute and I think we are done. “Thanks honey.” She looks at me. “From Gone with the Wind, wasn't it?” She smiles.

She has me tell her about the basketball sectionals and says that she came to part of the last game and I did good, even though we lost. We talk about this and that for a bit and the wind picks up, she's decides it's time to go and tells me she will be at graduation. I'll believe it when I see it.

She gets out of the chair, comes towards me and I almost panic thinking she's going to hug me or kiss me or something, but she brushes hair from my forehead and lays a hand on my shoulder before getting on the flagstone path to her place. She is in the moonlight, the wind blowing the towel clutched around her shoulders, hair pulled back. She is illuminated, she is beautiful. “Hey Mom,” I say and she turns “Good job on not smoking. Stick with it.”

“Thanks son.” She smiles, the light perfect on her perfect face and I almost cry out loud, she disappears around the stand of trees that separate the houses.

I see her again, the next morning. I start the coffee in the kitchen about dawn, look out the window and there they are. Hand in hand about twenty yards away, going to the ledge I told you about. It stormed like crazy the night before, it is cool and wet out there. They are standing on that overhang, holding hands and looking at the woods in the morning mist, it is cute.

And then they are gone. It isn't like in the movies, all dramatic and noisy and in slow motion. They drop out of sight, not jump or pushed or blown off, but drop straight down, so fast I almost miss it. That overhang is broken loose and almost as sudden the whole piece of ground where the ledge is gives way and slides out of sight.

When I get out there I don't see them, I don't see anything but a pile of mud and dirt and it is way down it takes a long time to get there. I see no sign of them, believe me, I look. There's a mound of dirt and mud that has knocked over small trees, I paw at it, get some big sticks and dig in it a while but it is too thick. So I sit down and cry and go home. My clothes are ruined and I take them off at the back patio and hose myself, double bag the clothes and toss them in a trash can, take a hot shower. I am shaking, but not crying now. I dump out the coffee, make a fresh cup and sit on my leather sofa, the sofa she picked out for me. I break down again.

I know I need to call the cops, but I hesitate. And this is why I get labeled an unfeeling monster. See, I get to thinking about what might happen. Yeah, it is an accident, not my fault, not anyone's fault. But, the authorities won't care, they will insist that, I am a minor, I need to be taken care of. True there is a step brother and sister but they hate me, wouldn't have me, and live a long way off. No father, no family, the authorities will stick me somewhere with people I don't know, maybe in a whole different town. It will screw up my finals and graduation.

Leaving her under a pile of muck is a problem, she doesn't deserve it, Chet doesn't deserve it. Screwing things up in my life is a problem, I don't deserve it. So, I do nothing, I carry on like always for two days. Friends say something is wrong with me, I tell them the folks are gone and I miss them. I graduate and turn 18. Two days later I go into Jefferson and park on the square in front of a lawyer's office, Cathy Cochyse. I go in, tell her what happened, pay her, and we let the police take it from there. She watches out for me and that is how I get labeled a dumb kid. The news people talk it up for a day or two, but nothing comes of it. The judge at the hearing yells a little and lets it go. Chet's kids are up in arms but more concerned about a will and they calm down once that is out of the way, they leave happy and I never hear from them again.

The other day I go in their, now my house. No real reason, It is so quiet in there, my footsteps on the floors are kind of creepy. I go in her writing room and look around, wake up her laptop. On the screen is something she is working on, I look through it, another novel and the first thing is a dedication.

Mother Cat dedicates this one to her kitten.

END