

THE BLACK CAT

Adapted as a One-Act Play
By Robert Brome

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STORY OF THE PLAY

A husband and wife are known for their violent quarreling, especially over their cat. Obsessed, the man tries to kill the animal but accidentally kills his wife. He covers up the murder until the cat's plaintive howls are heard from within the cellar wall.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 M, 3 W, 1 Cat)

CLY ENGLEMAN: A plasterer by trade, 35
VEDA ENGLEMAN: His shrewish wife, 35
MAGGIE THORP: Their inquisitive neighbor, 35
BENJ THORP: Her husband, a drayman, 36
IRIS POMEROY: Veda's sister, 28
TOM FLAVIN: The county sheriff, 36
SATAN: A coal-black cat

PLACE: The dingy cellar beneath the Engleman home.

TIME: A November afternoon, a few generations ago,
then, four days later, 9:00 am.

SETTING

The cellar of an old house. The walls are plastered, but not painted. The only entrance is a doorway in USL corner, seven feet above the basement floor; a rickety set of steps with single rail guard descends from the landing above. About six feet from the floor, in SR wall, are two rectangular windows through which dim light penetrates. Small wood logs are stacked carelessly against the SR wall, with a chopping block just SL of them. Two large wooden boxes stand near SL wall. Leaning against steps, UPS, is a workman's pick; an ax is near SR wall DSR.

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(AT RISE: Right of CS, UPS from chopping block, CLY ENGLEMAN is splitting a small log into kindling with a hatchet. He is dressed in Levi's, a mackinaw, and stocking cap. Through the elevated doorway USL comes the unpleasant SOUND of a cat, plaintively at first, then more and more loud and demanding. CLY glowers in the direction of the cat noises, wielding the hatchet thereafter with increasing grimness and force.)

CLY: *(Shouting in direction of stair landing USL.)* Veda! Veeeedah! *(The CAT is heard again, gratingly.)* Shut up that cat! If you don't, I will! Veeee-DAHUUUU!

(Appearing at top of steps USL, VEDA has SATAN in her arms. She wears a dark, plain dress under a kitchen apron.)

VEDA: What ails you now--?

CLY: I'm not going to put up with that yowling cat! Better keep close track of him, or you might find this hatchet buried in his skull!

VEDA: Even so much as touch Satan, and you'll find something long and sharp buried in your ribs. *(Pausing at foot of steps.)* Maybe what shoulda happened after what you done to Pluto. I guess this town ain't very soon going to forget that poor, innocent black cat, swinging from the tree in the garden, Cly, your noose around its neck!

CLY: This--this town knows what you do--I'd been drinkin' that night. Heavy.

VEDA: And just as heavy, three months before, when you gouged out Pluto's left eye with your pocket knife. *(Moving DSL)* You and your eternal drinking. Wasn't for that, maybe you could hold a job. But who wants a boozy plasterer slopping around, falling from ladders--off work with a hurt back. Or so he claims.

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CLY: *(Sitting on edge of chopping block, starting to use a whetstone on hatchet blade.)* No claim about it--back still pains--all the time. Can't even straighten up right.

VEDA: *(Over SL)* Want an excuse to hang around here, so you and your neighbor, Benj Thorp, can share a bottle.

CLY: Ain't I gettin' the wood in for winter? The kindling cut for your kitchen range and the heating stove?

VEDA: Huh! You know it's that or get nothing to eat. Still a possibility, Cly, if you don't start bringing in some money pretty soon to stock my pantry. Maggie Thorp told Benj the same thing.

CLY: Maggie Thorp is a nit-picking nag. Don't see why Benj puts up with her.

VEDA: Maybe same reason you put up with me. Not much choice.

CLY: Oh, I'm not exactly chained here, you know.

VEDA: *(Sitting on box DSL, caressing SATAN.)* Guess I'm not either. My sister Iris knows the cross I bear. In every letter, she tells me just to pack my duds and come on out to Oregon, any time I want. Says I'll always be able to earn board and keep. *(To CAT)* Now, now, Satan! None of that growling. *(To CLY)* He sure don't like you, Cly.

CLY: He's a creature outta Hell!

VEDA: Don't you talk about my cat in such a voice!

CLY: *(Moving SL)* Then you just keep him outta my way--outta my sight! You hear--??

VEDA: *(Rising)* This is Satan's home, much as it is yours.

CLY: I'll show you!

VEDA: Everybody in the county knows how you resent this poor, helpless animal.

CLY: Poor, helpless animal! He'd claw the life right outta you if he got the chance. *(Pointing)* You can see that in his eyes. Look--just look! Those yella, evil eyes!

VEDA: Maggie Thorp says they're eyes exactly like Pluto's.

CLY: Who cares what Maggie Thorp says!

VEDA: *(SHE crosses SR.)* Maggie says wouldn't it be funny if Satan was really Pluto, come back for the second of his nine lives. Back to get revenge--

CLY: She should know all about cats, being a witch!

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VEDA: (*Petting SATAN thoughtfully*) It would account for the way Satan likes to torment you, wouldn't it, Cly? He did follow you home from the saloon. Maybe he's biding his time, just to claw the life outta you--

CLY: Is that vicious monster starting to growl at me again-- ?? (*Raising HIS whetstone, as he moves SR.*) One more time, Satan! Just once more!

VEDA: You're the vicious monster!

(*MAGGIE THORP enters USL, standing at top of stairs, listening with much interest. She is plump, nosy, and dressed in everyday gingham.*)

CLY: Maybe, Veda, you'd like this whetstone alongside your cranium--!

MAGGIE: Yoo-hoo! Just walked in the back door. Decided you must be here in the cellar...(*Descending the steps*)...from the loud sound of voices here below.

CLY: (*Crossing SR toward wood pile*) I'm putting a bolt and chain on that kitchen door!

MAGGIE: Don't see why. Nobody locks a door in this town. No thieves in a hundred miles.

CLY: Just female snoops!

VEDA: Don't pay him no attention.

MAGGIE: (*Moving DS.*) Oh, he'll sweeten up, Veda--about the time him and Benj lay hands on a bottle. Before you taught him your tippling tricks, Benjamin had a right good dray business. Hauled everything everywhere with his team and wagon. But now people won't tolerate a sot drayman any more than they will a sot plasterer!

CLY: (*To VEDA, pointing a finger at SATAN*) He's snarling again--that cat--!

MAGGIE: (*Moving SR to VEDA, making a fuss over SATAN*) Hello, Satan baby! Is that wicked skinflint scaring our big old black sweetie cake? If I was you, Satan, I'd just up and sink my claws into him--teach old Cly who's the king around here.

CLY: Go take him for ride on your broom!

MAGGIE: (*To VEDA*) Isn't he the nasty one!

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VEDA: More so every day!

MAGGIE: Almost forgot what brung me over. There's no Christian Women's Circle at three-thirty this afternoon, Veda.

VEDA: No Circle? Why not?

MAGGIE: Well, the Reverend and his family was just called outta town--her niece dying sudden. With the preacher's wife our Circle president, and in mourning, guess it didn't seem right to go on and have the meeting.

VEDA: Wish we had. I've got something to share with the girls--something I'm afraid won't keep.

MAGGIE: Oh? What's this all about? Tell me, Veda! Who's involved?

VEDA: Pru Pendleton--wouldn't you know? Mrs. Niegrosser told me only this morning that--*(Finishing in a confidential whisper)*

CLY: *(Going to work at chopping block)* Huhhhhhh!

MAGGIE: No--! Oh, how the ladies will love that! *(BENJ THORP stands on landing USL. He is a rangy, dirty disreputable-looking man wearing soiled pants and an old jacket.)*

BENJ: Well, Cly, they're at it again--our fine, Bible-thumping, Christian wives! Somebody's good name just went up in smoke.

MAGGIE: *(Moving SL toward steps)* Benj--! What are you doing here? Thought I said to get that old walnut tree cut up. It's blocking the whole backyard, where it fell.

BENJ: Tree or no tree, some old hag is there at the place, wanting to see a Mrs. Thorp. Woke me up from a nap. Next time, Mrs. Thorp, let somebody else carry your messages!

MAGGIE: Well, who is the old--? Who is the lady, in the first place?

BENJ: Couldn't trust me with her name! Gray hair--droopy shape--jewelry at her throat. Looks like death warmed over.

VEDA: Maude Humphrey!

MAGGIE: Why, maybe we're having Church Circle, after all. She is secretary-treasury. Come on over with me, Veda.

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VEDA: (*Eagerly moving SL.*) Of course!

CLY: And take that damned cat with you!

VEDA: I might just leave him here, Cly--to get his revenge--!

MAGGIE: (*As SHE and VEDA proceed up the steps.*)
Maude Humphrey! Why, she hasn't put foot in my house
in ten years. Too fancy to wade through the muck, I
always figured.

(*A loud, fierce GROWL is heard from SATAN as VEDA
reaches landing.*)

VEDA: Now, now, Satan Boy--!

MAGGIE: (*To BENJ from top of steps*) Benj...! Time for
that afternoon train. Might be something your team and
wagon could haul from the depot--luggage or even
express. Maybe passengers needing a ride. We could
use the money.

BENJ: Money--what's money?

MAGGIE: Thought you might need some--to buy another
bottle of spirits! (*Exits, following VEDA.*)

BENJ: Nag and rile, nag and rile! (*Descending steps*) Life'd
be great without women cluttering up the place. Ever think
of that, Cly? Cly--? (*CLY stubbornly says nothing as he
whacks viciously at a piece of wood on the chopping block.
Laughs insinuatingly.*) Oh, sure! You and Veda are a
couple of love-birds sitting on a perch! What is it the whole
neighborhood hears when you get soaked? Bird songs--?
The way she screams around, we all think Veda's being
murdered. Somebody's always telling Sheriff Flavin he
oughta interfere.

CLY: Plenty ruckus from your side of the fence! Remember
when Maggie emptied all your gin? Sheriff over there
mighta heard you that time!

BENJ: Yeah...he mighta. (*Moves SL*) Some of these days,
I'm going to cut the anchor...move out...see the
world...enjoy life. Without nobody to nettle and squawk if I
happen to whiff a cork. (*HE stretches out lazily on top of
box DSL.*) Why not come along?

CLY: When I strike out, it'll be on my own.

End of Freeview

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