

CAT'S IN THE CUPBOARD

By Jeanne M. Rideout

“Big A, Little A, Bouncing B, the cat’s in the cupboard and can’t see me!” Melinda plucked up Furball with her chubby hands and stuffed the white Persian into the cabinet under the sink. There was a squishing sound as Furball settled down on the bottle of dish detergent.

Melinda never did what her mother wanted.

Right now, her mother wanted Melinda to die.

“Get that cat out of there!” mother snapped. “I swear, Mother Goose was a sadist.”

“It’s just a nursery rhyme,” Henry said. “Calm down, Catherine. No harm ever came from reading a poem.” He sent her a stern look from over his breakfast.

Melinda snuggled into her father’s lap, and Henry’s eyes twinkled as he ruffled her shiny blond curls. He broke off a piece of his raspberry Danish and handed it to her. Melinda gobbled the treat down and pointed to her mother.

“Mama have some?”

Henry laughed. “No, sweetie, too much Danish makes too much mama, and swimsuit season is coming.”

“Finished?” Catherine asked. Without waiting for her husband to answer, she snatched his plate and emptied the scraps into the trash barrel, then tossed the plate into the basin of suds. She pulled on her yellow latex gloves with angry jerks.

“So what’s my girl going to do today?” Henry asked Melinda, kissing her forehead. The little girl giggled.

“Me let cat out of cupboard,” she said, sliding down to the floor. Henry went into the bathroom, and Catherine heard him mumbling. He came back into the kitchen with an orange plastic vial and frown lines.

“Order me a refill,” he said, placing the bottle on the counter near the wall phone. “I just took the last pill, and my blood pressure has been up lately. I can’t imagine why.” He shot her a meaningful look.

Catherine followed him into the hall, watching as he took his suit jacket off the brass hook at the foot of the polished wood staircase leading upstairs to the bedrooms. Red and purple light from the stained glass window on the landing flowed over his hands.

“Are you coming home for dinner?” Catherine asked.

“You know I have a big project due next week. I have to put in overtime,” Henry said. “My schedule calls for it.”

Lately his schedule called for Henry to be at the office long after she had fallen asleep next to an empty pillow. As the door closed, Catherine stripped off the gloves and called in the refill for his blood pressure med. Then she strode upstairs into Melinda’s room, snatched the Mother Goose book lying open on the Cinderella bedspread, and threw the book into the trash, along with the pastry crumbs.

“Big A, Little A, Bouncing B, cat’s in the cupboard and can’t see me!”

Now Melinda stuffed the compliant Persian into the hall closet.

“Cat’s in the cupboard!” she chortled.

Of all the nursery rhymes in the world, why did Melinda have to fixate on that one?

The pulse throbbed in Catherine's neck. A cupboard, a small white space, just like Room 23, just like the place she had put her brother Cat. Unlike Furball, Cat never came out of the cupboard.

Christopher and Catherine, Cat and Cathy. Her blood, her bane, her twin brother, their daddy's favorite. Cat had crowded her in the womb and crowded her for all their childhood, right up until the "on purpose." Everyone, the doctors, daddy, maybe even Cat, thought what happened to him had been an accident.

On that day after school, Cat had stood at the head of the oak stairway, grinning, sun from the stained glass window glinting on the gold streaks in his blond hair. Cathy stood behind him, in his shadow, as always. He got all As on his report card this term, and she only got Bs, and daddy, a widower, had always liked Cat better, anyway.

Daddy stood at the foot of the stairs, reaching for his hat on the brass hook by the door. "Got to take my boy out for a sundae," daddy said. "We can drag Cathy along, too."

Cat stepped off the landing, and Catherine hooked her leg across his ankle. He yelled once as he fell, and then his head smashed on the banister. The impact twisted his neck to an awkward angle, and Cat tumbled all the way down the stairs, sprawling, motionless, at daddy's feet.

"Don't move him!" daddy wailed. He lurched forward, clutching his chest.

She skipped down the stairs and knelt beside Cat, lifting him up in her arms, letting his head loll.

The EMTs confronted a terrible choice. Who to rush to the hospital first, the kid who took a fall or the old man having a heart attack?

She waited with Cat until the second ambulance arrived. She rode to the ER with him and was glad she did, because she was there to see Cat regain consciousness.

"I can't move my arms and legs. Why can't I move?" Cat cried.

After daddy died, Catherine put Cat into the nursing home, Room 23, and she took over daddy's house. Cat had lived on for two years in his dead body, until she slipped in one night and pressed a pillow over his face and killed his brain. This time he knew she did it

"Big A, Little A, Bouncing B, Cat's in the cupboard!"

This time, Furball visited the closet in the hall. Catherine stood in the kitchen, trying to drink a cup of coffee. She turned around, and the Mother Goose book lay open on the table. She slammed it shut over the hateful poem and again discarded it.

"Melinda, you keep out of the trash!" she screeched.

"Me didn't do it," Melinda said.

"If you didn't, who did?" Catherine snapped.

Melinda didn't answer.

The hours ticked by. Catherine took Melinda to pick up Henry's blood pressure pills from the pharmacy. She tossed the white bag on the counter and made lunch. Then she sent Melinda upstairs to her room to nap.

Catherine took the last two Danish out of the box and placed them on a china plate. She went into the living room, munching the pastries, staring out the bay window at the storm clouds cloaking the horizon. She put the empty plate on the marble top of the credenza and lay down on the sofa. After a while, Catherine must have dozed off, because of the dream. In her dream, the

doors to the credenza slowly opened, and a haze roiled inside. The haze saw her, but she didn't see the haze.

When Catherine opened her eyes, dark clouds covered the sky. Without a thought, she closed the door to the credenza and picked up the plate.

Melinda sat cross-legged in the hall, holding Furball in her lap.

"Cupboard's full," Melinda explained.

Catherine went into the kitchen, her eyes darting to the table.

There was no book lying open.

There was no Mother Goose book.

There was a single yellowed photo with curled edges. She picked it up and her fingers trembled.

Cat. It was the photo of Cat, standing onstage with a big grin in the auditorium of the Green Street Elementary School on the day he received the President's Award for outstanding academics, also the day he received the "on purpose." She had not looked at that photo in years.

She stalked up the stairs to her bedroom. The bottom drawer of her bureau was yanked open and the old cardboard box was extracted, the contents dumped out. Piles of photos littered the plush rug. How did the brat know Cat's picture was in there? How often had Melinda poked around in Catherine's belongings?

Catherine's neck corded. Her heart beat a Tympanic rhythm. The scream started in her brain, amplified, welled up her vocal cords. She felt her blood pressure soar. And she let the scream die in her throat. A vision of the full vial of Henry's blood pressure pills glowed incandescently in her mind.

Think of how tall Henry stood, and just one pill quieted his pumping heart. Think of how small Melinda was. It wouldn't take many "accidentally" swallowed pills to shut down her little heart.

Catherine ripped open the white pharmacy bag. She slipped on her dishwashing gloves and loosened the cap on Henry's bottle of blood pressure pills. Catherine stood in the archway to the hall, with a glass of juice in one hand and the pill bottle in the other.

"Here, honey, open this for mama." She handed the bottle to Melinda.

Melinda uncrossed her legs, making Furball jump down. Her little fingers deftly uncapped the vial, spilling a bunch of pills on the floor.

"These are special vitamins." Catherine spoke softly, silkily. "Daddy wants you to take four. They're just like candy." She held out the chocolate brown pills on her open palm.

Melinda's tiny fingers closed over the first pill.

A fist pounded on the front door like a five-pound canned ham.

"Police!" a male voice shouted.

Catherine quickly swept the pills back into the bottle, stripped off her gloves, and hid everything in a drawer.

"You stay here!" she hissed at Melinda.

Catherine answered the door to two burly officers. No, she had not called 911. There must be some mistake. There was no emergency. Yes, certainly, they could come in. She followed the men as they entered the kitchen. They questioned her about why the receiver of the wall phone was off the hook, buzzing on the counter. She didn't know, maybe her little girl had been playing with it. Of course Melinda said she had not touched the telephone. The men toured the rest of the house, admired Furball as the Persian cuddled in Melinda's arms, and finally left.

Catherine spotted a round brown pill under the table and threw it away, muttering angry words in a low tone, so Melinda wouldn't hear what she said.

"It not work anyway, because of the topsy," Melinda said.

"What is a 'topsy?'" Catherine snapped.

"A TOPSY, you know, what they do to dead people," Melinda said.

An autopsy. Her anger had carried her into an ill-thought plan. Yes, if she had fed Melinda those pills, it would have shown up in the autopsy. But how could Melinda know that? And now she'd have to find another way to be rid of the kid, and she'd have to find it before Henry got home to hear his precious little girl lisp about how mama tried to make her eat pills. Did Melinda know what she was trying to do and that was why she dialed the emergency line?

"You thought I was trying to hurt you," Catherine said. "Is that why you called the police?"

"I didn't call the police, mama."

"Don't lie to me!"

"I'm not lying, mama."

"We'll see." Catherine grabbed Henry's electric razor from the bathroom. She turned on the razor and grabbed Furball.

"Tell me the truth!" Catherine screeched.

"Me didn't do it, mama, Me promise! Don't shave Furball," Melinda wailed.

Catherine aimed the whirling triple heads at the squirming Persian's fluffy stomach.

"Tell me the truth!"

"The boy did it! Melinda cried.

"What boy?"

"You know, the boy who lives in the cupboard."

The razor fell onto the tile, clattering, bouncing. Sniffling, Melinda turned it off. Ten hind claws dug into Catherine's arms with bloody slashes as Furball leapt out of her grip and bounded down the hall.

Catherine's eyes darted around the kitchen.

The cabinet over the stove drifted open a crack, just a crack, just wide enough to peek through. Catherine lunged, slamming it shut with her palms. She leaned her weight against the smooth wood, her head lowered, feeling no movement under her hands.

There. She had done it. She had closed the cupboard.

A soft squeak, so soft she barely heard it, came from below her. On her arms, on the nape of her neck, the hair stood up. She spun around. The cabinet under the sink slowly opened, fingers of haze drifting out. She kicked the door shut and shoved the waste basket against it.

Her chest rose and fell, heaving against her dress so hard she felt the coarseness of the fabric against her breasts. Slowly she rotated, scanning the kitchen.

Rows of cabinet doors. Rows and rows of closed cupboards.

She backed away, running into the hall.

The hall closet. What is a closet but a big cupboard?

There were rooms and rooms in daddy's house, each one with a closet.

Her bedroom closet. The den closet. Melinda's closet.

Rooms and rooms, each one with a closet, a big cupboard, stretched out in her mind.

And she knew Cat was in the cupboard.

The murmur came from behind her.

Melinda crouched on the floor, staring at Catherine, whispering. “Big A, Little A, Cat can see you.”

“I can see him, too!” Catherine screeched, even though she couldn’t see him, yet.

She knew where to find him out of the cupboard.

Catherine ran to the hall stairway and grasped the banister, her hand streaked red from the stained glass window as she swung up onto the glossy steps. She scrabbled up to the landing and whirled around, glaring down the stairwell.

Dust motes whirled lazily in red and purple and gold bands of light. Gold, sleek shining gold, shone before her, casting a shadow over her, the brilliant light forcing Catherine to turn away. The light flared. Catherine stepped back, her shoulders stiffening.

Cat was materializing, the lines of his body translucent. Through him, she saw the descending steps, each with a hard protruding lip. So many steps, 13 steps, down to the hallway floor.

The lines of Cat’s body hardened and he stood before her, grinning, the sun through the stained glass window gleaming on his sleek blond hair. He stood on strong legs.

“I killed you once, I can kill you again!” Catherine hissed.

She plunged forward, arms thrust out straight. Her hands impacted his shirt, she felt the smooth blue cotton over his taut chest. She shoved with all her strength.

Then there was nothing under her hands.

The cotton under her palms disappeared, Cat disappeared. She toppled forward, through the emptiness.

Catherine fell, the banister rushing up toward her. She threw her arms out, and her fingers clawed around the hardwood, sprawling sideways on the steps, her ribs cracking against the oak. Her torso kept going until she wedged her legs against the wall and stopped her plummet.

She pulled herself to her knees, gasping in ragged breaths. She limped down the hallway, toward the golden glow from the kitchen. She felt lightheaded, her ears buzzing.

Cat, his body solid, stood over Melinda, as the little girl cowered, holding Furball tight.

Catherine edged toward the sink. She reached slowly, her fingers closing over the handle of the knife.

She sprang.

The blade of the knife flashed, plunging toward Cat’s neck, cutting through Melinda’s scream.

“I’ll kill you!” Catherine screeched. The point pricked Cat, piercing the fabric, pricking the chest.

Cat disappeared.

She stood above Melinda, brandishing the knife.

“What are you doing?”

Catherine screamed. The knife clattered on the tile.

Henry stood in the doorway.

“You were going to hurt our little girl.” His glare, iron cold, riveted her.

“Why are you home?” Catherine gasped, but saw the answer to her question even before she finished the words. Again, the receiver of the wall phone buzzed on the counter.

Catherine had never been mother of the year, but the media gleefully deemed her the monsteress of the year. Who but a monster attempt to murder her innocent little girl? The honor granted Catherine a prize of 25 years to life in the state pen.

On the day of Catherine's conviction, Melinda sat at the kitchen table, cuddling Furball, as Henry microwaved corn dogs for her lunch.

Catherine was in prison cell, a small room with a door.

What was a prison cell, but a large cupboard?

Melinda stroked Furball, crooning.

"Great A, Little A, Bouncing B, Catherine's in the cupboard, and can't see me."