

CAT FOOD

By Robert P. Bishop

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We ask authors who we publish to wait 2 issues before submitting again. Some do. Some don't. Robert (whose story 'Seventy Grand' we published in Issue 5) didn't and we're really glad because we love love love this slap-back, wise-cracking, blackly hilarious retro-styled example of seriously entertaining crime fiction and if you like this kind of junk too, you'll be sending us e-candy (and that was one looong mother of a sentence, y'all.) The dialogue is whip smart (imperative in this genre) and the story is told with a practiced economy. It all looks easy and fun but this kind of moxie, boils and goils, only comes with skill and experience. Quote:*

In the beginning the lunacy was quirky but amusing because it involved lots of sex. The first time I suspected she might be mad was when she took all her clothes off and said, "I'm Lady Godiva. You're my stallion. Take off your clothes and get on your hands and knees."

I did what she said. She sat on my back with her legs on either side of my body, gripped a handful of my hair and pulled my head up. "Now gallop."

"What?" I tried to look at her.

She jerked my head back. "You heard me. You're a horse, now gallop through the goddamn village!"

About as good as this kind of writing gets. Just wonderful stuff.

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by

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The phone woke me. I didn't open my eyes but picked up anyway. "Yeah?"

"I'm going to kill you for what you did to me," a voice said.

"For God's sake, Sandra, give it a rest."

"This time I'm going to do it." Shrill laughter blasted my ear.

"Sandra, you can't keep calling me in the night like this. You've got to stop it."

"Oh, I'll stop it, all right, after I kill you. Then I'm going to cut your wanker off and feed it to my cat." Shrieks of laughter stabbed into my brain.

"You don't have a cat."

"How do you know?"

"Nothing can live with you, not even a starving cat."

"I'll get one from the animal shelter."

"They won't give you one."

"Yes they will. I'm going to get the biggest, hungriest..."

I interrupted her. "Goodbye, Sandra." I hung up, forced my eyes open and looked at the clock; Christ, 2.32 in the morning. I got out of bed and poured a scotch. Sandra, my ex live-in, couldn't accept that we were no longer together. It's been a year and she still hasn't forgiven me for throwing her out.

I couldn't live with her any longer. She is mad and she nearly drove me to the madhouse to escape her lunacy but I didn't want to seek refuge there. The madhouse isn't much different than being outside the walls and living in what people call normal society.

Usually Sandra screamed and broke things when she threatened to murder me. I grew used to her tantrums. They didn't last very long. Like a lobotomized cat, she lacked staying

power and couldn't keep her anger focused. Sandra's tantrums usually ended with the complaint that I didn't love her anymore, which wasn't true then and isn't true now.

But I had to tell her to get out to preserve my sanity. She took it badly. It's not a good thing to end up on the sidewalk waiting for a cab with everything you own in two suitcases by your feet. I still love her, but I couldn't live with her lunacy any longer. She had to go. I miss her terribly.

This call differed from the other middle-of-the-night calls. Before, Sandra never laughed when she threatened to murder me. But tonight, she was positively gleeful, laughing and shrieking like she had removed the last inhibition preventing her from committing murder. Her laughter was terrifying. She sounded like she really meant to bump me off. It scared the hell out of me.

We didn't start out this way, of course. We started out when I got a job where she worked. She was an accountant in the finance department and I was an engineer in the production division. She was hot so I pursued her. We went on several dates and got along well. I didn't know she was crazy. She kept that hidden until she moved in with me. Then the madness erupted.

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I began to waddle across the bedroom floor on my hands and knees. It was awkward. Sandra swayed from side to side. I had to work to keep from falling over.

“You’re not galloping.” Sandra jerked my head again. “Go faster!” She hit my right buttock with a metal spatula. I didn’t even know she had the thing in her hand. The swat really hurt. Before I could react, she whacked me two more times, really hard.

“Ow!” I yelped.

“Move your ass,” she screamed and swatted me again.

“Ow!” I yelled again, stood up and dumped her onto the floor. “What the hell, Sandra?” I rubbed the spot where she had hit me.

“I was just trying to have fun and you’ve ruined it.” She rolled onto her side, wrapped her arms around her legs and pulled her knees to her chin. “You don’t love me. You never let me have any fun. This never happened to the real Lady Godiva.”

“You’re not the real Lady Godiva. You’re a lunatic. Come on, get up.” I helped her off the floor and guided her to the bed. She crawled under the covers and pulled them over her head.

“You can’t humiliate me like this and get away with it,” Sandra said from under the covers. Then she went to sleep.

We went on, living each day with greater degrees of madness swirling through our routine of sleep, work, and sex. We lived together and worked at the same place. We were never apart. Sex kept us together. It was a wild and uninhibited sex that served as a release for what we kept bottled up inside as we struggled to live with each other. Like addicts, we couldn’t do without it. Oddly enough, sex was responsible for the final indignity that made me throw her out.

“I want you to get naked,” she said that day then took her clothes off.

“All right.” I took off my clothes.

“Now lie down on your stomach. I want to tie you to the bedframe.” She held several pieces of string in her hands.

“Why?”

“I want to do things to you. Don’t you like how I make you feel?”

“You know I do.” I lay down on my stomach. Sandra tied my wrists to the bedframe with the string.

“You’re all tied up and in my power. Just lie there and let your imagination go.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Something you will never forget. It will be memorable.” She did something by the side of the bed. “Are you ready?”

“I’m always ready.”

She straddled my lower legs and massaged my back for a few minutes. It felt really good. “It’s almost time,” she said.

I waited.

Sandra got off my legs, did something by the side of the bed then got back on my legs. “Here we go.”

“YOW!” Pain surged through my right buttock. It was on fire. I smelled burning flesh. I jerked my arms, broke the strings and scrambled off the bed. Sandra fell to the floor. “What did you do?” I screamed. I didn’t wait for her answer. I ran into the bathroom and looked at my right buttock in the mirror. A raw wavy line about three inches long was burned into the skin.

Sandra had branded me.

I came back to the bedroom. Sandra lay on the bed. “I put my mark on you.” She waved a tool that looked like a soldering iron with its end bent into an S shape. “You’re mine now.” She threw the tool on the floor and held out her arms. “Do me.”

“Do you? Do you?” I shouted. “You’re getting out of here right now. Get up and start packing.”

That’s how Sandra ended up on the sidewalk with her suitcases. I called in sick the next two days, replaced all the locks on my doors then quit my job so I didn’t have to see her. A week later I landed another job and started life over. This time I was going to play it a little cagier. No more lunatics. I had a brand on my butt to remind me of that every day.

But Sandra still lurked in the shadows and let me know she was there, sending anonymous letters through the mail, calling and hanging up without leaving a message or saying anything. One night she left a six-inch boning knife jabbed into my front door so I installed a video system and had security bars bolted over the windows.

Another night I returned home but couldn’t get my key into the front door lock. I tried the back door. Same result; something was in the key hole. With bars over the windows I couldn’t even break into my own house. I had to call a locksmith. He charged me a bundle to make an after-hours call and drill out the front door lock. He said somebody had jammed a strip of metal into the keyhole.

When I got inside I checked the surveillance system and saw a person in a long overcoat with a Nixon mask hiding their face standing on my front porch, giving me the finger. I couldn’t tell if the person were a man or a woman.

Jesus Christ, a Nixon mask.

Sandra. Had to be.

I upgraded my surveillance system so I could check on my home at any time with my cell. Then I went to the police. They said they couldn't do anything without proof it was Sandra. I talked with a lawyer. He said the same thing.

"You're in the soup until you come up with something I can use to haul her into court," he said.

"That's what the police told me."

"You're pretty small stuff to them. They don't have a lot of time to spend on minor cases like yours, nuisance cases, really." He laughed. "But if she kills you, then that's a different matter. Murder is always a big deal to the police. It pisses them off. They think somebody is trying to get one over on them. They'll investigate for sure, and maybe even find out who killed you."

"That's great, that's just great. It's serious after she kills me, is that what you're saying?"

"That's about the size of it."

"All right." I stood, ready to leave.

The lawyer held up his hand to stop me. "Now think on this. You lived with her once. You admit you still love her. Reconcile with her, have her move back in. Maybe both of you have learned some things by now. Give it another chance. If it doesn't work out, you will know it's really over and you can boot her out permanently."

On the way home, I thought about the attorney's suggestion and how much I missed the sex with Sandra. But Sandra was a lunatic and wanted to kill me. Asking her to come back bordered on being suicidal. I wasn't ready for that. Not yet, anyway. Still, her body had its attractions. I groaned.

When I got home I found a 10-inch Bowie knife stuck into the doorframe. Sandra's threats were escalating. My phone's surveillance app showed a person in a large overcoat with the same Nixon mask over their face, giving me the finger.

I went to the police again. They said they would talk with Sandra then get back to me. They never did get back to me. I don't know if they even talked with her. Fuckers probably didn't. I was becoming a nervous wreck.

The doctor handed me a prescription. "This medication will help you deal with the anxiety you're experiencing. Have it filled and take as directed. I'll see you in thirty days."

I went home, poured a scotch, sat in the dark, thought about Sandra and took one of the pills. God, I missed her. No, I said, that's not true. I missed the sex. I poured more scotch.

An hour later I hadn't felt any effects from the pill so I took another. A few minutes later I began to feel pretty good. Things didn't look quite so dark and threatening so I popped another pill. After a few more minutes I was feeling practically euphoric. Life was going to be great after all. I drank more scotch.

The phone rang. Sandra's number scrolled across the screen. I picked up. Before she had a chance to speak, I said, "Sandra, I want you to come back. I miss you." I heard a sharp intake of breath then silence.

"Sandra? Are you still there?"

"Yes, Brian, I'm still here."

"I want you to come back."

"What do you mean, come back?"

"I want you to come back. I want us to be together."

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“When do you want me to come back, Brian?”

“Tonight. Right now. I want you to come back right now.”

“Oh, Brian, I’ve wanted to come back so many times.”

“Hurry, Sandra. I can’t wait.”

“I’ll hurry, Brian. I promise I won’t be long.”

I was feeling great. Things were looking better already. Those pills were wonderful so I took another one, drank more scotch and paced, waiting for her.

I put my arms around her when she came in and gave her a long, deep kiss. She returned my kiss.

“I’m glad you’re back. I missed you so much.” I kissed her neck.

“Oh, Brian, I missed you too.” She hugged me tight.

I kissed her again and felt something rub against my ankle. I looked down. “Why, Sandra, you brought a cat.”

End

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I’m interested in why people behave the way they do. I try to understand and explain their behaviors in my stories. Cat Food is based on the decisions two people made when love and passion went off the rails. Brian knew he was making a bad decision, but that didn’t prevent him from going through with it. Sandra told him what she was going to do to him. Why didn’t he hear her? Maybe it’s because Brian is human and does dumb things, like so many do from time to time, except most of us don’t commit murder. Unless we turn into a Sandra. There might be a little bit of Brian and Sandra in all of us. That’s a worrisome thought in the dark of night.*

I try to be direct and uncomplicated with my prose...have a story to tell, tell it, stop. Writers who have influenced my style and approach to story-telling include Charles Bukowski, Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemmingway, Elmore Leonard, Elizabeth Strout, and especially Jack London, whose short story To Build A Fire, is, in my opinion, likely one of the best ever written.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Robert P. Bishop, a former soldier and teacher, lives in Tucson, Arizona.. His short fiction has appeared in *The Literary Hatchet, The Umbrella Factory Magazine, CommuterLit, Lunate Fiction, Flash Fiction Magazine, Fleas on the Dog, Corner Bar Magazine*, and elsewhere.