

The Black Hole Cometh

by Joseph M. Owens

Bufordsville Retirement Community — aka: *The Old Folks' Home*, *The Home for Oldies*, *Old Mold's Bar and Grille*, *McMoldy's*, *the Stairway to Heaven*, *The Last Train Stop to Nowhere*, *The Dead End, Hell*, *The Black Hole*, etc. I've heard them all — was located in a part of town no one would (or could) ever mistake for “the best.” This is just a simple and inarguable point of fact. The part of town itself in which BRC called home was also seedy and old — the phrase *abject disrepair* springs to mind when one thinks about both subjects either together or separately.

And being's the old part of town is where the more useless of the... sorry... more *mature* members of the populous were expected to “retire” — here I use the term *retire* loosely — the whole situation would be funny and ironic in a kind of way that something truly ironic actually *is* funny, but then some supreme master-of-the-obvious says something like “no pun intended,” when, in fact, a pun was mostly obviously intended, and goes and ruins the whole thing for everyone. And the pun itself constitutes such unimaginably poor levels of quality and creativity that, when uttered, causes all standersby to laugh uncomfortably because the situation has taken a turn toward the excruciatingly awkward,[1] but that's a whole other story in and of itself.

So then the point of *this* story is that the Black Hole was basically just a really weird fucking place to work at, or have anything else to do with, in the first place. The neighborhood, as I've mentioned, was one of the oldest in Bufordsville, and, *sweet Jesus!*, it showed. The area surrounding the BRC is well-known even to those not born and raised in Bufordsville because of the overall poverty, violence and gang activity. There's a shooting just about every night within a few square mile radius of the BRC which pretty much meant, at the time of *the Event*, we were at *ground zero*.

A few months back, Bob Delaney, the old Black Hole's *man with the plan* (and more importantly, the check-signing authority), hired a

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young new guy named Gary — who had the unfortunate last name, Indiana — as a geriatric nurse at Bufordsville Retirement Community. Gary, by the nature of being both male *and* a nurse — two contrivances that only served in doubling his *unfortuity*, specifically where he and his general interactions with other members of the staff and BRC residents[2] alike were concerned — had a rough go of it from the gun. He was the only male nurse on staff, and he was also the only member on the overall staff under the age of 58, replacing me as the resident spring chicken (as the Black Hole, like the society at large, served as a repository for the medical community where it could send its aging professionals in the twilight of their careers, as well). Consequently, every corner of the facility had a distinct and unmistakable scent of Brylcreem, Old Spice Original and Youth Dew, and it had it in spades.

Being 28 and fresh out of nursing school, Gary Indiana may as well have been employed at a retirement facility on Mars for all the familiarity he felt at the BRC.

Bufordsville Retirement Community was also home to a sort of local folk hero, though *hero* is probably not the right word — more like, *celebrity* — a seemingly ordinary housecat of indeterminate breeding named Blackie[3], whose name, while not exactly observing all of the diversity and sensitivity sections of the BRC's policies and procedures manual[4], was certainly much better and more appropriate (not to mention *far* more racial- and culturally-sensitive) than the nine-lived celebrity's first two names: *Old Pussy* and *Mr. Spooks*.

No one could really say for sure if it was his half-missing ear or his two disparate-colored eyes that lent him all those special abilities that almost everyone's always attributed to him — and which have also garnered him such notoriety — but without adding too much conjecture to the whole mix here, the damned cat actually seemed able to predict a BRC patient's *death* with a startling, uncanny level of accuracy that, in truth, kind of freaked out more than a few of us. I mean, you just *knew* a resident was warming up to cash in his or her chips if someone on the night staff reported

seeing Blackie curled up on that particular elderly resident's pillow.

However, Blackie isn't the only reported and documented feline allegedly privy to this truly special — though admittedly, incredibly freaky — ability. Oscar, a tortoiseshell and white cat at the Steere House Nursing and Rehabilitation Centre in Providence, Rhode Island has accurately “predicted” the last days for more than 50 patients. I hear he spends his time pacing from room to room, rarely spending any time with the patients — he's kind of an *antisocial* little fucker, in that respect — except for those with just hours to live. If Oscar's somehow kept outside the room of a dying patient, he'll actually scratch on the damn door trying to get in. I'm pretty sure I read that in one of the British newspapers Gary was always leaving around.

And so, OK, Blackie wasn't alone in his gifts, but as far as anyone knows, he'd had the highest batting average before *the Event*: 100 percent. The inter-facility death pool even got shut down[5] since the hairy little bastard'd basically all but eliminated the element of chance and surprise. When rounds would begin the next morning — as sure as death and taxes — if that cat was fast sleep and purring soundly on the resident's pillow (and usually it'd be none other than Gary Indiana who'd find them — both the former patient and the sleeping cat — since no one else wanted any part of actual *work* that early[6] the patient was for sure guaranteed to have *kicked the bedpan*, metaphorically speaking, sometime during the night.

But people just really loved that cat. Some of the old birds who had husbands staycationing long-term at the Black Hole — old birds who spent their visiting time crocheting sweaters no one would ever wear and scarves nobody'd asked for — would bring knotted balls of yarn for Blackie, even though balls of yarn only mildly interested him. Some of the more cognitively-questionable patients over in *Psych.* would “accidentally” turn their dinner trays over after eating only the pureed carrots — god only knows how *anyone*, even people who spend the vast majority of their day drooling all over themselves comatosely, can eat that mush, but they sure as hell did. And then Blackie would get several helpings of tuna[7] casserole

and mashed potatoes, or whatever side dish the residents were being served at the time.

Why an animal that seemed to be the harbinger of the death's own physical incarnation had remained so popular was anybody's guess. Aside from the fact that, for all intents and purposes, Blackie was pretty adorable with his crazy two-toned eyes and 1.5 ears, not to mention the fact that he was somehow almost completely hypoallergenic to all residents and staff, indiscriminately — which, of course, really endeared him to those residents and staff who'd always loved animals but, due to a myriad of allergy and bronchial-related problems, had never had any of their own since they loved the act of normal, uninhibited respiration even more.

So as I've said, Gary Indiana would be the one who'd find the dead Black Hole resident and the sleeping cat and, typically, he would also be the one who'd end up delivering the bad news to the deceased's families over the phone because — I mean, really — who wants to deliver that kind of news before a person's even had a smoke and their morning cup of coffee?

To clarify, it wasn't exactly that Gary himself was *disliked* by all of us around Bufordsville Retirement Community; we'd never say that about him. He was just more or less addressed in a way that bore a resemblance to Patrick Swayze's character in that movie, *Ghost* — it was like Gary'd somehow found it extremely difficult to physically *exist* in the world like the rest of us did, trying without much success to interact with people and their surroundings. Gary was like a ghost.

The majority of the BRC staff, we basically paid Gary as little attention as possible without too obviously coming off, ourselves, like a bunch of old washed- and used- up assholes trying to just make his life as unpleasant as possible while he worked there. I mean, that was, in fact, what we were doing — we just didn't want it to seem so... well, *obvious* — hence our favoring of the more *stealth-like* tactics we ultimately implemented under the guise of simply ignoring him.

I should probably mention that things didn't get any less weird at BRC once Blackie started following Gary around *every-goddamn-where* he went, either.

During rounds, Blackie would trot alongside Gary. When Gary went to the break room for coffee, Blackie went right with him. Vending machines? Same deal. Gary couldn't hardly take a piss without that cat on his heels, *lickety-split*.

We started joking around that Blackie was maybe trying to tell Gary something which, as you can probably imagine, Gary didn't find nearly as amusing. We didn't think Gary found much amusing, actually. The guy was weird even for the Black Hole.

And what else was weird was that the old people stopped dying around the place once the cat started following Gary all day and night. It's like death had given up his attention on everyone else and focused it on the young male nurse named after the King of Pop's hometown. I read a book once where death took a vacation and everyone stopped dying for a spell. It was kind of like that at the BRC. I never finished the book, so I can't say how it turned out for those people.

But no one was dying, and Gary's actions began getting stranger and stranger. He stopped taking breaks, so we couldn't rib him like we usually did when we had nothing better to do. Gary looked like he hadn't slept in weeks and he even started to smell a little funny, which, in a retirement community like the old BRC, was really saying something.

Someone even said one day they heard Gary in one of the bathroom stalls mumbling all nonsensically to himself. Blackie was sitting just outside Gary's stall door flicking his tail this way and that, just purring to beat the band. Gary was saying crazy stuff like, "how does it know where I live?" and "Oh god, oh god, I think I'm rotting..." and "It's actually making me *rot*," things like that. Gary said a few more things, too, but my colleague didn't stick around to listen, preferring instead to "hold it," as he put it, for six more hours until his shift was over and he could go home. He said that smell

we've been associating with Gary was even more unbearable in the bathroom where proper ventilation was almost nonexistent, too.

And when Gary was jabbering on about "it," we all assumed he meant the cat, in reference to making him rot and what not, but the fact that it knew where Gary lived and the effect that particular circumstance had on him just cracked our shit up. Though, with respect to the overpowering smell, he very well may have been rotting — we weren't absolutely sure — but that aspect of the ribbing was decidedly less funny.

What was also decidedly less funny was when we arrived at work the next morning after *the bathroom incident*, as we like to call it now, to a squad of police cars parked in front of the main entrance doors. Some shit of an unquestionably serious nature had very clearly gone down at the Black Hole over night and we weren't sure we wanted to be a part of it — we were all getting too old for this kind of thing, we agreed. The police were probably just going to tell us things or ask us questions that would ultimately require us to double up the milligrams of our ACE inhibitors for a while.

When we walked in, our co-workers' faces told us just about everything we needed to know. Dying, it seemed, had once again commenced at The Black Hole. The police presence only gave the sullen atmosphere a dark and ominous overall overtone.

Camera flashes were going off capriciously and police tape cordoned off the entrance to the men's restroom. No one was talking; everyone's shoes, all at once, seemed to become the most interesting two things in the universe to them right then.

Three of us who catch the 22 bus from downtown together every morning shuffled a little bit closer to the action. Big Bob Delaney, sat on a bench just outside the breakroom catty-corner to the two bathrooms with his face in his oversized hands, rocking his head back and forth, the pigment across his balding pate all splotchy, as he was taking whatever terrible news he'd received rather terribly.

We asked the officers standing closest to the yellow tape what the hell happened and they gave us a one word reply as stark and

affectless as if this was the type of thing they witnessed on a daily basis: *Suicide*.

It didn't take a genius to figure out who it was in there beyond the tape, but before we could verbally hypothesize among one another, we heard Bob Delaney behind us say, *Gary...* before his voice broke up and he reverted back into a sobbing mess again.

The other part didn't come out until later when the papers got wind of the story. There were two bodies found dead in the men's restroom that morning: that of a 28-year-old male and a charcoal gray cat of undetermined age.

Now, I'm no animal lover, but what Gary did to Blackie was just sick and — pardon my French here — but it was just real fucked up, too.

Police determined the color of the cat by the removed and discarded pelt they found wadded up in the trash can — Gary'd actually *skinned* Blackie! We were sure of one thing at that point and that was that Gary'd completely *lost his fucking marbles*. The cat finally drove him over the edge, we figured. All over the walls and the mirror, Gary'd written indecipherable messages in what was later confirmed by a team of crime scene investigators as *feline blood*, and when we heard that part, we all agreed we could probably use some fresh air.

I don't think any of us realized the kind of lunatic we'd been working with for those several months. No one could've foreseen what happened inside that bathroom at The Black Hole. We all agreed that, at our age, it was probably best not to tell the investigators about how a few of us came up with the bright idea of hilariously transporting Blackie to and from Gary's house once we realized the cat seemed to really like him. We just thought it'd be funny. We didn't think anyone was gonna get skinned over it. That's what we get for thinking, I guess.

But the story's weirdness doesn't stop there. No sir. There was a note — there always is, isn't there? We didn't hear about this part until we read it later in the papers, either.

The note was actually, first and foremost, a sort of *confessional*. Gary had a guilty conscience he'd wanted to relieve himself of. And some say this is the saddest part: Blackie didn't really have any special abilities, or at least any *extra* special abilities, so to speak. Though, in my opinion, that's not the saddest part.

Once Blackie had — what we realize now — *accidentally* predicted a few deaths, people started talking and getting excited about being a part of the BRC. Staff members joked with residents, residents liked Blackie. And hey, if they were in fairly good health, why would they worry about the cat, right? Blackie only “predicted” the sickest resident's death, ones who died in their sleep — natural causes and respiratory failure and whatnot.

But we were in for another real shocker when we read what was in Gary's note: he'd actually *killed* the majority of the residents Blackie'd predicted himself. No one else got to work before Gary, so it was hard to say that he was lying, postmortem. The night staff was really lean and Gary always seemed pretty affable to them, they said when questioned. But the residents who were sick, those who were in the last stages of their lives, anyway; Gary was sneaking into their rooms when the BRC was quietest and smothering them with their pillows. Their bodies were just too weak and frail to fight him off.

Gary'd then locked Blackie in the room with the deceased and an hour or two later during morning rounds, he'd “discover” the scene as if he'd had nothing to do with it earlier. And who would question him? His discoveries seemed legit. Mr. Bakerswaggle had been on oxygen for the last 25 years with emphysema and Mrs. Gallindroning had stage-4 lung cancer that'd metastasized. We weren't surprised at all patients like that finally gave up the ghost. But Gary confessed all the gory details in his note.

But when the cat started showing up everywhere Gary went — which, as we later found out, basically consisted of the BRC and his house — Gary just started to lose it, bit by psychopathic bit. He thought the cat wasn't actually the physical embodiment of *death*, but of *karma*.

Paranoia began seizing hold of Gary and, as a consequence, he began not sleeping, not bathing — thus the source of the odiferous scent that followed him everywhere. He also began eating only very little. At the end of his rope, he finally decided he had to get to the cat before the cat got him.

And he did.

Oh boy, did he... What a mess.

After the cat skinning and bloody painting exhibit, investigators said they believe Gary'd more or less panicked and plunged the knife into his own throat, which he immediately realized was a terrible idea by the nasty wounds it left in him as he unsuccessfully tried to remove it.

The whole scene was just grisly and I'm not sorry I didn't see it firsthand.

So that probably brings us up to speed, I suppose. Suffice it to say, that was the last day for a large majority of Bufordsville Retirement Community employees. There was just no way any of us were sticking around after that. We couldn't be sure who we were really working with anymore, and when you can count the number of years you have left on this planet on your own two hands and feet, sometimes early retirement seems like the best course of action, when all's said and done.

Most of us didn't really work for the money, didn't necessarily need it. We worked for the camaraderie. It beat greeting people at Wal-Mart. But one thing's for sure: you can't have any kind of real professional, camaraderie once you've worked with someone who turned out to be a knife-wielding, elderly-suffocating loony toon.

Some of the others put in their two weeks, but not me. I simply said to hell with it. I needed all the time to myself I could get just to process how we all played a part in this *Event* and none of us ever *fessed up* to our part in it.

But like my dad — may he rest in peace — always used to say: *a guilty conscience beats a prison sentence seven-out-of-seven days a week.*

- [1] Bad puns are, as a matter of fact, equitable in many respects to passing wind in a stuffy and crowded elevator and will, under no circumstances, whatsoever, make you more popular.
- [2] Or just people in general.
- [3] Who also was really more of a charcoal-*gray* hue than *black* but that's neither here nor there.
- [4] Which, all BRC employees were given a 75 question True/False quiz over before commencing employment.
- [5] Which had, at one point, been a seriously profitable *on-the-side* enterprise for me.
- [6] And in hindsight, that was probably one of the reasons we all probably kind of resented Gary.
- [7] Tuna that was actually made with the less appetizing parts of a chicken that was pureed into a kind of pink looking paste before it was fried, if you want to know the truth.

