

A Black Cat

by Pat Pujolas

And then, and then, and then! After all that, this. After all that bullshit with her Dad, the Associate Principal, the idiotic counselor, and that psychotic police officer, after all that, this: a dead black cat. Blocking her path! Right in the middle of the street!

A black cat! And all the bad ju-ju that goes along with it. Witches and goblins. Superstitions, curses, and for some reason, Egypt. There couldn't be a worse omen. Not today.

Kayla parks the car in a driveway; gets out. What is it that compels her to take a closer look? She's seen dead animals before in Martinelli's biology class; no, there's something strange about this cat's body or the vague steam rising from it—something calling to her for help.

As she approaches, the first detail that etches into her memory is the tail. It's been skinned. The force of a car's tire must have torn off the muscle and fur entirely; because the remainder of the cat's shiny black pelt is intact, almost perfect, but with a bony skeleton tail tacked on.

She crouches down; the skull has been crushed; mercifully. This cat died instantly, Kayla thinks. One of the eyeballs has been forced out through the socket; the glassy white orb seems fake; it sits atop the cat's skull like a child's bouncy ball; lifeless; inert.

Kayla thinks about taking a picture; posting it. Her friends would call it grotesque, disgusting; but there is something beautiful here, something poignant, though she can't quite explain it.

Where is Martinelli when you need him?

Then she sees it; notices it. A thin pink leather collar, almost hidden by the thick black fur. Somebody owns this cat. Loves this cat. And she can't allow that person or persons to see their pet like this. Empathy. Her greatest strength; her greatest weakness.

Kayla trots back to her car, dumps out the wrappers from a plastic Taco Bell bag, then waits; a series of cars drive past, swerving to avoid the black cat.

She wraps the Taco Bell bag around the cat's body and lifts; it's soft, flexible, and surprisingly heavy; the carcass is not warm but not cold either; the animal's body heat is still dissipating, moving from a warmer system to a cooler one.

Kayla ties shut the plastic bag and opens the passenger side door; she gently places the cat's body on the floor mat. A few more cars speed by; their drivers oblivious; talking on the phone; texting.

Martinelli. Of all the people in her life, she will miss him the most; he is the only one who saw something unique in her; realized her potential. To everyone else, she has always been a freak, a two-percenter; someone who needs to be medicated; studied.

Across the street against the curb, a long black object flutters in the wind. She knows, even before she approaches, what this object will be. But she doesn't want to say the word, it feels too sacred; so instead she channels Martinelli, from his most brilliant lecture, while she crosses the street to retrieve it.

"At some point along the evolutionary trail, we mammals split off from reptiles, favoring a new survival strategy, internal combustion. We became warm-blooded. Through the process of metabolism, we began producing our own heat; this allowed us to remain active in any climate, any environment; this allowed us to hunt; to defend ourselves; to prevail."

Back in the car, Kayla pushes the ignition button and waits; again cars pass by; people go about their daily routines, their bodies exchanging matter and energy with the universe, waging a constant battle to produce and maintain heat -- a battle which, Kayla thinks, one day we all will lose.

And so, and so, and so! After all that, Kayla knows what must be done next. There is only one possible course of action now. After all that, there is only one option. After all that.....this.

