

KAREN E. BENDER

*What the Cat Said*

It was two in the morning when the cat spoke. It was raining again, great pale thunderclouds moving like ships through the sky. The bedroom flashed with white light. The children were eight and five years old, and earlier that evening they decided that they hated us. They had tried, for the first time, to run away.

Now the cat was pacing the room. He was full of anguish. We were all trying to sleep. That was, in itself, a joke. No one slept very deeply, ever. Our boy was up the most.

"My blanket fell off," he said. "It's hot." He stood by the bed. "I need to find my Yankee card." He paused. "Now."

He did not want to leave the day even after it had left him. It was a touching sentiment, though for us, tiring. It was the gray hour of the morning when nothing seemed alive, the hazy moment before the march through our lives started again, before the sun was up and the dreary march continued, to eat, to fill the wallet, to be educated.

"I love you," the cat said.

The words sounded almost choked, as though he had been holding this in for a long time.

I thought my husband had said it, or our son. The cat looked at me. The room whitened with lightning, then went black again.

I did not love the cat. In fact, I often hated him. His name (horrifyingly, and chosen by the children so it could not be changed) was "Cutie." His gray, matted hair floated through the house. He had the bad judgment to bring leathery, green half-eaten lizards back to us as gifts. I hated his guttural yowl, his desire to jump into my lap. At the end of the day, I had nothing left for him. It was a terrible thing to admit, the end of my capacity to love a living being, but there it was. And it had been my idea to admit him to the family, to pretend I had more tenderness inside of me than I did, to test myself, though of course I said it was for the children.

"Was that the cat?" my husband asked.

The cat sat and stared. How could he love me? What did he see? How was I particularly worthy of love?

We had all had a bruising night. Our son, eight years old, was experimenting with disdain. "I want to run away," he had said. Before he went to bed, he had packed up what he needed: a pack of chewing gum, a small golden trophy from T-ball, autographed cards of Derek Jeter and Mickey Mantle and J. J. Putz, because he liked to laugh at his name. His sister looked at him, absorbing his tactics. She packed a Hello Kitty bag with a plastic comb, a pink crayon, and a pack of Smarties that were so old they had petrified.

"We are going to join the poor," our son said. They put their backpacks on their shoulders and marched with great and sorrowful dignity downstairs. He opened the front door and stepped out into the porch. They looked out into the great pulsing blackness of the night, the grinding machinery of cicadas. They stood, nobly, on the concrete edge of the porch.

No one stepped out into the darkness.

My husband laughed, unkindly.

"Don't," our son said, running back in and slamming the door, enraged and relieved that he would not have to negotiate the wet black maw of the night. They were stuck with us. They slapped uselessly at their father's big legs. They were so small. But so intent and full of plans.

Earlier that day our boy had been disinvented from a playdate with Gary Snow. Gary Snow had a trilling laugh, hair as light as sunlight, and an exhaustive collection of baseball cards that he housed, oddly, in a casserole dish. Gary Snow had invited our son to his house and then had been invited to John Meyer's birthday party and suddenly, cruelly, canceled.

The girl had also been betrayed. She had found the cat gnawing on one of her My Little Ponies. The cat lolled back, eyes glittering like a drug addict's, the pony's tiny pink leg in its mouth. The girl screamed as though the cat were murdering a living thing. "I hate Cutie," she said. "I hate him!" Now she peered into rooms to see if he was there; she woke from bad dreams in which he tried to eat her.

The children had numerous and passionate complaints. The complaints both deflated and excited them. They wanted to find solutions! Their solution was to ask for more TV. They would watch TV until their eyes crusted over. They wanted candy, candy, candy. They lay on the floor in their underwear, their bare summer brown skin aglow in the false blue light. They were so beautiful, I wanted to eat them, to taste whatever freshness I had lost, in the intervening forty years. We were, all of us adults, vampires of their sweetness.

They knew.

They were staring at the television, eyes half-drooping. Something gorgeous was in the bright glare. They were straining to see it. That thing was adulthood.

They wanted everything and we could only give them a little.

I heard the rustling; soon they would see through our grubby lies. Our pathetic attempts to shove them off to sleep at nine p.m. so we could have sex. Our insistence that more than half an hour of TV a night during the week would curdle their brains. My attempt to convince the boy not to do little league simply because I hated the other parents. They would recognize our lameness, our fatness, our failure—and theirs—to live forever.

“When am I going to die?” the boy had already asked.

We mumbled, looked away, scratched our legs.

“When?” he asked, searching our faces.

Soon, in a big huff, they would pack up and move out. Trailing stuffed animals, baseball cards, My Little Ponies, the objects that they had once coveted, which, at seventeen, would make them feel naïve and small. They would head off armed with rock posters, black T-shirts with scary sayings, green hair. They would think they were starting anew! They would have better lives than we did! Soon they would be disappointed by sex, or thrilled by it, soon they would feel things—sexually, emotionally—that we never had. Or they would feel less. We believed we had beat our own parents on this score, but there was no knowing, really. No one said. We lay in our bed, the sheets damp with the chemical smell of spermicide, breathing hard.

“I don’t like your toes,” my husband said, suddenly. “How they rub against me.”

“Why?” I asked, alarmed.

“I don’t know. I’m just not a fan of them.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve just decided. It feels like scraping.”

I contemplated this. What was this new change? Should I be understanding? Or mad?

The cat sat there, a gray and hairy beast.

“I love you,” said the cat.

“What?” I asked the cat.

Did the cat love me? Or—more likely—did he just want dinner? I had forgotten to give him dinner. I felt bad about it, but not that bad. He was so fat his stomach dragged against the ground.

If the cat was saying I love you, and he was saying it to me, what was my responsibility to him? Did I have to pet him more? Did I have to say I love you back? He seemed to need nothing. He awoke several times a day, stretched, checked his food bowl, trotted to the front door, went out, and came in, over and over. He had been allowed into the house because he was the one with no longings.

The rain began to bang against the house. The cat sat there, with immense and troubling patience.

"Was that the cat?" my husband asked.

"Yes," I said.

"He can talk now?" asked my husband wistfully.

"He said, I love you."

"To you or to me?"

I said, trying not to brag, "I think he said it to me."

"How do you know it wasn't to me?"

"I just assumed," I said.

Cutie was now apparently done speaking. He would just gaze upon the wreckage.

"Why couldn't it be me?" I asked, now mad.

"Who did you say it to, Cutie?" my husband asked the cat. "Me or her?"

The cat stepped forward. My husband petted its head. Now he was pandering. Cutie rolled over on his back. He was large, his gray fur smelled of wet grass, there was a leaf stuck to his underside. He was a wild animal. We had innocently invited him into our home. We had even joked to the children that he was the third sibling. They liked that, someone they could push around. "He is your furry brother," we said. But he was really no better than a possum or a rat. He assumed the fragile mantle of a household pet, nibbled politely at the kibble, rubbed against your legs, posed adorably with a ball of yarn; but up close he smelled of damp earth and his hot breath had the metallic undertone of blood.

He rolled on the bed, his legs trembling, splayed out, in a shameless erotic display. His belly was pale pink, rimmed with translucent white fur.

What did he feel when he watched us? Now would we have to feel guilty about not including him? He could not love us because I did not want the weight of more guilt.

My husband petted him. "It was me, wasn't it," he murmured. His arm was covered in curly hair. He looked brutish. He was sexier now than when we first met, when he was just thirty, a raw-faced boy. Why didn't he

like the way my toes rubbed against him? What other mistakes would we find in each other? But we loved new things, too. My husband had put a freshly washed plate into the cabinet with a tenderness that moved me. In what corner had he found this gentleness in himself? Would he find other things to love about me? We were peculiar mirrors for the other. We were each a long, stubborn wall; the unspoken pressure of marriage was trying to crack through the wall of the other. What gorgeousness would we find when we finally broke through it? I ran my finger along his skin. It was a lifelong task to distract us.

"What do you want, Cutie?" I asked. "What? Tell us?"

We wanted an answer. The pressure in the room was unbearable. Nothing would break it, not speech, not sex, not sleep.

Cutie writhed under my husband's hand and then nipped at my wrist.

"Ow!" I said. "Cutie, no."

He was prone to this sort of casual savagery.

"No, Cutie!" my husband said. "Be nice!"

This was the behavior we were used to—it was comforting, actually. We were more frightened by the idea of the depth of his feelings. Cutie meowed, a regular catlike sound.

"Ignore him," my husband said, now annoyed.

"But he said something," I said. "He did."

"We don't have to answer," said my husband.

"Why not?" I asked.

Cutie leapt off the bed.

"Cutie," I said. "Wait."

I wanted to ask him—why did you say what you said?

But it was too late. He was just a cat again. He was just what we had thought all along. It was a little sad; but, then again, it wasn't. I wanted him to be this—a cute, furry beast who would run through the house on his little pink paws without thinking. I wanted to watch him stretch his long, hairy body lazily in the sun.

Maybe he forgave us for not listening, or maybe he did not. In any case, he was not the mourning type; he moved on to his next plan. I listened to the patter of his feet as Cutie trotted out of the room, down the stairs, and out into the wet, thundering world. Upstairs, we huddled, naked, under the sheets, waiting for the new day.