

SHOCK

Magazine

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How do you feel about cats? They say that whether you like cats or not can be a clue to your character. Heh-heh. I like cats—especially ugly black ones, with yellow eyes, who prowl the tombstones at night. But I won't argue if you hate them. Every man to his own taste, I say, provided that, unlike Donald E. Westlake, he is able to foresee all of the consequences . . .

CAT KILLERS

by DONALD E. WESTLAKE

MORTY HATED CATS. THEY SLUNK along the ground and ate garbage. They hissed and scratched and their teeth were sharp. And their eyes were like devil's eyes, wide and cold and cruel and unblinking. Every time Morty saw a cat, he shivered and trembled and was afraid.

He hated that most of all, being afraid. He was fifteen, he belonged to the Forty-Fourth Street Avengers, he had once knifed a guy in the arm during a rumble. He wasn't scared of anything in the world, nobody he knew, not his old man or the teachers in school or the fuzz on the beat

with his lousy tin badge. He wasn't scared of anything except cats.

And that made him mad. He was mad at every cat in the world, for making him shiver and tremble and be afraid. He hated them, he wanted to kill them. *Cats!* He wanted them dead.

At first, he just threw rocks at them. Or beer cans, or whatever he could find. He'd be walking along, on his way home from the matinee at the movies because school was a drag and the teachers didn't care if he showed up or not, and he'd see a cat come slinking out of an alley. And he'd get scared. He'd want to turn around and run, he was so scared. But he'd get angry, too, and he'd look around for something to throw. A coke bottle out of a garbage can, a stone out of the gutter, anything. He'd throw it at the cat as hard as he could.

If he connected, the cat would yowl and hiss and jump around with his feet rigid and straight and the hair on his back standing up in the air, and Morty would keep throwing things until the cat took off and disappeared.

Only that wasn't enough. You throw a beer can at a cat, even if you hit him on the head, you don't kill him. You don't even hurt him very much. Cats have hard heads, hard solid heads. So Morty would holler and curse and throw things and wish he had a gun so he

could blast the goddam cat right into the sidewalk.

The other guys couldn't figure out why Morty was so hopped up about cats. They'd say, "Come on, Morty, quit foolin' around with the goddam cat. Come on, we got a meetin'. Come on, whadaya so hot about cats for?"

And Morty would say, "I hate their lousy guts."

One day, it was a Saturday, Morty was sitting on the stoop, waiting for a couple of the guys to come around and maybe they'd sneak into the matinee, and this cat came out from the little passageway where the garbage cans were kept, and went *right by* Morty and up the stoop. Morty practically died. He shrank back against the railing and stared at the cat and he could feel his heart pounding away like a wild drum. The cat was tiger-striped and thin and filthy, and as it went up the steps its tongue came out and licked its chops.

Morty didn't even think. He just reached out and grabbed the cat by its tail and lifted it over his head and threw it down on the sidewalk. He threw it as hard as he could, and the cat didn't have time to get its feet under it. It landed on its back and head, and jumped right up. It staggered around for a couple of seconds, and then took off, back into the

passageway.

Morty stared after it, breathing hard. Then he looked at his hand, and he realized that he had touched a cat, *touched* one, with this hand. He ran upstairs and washed his hands, over and over again, and all of a sudden he threw up in the sink.

After that, he got madder than ever. The thing was, he was ashamed to even talk about it to anybody. He couldn't go up to one of the guys and say, "Look, I'm afraid of cats. I touched one and I threw up." The guy would look at him and say, "You're nuts." Or maybe, even worse, he'd say, "You're chicken."

And he couldn't tell his old man. Hell, he couldn't tell his old man anything. Six years ago, when Morty's mother died, his old man got drunk, and they were still waiting for him to sober up. If Morty said, "Pop, I'm scared of cats," his old man would say, "Open me a can of beer on your way out; will ya?"

And he couldn't tell any of his teachers in school. If he told one of them he was afraid of cats, they'd go off into that double-Dutch they talked to each other in, and he'd wind up on a couch in front of a nut doctor.

So there wasn't anybody he could talk to about it. He had to keep it inside, where it could

fester and gnaw away at him and make him twist and turn in bed at night, staring at the ceiling and biting his lip. And sometimes, when the cats would be out in the alleys and the passageways, among the garbage cans, and they'd all start wailing and crying like damned souls in hell, Morty would lie in bed, soaking with sweat, and he'd get so terrified and so enraged he'd want to go out and rip them apart, rip their legs off, rip their tails off, rip their heads off, and he'd grab handfuls of sheet and thrash around in the bed, furious and afraid.

The next time he grabbed a cat, he didn't throw up. This one was sitting on the sidewalk, washing itself, and Morty grabbed it and threw it against a wall. The cat managed to leave a long red scratch on the back of his hand before he threw it, and as Morty stared with horror at the tiny drops of blood oozing out of the cut, the cat ran away under a car. Morty went home and washed his hands and put iodine on the cut and waited to see what would happen. After a while, the cut healed, but it left a thin pale scar on the back of his hand that wouldn't go away.

Morty wanted to kill them more than ever, now. They had cut him, they had put a mark on him. It

was the same as in a rumble. If a guy touched you with a knife, if he cut you, left a mark on you, you had to cut him back. You *had* to, some day, and until you did you were nothing. Once a guy cut you, you had to get him.

That's the way Morty felt about cats. They had cut him, and he had to get them. He had to.

Now he started looking for them, started prowling around the alleys and the passageways, poking around the garbage cans, crawling around the concrete-covered "yards" behind the apartment buildings. Practically all of his fear had been turned into rage. He was no longer afraid to touch cats. He wanted to touch them now, he wanted to get his hands on them.

At first, he'd just throw them, and if they were stunned the first time they hit, he'd pick them up and throw them again, and just keep throwing until they were dead. But most of the time the cat would get away after the first time he threw it, so he changed his tactics. Now, he'd grab a cat by the tail and swing it against a wall, smashing the cat's head against a wall, and he'd hold onto the tail and keep swinging until the cat's head was just a bloody pulp, and then he'd throw the dead thing away.

But that wasn't enough, either. They still vowed late at night, they still kept him awake when

he should be sleeping, they still wandered around the neighborhood in the daylight. He wanted them dead, every one of them. No more cats, that's what he wanted. No more cats anywhere in the world.

And it wasn't enough any more to just kill them. He wanted to punish them, too, make them suffer, because they had made him suffer for so long.

So he found ways to punish them. He'd come up on a cat and he'd slam it into a wall to stun it. Then he'd take the pliers he always carried in his back pocket, and he'd break its legs, snap the bones with pliers. Then he'd sit down and wait for the cat to wake up. When the cat was awake and struggling to get up and get away, Morty would lift it high in the air and drop it onto the concrete. The cat would try to land on its legs, and would scream when the legs crumpled under it, and at the sound Morty would finally feel good. He'd feel relieved, freed, and he'd keep lifting the cat up in the air and dropping it, and the white bones would stick through the furred skin of the cat's legs, and the concrete would be spattered with the cat's blood, until finally it died.

He found other things to do, too. He'd pull out the cat's fur, hair by hair, with a pair of

tweezers. He'd take a thin metal rod and hold it over a match until the end was too hot to touch, and he'd shove the rod down the cat's throat.

He hated the eyes worst of all. Cat's eyes, huge and oval-shaped, staring at him with hate, no matter what he did. They never looked afraid, they never begged for mercy with their eyes. The eyes stared at him, and he could almost taste the hate. And he'd hold the cat's head with one hand and shove a stick into the eyes, grinding them into nothingness, leaving bloody holes where the terrible eyes had been.

And still they yowled at night, beneath his window, and he listened to their high shrieking and he thought he could see them looking in the window at him, and finally, one night, he'd had enough. He got out of bed, got dressed, took his pliers and his tweezers and the thin metal rod, and crept out of the apartment. It was after three o'clock in the morning, and the street was deserted, except for one fuzz in his blue uniform, walking along, swinging his billy.

Morty waited in the hallway for the fuzz to go by, and then he went out on the street. He listened. In an alleyway, off to his left, he heard the yowling of a cat; he heard a scuffling and a

running, and then silence. He said, "All right, you bastard," and started after him.

It was dark in the alley, and he waited until his eyes were used to it, until he could make out the shapes of the garbage cans and the piles of rubbish. The cat was silent now, and he waited for it to make a noise, waited for it to let him know where it was.

He stood there for a couple of minutes, and then he heard a soft cat-wailing down at the end of the alley. Cautiously, silently, he worked his way down toward the sound.

When he got to the end of the alley, the cat was gone. There was a small square of concrete there, ringed by buildings, and another alleyway that went off to the right. Down in that alleyway, he heard movement, a sound like paper rattling, and then the soft cat-wail again. He went after it, moving slowly and carefully.

It kept ahead of him, moving through the alleys and passageways, the spaces behind and between the tenements. Once, Morty had to climb over a tall wooden fence after it. And the longer it took to catch up, the madder he got. And the madder he got, the more things he thought of to do to it.

Another alley, with a little bit of reflected light at the end, com-

ing from a streetlight somewhere. The cat called from down there, and he caught a glimpse of it as it scurried across the oval of light. It was a dead-end alley, and Morty smiled. He muttered, "I've got you now, you bastard," and he started down the alley.

He had to move slow, be careful the cat didn't get by him and escape. He had to be sure this time. And this time he was really going to give that cat the business. He had some ideas he'd never tried before.

He got down to the lighted place, at the end of the alley, and he saw it, peeking at him from behind a garbage can. He started for it, and heard a sound to his right. He turned. There was another one there, coming out from under a pile of old newspapers. Morty grinned. "You're next," he said.

But then another cat came out from the other side of the pile of papers, and when Morty looked back, there were three cats coming out from behind the garbage pail. A murmur came from behind him, and he looked down the alley. There were more cats there, more than he could count, they were pouring into the alley, they were coming down toward him.

He stared at them, too terrified to move or think or speak or do

a thing. They came close to him, maybe three or four feet away, and stood there looking up at him. They were in a ring around him, looking at him out of their wide cold eyes. The last of them came into the alley and stopped, and there was silence.

Morty started to breathe again, a choking, rattling breathing. He had to get away. Cats, what could they do to him? He could get away. Run down the alley, turn, out to the street—which way? He was lost back here, it was a maze, he didn't know how to get to the street. But he could still get away from them. They couldn't do anything to him. He stared at them, the circle of cat faces and hate-filled cat eyes. He breathed deeply, and started to run. And they rose up in front of him, and he saw the claws come out, and as the bodies hit him, he screamed.

An hour later, the fuzz found him. Morty was crawling out of the alley when the fuzz came along, whistling, swinging his billy, and the fuzz stopped walking, stopped whistling, and stared down at him.

Morty was crawling. Not with his arms and legs, they were broken, and the bones were sticking ragged points through the bleeding flesh. He was squirming on his stomach, inching forward, painfully, blindly. Because he

didn't have eyes any more. Blood trickled down his scarred face from his mangled eye sockets. And out of his scorched and blackened throat there came a sound, a mewling, a mewling like a cat.

The cop stared down at Morty, and as he stared a cat ran out of the alley. The cat stopped for a

minute and looked at Morty, and then it ran way. The cop looked after the cat. "Scared out of its wits," he said to himself. "And no wonder."

And Morty inched along the pavement, and from his mouth came the sound, the mewling, the mewling. ■ ■

