

The Cat in 3B

The call came at 9AM, always 9AM, the moment Greg turned on his work phone. Clara called it Feinstein-O'clock. It was a leaky faucet, a squeaky hinge, a groaning floorboard, a late-night party on the other end of the block that she only whined to Greg about because the police had stopped taking her calls.

Today it was a cat. "A violation of the no-pets policy," she said.

Greg told her he'd take care of it. He said it with so much reassurance, she didn't ask for a timeframe.

9AM the next day: she sounded urgent. She'd started claiming the cat was a... demon? Did she say *demon*? A kooky claim even by Feinstein's standards. Worse, she'd decided she was 'deathly allergic' to cats, which begged a mention the day before, if true.

Almost certainly, she was being dramatic, but even a 1% chance of killing someone and risking that kind of lawsuit would not do.

As he climbed the steps to the third floor, wood groaning under nylon carpet, something slowed his walk—guilt. The feeling followed him down the hall to 3B. He paused, his knuckle at the door. Victor Mason was alone in his apartment for weeks at a time. To interrupt his solitude felt like a violation, like throwing a rock in a mirror-smooth lake.

He knocked.

A TV-crowd roared. A cat meowed. Muffled behind the door, a grumble rose above the noise, "What do you want?"

“Mr. Mason, it’s your landlord. It’s good to hear from you.”

“If you wanted food,” said Victor, “you should have eaten at supper.”

Greg raised his voice at the door, “Mr. Mason.”

The meowing got louder. “Angel, stop! It’s okay, baby. It’s okay.”

“Mr. Mason!”

“What!” Victor called, “Jesus Christ, what, I’m watching the game.”

“I’m sorry, but—”

“I’m watching the game.”

“I only need a minute of your time.”

“Can you believe this?” He was talking to his cat again. “Sunday’s game time. Everyone knows that. Sunday’s game time, but no—here comes Mister I-Need-a-Minute.”

“Sir, I’m your landlord.”

“Wait for commercials.”

“What?”

“Pipe down, wait for commercials. Roman’s making an ass of himself.”

The cat quieted, the game rumbled.

A slow breath escaped through Greg’s teeth. No wonder Victor paid for his company. He had no capacity for dialogue. In one minute of conversation he’d managed to interrupt, complain, bark orders, insult, and dispense a brand of disrespect so casual it was hard to take offense. *Speaking in walls*, Greg called it, spewing words with no intent to connect.

He recalled the one conversation they'd had in their twelve year history. They were getting their mail, politely ignoring each other—or so Greg thought.

“Goddamn dentists.”

Greg flinched at the muttering to his right. He traced Clara's purple note to find where he left off. He used his fingernail so he wouldn't smudge her handwriting, and read with a smile.

“Buncha scammers, if you ask me.”

Greg had not. The rant came out of nowhere. He went to finish the note in his apartment.

“Fifty-two minutes!”

Victor was looking right at him; there was no getting out of it now. His face was a series of droops, with jowls, dangly earlobes, and long eye-bags that looked like clay—a face where no smile would stand a chance.

“Fifty-two minutes, they got me next to that damn dog. Just stinks and drools, is all I see. And they're sayin' it's a service dog.”

“At the dentist?”

“Yes, the dentist!” Spittle hit Greg's cheek. “Are you deaf? I said it's a service dog. And they're sayin' full price, even at *fifty-two minutes*.” Victor held a letter up, flapping it in-hand. “Can you believe this?”

“No,” said Greg.

Victor shook his head with vigor. His gaze retreated inward. He looked like a broken robot, buffering, unable to compute, stuck in a repetitive

motion—his head shaking, shaking, shaking, accompanied by a contemplative grumble.

He slammed his fist down on the mail slots. It sounded like a gunshot in the quiet wooden halls.

Greg's hand reached out, he opened his mouth to protest, but too late. The slot for 3A was dented. *I have to fix that, you know.*

He might have said it. He probably would have said it to most anyone else. But on the few occasions he'd talked to Victor Mason, he had never gotten the sense of a receptive man.

The door opened, and out stepped a shirtless Victor Mason, sweat shining on his beer belly. Behind him, a white-furred cat was jumping at dust as it lit up in the sun.

"The game's back on in two minutes," he said. "I watched a soup commercial too. I don't know why, but I did."

"That's fine."

"Well, it's gonna have to be. I'm not changing my day on account of some young kid, just decides he wants to talk."

"Yes, I appreciate that you've been a good tenant, and you've paid your rent on time."

"It's your two minutes."

"We don't allow pets in the building. It's stated quite clearly in the lease."

The door shut. The crowd roared.

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What to say about Greg's relationship in decline?

He didn't think of it that way at the time. *Healthy boundaries* was why Clara stopped coming over. *Comfort* was why she stopped talking at dinner. It was work to talk, after all.

But no, not for Clara. For her, words came with no more effort than water took to flow. Small talks, nervous yammers, political debates, silence fillers, any kind of talk a fella could name, she talked it at high speed. She talked to calling salesmen. She talked to the salvation army people who rang the bell. Greg would stand seven feet closer to their destination, waiting.

That was the deal; she talked, he listened. Even if that listening became more passive over time, even if he no longer tried to keep up with the ceaseless barrage of words, it was all *fine*. Denial would cover the difference.

What to say about his relationship in decline?

The words became too many. And then they became too few.

On the morning that Greg marched to 3B for the second time, his denial began to crack. It started with an empty mail slot. No purple note (it was a purple *envelope*, actually). It had been two weeks since his last. It had never been that long before.

He climbed the creaky stairs to 3B. An empty feeling clung to him and came off him like a stink. If he was just sensing a rift, she probably saw an ocean between them.

He knocked.

Victor answered in a sleeveless white t-shirt with coffee stains and pit sweat. He looked Greg up and down, one eye narrowed in an expression that seemed at once thoughtful and stupid. “How’s the missus?”

Greg’s jaw tightened. “You should know I’m prepared to call the cops.”

“Easy, boy, just a question.” Victor turned and walked into his apartment, leaving the door open. “So let me guess.” He raised his voice at Feinstein’s wall. “It was *Feinstein*, wasn’t it?”

Greg stood at the door and answered, not a toe crossing in. “She’s allergic.” The funk of sweat and garbage drifted out and made him scowl.

“Mmhm. What’s your name, son?”

“*Deathly* allergic.” Greg put a pause between each word to emphasize, “*She could be killed.*”

“Name?” Victor disappeared behind a corner.

“Gregory Leminsky,” he called from the door.

“Your first name, you idiot.”

Greg was being goaded. He recognized it from his father who would drunkenly instigate yelling matches just to enjoy the argument. He recognized it from various angry tenants who had threatened litigation or worse. He said with a smile, “I’m Greg.”

“What do you know about Radon, Greg?”

The corner of his mouth twitched, his smile softened. He took a step into the apartment. “What did you say?”

“Radon. Limestone deposits. Surely a responsible landlord like yourself knows a thing or two about Radon.”

“Do you have a point?” As Greg spoke he heard irritation in his voice.

“See, I was looking at your basement the other day, or at least the part of it that’s an actual basement.”

Greg took another step in. The apartment was strewn with pilsner cans, and plastic bowls with gaudy colors. The ‘living room’ consisted of a recliner facing a box-shaped TV. “That basement stays locked.”

“It *did*.” Victor corrected. There was a heavy thud in the bedroom. Something growled low, something too large to be a cat. Greg took another step in, and leaned over to look down the hall. The door at the end was cracked. The vertical slit filled and emptied with shadows as Victor passed.

“Looks like you were *planning* a basement, but then you just blasted away whatever space you needed for a water-heater and a furnace. It’s awfully expensive clearing all that rock the right way, isn’t it?”

Fifty-thousand dollars expensive, you son of a bitch.

“And what you have left,” Victor went on, his confidence grating, “is a lot of blasted limestone leaking cancer-gas 24/7 right under all of our feet. Radon, Greg.”

“In a ventilated, sealed-off space,” Greg pointed out, “Whatever risk there *might* be is confined to a room that nobody goes in other than myself.”

“I’m not so sure the county inspector would see it that way, especially considering the door to that deathtrap isn’t even locked. Oh, I think I’d know people like that, just like I know some boys who were living downstairs, might want to know more about their withheld deposits.”

“Those apartments are filthy.”

“Carpet stains!” Victor spat. Another heavy thud. “Come on, girl, it’s different now.”

“I have all the picture evidence—”

“Pictures! He’s got pictures! You give me fifty bucks, and I’ll rent us a steam-cleaner with enough soap to clear out the whole first floor.”

“What you don’t understand—”

“Tell that to your pictures.”

Greg spoke louder, “*What you don’t understand—*” He paused. He was yelling at the hallway. Angry people were prone to all sorts of stupidity. He dropped his outstretched hand to his side, and continued softly, “...is that those were above and beyond—”

The door opened. What came out then he hardly recognized. The cat had grown, doubled in size. Its head had become wrinkled and spotted, patches of bald pink showing where there had only been fur. There was a cold dullness in its slit pupils, in eyes that scanned robotically.

But what squeezed Greg’s throat, what buckled his knees, what would splice his thoughts in the months after, was its gaping, hungry mouth. Behind its thin teeth was no tongue, no throat, only a solid black that defied the lighting—empty of insides.

Victor appeared behind it, and carried on like the carpet was really what mattered. “It’s a shit material for a floor and you know it—hell, the whole world knows it, unless you like to vacuum twice a day and complain about allergies. Well, I sure don’t.”

The cat's mouth swallowed his gaze. To be eaten was to be unmade, not digested.

"And I'll tell you something else. I hinted at the fact that I know the inspector, she's my good friend's wife. But I think I was probably too subtle, so there you go."

Greg backed up until the wall hit him. "There's no need for all that." He fumbled at the knob. The cat stepped closer and twisted its head.

"Have a good—" Greg stumbled out of the apartment.

"Oh, I know, Angel," Victor Cooed from within. "I know, baby."

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A month went by, and Clara left him. It helped him forget about Victor and his fucked up cat. He focused instead on memories of his life before her. He'd been embarrassed by that lifestyle when they'd first met, and now it was reemerging around him—gas-station food, laundry piled up, dirty dishes, and all the humdrum depressive crap that came too easily when there was no one around to see.

The heater clicked on, air whooshing all around, the vents clicking and popping like mice running through the walls. He was in bed. Clara would have woken with an incoherent, high-pitched mumble, and moved closer. He would have smelled the kiwi shampoo in her hair.

He checked the mail slots. No purple note. He wondered if there would ever be another.

Best way to give a compliment, that's what Clara said about writing letters. Slips right in your pocket. No way to pay it back, no way to argue, nothing you can do but accept the words on the page.

Greg had countered that he could make corrections in red ink, or get his tenants to sign a petition declaring the document null and void. It made them laugh then. It was less funny now.

Feinstein called at the usual nine, but again around noon. A lightbulb in her kitchen had gone *cold*, and she was afraid of using the wrong wattage. If he couldn't be bothered to keep her from dying, she said, he could at least be bothered to get his ass up here and change that bulb right away. It was the first time Greg could remember her cursing.

When he reached the last stair up, he stopped.

His camera. It hung by its wire from the ceiling with a busted lens.

And down the hall, the door to 3B was cracked open. From it, a sliver of gold light shone down the hall to his feet.

He brought up the footage on his phone: two time-stamps with movement.

The first time-stamp was two hours ago. He hit *play*. Victor's hooker strolled to the door, a pink coat to match her hair. She knocked on 3B and went in—end footage.

The second time-stamp played. The door swung open and slammed against the stopper. The hooker stumbled out of the apartment without her coat. Her purse dropped as she ran down the hall. She might have been sprinting if not for the heels.

Victor stumbled out after her, yanking his pants on. He grabbed her purse, and chased her out of frame. Ten seconds later, the footage blurred and went to static. 3:37PM—thirty-seven minutes ago. Greg watched it three times.

He could call the cops, but it wasn't quite evidence of anything. For all he knew, they could be making out in the parking lot, just out of frame. Greg shoved that image out of his mind.

He could ignore it. Go about his day and change the bulb. That sounded like sense.

Or he could peek in. Keep an eye on the front door footage, claim he was concerned for their safety if he got caught. He hadn't seen Victor or his cat since his last visit to 3B. How much of his memory had been a hallucination? With active footage of front door, there seemed little chance of getting caught.

He walked the sliver of light to the door. He spotted a pot of spaghetti sauce sitting on an electric burner. He moved to get a better angle. Too narrow. With two fingers, he cracked the door open with a squeak.

It was almost the size of a puma. Sunlight shone red through big, goblin-like ears. Its bald head was so deeply wrinkled it looked to be wearing its brains on the outside. It touched its chin to the floor, eyes locked on Greg. One boney paw lifted, trembling. Ready to pounce.

It darted. He yanked the door closed. The beast crashed into it with the force of something heavier than it could be. It struck the door. Again it struck, hard like a brick.

Greg braced his back against it until the banging gave way to scratching and howling. He clasped his chest like it would slow his thumping heart. He slid down and sat, his back against the door.

The beastly sounds died away, and there was only a purring cat. Greg rested his head against the door and felt his heart-rate return to normal. The purring was too close; even coming from the other side of the door, it was a whisper in his ear. It was a comfort.

More than a comfort. It was a needle in his vein. The purring was... apathy. A near-lethal dose of the old fuck-it. It might have alarmed him, except—well, he didn't give a shit.

He was startled to find his hand resting on the knob above his head. A voice screamed in his skull not to turn it, but what of it? The voice was distant. Dismissible.

He grasped the knob.

The door of 3A opened. She was a bulky woman dressed for a nice dinner. Feinstein leaned out, a pink top and matching skirt, twiddling with a dozen pearl necklaces. A polite grin spread across her face. "Are you going to help me with this bulb, Mr. Leminsky?"

Greg caught a sudden inhale like he'd forgotten to breathe. His hand fell from the knob. "Jesus Christ." He looked at his hand like he blamed it. A hungry growl took the place of the purring.

He managed a few words between labored breaths, "Demon cat."

"As I told you."