

Rex

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A gnarled face peeked under the kitchen table and stared into yellow eyes surrounded by pink flesh and whiskers. Dick Wildee's mission was making this cat miserable. From under the table, he hurled a loafer at its head and missed. A look of venom, it walked off, its bare tail raised high.

"Stop torturing Rex," his wife said from the sink. Though her back faced him, Sharon Wildee could tell her husband had bad intentions. Her calloused hands purged the plates of old food and stains. Her pajamas would look baggy on anyone else, but her pleasant roundness filled the cotton shirt like a stuffed Christmas stocking. He would have looked better in it.

"I've got to go to Jackson today, sweet pea. Linda's got her new grandbaby and wants me to visit. Can you behave?"

Dick looked up from his newspaper and grits. "I'm not five, Sharon. We'll be fine, right, Rex?" From the other room, paw pads and crumpling paper could be heard on the hardwood coffee table. The room was quiet until interrupted by a sneeze.

"That means 'yes' in Asshole."

"Glad to hear you two speak the same language," said Sharon.

She accepted that her husband hated the cat. Frog Jump, Tennessee had been home to the Wildee family since the Civil War. Sharon's family were newcomers from Trenton decades later. It hurt the couple to see family leave. Five years ago, their children and grandchildren had moved out of the family's hometown She was bored without grandchildren down the street to pamper.

They spent their lives as dog lovers. Cujo was hit by a neighbor's Ford, Peaches was bitten by a rattlesnake on one of Dick's duck hunting trips and Reagan was mauled by a pack of other dogs. Sharon was without dogs, children or grandchildren nearby. Dick was her only company and pets were better conversationalists. Sharon finally broke down and decided to go in a different direction.

She always liked cats, but never had one; Dick was allergic. She skimmed over advertisements for mutts and pitbulls, for once not interested in a dog. After searching for weeks, she found an ad for a hairless cat breeder in McKenzie, an hour and a half away from Frog Jump. The \$400 price tag would be worth the price of good company and a Ford-proof pet.

"Honey, eat the rest of the bacon and clean the skillet. I'm fixin' to be late if I don't hurry," she said, passing Dick at the breakfast table in her standard Saturday pajamas. Dick caught her by the hem of the Tweety Bird night shirt and pulled her in for a kiss. They were interrupted by hacking and coughing echoing from the den.

"What's wrong with you?" said Dick.

"Oh, he gets respiratory problems, you know that."

"Yeah, but ain't I supposed to be allergic to *him*?"

Sharon gave Dick an acetone look and left the room to get ready. Dick rose from his chair with leftover bacon on the brain and felt something slithering between his feet. Rex's yowl rang

in Dick's ears and through the house bouncing off the dry-walled kitchen and the wooden-paneled den. He stuffed a strip of bacon into his wrinkled wooden face. Dick smiled at the thought of his wife; there was no coincidence that she was fat and the best cook in Crockett County.

Friends joked about Sharon that she, “makes so many dumplings, she looks like one. Bless her heart, she's a good woman.” Dick was aware of the joke and often added, “She learned to make cottage cheese a long time before that. Bless her heart.” None of them really knew what it meant. They just said it when someone was mildly unfortunate. Dick really did love his wife; he was just bad at showing it.

“You're dumber than a cracker box if you think you're getting this.” Rex just stared at him, eyes like headlights. Dick bit into half of a piece and held it above the cat's head. As Dick stared at Rex, both their faces wrinkled- one like an oak tree and the other like a wet bathing suit. He remembered all the humiliating chores required to keep the monster alive. When Sharon bought Rex, she didn't know hairless cats needed so much maintenance. The breeder gave Sharon a special lotion to moisturize Rex daily. His lack of fur dried his skin and left scaly patches and flakes across his body. For the first few weeks, Sharon oiled Rex because Dick refused to look at him. Eventually, Dick had to oil the cat.

Whenever the task fell upon him, Dick cringed at the thought of Rex wriggling under his grip. Paws flailing, torso undulating and eyes wide with fear, Rex was hard to hold when he resisted.

After a long struggle and chase, Dick would clasp Rex by the nape, a squirming bag of skin, and sit into his plaid armchair surrounded by wood-paneled walls and orange shag rug. The two would fight as Dick squirted a puddle of moisturizer onto the writhing cat.

“My pecker's prettier than you,” Dick often said. Rex hissed under the chill of the lotion. His skin grew slippery under the medication and became harder to hold onto. The sounds coming from Rex disgusted Dick even more. To annoy the cat, Dick rubbed the lotion backwards down Rex's sides and onto his head. The whole process took about thirty minutes, enough time to watch The Match Game while Sharon taught Sunday school.

Dick looked at the cat on the linoleum. “Smells good, don't it?” Rex sniffed the bacon and reared up on his hind legs, flesh like uncooked chicken. He remained with paws up like a tiny angular bear.

“Christ A'mighty, you're an ugly son of a bitch.”

Dick bent down and teased the cat forward a few steps, wiggling the bacon just enough to let Rex's nose reach the strip. The cat sneezed and covered the bacon with snot. Rex shivered with aftershock and padded into the other room unimpressed by Dick's game. Dick stared at the soggy bacon; wretched then tossed it into the wastebasket.

He walked into the living room and turned on the television. Wheel of Fortune was about to end. It was not unusual for Dick to measure time by Game Show Network. On Sunday, Press Your Luck usually meant Sharon was done with church. The end of the Card Sharks' hour meant lunch with her girlfriends. By the time The Newlyweds' theme song aired, Sharon would walk through the door and greeted Rex with a hug and baby talk. Today was Wednesday so he wasn't

sure how long she would be out.

Usually, Dick knew what to do with his time alone. If his truck didn't need maintenance, he flipped through a National Geographic or a John Grisham novel. TV Guide Channel had nothing on. He hated golf and the news was never good.

He wanted to get drunk or smoke a cigarette. The American Soybean Review sat on the coffee table over the spread newspapers and magazines. He was tired of reading and channel surfing, all he did at his age. Dick wandered into his bedroom and into Sharon's closet. He stared at her clothes.

He looked for his keys and shut the door. Rex scratched at the door and walked off bored to sleep on Dick's favorite sweater. Dick pulled out of the driveway and down the gravel road. The impulse had never come over him for fifteen years until today. He felt like a teenager as he sped around the curves and honked at the neighbors in their yard. Ring of Fire blared through his old radio. He knew he needed to get out of the house.

He Tokyo drifted into the Bay St. Texaco smiling like a lunatic. Collected himself, straightened his cap and let his boots crush the gravel around the building. The front door beeped as he walked into the store; Dick headed straight for the beer. Years ago, Crockett County had been a wet county, the bars open on Sunday. Now, options were limited to smuggling liquor over county lines or beer from Texaco. He selected a case and walked up to the counter.

Arnold Valentine, the store owner, was a little younger than Dick but just as wrinkled and grizzled. The two worked together at the Mason's Club meetings on fundraisers.

"Jesus, Dick. I didn't know you were drinking again. Sharon know?" said Arnold.

"It's just a few beers. Don't tell her. Damn cat." Arnold had heard Dick complaining about his wife's pet.

"That ugly thing? Why don't you shoot it? Ya'll've had tons of pets before."

"She loves that thing like a grandchild. I couldn't do that to her."

"My pecker's prettier than that critter," said Arnold.

"That's what I told her."

"Happy Sunday, Dick." Arnold scanned the barcode.

"Can you get me a pack of USA Gold's too?"

"You haven't bought cigarettes or beer in at least ten years."

"You ain't gonna tell her?"

"No, Dick. Drive safe. Wait to get home to drink that."

He strapped the case in with the passenger seat belt and lit a cigarette. He shifted into reverse and rode home feeling like a cowboy.

Forty-five years ago, twelve beers didn't feel like this. Dick felt nauseated and motivated. He could remember his dad at this age sitting on his arm chair drinking and smoking. John Wildee was a bad man; Dick realized it long ago but still admired him. John raised his family on a sharecropper's pay for soybeans before the local farms became completely monopolized. He was an alcoholic, not violent, but abusive in his own way. Dick was afraid of his father and like other men from his generation worked very closely with him.

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If John Wildee were alive today, folks would call him a homophobe. As a teenager, Dick was scrawny. His father reminded Dick every day that he would never grow a gut or muscles unless he started working. Dick fought the names and taunting for years. John often said he should have had a son instead of a little girl and Dick was switched at the hospital. After dropping out of high school to work with his father, he joined the army and fought in Vietnam, met Sharon and got married. John Wildee still wasn't impressed.

Dick's bad idea resurrected and he was easily motivated in his inebriated state. He peeled himself out of his armchair and walked to the bedroom starting on his thirteenth beer. Rex looked up from his curled position on the antique quilt. His pink wrinkles melting into the floral pattern of the quilt, pointy bat ears poking up and giving his camouflage away. Rex lifted his head and stared at Dick as he stumbled into Sharon's closet with the open can of beer and turned on the light. The bulb from the ceiling swayed and twisted, making Dick dizzy. He started giggling at his bad thought, took another swig of beer and went through Sharon's closet. Underneath floral pants, button tops and decade old dresses, he found treasures in old shoe boxes. Pictures from their wedding, his old army days, and five-year-old children stared back at him. A collection of old shells from their Gulf Springs vacation clicked under his hand. A twenty-year-old Sharon stared back at him. Her eyes were the color of his Army uniform, hair long and modest. She had a slight figure, like she would break easily as an eggshell.

He dug further and found a picture of his father and mother. She looked like a frightened doe with large brown eyes and curly gray hair, a soft spoken but sturdy woman. Wilma Wildee could throw a punch. He'd seen it. John Wildee stood next to her in front of their house, Dick's childhood home. His father's smug handsome look angered Dick. John Wildee looked like a redneck Jimmy Stewart. Dick dropped the shoebox, scattering pictures to all corners of the closet.

"Fuck 'em," he said, finishing the beer.

He threw the can on the floor and picked out Sharon's best dress. He was too drunk to care and stripped to his underwear and donned the dress. The zipper caught halfway up his back. The purple sequins were itchy on his ass and belly but he felt great. Dick managed a couple drops of beer from the empty can and wet the zipper track and pulled up a little higher. He stepped out of the closet and into the mirror.

He recognized the dress; it made several appearances in the photos he flipped through-graduations, their son's wedding and his father's funeral. Dick giggled at the sight of himself. His Laster Backhoe Company cap still on his head, his hair caught in the netting and bill cocked to the side. Dick would never admit it to himself, but he felt pretty. He locked eyes with the doughy man in the purple dress and smiled. Dick wanted to parade around town, wear the dress to Jackson and church. He couldn't help but twirl in front of the mirror.

Rex hacked and stretched on the quilt, watching Dick with a smugness only cats possess. Dick grinned at Rex and reached for the cat. Thinking he was about to undergo a hygienic maintenance, the cat jerked and fought Dick's grip but couldn't escape his strong grip. Dick held Rex up to eye level and peered at his face like he did the mirror. He inspected every wrinkle and

taut, dry patch on Rex's face, and every glob of earwax in his ears. Dick stared at the cat intensely, held its belly up to his ear and listened to its heart. It sounded like a tiny steel mill on overtime. Rex wheezed. Dick snorted with laughter.

"You ain't ugly, just old and funny looking."

Dick began to whistle Clementine and twirled around the room with the cat in his arms like a baby. He dipped Rex like a dance partner and kissed the animal on its loose forehead. He felt beautiful. Rex was beautiful too.

"You ready for this, Uggo?"

He held the cat with his arms straight out, Rex still struggling to escape. The animal yowled from the trauma with paws flailing frantically. With a quick turn, the two were flying around the tiny room. Dick's dress flared and rippled at the bottom and created a rippling effect. For the first time in years, he remembered his legs and feet.

Sharon smelled the beer immediately. After raising two children and a husband, her sense of smell was impeccable.

"Dick? Sweetie, where are you?"

The television was off, magazines were scattered and eleven beers sweated in a cardboard case. Sharon called for Dick several times and heard nothing. She wandered into the bedroom to find her husband in her best purple dress sleeping with her cat in his arms. The zipper was ripped and marred and spots of vomit stained its sleeves. They both snored and wheezed in time. She was too surprised to be angry. Anger would have been her first emotion, but the combination of her husband in her favorite and newly ruined dress sleeping peacefully next to the cat he hated shocked her into a fit of laughter.

"Last time I leave you home alone." She said as she dug through her closet and found her camera.