**The Cat Came Back**

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Michael’s throat felt tight and heavy, and he tried to swallow but couldn’t quite manage it. His eyes were wet with tears as his father lowered the cardboard box into the hole by the back fence.

His two younger sisters were crying and not trying to hide it, but Michael was eleven and he didn’t want to cry like a little kid. He kept his mouth tightly closed.

He still couldn’t stop a couple of drops from rolling down his cheeks.

“Goodbye, Bootsie,” Ashley said. “You were a good cat.”

Michael wasn’t sure about that, really. He had liked Bootsie, and the cat had been a part of the family, but he wasn’t sure he would have called Bootsie a good cat. Right up to the end, Bootsie had sometimes mistaken people’s legs for scratching posts; he had ruined expensive furniture, knocked glassware off shelves, and left dead squirrels and chipmunks on the front porch.

But he had also been a big, friendly cat, with a purr you could hear clear across the family room. He was always ready to curl up on your lap and be petted. His fur was soft and sleek, and stroking it felt wonderful. He was black, with white feet and a white patch on his face, and could look elegant and noble when he wanted to.

“That was one reason we originally named him after an emperor,” their mother had mentioned once, when Michael had commented on how regal Bootsie looked.

“You mean his name wasn’t always Bootsie?” Michael had asked, startled.

“No,” his mother had said, “we translated it from Latin to English when you were little, because you couldn’t pronounce Caligula. Caligula is Latin for Bootsie.”

“There was a Roman emperor called Bootsie?” Michael had asked.

His mother had nodded. “One of the very worst,” she told him. “And that was another reason we named him that — when he was a kitten he was the worst nuisance I ever saw. A real little monster.”

Michael could believe it — but he couldn’t remember it. Bootsie had been a full-grown cat by the time Michael was born.

And now he was dead.

It wasn’t all that surprising for a thirteen-year-old cat to die, but Bootsie hadn’t even been sick. He’d just slowed down enough that after years of trying, Brutus, the dog next door, had finally caught him.

Brutus was supposed to be kept chained up in the backyard, but he got loose fairly often, and terrorized all the cats in the vicinity.

The cats had good reason to be frightened. Michael swallowed again at the memory of finding poor Bootsie dead on the lawn, with the dog still standing over him.

Michael’s father straightened up and picked up the shovel.

For a moment they all stood, not moving, not saying anything. Then, with a sigh, their father started filling in the hole, and Michael and the girls shuffled away, drying their tears.

It was going to be strange, not having Bootsie around.

Well, Michael corrected himself, maybe it wouldn’t be that strange. After all, Bootsie had wandered off a few times.

But he had always come back after a few days, his tail held high and the tip waving back and forth.

This time he wouldn’t be coming back.

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Michael lay awake in bed until almost midnight that night staring at the ceiling. He was tired, but he couldn’t get to sleep. The wind was blowing hard, rustling the trees and groaning around the eaves, and he kept thinking he heard Bootsie out there, meowing to be let in.

At last, he fell asleep.

He slept late the next day — school wouldn’t start for another week, but the summer activities program had ended the previous Friday, so there was no reason to get up at any particular time.

He was still eating breakfast when the doorbell rang. His mother answered it, and talked quietly to whoever was there. Michael poked at his cereal, thinking about Bootsie, and paid no attention to anything else until he heard his name called. He looked up. His mother was standing in the doorway.

“What?” he asked.

“I said, have you seen the Marstons’ dog this morning?”

“No,” Michael said. “Why?”

“Mrs. Marston says he’s missing.” She turned away again.

Michael resisted the temptation to say, “Good.”

A moment later his mother closed the door and said, “When they got up this morning the doghouse out back was empty, but they just thought he’d gotten loose again.”

“The way he did when he killed Bootsie,” Michael said.

“Yes,” his mother answered. “And they thought he would come home again after a couple of hours, but he hasn’t turned up yet, and they’re getting worried.”

“I haven’t seen him,” Michael said. He turned back to his cereal, hoping that the dog was gone for good.

“Well, he’ll probably turn up soon,” his mother said to no one in particular. “I hope he doesn’t hurt any other cats.”

That last comment made Michael feel guilty about not wanting the dog to come home. He didn’t care about the stupid old dog, especially after what he did to Bootsie, but Michael didn’t want any other cats to be hurt.

He finished his breakfast and wandered outside, with no particular plans. He sort of hoped he would find Brutus somewhere, so he could stop worrying about the neighborhood cats, but he had no idea where to look. He peered up the street, and down, and didn’t see any dogs.

He noticed the spot on the lawn where Bootsie had died — the grass was a bit torn up. His throat tightened. He turned away and walked off, not really thinking about where he was going.

The next thing he knew he was in the back yard, walking toward Bootsie’s grave.

It was easy to see where the cat had been buried; Michael’s father had tried to get the grass back in place, but hadn’t quite managed it, and a lot of loose brown dirt had been left scattered around the site.

This morning, though, it seemed even messier than Michael remembered, and he went to take a closer look.

There was more of a hump than there should be. Michael remembered his father smoothing it all down, but now there was a big bulge in the lawn. And the sod was partly rolled back.

Something had been digging there.

Michael felt a hot anger boiling up inside him as he realized what must have happened. Brutus had got loose and had come over here to dig at poor Bootsie’s grave! Even after Bootsie was dead, that horrible dog wouldn’t leave him alone!

Michael was furious as he ran to the grave. He pulled up the strip of sod and tried to straighten it.

Then he looked down, and dropped the sod.

He stared for a moment, then ran back inside to get his mother.

She came to look; so did Mrs. Marston.

But it wasn’t until Michael’s father got home that night that anyone touched the grave again.

Michael’s mother had explained what happened, how Michael had found Brutus dead under the strip of sod.

“He must have been digging there, and the hole fell in on him,” she said, not really sounding as if she believed it.

Michael’s father looked puzzled. “I don’t see how that could kill him,” he said.

But he got the shovel, and everyone went out into the backyard to see.

Michael’s father lifted away the sod, then used the shovel to dig away the dirt on either side and uncover Brutus’ body. Then he reached down to pick up the dead dog.

He heaved, but the body didn’t come, and Michael’s father blinked in surprise. “Something’s holding him,” he said. “He must have got trapped somehow, and smothered.”

He let go of the dog and cleared away more earth. Michael heard cardboard tearing — the dog must have gotten down as far as the box Bootsie was buried in. He shuddered at the thought.

Michael’s father picked the dog up again, but something was dangling from its neck. Then his father lifted the dog higher, and everyone could see what had caught and held Brutus, what had killed him. Michael’s eyes widened with shock.

Bootsie’s dead body hung from the dog’s throat. The cat’s teeth were locked in Brutus’ neck, and the dog’s blood was smeared on Bootsie’s fur.

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