

SHORT STORIES

CRYSTAL BALL EYES

Vincent is silent and as combustible as the coal under the earth. He attracts trouble and orphans with the ease of metal to a magnet. Freaky gray eyes that look with disdain at the world and the entire foolish goings on in it - kind of like those paintings that seem as if the eyes are following you around the room and are always watching, always watching, that's Vincent. His coat is black, almost a charcoal blue and impossibly thick and shiny, misty morning dewdrops, even on the driest of days. Neighbors have told me they have found him watching outside their windows or inside their open doors. He is known to stow away in minivans and under strollers. Always watching and waiting. But Vincent is not all bad. As cats go, he's pretty good to have around. A life saver, actually.

The disdain that Vincent so obviously displays toward our emotional world was born of this ability to be the proverbial fly on the wall. Laissez-faire. Silently slinking in or out of the house at will and without any thought of letting anyone know, Vincent tours the neighborhood around our home with purpose, not the slow languishing sway of most cats. He gathers what he sees, and remembers. It doesn't appear that he does anything with all the joy and dirt and such that he sees, but that's not true. He steps in every once in a while.

Vincent the cat has a dog-like characteristic. When he needs something, he will bang up against you, demanding your full attention, then walk a few steps toward whatever it is he wants you to see. If you follow, he leads you on to his desires. Not following or persistent refusal to get it will result in a nasty nip of razor teeth on the finger closest to him -- "Do I have your full attention now?" he often seems to be saying. But I am getting better at reading him, I am a quick study and he has trained me well.

When Joan, the neighbor from two doors down, would come to visit, Vincent would immediately leave. I don't know why. Well, 'though I don't want to even think it, maybe I do know the reason, in the black, evil places of the mind that I don't ever want to go to. But if Joan brought her daughter, Megan, still in the carrying chair, with her, Vincent would react quite differently, standing sentry protectively between Joan and the baby, giving Joan an awfully hard time when she tried to touch the baby. Something deep, fearful and horribly unsettling inside of me tells me that Joan is not a good mother, not even a good person. She smells evil. But only Vincent knows for sure.

Emily, Joan's other daughter, four years old, "fell down the stairs," one night. She died. Joan claimed that she thought the little girl with the curly Q ebony hair and haunted eyes was asleep in her Growing Girl bed. "It was only the racket of my poor baby falling down the stairs that made me wake up and find her. I sensed something was wrong in my heart and I woke up." The racket? The nausea I still feel at not saving that child haunts me, in sleep, and in daytime nightmares too.

The day after Emily died, Joan came over, to supposedly borrow some aspirin. Joan had been hitting on me since well before her husband of six months, and father of both Emily and Megan, got the hell out of Dodge, but I knew to evade the endlessly conniving Jezebel Joan. She wasn't going to get

any sympathy love from me. Vincent knew better too and cleanly sliced Joan from ear to lip with one finely sharpened paw as Joan passed by the eye-level cabinet that Vincent was sunning on. It couldn't bring Emily back but Vincent had a message to send. He knew what Joan had done. The cops suspected, but only Vincent and Joan knew. In the months that followed, I saw how Joan's husband, while on his supervised visitations, went from dotting father to empty shell, hollow eyes daring to dart a look at something, before resuming their depths of desolation, so lost. I think the doubt in his mind drove him away. He tried to get custody of Megan too but the courts are stacked against a man.

Carolivia had been Emily's best friend. She lives between Joan, and Vincent and I, and was inseparable from Emily while Emily was alive. I think Carolivia knew Joan was evil too. One day Carolivia's mother tried to get her to go to Joan's for an hour while she ran some emergency errand. Joan kept trying to cajole Carolivia into coming with her, but Carolivia would have none of that. She threw a tantrum unseen before or since. She just would not go.

Reading on my porch, with Vincent perched on the bay window sill behind my shoulder, I heard the commotion. Vincent gave me a nudge to get up and as I walked toward the neighbors, I asked if I could help. I was determined that I would take Carolivia or I'd do the errand myself. That woman was not going anywhere near her. Carolivia abruptly stopped her screams, walked over to me and held her hands up to be picked up. I had never held Carolivia before. I had barely even talked to her.

"Mommy, I will stay with Vincent's Daddy, can you bring me back some booberry?" I nodded to her mother, both of us equally shocked. The transformation from flailing, wailing child to cuddly Hallmark-card child had taken all of one half of one second. Carolivia knew that I had Joan pegged. Joan just wilted and slinked away, her speed picking up as she moved further from us.

My new friend started coming over a lot. She expected Vincent and I to protect her, and Megan, from Joan. "Vincent, your daddy doesn't like her either. He won't let her hurt baby Megan like she did Emily, I know it."

The overheard one way conversation from Carolivia to Vincent chilled my soul. More unsettling deep inside of me. Vincent licked Carolivia's hand, looked up at me almost hidden behind the door frame and silently ordered me to do something about it. I didn't have a clue of what to do but I was scared. Scared for Megan, and scared of Joan, of what she might do.

I think Megan missed her sister. She became more and more restless and Joan became more and more frazzled. I could hear her screaming at the child once in a while. I could hear the child screaming more often. Vincent always heard it first. He would rise, hiss and arch his back, all hackles and spikes and spewing angst. Out he would go as I watched him cross our yard; Carolivia's, and then

turn the corner up Joan's driveway. Vincent's silent reproach each time he returned to our house burned a hole in me. Yesterday, he came back almost immediately. And he was running.

Vincent never ran. He moved quickly and with purpose, but he never, ever ran. He was way too cool. He didn't try the bump and lead this time. Vincent bit me, hard, pulling me toward the front steps, tail swishing and cutting through the air. I knew before my mind could process and I ran. I don't remember leaving the house. I don't remember anything, until I found myself at the window of the bathroom of Joan's house, which faced out into the backyard. I looked in, my heart pounding, violent unease in my stomach.

Megan was in the white porcelain tub, the water rising, and Joan was nowhere in sight. The steam was rising too. I out screamed Megan, for Joan, and the very surprised mother instantly popped into sight, turning from where she was leaning against the wall, just outside of the open bathroom door. She saw me, her vacant expression wavered, eyes rolled upward, then snapped back into this world and grabbed Megan from the tub, all soothes and murmurs, the concerned mother.

She had been caught, it was fake, and we both knew it. I knocked out the screen, vaulted through the window and found the phone, dialing 911. I trembled and my fingers followed suit. Joan screamed at me, "Stop, she's fine. It was an accident."

I didn't believe her. She had been leaning just outside the bathroom door, not four feet from her baby, and not responding to the screams, the steam or the rising water. "She's trying to kill Megan, as sure as she killed Emily," I muttered to Vincent, who had followed me through the bathroom window.

I took the baby from Joan, placed her on the hamper and wet slightly cool facecloths, resting them on the writhing baby. The ambulance, and the cops, arrived. Megan was still screaming of course; she had burns all over her tiny white back, hands and sides. Both officers talked to Joan as I leaned in stunned silence against a kitchen countertop, the E.M.T.'s feverishly assisting Megan. Vincent sat on his haunches, between my legs, and never moved. The ambulance rushed off with Joan and Megan and I sat down for a chat with a police officer.

I told my story, skipping the part about Vincent "telling" me that there was a problem. He is a smart cat though and I knew he would understand. The cop walked with me back to my house and I found the phone number for Megan's father. He was going to be the full time parent again, if Megan survived this.

As I'm drifting off watching TV, Vincent suddenly rises from my chest, he had been especially cuddly and happy with me all evening. He softly steps to the door and looks back at me. I hit the mute on the TV and then I hear what he had heard. A little knock on my door. A little knock. I rise, open the door and find Carolivia there. She is holding her mommy's hand and gazing up at me.

"Carolivia wanted to tell you something," her mom informs me. "She wouldn't call on the phone or wait until tomorrow."

"That's okay, do you want to come in?" To Carolivia more than her mother, I think.

Carolivia shakes her head no. I step out and kneel down on one knee. Carolivia moves close to me and I see one tear slip away from the puddles in her eyes as I wrap one arm around her. I feel her little open hand rest on my knee. Her forehead to my bent down cheek, Carolivia slips her other arm around my neck.

"Vincent was right. You saved Megan," she spoke softly

A sharp intake of breath. I feel such a chill. Goose bumps and the flip flops of my stomach all rush over me at once. "I think it was Vincent that saved her," I whisper back, my throat almost completely closed up now.

"No, he could see, but you heard. You saved Megan. Emily is happy now."

My tears join Carolivia's, and as I hug this most precious little girl, I see two tears splash on the porch, from her mother's eyes.

Vincent's swishy tail sweeps my side. He looks right at me as he settles on his haunches to watch us. I see, for the first time ever, no disdain in Vincent's freaky gray eyes.

SAVING BORU

On a cold and wet fall day in November, knowing it might be one of our last walks outdoors for the year and facing a weather induced quarantine to the indoors, we tread the well-worn path and pipe dream towards weight loss once more. Large, multi-colored oak leaves stuck to my shoes and the damp wind had the scent of chilly days hanging on its edges.

I was taking Vincent for a walk, even though most folks say cats don't "go for walks." But you have to know Vincent. Cat or not, there are no parameters too broad, for Vincent walks her own line. She likes to stroll along the neighborhood's busier streets with me, looking around and making sure all is well, with me and with the world. Vincent seems to worry that I don't exercise enough and is always demanding to take me for a walk. We weave the same old course, forwards or back, a big square around the main streets of our WestPark, Ohio neighborhood.

That day, at the spot where we usually walk right on past Lucille Avenue, Vincent made a left. She took a short burst of steps and vaulted onto the braces of a six - foot high fence. Such a serious privacy fence, on the corner lot. Vincent took a look and waited for me to do the same. I knew something was wrong. I could taste something foreboding in the air, and in Vincent's raised hackling back. I am tall, so seeing over the fortress wall was not too hard. I wished that day, for the first time in my life, to be a vertically challenged man.

The yard was a household's junkyard. Dirty old blankets, broken furniture, pieces from cars and lots of dried and lumpy mud covered the area from the

back porch to the back fence. The only green came from several large trees, used to hold up more garbage. Not a blade of grass anywhere - just hard packed earth and dried out muddy lanes. I didn't see any way to get into the yard, nor a reason to do so. But Vincent did.

Over the fence, silently leaped the blue- black shadow, almost disappearing in the garbage piled high. The long and so straight tail was the only antennae to her location. Leaping on top of a propped up gas tank, Vincent turned, looked back at me, sat back and then covered her nose with one curving paw. I couldn't smell it but Vincent was giving me fair warning. There were dead things back there.

I waited, knowing full well she would show me what needed to be seen, and sadly, I wasn't wrong. Laid full out on the ground was what was left of what must once have been a most magnificent animal. It was a huge, albeit soulless carcass of an Irish wolfhound. The hot rock that was my heart went from its usual resting place below my ribs to drop into my stomach and it lurched and sank among the new acid located there. What Vincent had found was a dead dog. Magnificent in life, horrid in death. His long harried coat, normally dark grey and white, looked more like matted black seaweed, discarded in a corner - wet, clotted, stuck together by dirt and who knows what, and crawling with bugs and flies.

Vincent went toward the dog, stepped through the mess like an Indian scout, a wind, stepping silently, disturbing nothing, until she reached the hound's side and called into his ear. That Vincent would approach a dog was, in and of itself, not surprising. Vincent loved dogs of all kinds and would often lay down beside a few of her favorites to catch a well deserved nap while they kept an eye on things. But not a dead one. That should have been my first inkling that maybe the great hound wasn't dead after all. I couldn't see any reaction to Vincent's approach but I moved over to the corner of the lot to get a better look. The hound must have heard me, for suddenly it raised its great shaggy head, looked at me looking at him, and then flopped back down hard, not a drop of strength left. My heart leapt in fright, from my stomach to the top of my skull, then back down again.

The hound may not have had any strength in its body but in a sliver of recognition within my fright, I had seen the hurt in its great big sorrowful black eyes. That dog had been abused, often and intentionally. Vincent whispered once more, into the hound's ear. The ear twitched once and the wasted hound seemed to relax. But its eyes did not open again. I feared it was gone, but now that I was closer, I was able to see an occasional, oh-so-faint and highly irregular rise in the Wolfhound's chest. I also saw the look of anger, hopelessness and despair in Vincent eyes too.

I leaned against the fence and Vincent hopped back up onto the beam, so we could consult. What to do? I knew of the Irish Wolfhound Rescue group that would take hounds and find them a good home. It was usually meant for owners who could no longer care for a hound and called for help. This was far

different. Calling the APL might help, I didn't know much about them. But calling the cops was certainly in order. So I did. And I waited, speaking softly to the grand dog as Vincent rubbed her furry black face across the dogs muzzle repeatedly, encouraging with the thought that help was on the way.

I pulled a beef jerky out of my pocket, unpeeled it and held it out. Vincent came and got it, then brought it over to the hound and waited. Achingly slow, the hound caught scent of it, then raised its head and opened its mouth, accepting the gift from my cat. The pain seemed more than the poor hound - or I, could bear.

A squad car came by soon enough and I waved the officer over. He took one look and made a call himself. Westpark is the last great neighborhood in Cleveland and the Residency Rule is in force here. City government employees must live in the city. A lot of cops lived in Westpark and, via the radio traffic, a lot of cops heard what was going on in their neighborhood. Soon there were all kinds of people tripping over themselves to find a way into the yard. No way had been built, except for from the house. Vincent and I stayed out of the way. I was learning to watch just like my cat.

I liked these cops, my neighbors, they didn't mess around. When no one answered the front door, they took it down. It only took four or five seconds for them to all come back out, holding anything they could find over their noses and quickly shutting the door to keep something inside. There were more dead things in there, I feared. More calls, more arrivals, and the cops started talking to the neighbors too.

Somehow, no one knew that this abomination existed, right next door. Soon technicians in white protective suits, like poncho pantsuits with oxygen, started making forays into the house, removing all kinds of dogs - only dogs. Almost all seemed alive, none as bad as the hound tossed into the backyard graveyard. All wore muzzles and were nearly as gaunt as the hound. Hate and distrust radiated from their eyes but the gentle touch, warmth and caring of the technicians did seem to help, at least a little. Then they started removing the dead ones. I had to turn away.

Light bulb flashes turned the fading sun into daylight again and the news stations got a hold of the story. The news and the police photographers competed to document all that I wished I could not see.

After an hour or so, the house was cleared of animals enough to allow passage into the backyard. Vincent nudged me, to take a look, as the back door swung open. Technician #1 went directly to where we were standing, with me leaning on the other side of the fence and Vincent overseeing both me and the hound. The tech called for help but his words were drowned out by other calls from the yard. "I've got one over here," or "there's another one over here." Over and over. The chills that ran through me would not have been lessened by the hottest summer day, let alone this soggy precursor to the bitter cold on the way.

Dead compatriots in the yard. I gagged. The smell of dead bodies didn't reach me, the overwhelming release of massive amounts of lime did. The intent must have been for the lime to eat all the evidence and kill the decaying smell. There was no grass in the graveyard.

But then the two techs oh-so-tenderly hoisted the hound up, looked toward the house and the long carry. The arrival of Fire Station No. 1, and three axes, gave the technicians a much closer exit. These guys were seriously pissed now. I was just sick. I held Vincent in my arms, stroking her and feeling the anger

coursing through her too.

The techs carried the hound to a waiting SUV and laid him gently on a few blankets arranged into a bed. The poor creature still didn't open its eyes and I knew it couldn't last too much longer. A stream of vehicles headed for the nearby Warren Village Animal Hospital, and Vincent and I headed there ourselves too, once we told the police of our very brief involvement. We left the most silent bedlam I had ever seen.

The animal hospital was not much better but it smelled clean, a scent I was wondering if I would ever experience again. I needed a mental and emotional shower. Dogs were lying and sitting everywhere, but not a bark was heard. I saw lots of trembling though. People were shaking my hand and nodding as Vincent made his rounds. I just numbly looked around at the eerily silent chaos.

I was told volunteers had been arriving at the hospital since the first reports were aired on Live at Five News and every one of them was needed. When the hound went into the back for surgery, I saw Vincent slip out an open door, stop to nod to me, and head for home. I put on a pair of gloves, doing whatever I was told. Mostly it involved holding, stroking and trying to fuse love back into these hollow lives as doctors and assistants looked them over. Realistically though, after love, food and water were the medicine they needed most.

After a few hours, I woke up a friend at the hound rescue group with a call and gave him a heads up. He said he'd take care of it. Over the next few weeks, we moved dogs from critical to just plain lonely and their health changed tremendously in a very short time. Amazing resilience. Over a two dozen dead dogs had been found in and around the house on Lucille, four more died that week. But thirteen didn't. Vincent had gotten to them in time.

The owner was eventually found, in Death Valley, of all places, where he had run after getting a heads up by the reports on the radio. He ran, the police chased, and hell hath no fury like a neighborhood embarrassed by its own daze. The neighborhood watch hunted down every clue and forced their findings and ideas on anyone who would listen. The man was caught, tried and convicted, - to three years in jail. He had no explanation. All thirteen dogs found a new home, and love.

Now, two years after that fall walk, Boru, the hound, is nuzzling me, a leash in its mouth. Comparatively tiny Vincent is not jealous, only watching out for the dog that is a good seven feet tall when standing on its hind legs, thick and

strong. Boru is healthy, affectionate. Seems to be happy, and barks once in a while too. Boru thinks I don't get enough exercise either. That darn cat has been talking in his ear again.
