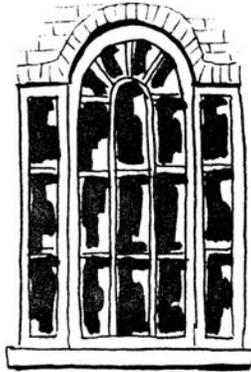


2004 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Starstone Winner

CAT WOMAN

By Julie J. Nichols



IT'S CHRISTMAS, OR WILL BE NEXT WEEK, but I've been resenting it since Thanksgiving. This winter is bitterly cold already and gray, dull-metal silver with the polluted inversion that plagues this valley in December and January so that light is dim and breathing measurably difficult. Logan, our two-year-old, suffers from asthma; already we're spending nights holding him upright after he's been dosed with his prescriptions just so he can breathe. It's the worst part of winter, come earlier than usual this season, and I resent it. I'm a stickler for fairness. I don't like to be barred from tranquility by such ephemera as light or breath.

So when the alarm rings at 6:00 a.m. and NPR pumps out some esoteric harpsichord, I want to stay in bed, curled up and blank to the hard weather. "Couperin's *Barricades Mysterieuses*," they announce cheerfully. "Winter storm warning for tonight. Stay home if you can!" I'd like to pretend I don't have to get Logan up and ready for daycare as usual, don't have to be in a high school computer classroom calm and detached at eight to once again monitor honors English students—integrating cutting-edge technology and language learning in a postmodern, rational way.

Of course I do get up. But I'm bothered.

SOMETHING happened yesterday," I tell Geoff in the shower. He's scrubbing my back. It's a good time to confess.

I tell him about the face I saw in the monitor yesterday when Peter Hollister raised his hand for help. Peter wants to know everything. He always needs help.

"I tried to log on, and nothing happened, Mrs. Dumont," he said. I typed in the generic login and password and saw on the screen a snarling face, real as a video clip, *seeing me*, her eyes—definitely a woman's eyes—meeting mine, her dirty, nail-bitten hands clenched close to her terrible bared teeth.

Peter said, "Thanks, Mrs. Dumont!" He clicked on a link and went right to work. Saved by a password. Didn't seem to

have seen what I saw.

"Thought you saw," Geoff says. He turns me to face him so he can soap my breasts. "You're hallucinating. Too many nights up with Logan. Or"—this is why I love Geoffrey, his lawyer instincts advocating for me—"what was it?"

There it is again, the snarling face in front of my eyes. I lean against the wall of the shower, close my eyes. "I am exhausted," I admit. "Log's meds don't work." I'm thinking. Slowly. "Doc said give it 72 hours to kick in, but four days? Don't

they know anything about pediatric asthma?" The loofah on my arms and neck comforts, the warm water hypnotizes me kindly. But no. Right now, perplexity before pleasure. I say, "Something was going on with that computer." I'm an expert in computers. This was *not* about Logan.

"Want me to give Log a blessing?"

A blessing? I shake my wet head to clear it. "You think that would help?" Geoffrey knows I doubt. Among many other things, I doubt I'd have chosen this religion he and I were born into. I'm not into mysteries. But Mormonism is, I've pointed out repeatedly, not only one of the largest and fastest-growing Christian sects in America, maybe the world, but also a mystery cult. Witness the book from the bowels of a mountain, the visionary teenaged prophet, the temples where the faithful do work for the dead—new names, cleansings, redemption. Blessings! It's all mystery.

I push away Geoff's hands now teasing my nether regions. Fine hands. Blessing hands. Like all good Mormon parents, his taught him to take them for granted—blessings *and* mysteries. Eva, his mother, does genealogy these days as if there were some virtue in it that would keep her alive forever. Stereotypically spry, still shoveling her own walks in the winter, golfing in the summer, she's gone to Canada or France to look at gravestones every autumn for the past ten years. As she was doing the temple ceremony in proxy for one of her own dead ancestors, long-ago Europeans whose sturdy (if asthmatic) classical genes my boy carries, she says she nearly fell asleep at one point when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She looked around, and *no one was there*.

Well, it could have been one of the helpers. That's what they're supposed to do, help you through—remind you of the

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words you forget. But she says it happened again. Every time she nodded off, every time she looked, no one was there. Maybe it's inevitable that if you're standing in for a dead person, you expect strange happenings, unexplainable details. Mysteries. But right here, right now—blessings? Faces in the computer? "I can't think about it," I say, pushing out of the shower. "Really, hon." But before I can grab the towel, Geoff's hand rests on the small of my back. He is rarely in the kind of hurry I always am.

"Tell me about the computer thing," he says, pulling my head to his chest. "Mom says nothing's so important a little attention can't help."

I yield. "Just for a minute," I say into his collarbone.

A young woman on the edge.

She stands, hissing, just outside a group of young women who should have been her peers. Something has been wrong with her from the beginning.

All her life she's watched those other young women marry, have children, live smooth unbroken lives. Her brain's so jagged. . . .
The secret key was lost.

"Sure," he says, climbing out of the shower, "of course." He knows I have to get to work. He wraps the bath sheet around both of us, sheltering.

And the furious face from the computer appears. I know—how do I know this?—she hates everybody. Including me. Including Geoffrey. Thoroughly. "Whoa," I say.

"Just tell me," he says. It won't switch off anyway.

THE WOMAN'S STORY comes at me in a series of insistent images, the background sound of the shower still running a soft white noise in my awareness, Geoff's hands a soothing presence. Now the snarling face is covered with knotted hair. Now it bends downward, the hands, with extraordinarily long fingernails, covering it. The entire image seems vivid red as if backlit by a violent video game. I'm meant to make something of this, I know. I *have* to pay attention. Geoff holds me while it happens.

The story plays out like some kind of video cartoon, except that it's a real, eighteenth-century European woman in there, not a jerky-limbed android hybrid. First a little girl runs wild, screaming. Her life is bound up with the lives of women, caregivers who suffer her. That's the word that flashes almost subliminally, like an Internet pop-up: *suffer*. An older woman with a gray braid and a stout, coarsely bloused bosom feeds her and holds her, much more kindly than any cartoon I've seen in the last five years. Another (the older one's daughter?) stays just out of reach of the child's screaming, scratching fingernails.

Now (a flash of graphics), a young woman on the edge. I understand this word "edge" to be both literal and metaphorical, both emotional and physical. She stands, hissing, just outside a group of young women who should have been her peers. Something is seriously wrong with her, has been wrong from the beginning. She can't speak. She only spits and

shrieks. But the old woman and the young one have suffered her to live, have made sure she stays alive, clean and fed, though she pushes at them always and sometimes rakes their skin.

The other young women call her "cat woman." But it's pre-superhero, pre-Michelle Pfeiffer. I hear nothing—what comes at me is all visual—but I see she hisses and scratches, and knots her hair with her clawing fingers. I know she dies like that; she never gets better. "I'm so sorry," I mumble into Geoffrey's chest.

"What?" he asks.

"All her life," I say, in a sort of trance, "she's watched those other young women marry, have children, live smooth un-

broken lives. Her brain's so jagged . . . she can't—oh, wait."

Unbelievably (another flash of color), and only by the grace of her caretakers, she grows to old age, sitting in corners, taken care of by other women, the daughters and granddaughters of her original woman-family. These younger women she treats miserably. At her death—I realize I know—many of the young women of her town are relieved. She's been a burden to them even if they haven't had to wash her and feed her. They've seen her and said to themselves, "We could have been like her." She's known this too, only in converse terms. All she ever desired in all her life was to be like them. Normal. Womanly. Able to speak what she feels, able to function properly, all parts of her body, all parts of her brain. But the secret key was lost. What she wanted could never be hers.

Finally I know she's died, unhealed, unloving, unfulfilled. I'm there. It may be a dream, but I am connected somehow to this visual across time and space, and I'm tense with sorrow and anger.

S UDDENLY GEOFF IS moving away from me, standing me upright, gathering his robe around himself, urgent, insistent: "Listen! It's Logan—you'd better wake up. Hurry!" He throws me a wrap. Together we follow the sounds of the wheezing, dash to the room where Logan is coughing, barely getting in enough air to make the next outbreath, panicked, jerking, unable to make a sound. We throw on sweats and jackets, bundle him in his coverlet, and run.

In the next four hours, we will spin over frozen streets to the hospital emergency room. We will arrange for a substitute to take my place at school, we will denounce the doctor whose prescriptions have been so ineffective. We will call Eva for support, catching her on her cell phone just as she is in the parking lot of the Jordan River temple. Her second home.

“Do you think I can do anything right there, right now? I’m just about to do the work for this new name I found on the last trip to France. My namesake! An Eva! What if I come as soon as I’m done? Less than two hours, and I’ll be there.”

I protest, but Geoffrey suggests that she’s right, there’s probably little she could do here immediately. She might as well do the work she loves, praying for her grandson as she stands in for her great-great-great-ancestress So we pour the meager efforts of our hearts over our little boy as he pants more and then less convulsively, clings to our hands, scratching in terror if we let go for a moment. Doctors come, observe, administer, depart. At one point, Geoff puts his hands on Logan’s head and murmurs ritual words.

When Eva arrives, she holds us all in her embrace. “I put his name on the prayer roll,” she assures us. “I did the work for, let’s see . . . Eva Serena Reynard, 1742, somewhere in Boulogne. And you know? I felt peaceful. He’ll be all right.”

Shortly after, nurses inject our boy with something that finally quiets his attack. We get a new prescription which maybe this time will work. Logan says, wanly, “Mommy—home?” and that’s where we all go.

Now it is snowing hard. Such weather often pushes out the inversion, and though visibility is poor to drive, I’m glad of the snow, the veil of white fanning away the infernal gloom. At home, I hold Logan in the rocker by the window. Geoff turns the humidifier’s spray toward us as we look out into the snow. Briefly, so that I almost don’t see it, a clear, untwisted face appears in the window, a hand raises. I am almost sure I see it: the fingernails on the hands cut, the hair smooth. *Release* flashes behind my eyes—not a command but a noun—and *grateful*. Breathing slow and deep, as if I could inspire my boy’s lungs to work properly on their own, I rub his back. Geoff puts one hand on top of mine, with the other offers Logan something warm to drink from the kitchen. “Sank you, Daddy,” he says, and sleeps within minutes. I’m faint with gratitude. Help from anywhere, I’m thankful.



AFTER

My grief is a handful of sand, father.
I hold you cupped while the wave
sucks back. Liquid ropes
lash my ankles. My feet have become
invisible in the soft white face
of the beach.

—HELEN W. MALLON

Shortly we tuck Logan back into bed, his head propped up on two pillows. Hand in hand, we return to the living room to send Eva home. I try to tell her about the cat woman and about what I saw just now, in the storm. I know I sound inarticulate and exhausted. “Ah,” she says, though, nodding. Smiling. “It’s so good our boy is fine.”

When she has left, we head back to our own room and lie close to each other, warming ourselves under the star quilt, luxuriating in the possibility of a few hours’ rest. “Mysterious,” he says once. We lie quietly for a time. Then we turn toward each other, letting things work themselves out through the skin and tongue, wordless, unexplainable, all puzzlement and love. ☺

THE 2007 BROOKIE & D.K. BROWN FICTION CONTEST

THE SUNSTONE EDUCATION FOUNDATION invites writers to enter its annual fiction contest, which is made possible by a grant from the Brookie and D. K. Brown family. All entries must relate to adult Latter-day Saint experience, theology, or worldview. All varieties of form are welcome. Stories, sans author identification, will be judged by noted Mormon authors and professors of literature. Winners will be announced in SUNSTONE and on the Foundation’s website, WWW.SUNSTONEONLINE.COM; winners only will be notified by mail.

After the announcement, all other entrants will be free to submit their stories elsewhere. Winning stories will be published in SUNSTONE magazine.

PRIZES will be awarded in two categories: short-short story—fewer than 1,500 words; short story—fewer than 6,000 words. Prize money varies (up to \$400 each) depending on the number of winners announced.

RULES: 1. Up to three entries may be submitted by any one author. Five copies of each entry must be delivered (or postmarked) to SUNSTONE by **30 JUNE 2007**. Entries will not be returned. A \$5 fee must accompany each entry. No email submissions will be accepted.

2. Each story must be typed, double-spaced, on one side of white paper and be stapled in the upper left corner. The author’s name must not appear on any page of the manuscript.

3. Each entry must be accompanied by a cover letter that states the story’s title and the author’s name, address, telephone number, and email (if available). This cover letter must be signed by the author and attest that the entry is her or his own work, that it has not been previously published, that it is not being considered for publication elsewhere, and that it will not be submitted to other publishers until after the contest. If the entry wins, SUNSTONE magazine has one-time, first-publication rights. Cover letters must also grant permission for the manuscript to be filed in the SUNSTONE Collection at the Marriott Library of the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. The author retains all literary rights. SUNSTONE discourages the use of pseudonyms; if used, the author must identify the real and pen names and the reasons for writing under the pseudonym.

Failure to comply with rules will result in disqualification.