

Old Jake

Jake Osborn liked cats. No matter the kind, if they was homeless, Old Jake would take 'em in. How he kept track of 'em all was, in itself a mystry. He said cats was older'n man hisself—they was sacred and should be “held in high esteem,” whatever that means.

He lived in a ramshackle old house in the woods down by Cranberry Crick. Some said the house was haunted; course, myself, I don't hold with sech things.

Jake never talked about hisself much, which set folks to wondrin'. They called 'im, “pee-kyoolyer,” not just cuz of the cats, but cuz he was— diffrunt. He allus wore a striped vest and a jacket even to go to the grocery. And he had a way of talkin' most couldn't understand, high-falutin' words, you know. You could find 'im at the library three, four days a week. Miss Agatha, the librarian, said he was a very intelligent man and folks just didn't understand 'im. I think maybe she was sweet on 'im.

But Avery Hinson down at the feed store, now—he took a strong dislike to 'im. He said those blamed cats should be done away with cuz they was allus killin' the birds and small animals. When Jake and Avery crossed paths, they allus had words.

Us kids was told to keep away from Jake because he was strange. Folks're always fearful of what they don't understand, doncha know. But we found out Jake could fix most anythin'. Kids took to bringin' their broke toys and hurt animals to 'im and he'd fix 'em up good as new. Worked a kinda magic on 'em, you know.

Well, one night, Binky Norton and me and John boy Mellins snuck over to Jake's house and hid in the woods so's maybe we could see how he worked his magic. Couldn't see nothin' from where we wuz so we snuck up right under the window. We could hear old Jake talkin' but none of us wuz tall enough ta see in the winda so Binky sez,

“Hoist me up so's I can see.” John boy and me cupped hands and Binky climbed on and peeked in the window. He said all them cats was sittin' around in a circle like they was under a spell or somethin'. Old Jake sat there readin' to 'em by candlelight. Didja ever hear of sech a thing? And they was listenin' like he was a schoolmarm.

John boy's hands was hurtin' from Binky's boot pressin' on 'im so he let go. Binky come crashin' down on the ground. Jake opened the door and hollered,

“Who's out there?” We took off runnin' like the devil hisself was after us. Never did find out anythin'.

It was about five years ago come Sunday—nice sunny day it was, I recollect—like the Lord's Day oughta be. Church let out and folks was spillin' out in the street when all of a sudden they started buzzin' like bees round a fertile queen. They seen a big, black plume of smoke risin' 'bove the trees down by the crick.

Somebody yelled, “FIRE.” Percy Smithins took the sledgehammer and hammered that fire gong for all he was worth. Pretty soon the truck come tearin' down the street, the bell clangin' like fury, the men hangin' to the sides fer dear life.

Next day the whole town smelled like my granddaddy's smokehouse. The smell and the smoke hung over Beaufort like a bedeviled cloud, all black and sooty-like. Word got round old Jake's house'd burned to a cinder. The fire chief said it looked suspicious. Warn't no sign of Jake or them cats, not even a whisker. Avery Hinson didn't seem too unhappy they was gone.

When the fire cooled down they saw a sight you wouldn't believe. Sittin' smack in the middle of them ashes was the biggest, blackest cat they'd ever seen. It stared at 'em with eyes like hot coals. Then it let out a howl that raised the hair right offn their heads. Folks was sayin' it was Jake's ghost come back to put a curse on his killer. Course, myself, I don't hold with sech things. None-the-less, every year on that very same day, a big old black cat sits right on the spot where Jake's house used to be, a howlin' to beat all and a black cloud covers the whole town.

Funny thing—ain't nobody seen Miss Agatha since the night of the fire.

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