

## Strawberries

The grass wasn't greener on the other side of the fence. In fact, on the contrary, it was the epitome of bereavement. It was yellow, and mostly dead. I felt bad for my neighbor, because I think that he really did work industriously to try to help it live. I would often see him out there, on his knees, examining, fertilizing, weeding, spraying. Any known method for such crisis- he tried it all. And it must be divulged, however remain undisclosed- that on the occasional night he even endeavored to sing the sod a lullaby. But nothing succeeded.

*My* grass on the other hand, *was* green. My *neighbor* could say 'the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence' and be correct. Because, well, it was. For some odd reason, my grass, was always green. And I do say, a quaint affair, due to the elementary fact that nothing was really done on my behalf to help it live. I only took to mowing it once in a while, to keep on the facade, and that was pretty much it.

Aside from this, I had a lot going for me. At least in the realm of all things material: I had a job that made me a lot of money, an expensive car, a big house, good looks, good teeth, good general health. Nothing to complain about, really. It all went pretty smoothly. Until...

Indeed, it's reckoned to be the essential of any common tale- it appertains to all that operates rightly- the famous *Until...*

"My name is Goch," he said as he stood on my doorstep, "And I know you." He looked at me, with a look that I didn't like. "I know you, Pensky," he said.

I looked around nervously, to see if anyone was witnessing this.

"What do you want?" I asked quietly, urgently, still dispensing anxious glances to the sides. "I can't be seen talking to a cat," I said.

"I think you may have bigger things to worry about soon," the cat named Goch said.

"What do you want?" It was awfully strange talking to a cat like that, and it was all the more bizarre that the cat, talked back.

He was a black cat, Goch, with yellow eyes; an amalgamation of the genuine kitty-cat aloofness, cavaliness and prissiness- everything that is typically feline- and a stare that would make you feel at unease, to say the least. Plainly, a *bête noire*, no pun intended.

“It might take a while,” Goch asserted, “are you sure you want to do this on your doorstep?”

“Do what? What are you talking about?”

“There is some thing I need to tell you, Pensky,” Goch said.

“How do you know my name?” I burst, aggravated.

“Sure you want to stay here? Because it won’t bother *me* any.”

Annoyed, I uttered, “Just get in.” And reluctantly, I let him into my house. He walked into the living room and, assertively, he sat down staring, waiting. And me, I just stood there and looked at him, thinking, *What is this all about?* I didn’t like it. It was, uncanny.

And between trying to sort through the questions that plagued my mind, tend to logic, and the attempts to come up with the odds of all this happening, and the whole lot of silence that sat heavy in the air I started developing a sense of urgency. This was a very bad situation.

Goch asked, “Aren’t you going to offer me water, Pensky?”

“Stop saying my name like that,” I exclaimed nervously, and mechanically, I went to the kitchen. Got him water.

Then he pounced onto my olive-green leather couch, and while my more immediate fear ignored the cringing (leather and claws never go well together), he sat on it complacently, and licked his tail as if there was nothing else besides him in the whole world. Then he looked at me and said, “You better sit down, Pensky.”

“What is this?”

“Sit,” he ordered.

I sat.

“I am not going to beat around the bush,” he said, “I want your life, Pensky.”

It took me a moment to assimilate that statement, and while my thoughts were processed, the grandfather clock in the living room sliced the silence into steady drops, indeed, making it all the more stark.

Click

Click

Click

Click.

Then, well, I laughed. Because one had to admit, on the surface it all seemed quite whimsical. But, in the back of my mind, I had different thoughts. And those back-of-the-mind cerebrations made my stomach hurt. Fear clenched my throat.

“Get out of my house, Goch,” assertively, I demanded.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

I stood up. “Get out.”

It was absurd, improbable, implausible, and yet, that ball of fear started growing bigger in the bottom of my stomach. I was made enraged; a feline, was ordering me around, and I couldn’t let that transpire. And so, I was adamant on convincing myself, and puss, that I was in control of the situation.

“Close the door,” he said, “and sit.” His voice was dark.

I didn’t like cats. Never did. Especially the black ones. And now there was Goch sitting in my living room, inflicting terror, holding me sway.

“You better get out now. I don’t want to say it again,” feebly, I tried to ascertain some logic. That was my final attempt.

And then came:

“I know about that day, in the Spring of ‘93,” Goch said.

I closed the door. I sat down.

That day. In the Spring of ‘93. All the blood left my face. My mouth went dry. The Spring of ‘93. “What do you want?” eventually, I let out faintly.

And Goch, he said, “I told you what I want. I want your life.”

Here comes hell.

“What do you mean?” I finally managed to say.

“You know what I mean.” The cat smiled, and surely, a smiling cat is a consternating sight. “Your life, your everything. Your job, your house, your car, your money. I want your life, Pensky.”

“And what am *I* going to do?”

“You are going to work in the strawberry fields.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Instead of me.”

“And why would I do that?” I demanded, horror clambering up my spine as hope was finally- entirely- evicted.

“Because I know what I know. And you know that I know what I know.”

That day. In the Spring of ‘93.

Oh, no.

“Is this a joke?” I whispered.

“No.”

The cat, he began licking his fur nonchalantly.

*What is this?*

“I am not going to work for you.” I was almost in tears, because I knew that I would.

“You are not going to work for *me*, Pensky,” he emphasized the ‘me’ part.

He grinned again.

“So who am I going to work for then?”

“For the devil,” he said simply, “And that is too bad for you. Because I know how much you hate strawberries.”

“All because of that incident in your childhood, when you were ill and your mother fed you strawberries with cream. You couldn’t stand them ever since.”

I wasn’t sure whether it was really happening.

“You are going to do my job,” Goch continued.

“How do you know all these things?!” I choked, surrendering to panic. But Goch did not provide explanations, just proceeded with his itinerary, “I made a deal with the devil. A long time ago,” he said, “and the strawberry fields-” he added, “were a part of the deal. But now you are going to work instead of me.”

If he didn't know what he knew. About that day.

That day.

But he did.

“There is going to be a white bus waiting for you every night outside your door, Pensky.

It is going to be vacant, and it won't have a driver.”

“This will end,” I affirmed.

“Not as long as I live,” the cat Goch said, obviously- gallingly- amused, “And I have 5 more souls left.”

I must have had a blank stare on my face, because then he explained. “I blew a few off, on some stupid bet in Las Vegas.”

There was John Lennon singing about strawberry fields in the background, at the strawberry fields, everyday, all day long. Forever.

If it wasn't for that day in the Spring of '93. If it wasn't for that day...