

**Brent Taylor**

## **All Cats Are Gray**

She hadn't heard from him since the divorce, over six years ago, but when he called, it sounded important. She knew he was remarried, had seen on Facebook that he had a little girl almost two years old. Her boy was four, and she was recently engaged to a man she had been seeing for two years. Her son was at his father's that night, her fiancé out of town on business, so she agreed to see him. It was after work on a rainy Wednesday night, but she drove across town to meet him at a sushi place where they used to go when they were together. He was there waiting on her when she arrived, a glass of water in front of him. She immediately knew what it was about.

The sushi place was a chain, *The McDonald's of Sushi*, they used to joke, but it was always a lively fun place. A good place to drink. There was a creek that ran alongside the shopping center where the restaurant was located, and there used to be at least two dozen stray cats that lived there. They would always save part of their sushi and leave it for the cats. It had been ritual.

They hugged, a little awkwardly, and she sat down.

He looked good, dressed in a jacket and tie, and she wished she had changed out of her scrubs. The waiter came, and she asked for water as well.

She looked at his.

"How long?" she said.

"Two years in December."

"That's great," she told him.

"And you?" he asked. "You're still —"

"I just got five years . . . I was pregnant with Adam when it finally stuck."

He smiled, looked her briefly in the eye.

"What?" she said.

"You were right."

She laughed, couldn't help herself. He shrugged.

"Right?" she asked finally.

"There's life after," he said. "A lot of it. Almost too much sometimes, but y'know . . . there's ways to deal with that too."

"Well good," she said. "I'm glad you've come through it."

The waiter came and they ordered. They sat silently for a little

while, then he looked away. When he looked back, he said: “So I guess you know why I asked you here . . .”

“You’re on Nine?”

He nodded, smiled.

“Saki bomb! Saki bomb!” Across the room was a table of college kids, chanting. They had ordered beers and sakis to drop in them like boilermakers. It was the house drink, and the chant was a thing they did. The waiters would start it when they brought it to the table. The staff and the table joined in, then the rest of the restaurant.

“Saki bomb! Saki Bomb!”

When the kids had downed their drinks and the chanting had died away, they looked at each other. “I forgot about this place,” he laughed.

She picked up her water, but there was only ice left in the glass.

“I heard you had finished school,” he said. “That you were nursing. That’s great.”

“Yeah, the last three years. You caught me on my normal work-week rotation. A week later, we would have had to meet at Waffle House at four in the morning. I’m sorry I didn’t have time to change, I’m a mess.”

“No,” he said. “You look good.”

She laughed.

“What?”

“I feel gross and tired.”

“Well, if that’s the case, you’re wearing it well. You’ve let your hair grow some, I like it.” She was also her natural blonde again finally, wondered briefly if he remembered that it was her true hair color.

He picked up his water, but it had been empty longer than hers.

The waiter came by, filled the glasses. As soon as he was gone, they both took sips. She wished he would just get it over with. She knew him well enough to know that of all the ways he had been wrong, he still had no clue about the one that mattered. Yes, the nights she drove, drunk herself, around to his friends’ houses looking for him; the emails and text messages she found from the other women; these things were insulting, embarrassing — but they were not what kept her lying awake staring at the ceiling.

“And you? What are you doing for work?”

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“I’m doing some consulting,” he said. “Working with a non-profit, actually.”

“Well that sounds great.”

“I like it. It feels right, y’know?”

The food came. She put her wasabi in the little dish on her plate, poured soy sauce over it, stirred it up. After a minute, she waved to the waiter, asked him for more of the wasabi.

“You still love spicy,” he said.

“I’m a sucker for the pain.”

He laughed, but hesitantly like he wasn’t sure he should.

“I remember,” he said. “You told me the first time we quit, you said: *We’ll still have loud music . . . spicy food . . . and sex . . .*”

“Yes,” she smiled. “And we lasted about five days.”

“And the whole time, we stayed in bed. You were on break from school, I’d quit my job. It would have been easy if we could have just stayed there.”

He looked at her, but she didn’t look up.

They managed some more small talk as they worked their way through half their plates, then waited quietly as the server went for boxes. The whole time she was braced, waiting. There was more silence, and he smiled. “So, after a searching and fearless moral inventory, I would like to try and make direct amends.”

“It’s not necessary,” she said, a little too quickly. “Really. I mean, I know it’s part of the process, but we’re okay. We’re past it. We got married, at what? — 24 and 27? We were kids. I’m surprised we made it eight years. I mean, we must have loved each other — to not let it go for that long.”

The waiter came with the boxes. He laid the check in the middle of the table. She reached for it, but he already had his wallet out. He pulled out a card, put it on the book.

“I’d like to think that we did,” he said. “And I just wanted to say it: I’m sorry.”

She smiled, cocked her head, a sort of half-shrug.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “That it didn’t work out . . . That I became so mean. I’m sorry about the cheating, and —”

He paused.

“It’s fine, really,” she said. “Thank you.”

She knew that he meant it. There were tears in his eyes. She was glad for him too, but at this point in the day, in the year, in her life, she wasn’t sure she could feel it the way he did. She wasn’t sure she wanted any more catharsis or closure than she already had.

“Thank you,” she said again. “And I’m sorry . . . I could have been better too.”

“Look,” he said. “I’m not here to dig up the dead. And if I am, I’m sorry for that too. But I — I needed to tell you.”

“I appreciate it.”

“And the baby,” he said, finally. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you when you lost the baby. I know that was the thing that — I know I should have been there at that point, and I wasn’t.”

She nodded. This she hadn’t expected.

“I know you felt it too,” she said, but her voice sounded small, flat.

He paid the bill, and they left the restaurant.

Outside, it was already dark. It was November, wet and rainy, but unseasonably warm. They both carried their jackets. He walked her to her car, even though there didn’t seem anything more to say.

“We forgot our leftovers,” she told him.

“Yeah. Hey, what happened to the cats?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Someone probably called animal control.”

“Or maybe they’re holed up because it’s been raining so much.”

She nodded.

That was when she remembered a Christmas Eve when they were first together that they had come here. He was Catholic, and she had known that he had gone to mass every year on Christmas, but that year he had skipped it to be with her. She was not religious and never understood his faith. She was always at the same time jealous of it and condescending to it. They had been happy leaving the restaurant that Christmas Eve: full, they had been drinking saki and beer, and it was snowing. Snowing lightly, maybe half an inch of coverage, but still — she had now lived in this city 37 years, and still, it was the only White Christmas she remembered.

And the cats came up around them in droves. Usually, a few would break off, while the others watched, but that night they all huddled towards the food like it was Midnight Mass. In her memory, they were all gray, the cats, against the stark white of the new snow. She knew that couldn’t have been the case, but that was what she remembered. She felt like she had read that somewhere — wasn’t it an old proverb — that strange cats are always gray in memory.

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She was parked a long way out, back towards the road.

“The hardest part is finding something to do with your hands,” he said. “You were right — you have to learn to be still.”

“That’s the hardest thing,” she agreed.

She was crying, but he hadn’t noticed. When they came to her car, he turned and saw her face, forced a smile.

“Thank you for meeting me. Again, I’m sorry for dredging it up.”

She put out her arms, he pulled her to him.

“I hate it,” she said, her voice muffled in his shirt. “I just hate it. For the longest time, I kept thinking: *If we had been able to keep the baby. . .*”

“No,” he whispered, stopping her.

She shivered. He took her jacket from her, put it over her shoulders.

Then, she pulled him to her, kissed him.

He stopped her, looked her in the face, then took her head in his hands, and kissed her back. She pulled away.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Stop saying that.” She pulled him back to her.

They kissed for a long time under the lights of the parking lot. It was like a photograph in sepia, a fossil in amber. The sound of car tires on the wet pavement rushed by out on the street. Finally, she pulled back.

“You’ll follow me to my place?” she said.

He nodded.

She got in her car, backed out of the space, waited for him to get to his and then pull up behind her. She could barely stand the stillness, couldn’t wait for the car to be moving. Leaving the parking lot, she pulled out in front of a taxi. She knew he would have to wait, and it was two stoplights down and she was caught at a red light before she finally looked up, saw him in her rearview. She breathed from her abdomen, said to herself: *So this is happening . . .*

In the parking lot of her apartment, they kissed again, kissed as she was fumbling for her keys, as she was opening the door to her apartment. She was glad she didn’t see any neighbors. Inside, she turned on the floor lamp near the door. She looked around briefly for Priscilla, the old black and white cat she’d had that had been her mother’s. She had stayed with her mother after the divorce, and in that time, the cat had taken to sleeping next to her. The cat was nervous around visitors though, especially men, and

she was nowhere to be seen.

He kissed her again, pulled her jacket off her shoulders, dropped it to the floor. He pulled her scrub shirt over her head, threw it on the sofa. She turned, went over, pushed play on the stereo. He kissed her shoulders, turned her facing him, kissed the tops of her breasts. He reached behind her to undo her bra. She put her hands over her belly shyly. He moved her hands, ran his fingers up and down her arms, started kissing her again.

A woman's voice came over the speakers, deep, sultry. She took his hand, led him down the hall to her bedroom. On the stereo, the voice sang about romantic love, of heartache — but of something else too. She had been hearing this song in her head all day. It was a song about love, the loss of it, but only because it had to sing about something. Beneath that, there was something emotionally benign, something transcendent, something that had experienced pain but managed to move beyond it.

"What is this?" he said, coming to the bed, stopping. "The music?"

She pushed him back on the bed, lay down on top of him. He rolled her over, lay her back on the comforter, and she was looking at the ceiling. The fan was off, but the room spinning. He ran his fingers through her hair, kissed her neck. She laughed, threw her head back, concentrated on the sensations and the music as she watched the room go round.

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Naked, damp, they lay side-by-side. He was barely turned, facing her, running his hand along her hip. The comforter, wadded at the foot, was nearly off the bed. She was already thinking about washing the sheets, her clothes, about what it would take to erase his presence in her apartment. It was entirely practical though — she didn't feel guilty.

"You do," he said. "You look good."

She didn't answer him. The music had stopped a few minutes ago, and the silence seemed to echo. She wondered if he were not even thinking about going home.

He kissed her, got up out of bed, went to the bathroom. She listened to him pee, then walk down the hall to the kitchen. The cabinet, then the sink. He came back in the room with a glass of water, placed it on her bedside table.

He sat down next to her on the bed.

She looked at how his gut bulged when he sat, looked at her own belly, flat because she was lying on her back. His hair was dark, nearly black, and she saw a couple of loose threads of silver at his temples. She thought how they would both be old the next time they blinked their eyes.

“What do you think this means?” he asked her, finally.

“What do you think it means?” she said back.

But it was clear he had not heard her.

“I mean, when I quit, when I stopped — I did it for my marriage,” he said. “I didn’t want it to be the reason . . . y’know, another one.”

She was staring at the ceiling again.

“Y’know? But here I am, two years down the road, and it’s still not right. Obviously . . .”

There was a long silence. She heard the cat move under the bed.

“It wasn’t a miscarriage,” she said, finally.

There was a long time before it registered. A long time when things were still how they were before it had been said.

“I see,” he said.

She had said it to hurt him, to make him get up and leave, to never come back. Never speak to her again. “I don’t know if you remember, but a few weeks before . . . I asked you what you wanted to do. I said I was willing to make it work — even through the money stuff, even through the other women. Even the one you thought you were in love with . . .”

“I remember.”

“I said we would try to get through it, right?”

“Right.”

“And I asked you if you were happy about the baby.”

He didn’t answer.

“And you, do you remember what you said?”

“No,” he answered, finally.

“You didn’t say anything.”

He nodded. He took her hand, started to raise it to his lips, stopped. He got up, started going around the room, picking up his clothes.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But you never even said what you wanted.”

He was dressing, used it as an excuse not to look at her.

“I — I figured I didn’t want to bring a baby into a loveless marriage . . . I honestly thought you hated me at that point. I didn’t know.”

He forced himself to look at her, smiled sadly.

"I'm sorry for it," she said. "You had a right to know."

"So —" he started.

And she knew the questions before he asked. Why lie to him about the miscarriage? Why not leave him immediately — did they really have to drag it out another year? Why was the second time she got pregnant — out of wedlock and with a friend whom she didn't love — so different?

But he didn't ask.

"So what was this?" he said.

"I —" she paused.

She had him. She knew she could finally make him feel how she wanted him to feel. The way she had felt for too many of those years they were together. And she was sick about it. This was not who she was. But the inertia of the thing was too much. It had been inside her so long, and she had thought just because there would never be a chance for it that she had grown past it.

She was wrong.

"I guess," she told him. "I guess . . . I just wanted to know what it felt like to be the other woman."

He nodded, picked up his coat.

"I'm sorry for what I did to you," he smiled, sadly. "I truly hope you believe that."

He forced another smile, walked out of the room.

She listened until he had let himself out, then reached over, turned out the light. In the dark, she was surprised how calm she was, how at peace. She heard a soft mewing. The cat had come on the bed. She reached out her hand, and it found her in the dark. She rubbed her two fingers between its ears, then pushed her hand down its length, giving a slight tug at the tail.

The cat purred.

She thought of her fiancé, still did not feel guilt. She felt like tonight was something that had already happened long ago. She thought of her boy, Adam, old enough now that his neediness was becoming a chore. But she also remembered holding him in her arms as a baby, and how, when she did, a love beyond understanding had flooded over her like music. She remembered having the little baby against her breast, and how she couldn't help but also remember the child that was lost — how, in that instant, she knew that no one else could hurt her ever again.