

The Widow Steadman's Cat

Growing up in a small, mill town in New Hampshire has its advantages and disadvantages. One of the disadvantages is that the real world we read about and saw pictures of in magazines our parents subscribed to just seemed to be more than a day's walk from where we lived. Another disadvantage to small-town living was that everything we did in public was scrutinized by the elderly living among us and reported to our parents. We never got away with much with the aged eyes of the town acting as security and surveillance for the rest of the folks who lived there.

One of these aged reporters lived at the top of the hill on the street I lived on in my teenage years. Now, you see our town was laid out according to wealth. The more you had, the higher up the hill you lived. As chance would have it, we lived on the lowest street in the lowest part of town, but we didn't think any different as we didn't know any different unless that is, the people living along the way to the top gently reminded us of our physical address. We never much cared about living higher up on the hill because it was always hard to navigate the street when the road was slick with ice. During those times, the hill people used to ask my dad if they could park their fancy cars in our driveway while they walked up the hill in the cold. We thought it strange to have a house you couldn't get to in the winter since about a quarter of our seasons were winter.

Now, getting back to the Widow Steadman. The Widow Steadman lived alone in her old Victorian house at the top of the hill. Her house was built like a castle. It had turrets on the corners of the front of the house. My dad said houses were built that way back in the Victorian era, but we kids swore she had it built so she could look down upon us to keep track of what we were doing.

We never saw very many people go up that way. The mailman would drop off her mail and would sometimes look back over his shoulder as if he were being watched. The milk man came early in the morning and left milk in the box out on her porch three times a week. Those were about the only people who ever had a reason to step onto her property.

The widow had a large, black cat that weighed about 20 pounds. That beast was her pride and joy. If you walked anywhere near her house, the cat would hiss and growl like a rabid panther, trying to make sure you didn't get too close. I guess, the cat was mean and old just like her owner as the local stray dogs didn't even venture close to it or bother to chase it.

It was getting close to Halloween, and all the kids in town were getting ready for candy, fun, and pranks on that scary night. Nobody ever went to the widow's house on Halloween because she would turn off all the lights in her house on that night, climb the staircase to the bedroom, position herself behind the curtains, and peek out the turret window to see what was going on in the town below. I think she thought we couldn't see her as we walked by, but the ominous shadow was there, betraying her hiding place.

Not many of us had ever seen her face to face and relied upon what we heard on the playground from others who claimed to have seen her. None of the descriptions were very kind and made her out to look like something between The Creature from the Black Lagoon and The Werewolf. Those descriptions just

made it even scarier to pass by her house on Halloween, thinking that she and her black beast would suddenly leap from the turret and snatch us away into the deep recesses of her cellar, which all the kids in town knew had to be a dungeon.

The wind was howling on this Halloween Eve. The trees made funny noises, and our minds wandered too far at times as we thought we saw horrid creatures peering out at us from the naked branches as we walked by.

All was going well that night until Homer Pickelsimer dared any of us to go and snatch the widow's cat when she let it out to patrol the perimeter of the house. Now, Homer was a kind fellow but never dared to do what he dared the rest of us to do. He promised the person who took on the mission his sack of booty, plundered from the neighbors, who would respond to a knock on the door as he went from house to house that night, filling his sack with all kinds of sugary treats.

Nobody wanted to get involved with the old widow in any way, let alone steal anything from her, especially the Satan Panther. We stood there, nobody wanting to be the first to say "no." The wind was still howling, sounding more like the dead crying out as they walked the face of the earth on Halloween Eve, trying to connect their soul with a dead body. I think Herbie Peterson peed his pants. He told everyone he had to go home and check on his grandmother. We all knew Herbie's grandmother had died the previous summer, but nobody wanted to call him out on his desire not to be the first dead child hero in our small town.

Finally, one of the new kids in town, Johnny "Goofy" Mahaffey, agreed to perform the heinous deed. The rest of us were instantly relieved that we wouldn't have to bare our fears on that cold, windy night. Suddenly, Goofy found himself an instant hero among the costume-dressed ragbag army assembled on the street that night.

Homer told Goofy he would stand watch when the cat came out and that he would give him an old mail sack to stuff the cat into. The deal was done. Homer and Goofy both spit into their right hands and sealed the deal with a spit shake. Don't ask me why we spit into our hands and then shook hands, mixing our spit. It may have been an unhealthy thing to do in the eyes of grownups, but it sure beat slitting our hands with a sharp knife and mixing our blood much like our black-and-white television heroes were doing on the silver screen in those days.

The deal had been consummated and signed with spit, and we all watched Homer and Goofy slowly walk up the hill toward the Widow Steadman's house. Our little group followed as supporters but at least 100 yards back just in case things got out of hand and we needed a head start to run back down the street. It seemed like an eternity just to walk up the street, walking toward an uncertain experience that was soon to transpire. I guess it seemed like time without end as none of us were skipping up the hill, knowing that the widow might snatch one of us to keep her in her dungeon until she could decide upon a horrible fate for her captive.

Finally, Homer and Goofy reached the widow's house and took their places behind the rock wall that separated the house from the street. Homer was to keep a watch on the turret to see if and when the

shadow moved from the sniper perch. He would signal Goofy when and if the shadow moved away from the window as that might be when the widow would let the cat out. It seemed like ages passed before the signal was sent.

Goofy moved in with the sack provided by Homer. He bent over and crawled up through the shrubs in the front yard to get as close to the house as he dared. Homer kept watch behind the house and had earlier agreed to make a cat call if he spotted the widow outside the house, hoping the widow would think her cat had a friend waiting for it outside the house.

Goofy waited for about five minutes when he saw a black shape drawing near. He backed up against the house foundation with the open sack spread before him, waiting for the prey to get closer. No signal from Homer yet, so the coast must be clear!

The shape drew nearer and paused just as Goofy made one fell sweep and gathered the quarry into the sack. "Gotcha, Satan cat!" he said as he drew the drawstring on the sack as tight as he could while the critter inside was desperately clawing the inside of the bag, vainly trying to escape the cloth prison it suddenly found itself in.

Goofy crawled across the lawn and made it to the wall where he found Homer. "What ya got in the bag, Goofy?" he whispered just in case something was lurking near the wall.

"I got the old widow's cat in here. Let's get out of here before she finds out what we did."

Homer said, "Man, that was quick! I didn't see her even move from the window. You are right. We better get out of here."

They ran back down the street, and the rest of us followed the heroes back to where the deal had taken place. Goofy came up with an intelligent question. "What are we going to do with the cat now that we have it?"

Nobody had an instant answer. So, we left the sack in my dad's garage while we finished our evening of trick-or-treating.

We decided to quit when it became a burden to carry the heavily laden candy sacks up and down the street and elected to go to my house and check out our booty. Homer told Goofy to get the sacked cat. We would bring it into the living room, surround it in a circle, and taunt it a bit before turning it loose to run back up the hill to its master. That would teach the mean old cat. It wouldn't mess with us anymore after we finished with it.

We got to my house, went to the living room, and checked the contents of our candy sacks. We rummaged through our goodies and traded off the things we didn't really like. There was a small pile of apples sitting by itself on the rug as none of us thought apples had any trading value, and, besides that, they didn't fit into a kid's food pyramid.

Alice, the girl with the buck teeth and freckles, noticed the cat bag stirring. She suggested we put the bag in the circle and let the cat out. Since Goofy had caught it, he was elected to let it out. He fought with the drawstring before it finally gave way. The creature inside must have seen a speck of light and decided to propel itself from captivity. Goofy had the bag up to his face and was peering into the bag when the creature rocketed out of the bag, propelled itself off from Goofy's shoulder, and began to run across the living room floor toward the kitchen where my mom was washing the dishes and my dad was sipping a cup of coffee. I stared in horror as I watched the creature draw closer to the kitchen.

"Goofy!" Homer screamed. "The widow's cat is jet black and doesn't have two white stripes on its back."

"Skunk!" Homer screamed as he dove behind the couch, and the rest of us sought refuge in closets and behind furniture. I knew the widow never moved from the window, Homer thought to himself.

Meanwhile, my dad heard the commotion going on in the living room and was getting up from the table when the skunk made its entrance. "What the blank is that thing doing in my house?" he hollered just as I heard my mother's scream, the breaking of glass, a table turning over, and chairs being thrown.

Suddenly, my nostrils were filled with the horrid odor of skunk essence, and the commotion, my dad's ranting, and my mother's screams grew louder. The skunk ran from the kitchen and made a beeline for the back of the couch where Homer was hiding. I don't know who scared the other the most, but the skunk certainly left its mark on Homer, who jumped over the couch and ran out the front door, leaving a trail of his newfound scent behind him.

The skunk saw the open door and followed Homer outside. Needless to say, the rest of the kids scattered to any open exit to escape the carnage and ran home to a more secure environment.

My dad emerged from the kitchen with a large butcher knife in his hand, looking to murder the creature that had caused such mayhem in his little sanctuary. I looked up at him and didn't dare to say a word as I made my way to my bedroom.

The house was totally wrecked. The kitchen looked like a battle zone—my dad and the skunk had made Custer's last stand look like a picnic. The living room was covered with candy, scattered by the former owners as they had fled the scene. The house was filled with the pungent odor of the skunk. It was beginning to make my eyes water though I was down the hall behind the bedroom door.

I heard the doorbell ring, followed by my father's heavy footsteps treading across the living room to answer the front door. It was the last of the trick-or-treaters, who were making a late-night visit to gather any remnants of candy that might be left in the neighborhood.

My father answered the door. Three kids between the ages of 9 and 12 stood there, festooned in their costumes. They didn't have a chance to say, "Trick or treat" before my dad said, "Trick!" A blast of skunk scent wafted through the door and attacked their young, unsuspecting nostrils.

The kids had seen all the candy scattered on the floor, but once the skunk scent hit them, they made a hasty retreat. I heard them talking among themselves as they quickly walked down the sidewalk and headed back up the hill to their homes. "Did you see all the candy that dude had on his floor? Man, those poor people must live on the stuff."

Just as they were getting out of earshot, I heard the older one say, "Yeah, all that candy, and the dude doesn't have enough money to buy a bar of soap!"