

The Little Black Cat

From the Japanese folk tale Yukiko and the Little Black Cat; Retold by Caroline Coetzee

Once upon a time there was a young orphan girl, called Yukiko. She was kind and clever, but because she had no money, she was forced to work as a servant or starve. She worked for a very rich family, as cruel, lazy and proud as they were wealthy. They treated Yukiko as their slave, ridiculed her gentle ways and paid her nothing, expecting her to be grateful to work for her food and threadbare bed in the attic.

Yukiko's one consolation was her little black cat. This little creature was devoted to her, following her round as she worked all day and curling up against her to keep her warm as she slept at night. Needless to say, the family hated the cat and treated her as cruelly as they did Yukiko, but nothing that they did or said could break the bond between the two.

One day, Yukiko awoke to find a cold space in her bed where her cat would have been. Alarmed, she leapt up and searched high and low for her friend, but the little black cat was nowhere to be found. All day long, as Yukiko cleaned, scrubbed and cooked, she checked every nook cranny in the house, but to no avail. The family shouted at her to work faster and the children teased her mercilessly.

That evening, as she sat on the kitchen doorstep in despair, she saw a travelling peddler making his way up the road, with baskets full of wares for sale. Yukiko jumped up: perhaps somebody who travelled far and wide would have seen her little black cat. The peddler scratched his head and thought for a moment.

"No," he said, I have not seen your cat, but I think I know where she might have gone. Three days journey from here, in the middle of a deep, rushing river, stands a strange island, with tall, steep, wooded sides. This island is known as Cat Mountain and if the little black cat is anywhere, that is where she will be."

Then, seeing Yukiko's excitement he gave a stern warning. "The journey to Cat Mountain is not to be undertaken lightly. Of those who make it, few, if any, return to tell the tale of what they have seen."

Undeterred and determined to find her friend, Yukiko went to speak to the family and told them that she planned to travel to Cat Mountain to find her friend. At first, they did not want to let her go, but Yukiko bravely stood her ground and, seeing that she would go whatever they did, the family grudgingly allowed her to leave.

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“But,” her mistress sneered, “As you are being so lazy you will have to promise to work twice as hard and twice as long when you come back to make up for the time lost.”

“I promise!” gasped Yukiko and hurried away before anybody could change their mind.

Quickly Yukiko packed a little bundle with the stale crusts that would have been her supper and set off down the road to the River. It was a long and tiring journey on foot and, by the time she reached the River on the third day, her meagre rations were long eaten, Yukiko was exhausted and hungry and the sun was sinking low in the sky. Nevertheless, she bravely set off up and down the riverbank to find a place to cross.

The River was deep and fast flowing and Yukiko quickly realised that she would need somebody to ferry her across, but she could find nobody to make the journey, especially so close to nightfall. Cat Mountain was too dangerous, said everybody she met. It was not worth all the money in the world to take her and anyway, she had no money at all.

Finally, as Yukiko stood despairing by the water, an old woman who had been watching her, came over and asked her why she was so desperate to cross to Cat Mountain.

“I have lost my little black cat,” Yukiko explained. “She was the only thing in the world who cared for me and I feel I cannot live without her.”

The old woman took pity on her. “I have a boat and can ferry you across,” she offered, “But you must take great care and not spend too long on Cat Mountain. It is a dangerous place at the best of times and whatever you do, you must be off the island when darkness falls. Nobody who has stayed on Cat Mountain overnight has ever returned.

“I am not brave enough to stay on the Island, but will row back to the safe side of the River. I will keep watch and if you return in time, I will come and fetch you back to safety.”

Quickly, the old woman took Yukiko to where her boat was moored and rowed her across to Cat Mountain. Yukiko thanked her and leapt out of the boat, setting forth bravely into the forest that clad the mountainside. The old woman rowed back more slowly, turning frequently and sighing sadly as she watched Yukiko disappear into the trees.

Before long, Yukiko stumbled across a path leading through the forest and up the mountain. It was dark under the trees and only a few rays of low sunlight pierced the gloom. As she

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climbed, Yukiko heard strange noises among the trees: muted growls and hisses came from the undergrowth, interspersed with half heard words she could not make out. Still, she continued bravely on till the path opened up before her and, bathed in the light of the setting sun, she saw a most extraordinary village.

The houses in this strange place were made of carved wood; some were on the ground and some were suspended from or balanced on the branches of the trees. All were linked by stairs and walkways, which swayed gently in the evening breeze. Every window was dark, but in front of one of the houses a lantern was lit, its warm light seeming to beckon Yukiko towards its door.

Cautiously Yukiko approached the house and even more cautiously, she knocked on the door. At first there was no response, but then the door slid silently open and Yukiko found herself face to face with a strange and beautiful woman. She was not much taller than Yukiko herself, with short, soft ginger hair and eyes as green as grass. And such strange eyes they were, with no whites at all, and pupils like a slit down the middle.

Yukiko gathered all her courage. "I have come to find my friend, the little black cat" she explained.

The woman said nothing, but beckoned for Yukiko to follow her into the house. As she did so, Yukiko noticed that her nails were long and sharp and hooked at the end. Down a dim passageway they went, till the woman opened a door to one side, gestured to Yukiko to enter and then left, still without saying a word.

As Yukiko entered the room, the door closed behind her and soft lights blossomed from lanterns around the walls. The room was beautifully panelled and hung with tapestries of trees and vines and flowers, as though the forest had come inside the walls. The only furniture was a simple table and two chairs. Yukiko sat on one and waited. As she did so, she heard voices through the walls, growling and hissing, like the voices in the forest. It seemed again that she could almost hear words among the noises, words that she could not quite hear, but which sounded threatening and terrifying.

Just as Yukiko was about to lose her nerve, the door of the room opened and in came a very strange creature. She too looked like a small, delicately built woman, but on her shoulders

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sat the head and neck of a cat. And not just any cat. Yukiko instantly recognised the face of her darling little black cat.

The friends fell joyfully into each other's arms. For a few moments they held each other close, then the little black cat broke away

"Yukiko," she asked gravely, "Why have you come to Cat Mountain?"

"Oh, my only friend," replied Yukiko, "I was so lonely! I felt I couldn't live, not knowing what had happened to you."

The little black cat looked worried. "That was brave," she said, "But you have put yourself in great danger. Cat Mountain is a haven for cats. When we grow old and tired, it is where we are able to live forever in peace. But it is not safe for humans. In fact, if you stay here once night has fallen and the darkness is complete, your very life is at risk!

"However," she continued, and her voice was gentle, "We still have a little time till sunset and I can give you something to keep you safe."

The little black cat clapped her hands and the woman with the ginger hair appeared again, her green eyes stranger and more cat like than ever. She was carrying a large tray on which were bowls of delicious smelling food, glasses of clear water and a mysterious parcel, wrapped in string and sealed with wax. It was the best meal Yukiko had ever eaten and even better than the wonderful food was the conversation, as Yukiko and her friend talked of their lives together and everything that had happened since the little black cat left the village.

All too soon, however, the little black cat told Yukiko that it was time for her to go. To stay on Cat Mountain any longer was to meet certain death. Before Yukiko left, the little black cat handed her the parcel.

"Keep this safe," said the cat, "And don't open it till you get home. But if ever you are in danger, shake the parcel and you will be protected."

With that, the little black cat handed Yukiko a lit lantern and the two bid a fond farewell to each other. Then woman with the green eyes appeared, looking more catlike than ever and guided Yukiko silently back to the path down the mountain.

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The sun had set and long shadows were reaching between the trees as night approached. Yukiko's eyes were full of tears as she set out, as she knew that this was the last time she would see the little black cat. But as she walked quickly between the trees, her sorrow was replaced by fear. The growls and hisses she had heard earlier were closer and louder now and the half-heard words were replaced by weird cries and yowls. On either side of the path, Yukiko saw gleaming eyes in the gloom and even the flash of bright teeth and sharp claws.

Bravely Yukiko clasped the parcel the little black cat had given her and shook it as hard as she could. To her surprise, the parcel emitted a terrifying growling sound and a loud rattle. The noises from the forest immediately stopped and the gleaming eyes blinked out. Yukiko ran down the mountain, shaking the parcel at every noise and shadow till she came out from under the trees to the riverbank.

Imagine her relief when she saw the old woman waiting for her in the boat. She had been very worried and had watched Cat Mountain all evening, till she saw Yukiko's lantern bobbing between the trees. As soon as she spotted the light, she rowed across, so that by the time Yukiko reached the water, all she had to do was to leap into the boat and be rowed to safety.

That night, Yukiko slept in a comfortable bed at the old woman's house and the next morning she set out, with a pack full of provisions to last her the journey back.

Three days later, Yukiko arrived at the house of the rich family, happier and better fed than she had been for many years. The family were very surprised to see her, as they had given her up for lost and begun to look for another servant. In truth they could not find anybody willing to work for nothing, so they were pleased at Yukiko's return and asked what had happened to her.

Yukiko told them everything, finally taking out the parcel and giving it a shake to show how it growled and rattled. Then she carefully broke the seal and unwrapped it. Imagine everybody's surprise, when they saw that the parcel contained a painting of a dog, with glaring eyes and enormous teeth. When Yukiko shook the parcel, the dog growled and gold coins came rattling and tumbling out of its mouth. Startled, Yukiko shook the parcel again and more gold coins came pouring forth.

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When the family saw the coins, their eyes gleamed with greed and envy. Leaving Yukiko standing open mouthed in their living room, they rushed out of the house and down the road to Cat Mountain.

Unlike Yukiko, who had worked hard all her life, the family were lazy and unused to hard travel. They stopped and argued often and made slow progress. By the time they reached the River, after several days, night was falling, they were exhausted and bad tempered. Up and down the bank they stormed, looking for someone to take them across. But the old woman had told everybody Yukiko's story and nobody would help them, even though they offered gold and silver in payment. Finally they found a disreputable person with leaky old boat who did not care about the dangers of Cat Mountain or the cruelty of his passengers. He took their coins and ferried them across the River, dumping them unceremoniously on the bank at Cat Mountain, before rowing away, as fast as he could.

The family did not care. They rushed up the path, ignoring the terrifying sounds from beneath the trees until they reached the village in the clearing. They did not stop to admire the intricate construction of the houses and walkways, but rushed straight to the building with the lantern, beating on the door and shouting for the little black cat.

The door opened, the woman with the ginger hair appeared and beckoned them inside. A chorus of howls and yowls, hisses and growls arose. And the family were never seen again.

And what about Yukiko? Sustained by the gift from her friend, she lived a life of quiet prosperity, always treating with kindness and generosity those whose lives were more unfortunate than hers. And always with a pet cat!