

Spank The Cat
By
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I'm a self-employed mechanic with my own shop, about three miles from my small rundown New York apartment. I take the subway to work. Even though I have my own car shop, I don't own a car. Most days I finish work around three, but I don't close the shop until five. Life was pretty much the same day in day out until about two years ago when *he* moved into my life. I first saw him one day on my way home from work. I heard yelling in the alley behind my apartment. When I went into the alley I saw Mr. Gonzalez, the building super, using a broom handle to poke at a cat. The cat's collar was tangled in some wire and he was not able to escape Mr. Gonzalez's torment.

"Get out of here you filthy thing!" he said, swinging the broom handle at the cat. "Don't ever come around *my* building again!" Mr. Gonzalez looked over at me. "I hate these things," he said. "Do you have my rent, Barrow?"

"Not with me," I said. "And stop hurting that cat. Just because you don't like them doesn't give you the right to treat them that way." I reached down and pulled the wire from the cat's collar. The cat bolted down the alley and around the corner.

"You mind your own business and get me my rent," said Mr. Gonzalez. "If you're more than three days late I'll have you out!"

I left the alley and went up to my fourth floor apartment. New York summers can be hot and I kept the windows in my apartment open so I didn't need to run the air. Someone breaking in would be unlikely since the fire escape is too far for anyone to jump from and reach the window, or close enough to save my life if there were a fire. There's only a small ledge about two inches wide running from the window to the fire escape. I figured that's how he got in.

I was reading a book, not paying much attention to what was on the tube when I caught something out of the corner of my eye. I turned and saw a very large gray and black striped tabby cat sitting on the arm of my sofa. It was the same cat I freed in the alley. I noticed he had a small black smudge on his right front paw. The only thing I could figure was he came in through the window along the ledge. There was a blue collar with a large silver tag around the cat's neck. Upon closer examination I noticed the tag was real solid silver, with the word SPANK deeply engraved. I didn't know if that was the cat's name or instructions that came with the cat.

The cat kept showing up in my apartment everyday. I didn't mind having the cat around and eventually I realized he wasn't going anywhere. I started keeping a bowl of food and a bowl of water out for him. Truthfully, I'm more of a dog person, but I enjoyed the company.

One puzzling thing was this cat never made a sound. He didn't purr, mew, hiss, growl, or howl. When he wanted to go outside and the window wasn't open, he would sit quietly by the window and stare at me until I opened it. If he was hungry, he would sit on the counter by the cupboard where his food was kept and stare at me until I fed him. He didn't solicit affection, but didn't mind if I pet him briefly, provided I didn't try to pick him up. Spank didn't have any bad behaviors like clawing furniture or having accidents in the apartment. He was proper in nature.

A few weeks later Spank started showing up at my work. I don't know how or if he followed me on the subway. I would leave the apartment with Spank still inside. About noon, Spank would show up at the shop. He usually slept while he was there. When it was time to go home around 5:00p.m., I would leave Spank, still there at the shop. I never saw him follow me to the subway station. When I arrived at my apartment, Spank would already be there waiting for me to feed him. I had no idea how he managed to beat me home.

It was a few weeks later when other strange things started to happen. I started receiving subscriptions to People magazine, Living magazine, and the Sunday edition of the New York Times. At least they were sent to my address. The name on the postmark was Mr. Spank. At first, I started throwing them away in the trash. But when I took out the trash, the magazines were no longer there and the New York Times would appear in the following week's trash. I never did receive any subscription bills. I figured someone knew the cat was here and was having a good laugh at my expense.

One evening after going to bed, the television came on. It wasn't loud. I got up and found Spank on the sofa with the remote next to him. I reached down, turned off the television, and went back to bed. A few minutes later, I heard the television turn back on and the channels change. Suddenly the channel changing stopped and the volume was turned down some more. I went in and found Spank watching C-SPAN. I decided to just leave it on and go back to bed. In the morning the television was turned off and Spank was asleep on the sofa. Eventually I found out that every night he watched C-SPAN until 2:00a.m. then he would switch the channel to a late-night showing of Days Of Our Lives. That went off at 3:00a.m. at which time he turned off the television. He would then spend most of the day sleeping at the shop. Something was different about this cat. Not that there's anything wrong with it, but I don't know anyone who watches C-SPAN on a regular basis.

There was a loud pounding at my door. I opened it, leaving the chain on. It was Mr. Gonzalez.

"Do you have a cat in your apartment?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"You know there are no pets allowed in the building, especially cats," said Mr. Gonzalez. "I've seen that cat around the building. If I find out you have a cat, I'll throw you out! Do you have my rent?"

"It's not due until next week," I replied.

Mr. Gonzalez stormed down the hall and started to bang on the next apartment. I felt bad about lying to Mr. Gonzalez. But I knew Spank wasn't hurting anything. As far as I was concerned Spank wasn't mine and he could come and go as he pleased.

One month after Spank moved in, I returned home from work to find a large box in the mail, addressed to Mr. Spank. It was a home computer system with a color printer and small digital camera. I didn't open it and was planning on sending it back the next day. When I woke the next morning, the computer and color printer were setup in the corner of the living room. The invoice in the discarded box was marked paid so I didn't see any reason to return it. But now in addition to C-SPAN and Days Of Our Lives being on after I went to bed, I would hear typing on the computer late at night. Every time I went to see what was going on, Spank would be sitting on the sofa and the computer would be locked. Surely the curious cat was only walking on the keyboard or something.

I usually wait to do my taxes until the last minute, since I always end up owing the government more than I paid in. I never took into account that something might happen and it did that year. About three days before April 15th, I came down with the flu, a really nasty flu. I'll spare you the details, but let's just say I almost got just as sick cleaning up the bathroom. Even Spank kept his distance from me. Needless to say, I wasn't able to go to work and all my tax information for the shop was there in my office. In addition to paying taxes, my fear now was the penalties and interest I would now have to pay on top of the taxes for filing late.

Eventually I recovered from my ordeal with the flu. It was almost May by then. I managed to get down to the shop. I had the taxes and angry customers to deal with, not to mention the two and a half weeks of lost revenue to make up. When I arrived at the shop, the cars were still where I left them, however the office was a different matter. All my work-orders, invoices, and other paperwork had been organized and put away. On my desk in a blue folder was a copy of my tax returns. I quickly went over them and discovered they were filled out with a fine point pen and to my amazement I was getting a refund. There were deductions taken that I never would have thought of. They all appeared to be legitimate business expenses. Lying beside the copy of the returns was a receipt for the certified mailing of the originals dated April 15th. Since the returns had my signature on them, I must have been so sick that I didn't remember coming down to the shop and finishing them.

Monday morning before work there was a pounding on my door. I opened it to find Mr. Gonzalez, red faced. "You're out of here Barrow!" he shouted. "I saw that cat in the alley go into *your* apartment through *your* window! You have to the end of the week to get out!"

I shut the door and turned to see Spank sitting on the sofa. "I guess we'll have to move into the back room of my shop until I can find us another place."

Two days later there was a knock at the door. A thin dark-haired man in a suit stood holding a briefcase and a large stack of folders.

"Are you John Barrow?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"I'm an attorney with The Hamrick Law Firm. It seems this building was sold yesterday."

"What's that got to do with me?" I asked.

"The new owner of the building has fired Mr. Gonzalez as building superintendent and has named you as his successor," said the attorney. "Mr. Gonzalez has until the end of the week to vacate the premises."

"There must be some mistake," I said. "I don't know anyone who would have purchased this building."

"There's no mistake," said the attorney. "My instructions are quite clear."

"I don't know anything about being a superintendent," I said.

"There's not much for you to do," said the attorney as he handed me some folders. "Just collect the rent and deposit it into the bank account in the second folder. The first folder is the operating bank account that you can withdraw funds from to make repairs and improvements. Your name is on the checks. You can contract out all of the repairs so it shouldn't take up too much of your time. Your free rent should be more than enough compensation for the couple of hours a month required to complete the work."

“What if I have to make a big decision or need additional money for repairs?” I asked.

“You can contact the owner at this e-mail address,” said the attorney. “An e-mail account has already been setup for you. Any additional funds you may require will be transferred into the operating account. I just need your signature on a few of these documents and I’ll be on my way. Congratulations and good luck Mr. Barrow.”

It seemed like my problem with the apartment was solved. And over the next few months, running the building was pretty easy. I got to know a lot more of the people in the building. They seemed to enjoy the fact that Mr. Gonzalez was gone. One of the first things I did was contract out some much needed repairs on the rundown building. In just a few weeks a lot of the problems that Mr. Gonzalez never took care of were fixed.

The second month collecting rent I had to contact the owner. Mrs. Bessemer, in apartment 207, would not be able to pay her rent that month. Her social security check was not enough to cover the rent and her doctor bill she incurred the previous month.

I e-mailed the owner and explained the situation, hoping he would understand. I asked if it was okay if she paid that month’s rent over time. It was the first time I had used the computer in my apartment and it took me about an hour to figure out how to send and receive e-mails. The next day I received an e-mail from the owner stating that Mrs. Bessemer’s rent would be free for this month and the next. The e-mail further instructed me to pay her utilities for this month from the operating account. The e-mail was signed with a single letter S. Mrs. Bessemer’s face lit up when I told her the news. I still had no idea who the owner was or why the owner picked me as the building’s super.

The next several months were uneventful. Then it happened. Martha Stewart was accused of insider trading. Now you might be thinking, how could Martha Stewart being accused of insider trading affect a mechanic with no interest in Martha Stewart and no stocks of my own? I came home from work one day and found Spank sitting on the sofa watching CNN and the announcement of Martha Stewart being involved in insider trading. It was then that I learned it was actually Martha Stewart Living magazine I... Spank had been receiving in the mail. Spank had not been to work all day and did not show up at the shop for several months to follow. All he did was sit in front of the television and watch the Martha Stewart reports. If I ever changed the channel on the television as soon as my back was turned, the television would be turned back to some breaking news about Martha Stewart. Spank wouldn’t even pay me any attention if I came into the room. He just continued staring at the television; except for one day when I passed him on the sofa and made the comment; “So, do you think they’re going to send her to jail?” I said smiling. Spank turned his head and gave me a cold hard stare. I felt a chill run down my spine and my smile quickly dropped. It was the first eye contact he had given me in months.

It was during the Martha Stewart trial when I found them. I was hunting something in my apartment, I can’t recall what, when I looked under my bed. There in one stack were all the People magazines and next to that was a stack of Martha Stewart Living magazines. Next to the magazines was this week’s copy of the New York Times and a black ink blotter. But what shocked me the most were the four manila envelopes. I opened the first and found crossword puzzles from the New York Times. All had been cut out of the paper as if by a razor. The puzzles were perfectly filled out with a very fine point instrument using black ink.

The second manila envelope had pictures and articles from the People magazine, Martha Stewart Living magazine, and New York Times cut out, also as if by a razor. The pictures were all of Martha Stewart and the articles were all about the insider trading scandal.

The third manila envelope contained printouts of stock transactions and offshore bank accounts. It looked like there were hundreds of thousands of dollars in the accounts and stocks. I couldn't find any names on the documents, only account numbers.

The last manila envelope contained lots of pictures. The pictures were all of Spank sitting in front of different Starbucks coffee stores around town. There must have been over three-hundred different pictures of stores that Spank visited. The lighting of the pictures seemed to indicate that they were all taken in the early morning. The angle of all the pictures looked like the camera was sitting on the ground with the cat about five feet away. Spank had the same sitting pose and stoic expression in all the pictures. I'm sure he used the digital camera and computer printer, as it would be ridiculous to think that he could develop his own film.

I quickly put all the envelopes back under my bed and looked up to find myself staring nose to nose with Spank sitting on the bed. He scolded me with his cold stare. I slowly backed away from the cat and decided to leave the apartment for a while to avoid the awkward moment.

The next morning I left for work. Spank was asleep on the sofa. Around noon I looked for Spank to show up at the shop. After a few hours, and still no Spank, I began to worry. I quickly closed the shop at five and hurried home.

When I arrived at my apartment Spank was nowhere to be found. The computer, color printer, and digital camera were gone. I checked under my bed. The magazines and folders were missing as well. These were the only things taken. I found Spank's water and food bowls in the dishwasher. Taped to the refrigerator at eye level was a note written with a fine point instrument which read: *It's time I moved on. It wasn't you, it's me.*

About a month later, the attorney from The Hamrick Law Firm came by to see me. It seems the building's owner transferred the deed to the building to me. The building mortgage had been paid in full.

Yesterday I received one of those novelty postcards. It had a picture of a cat in tiny scuba gear diving off a beautiful reef. I turned the card over and saw it was postmarked from Nassau, Bahamas. Written, in a fine script, it said: *Hope you're doing well. Just wanted to let you know I'm doing fine.* The postcard was not signed. I turned the card over and noticed the cat was wearing a blue collar with a silver tag. I couldn't make out the inscription.