

MR. WHISKERS

By David J. LeMaster

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ISBN 1-60003-182-X

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CHARACTER: Can be played by either gender

So I'm sitting on my sofa watching TV when my cat jumps in my lap and looks up at me with his giant green eyes and says, "Listen, you and I have got to cut a deal."

Well, this catches me totally off-guard. I'm drinking a Dr. Pepper, so I half-swallow, half-spit in exasperation, and I'm suddenly choking, gasping for breath. I stand up and cough liquid from my lungs, and the cat—Mr. Whiskers—gets dumped onto the floor.

And then he calls me a really dirty name.

It's a strange feeling to be cursed at by your cat.

So I'm standing there in my apartment with half a soda down my windpipe and a foul-mouthed feline saying things you wouldn't hear on HBO, and all I can say in response is, "Mr. Whiskers? Did you just speak?"

Mr. Whiskers looks at me like I'm from another planet. I ask him again, and he just meows.

So that's when I start thinking maybe it's a dream. You know, I'm sitting on the couch, I'm lulled to sleep by bad programming—have you watched television lately? The new shows really stink. I think I'm drinking Dr. Pepper, but really what's happening is I have sleep Apnea or something—you know, that disease where you wake yourself up choking, gasping for air? So I decide I've got that. I write myself a note to call my doctor in the morning. I sit back down and rearrange myself, and suddenly Mr. Whiskers jumps back in my lap and says, "Of course I was talking to you, you obsequious fop."

I start coughing again, and I realize—I don't even know what an obsequious fop is. I'm dumber than my cat. Mr. Whiskers sits on my lap as I convulse—and then begins to wash his ears.

"Let's cut a deal," he says.

"What deal?" I ask.

Mr. Whiskers coughs a hairball onto my lap. "Don't touch it," he says.

Mr. Whiskers is not an attractive cat. You see talking cats on TV or in the movies, and they're always pretty, with tabby markings and bold vibrant colors. Mr. Whiskers' colors are harsh and irritating. He's so thin he looks anemic. His coat is dingy brown mixed with yellow and orange, the color of vomit, with gray stripes and an uncontrollable swirl of black.

He has obscenely long whiskers that look fake, and matted bits of hair that don't all grow at the same rate. I found him at a pet store on one of those "Adopt a pet" days, and they gave him his shots and had all his papers, and all I had to do was take him home. I bathed him and brushed him and tried to make him look nice, but he's still so butt-ugly he makes me want to cry.

So that's why it shocks me so when he says it, like it's just a fact of life: "I'm the reincarnation of Albert Einstein." I mean, if you died and God offered to send you back as a cat, you'd want to be a good-looking cat, wouldn't you? Cute and cuddly? Maybe a nice kitten, or a majestic white or regal black? You know, dainty-like, with long, thick hair. Not—a gray and brown and orange and black and white knotted, matted, lethargic mess.

So what would you do? I mean, there's only so many possibilities here. Either A) I'm nuts; I think I'm talking to animals and it's only a matter of time before they put me in the loony bin, or, B) My cat just talked to me and is currently waiting to see how I'll respond, or C) I'm on one of those trick camera shows and somebody's watching a video and laughing at me. I opt for B. But I go to the bathroom to take my temperature and then search the apartment for hidden cameras.

When I get back, Mr. Whiskers is at the computer, typing. Not really typing. He doesn't have fingers. He stands on his back legs and hunts and pecks on the keyboard with the front. His paws are wider than the keys, so he makes a lot of mistakes. I read the screen over his shoulder—do cat's have shoulders? Anyway, I read the screen:

"Human. This is Einstein. I am solving the mystery of death and rebirth. You must aid me in my experimentation. Bring me six candles, a dictation machine, a New York Times Crossword Puzzle Collection, and six bags of catnip. Albert."

Except there's lots of mistakes. So, actually it reads: "Hdsafumajkkn. Thsaaais is Ekdlijkfdsaklinstein. I am solving the mystdfkldfkjauucucery of deaaaath and rebiiirth."

And like that.

"Why do you need a dictation machine?" I ask.

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