

**HER
FAITHFUL
BLACK
CAT**

by Alexis Brooks de Vita

What is love but the desire to be with another, at peace in her gaze and her embrace? I tried for years to come into Proserpina's world in the body of her child, but she would not have one. Each month, she flushed the empty sac from her womb with violent teas brewed from cotton roots grown where her kidnapper stole her, from his own mother's plantation. Once, she flung herself down their townhouse stairs while he lay in the vomit and urine of a drunken stupor.

He found her in the morning, battered and unconscious at the foot of the stairs. He grieved, clutching her to him, at the thought that he must have hurled her to what should have been death.

"Proserpina, can you speak? Oh, thank God you're alive. Proserpina, what have I done?"

She made no sound as he threaded his hands under her armpits from behind and hoisted her to her feet. "Proserpina, what happened? Darling, can you forgive me?"

Standing at last, she swayed a little before she staggered away toward the indoor kitchen that suffocated them in their Baltimore city house. Always dutiful, she set about preparing his morning bowl of porridge and his pipe, still wordless as blood seeped from her nose and broken lips.

He crept behind her about the stove and around his breakfast table, spluttering all the way, his fist to his teeth to muffle when

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whining broke into sobs of distress. “Proserpina, you must believe me, I remember nothing of this. I-I can’t believe it. Tell me what happened. Did we quarrel? Did you—did you refuse me, my darling?”

It was this terrible war between his resentful possessiveness of her and his destructive lust that drove him to the extremities he feared in himself and that would, one day, cost him all.

It was I as spirit who whispered in his sleep that he would have to release the one to keep the other. “Love her and let her go or hate her and have her. You cannot demand both, or it is I who will have your soul.”

He sprang awake, eyes darting around in darkness, calling out, “Who is there? What demon speaks to me?” But I had already sighed into silence like a breeze through the open casement window. *Let him go mad.*

I withdrew into a dark corner to watch.

Frantic to control his hunger for her, he leapt from his bed and fumbled through his waistcoat pockets and key ring until he threw at her the only key to a room on the second floor farthest from his own. “Lock yourself in at night! And be damned to you and the legion of fiends that follows you!” he shouted.

Trailing behind her stumbling form down the hallway, like a wisp of smoke no one had exhaled, I realized I’d be forced now to give up the one avenue to life I’d sought: birth through the body of her child. Too late, I realized that now there would be no child.

Why do we love, and where does it start? Surely my love for this one magical soul haunting the earth by the name of Proserpina had been born eons ago in a distant Eden’s cradle that neither of us could remember.

Only faithfulness remained.

So, once her tiny budding eggs no longer offered me that dark bloody nest to hunker in, curled and hopeful, I turned to her black cat.

Mr. Wight's pets—a monkey, rabbits, birds, a dog, all fed, caressed and battered to death—lay strewn throughout their tiny city garden in unmarked graves. But Proserpina's only pet, the black cat she'd named Pluto, skulked behind her all over the house, watching and appeasing our common enemy.

Though the cat feigned love for him, Mr. Wight feared the cat as much as he loathed it. He called it “that African woman's pickaninny cat,” or, when he tormented it, “that devil-worshipping black woman's demon of a black cat.”

When Mr. Wight wasn't daring Proserpina to run away to his mother and describing the outrages she'd endure at the hands of the posse that would track her down and drag her back to him, he regaled her with tales of witches hanged with “their familiars”—their cats and tail-wagging little dogs—up and down the northeastern shore.

Only I was there to see when Mr. Wight finally killed Proserpina's black cat. Before I entered the body, when I was spirit, I was everywhere, and I saw everything. Mr. Wight had sent Pluto sailing—limp and unresisting as if the exhausted cat knew and accepted that his end had come—against the wrought iron railing that imprisoned Proserpina in the garden. Pluto hit the unyielding metal and slid, warm and boneless, to the ground. I swarmed to the crumpled body and surrounded it. Could I work my way in through lungs and eyes to heart and mind before he died?

Mr. Wight never realized that he had in fact killed Pluto that day. He couldn't know that it was not Pluto but I who surged, full

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of life, and forced the stagnating blood to churn again through the shock-stilled heart.

Thought is deed. As Mr. Wight inched near to see if his rival was dead, Pluto's body leapt as if electrified. Shrieking and wild-eyed, it clawed its way past the startled man and back into the house.

In Pluto's haggard body, I cowered in a dark corner of the house, tiny and weighed down as gravity pressed me to the very floorboards. That first morning of my new life, I did not exult or even understand what I had accomplished.

I felt miserable and cramped. I missed infinity. I regretted what I'd done and wanted to return to the world of spirits and immensity but couldn't think how. Couldn't, with a cat's brain, seem to think at all.

Until Proserpina found me. "Pluto? My dearest," she cooed. "What's happened to you, to frighten you so?"

Gentle hands scooped under my belly and cupped me into the warmth between her arms and her pounding heart. She laid her cheek against my fur and began to sing and sway.

All the stiffness went out of me. My hackles softened and smoothed, and I slept and melded my mind with the mind of her cat, dreaming that I had been reborn blazing with light and fury into this misery-laden, miraculous world.

In those first days, Mr. Wight grew suspicious. He knew that something he could not understand had happened and he watched me, muttering, "That cat follows me. That cat gives me the evil eye. That cat is a curse. That cat is not a cat, Proserpina. You mark my words. That cat is more than cat. It is a demon."

"Come, Pluto. Come away, kitty-mine," she would call to me at the start of these bouts of descending frenzy, and we would disappear together behind her blessedly locked door.

My cat brain began to chug into life like a reluctant steam engine. And from my vantage point between their feet, I suddenly realized that Mr. Wight was going to kill Proserpina one day, no matter what I did to comfort and shield her. Not so bad, if only he were going to shoot her cleanly in a trice and send her soaring into eternity with me before she knew it, a clean, swift death, easily forgotten.

But, no. Killing her bit by bit like this, Mr. Wight was shredding whatever remained of Proserpina's soul into utter oblivion. If I did not find a way to rescue her, he would end this standoff between them by destroying her altogether.

As spirit, I had witnessed Proserpina's hatred of the fiend that called itself Mr. Wight eroding her eternal soul. Now, as cat, I sensed that, soon, if she could not be freed of him, there would be none of her left to fly with me forever into the spirit world. Already, she was not fully herself.

She hung, desperate, behind her locked door, listening breathlessly for him to stumble toward us down the hallway and threaten to kick it in. She wept her tears into my fur and told me her fears. And all the while, I felt his savagery like a gnawing hunger, foul-mouthed and framed with diseased teeth that snapped and clamped onto her spirit, devouring her and leaving nothing inside but that terror imploding into emptiness.

Calmed by my warmth and my purring, she whispered prayers above my head to a faraway, long-ago god whose name she could not remember. She begged that we be spared, that we be guided to safety, that we be delivered from evil.

I, instead, offered myself to that same god beyond name, beyond memory, as forfeit to ransom Proserpina's soul. "Take me, instead. I will survive. I will exist. I will return," I prayed.

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Mr. Wight was stone cold sober the night he stomped down the hallway to our room's wooden door and splintered it in with the heel of his boot. "You will not deny me, Proserpina!" he bellowed as the door bulged, cracked and splintered.

When the last hinge groaned, and the gutted door slammed upon the dusty carpet, I flew at him, hissing with fangs bared and slashing with claws unsheathed. Pluto transformed into the most terrifying cat I could conjure. I had no thought for my own safety but was determined that Proserpina's shrinking spirit must survive.

Mr. Wight threw up both arms to shield his face and shrieked like the fiend he was. My claws caught in his flesh and dragged deep ridges down his cheeks and throat. Blood oozed like strung beads.

But before I could fall, his descending hands caught me and tried to strangle me. I twisted and raked at his wrists, his arms, the shredded fabric of his waistcoat at gut level. I would have—if I could have—eviscerated the man.

Mr. Wight dropped with me to the floor, pressed a knee onto my head, and gouged at my face with a long splinter of wood pried from the broken door. "Die, you demon!" he raged as his wooden stake plunged into my open eye.

He'd dug the eye out from the socket and yanked it from my head—oh, horrible searing burn and blackness!—before I felt the weight of Proserpina's descent upon him. She screamed like a madwoman, beat at his head, wrenched at his weapon arm in its socket. Unmindful of protecting my secrets, I called to her in my real voice, thunder deafening between closed walls, but they fought on.

They rocked, threatening to snap my neck under their combined weight. He whirled and seized her. As they grappled,

I—overcome by pain and panic—am ashamed to confess that I scrambled, clawing at empty air, to my four feet and bolted like a scaredy-cat from the room.

Hours—days?—later, my dear sweet mistress found me bleeding and yowling, rubbing at my oozing eye socket with a matted paw in the cellar, sure that I would soon die, trapped in Pluto’s tormented body, and be no more.

She reached out to me in my darkness, calling softly, “Pluto, darling Pluto. Come to Proserpina, kitty-mine. Come to me,” until I crept forward onto her lap. I must have slept, I know not how long.

It was not until Mr. Wight—that Fiend Incarnate—came to find her in the cellar that I saw by his lantern that my brave mistress barred him from us with a carving knife.

“Come any closer, sir,” she said—and the deadly calm of her voice stopped him in his tracks; I too had never heard such grave intent from her—“and I will slice my own throat. Your mother will accuse you not only of my theft but also of my murder, both crimes in this state, I do believe. Or shall we test my theory and see?”

He answered hoarsely, “Proserpina, my own, I promise you that before I ever again harm a hair of your head, I will shoot myself. Darling, come and see. I have replaced the door to your room. I have fitted the new door with a second bolt that reinforces the repaired lock. Come and eat, my dearest. I have prepared a repast. Regain your strength.”

I came fully to my senses. Was Proserpina to die with me in this cellar? No, this must not be. Not in her nearly soulless state.

I rubbed her chest with my sore head, purring feebly, and she clutched me more tightly. “Give me your gun,” she instructed Mr. Wight. Her heart hammered against my ear, but she pointed to the dirt floor with her knife. “Leave your pistol and your lantern there where I can see them at my feet. Then go out. Speak to

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me through the cellar door once you are outside. When I am convinced that you are indeed outside, I will take your pistol and lantern to my room and see for myself if you have repaired the door.”

With one hand holding his lantern aloft, Mr. Wight raised the other in surrender. “I will fetch my pistol, Proserpina,” he assured her, “and return here to give it to you. When I deliver it, you may shoot me, if you choose, for I will die joyously by your hand if that will prove how much I have always loved you.”

No! She must not shoot him and die by a speedy execution for a crime she could not repent because he deserved it. I purred, butting at her hand with my aching skull. *Love the cat, Proserpina. Live for the cat who loves you!* She shushed me with caresses as she watched him go.

He kept his word, as madmen sometimes do. Proserpina sat with her carving knife gripped in one hand and, in the other, his pistol pointed ahead until the cellar door swung open from the garden. “I am here, my darling,” Mr. Wight called and held it propped open as we rose together, stretched stiffened limbs, and began the slow climb to the second floor.

He must have not only brought in a man to help him replace and reinforce the door but a woman to help him clean up the disarray and load a small tray with bread and milk, for the carpet and walls showed no trace of the bloody business that had so recently cost me one of Pluto’s eyes.

Proserpina did not relinquish Mr. Wight’s pistol.

Instead, she locked us in and bargained with the madman for two days before she ventured to twist open the lock and slide back the bolt for a larger platter of victuals. Laden with pots of milk and tea and plates of cheese, baked fish and buttered bread,

he had left it in the hallway outside our door before he vacated the house, as Proserpina demanded before she'd opened the door.

"He will kill us in one of his rages," she confided to me, sipping the steaming tea, her shaking hands cupped about the little pot. I lapped at a bowl of warm milk and gobbled up chunks of buttered fish she'd spread out on a saucer for me. I stretched and felt Pluto's weary body revive, gaining strength to face the tasks that lay ahead.

It was abundantly clear to me now that, if I would save Proserpina, I must destroy Mr. Wight. He gave me no choice.

For I might abandon the husk of Pluto's body at any moment and return to the world of spirits without her, but what happiness would there be for me in such a flight? I who had lived through eons could not think of a time when my soul had not loved and sought out hers. If she could only leave her body in peace, content in death, we could clasp hands and fly away together, back to the world of eternity.

But she did not understand. And her terror was destroying our future.

I decided upon a plan. For Proserpina's sake, I must find a means of escape for us both or stand and defeat our common enemy where we were trapped. There was no other solution.

Pluto's scraped eye socket healed as I bided my time, slipped out at every opportunity to search the city's streets and alleyways for a safe route to flee the fiend, a sure means of escape including staunch friends willing to help us along our way.

It was thus that Mr. Wight came upon me in a backstreet, unawares. He seized me by the scruff, yanked a noose about my neck, and carried me dangling like that all the way home, where he hanged me at last from a tree in his garden of pet graves.

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I swiveled and flipped, yowling for my mistress to cut me down before I died. A spirit killed in a living body is a spirit destroyed. I could not—dared not—stay with Pluto until his body’s miserable end.

But if I fled his body’s second—and ultimate—death, could I ever return to the world in which dwelled my beloved?

No, I dared not leave the tortured body behind and have no way of rescuing my stranded mistress. So, I writhed and swiped at the tightening noose until—suddenly—nothingness engulfed me.

There are no words for the void.

There was nothing—no pain, no receding, no blankness, no blackness, no grey—until suddenly I came roaring back to consciousness—to life—as a fireball.

Hell exploded through the garden and blew in the doors and windows of the townhouse, a conflagration. Wrath bore me, racing up the stairways and down the passages of the narrow dwelling, touching walls and floorboards into flame. I knew not what or where I was, or if I was a demon riding a crest of hellfire. I knew only that I must seek out my enemy wherever he had gone to ground and obliterate him.

I cringe to recall that I spared no thought, no care for my mistress Proserpina but exulted as my enemy scuttled before me like a cockroach from the blaze. I did not come to my senses until, in the smoky dawn, I roused to find curiosity seekers surrounding my murderer, gazing up at the sole standing wall of his erstwhile townhouse.

There, emblazoned in a blackened silhouette burned right into the bricks, was the image of the hanged cat I had been.

Mr. Wight fled his neighbors’ accusations that only Satanic rites could have left that image standing where his house should have been. I slinked among the smoking ruins until I found the

smoldering shreds of Pluto's remains and pulled them around me, so that I might again have some semblance of body.

And it was thus that he and I came together, from two different directions down an alleyway, upon my mistress Proserpina, clutching at her pistol and staring wide-eyed.

"Come, my poor darling," Mr. Wight begged her. "If our neighbors spot us, we are done for. We are accused of practicing witchcraft with your cat and his evil eye."

Upon hearing me referred to so hideously by our common enemy, Proserpina woke from her stupor of shock and fear and screamed at him to get away from her. I yowled to her on her other side, and she struggled to her feet to limp wherever I might lead.

I meant to guide her to the friends I'd made along my planned escape route—here, a woman who could be trusted to put out a saucer of buttermilk; there, a girl who'd sneak out scraps from her dinner table; and over by the way, a friendly boy who was a veritable champion at stealing offal from the slaughterhouse—but Mr. Wight followed too closely on our heels to risk exposing our escape route. He could not know all, or we would be undone.

Helplessly, in the end, I watched as he overtook my mistress and coaxed her, still clutching the pistol, into the most dangerous of Baltimore's streets. For we had nowhere else—as a threesome of the bitterest of enemies—to turn.

So it was that, penniless and shunned by the superstitious, Mr. Wight and Proserpina sought shelter, and I, shameless in my dotting love for my mistress, tagged after them into the filthiest of slums. There, I once again took up my watch over my mistress's deteriorating spiritual state.

I had become Mistress Proserpina's only consolation. She had never had a child and, now, she never would. How could she survive these mounting miseries without me, her twin soul

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and her earthly champion? What else could I do but haunt them, Mr. Wight whom I hated, who held prisoner the woman I loved?

In Pluto's disintegrating remains like a moth-eaten favorite sweater, cowering in the deepest shadows, I shuddered to think of how I must appear. For I wore the poor cat like a noonday sun barely cloaked by wisps of clouds, skulking through our house's gapped walls and the slum's gutters in search of vermin enough to keep Pluto's body and my soul together. I thought obsessively of the fiend's desire to kill me and pondered my determination to rescue my mistress Proserpina, even at the threat of my own eternal destruction. And each night, as I lay in a niche between floorboards and cracked walls in sight of my sleeping beloved, I reminded myself that I must not still be in this body when Mr. Wight killed it for the third and final time.

As, most assuredly, he would.

"What is kitty staring at?" Proserpina swept me up into her arms from my perch, ensconced at the grimy kitchen window of our most recent lodging, scouring the narrow alleyway that fled from our back door toward the wharf.

She held me close and nuzzled my grizzled head with her cheek and kissed it as though it were still covered with soft fur.

Jealous, as always, Mr. Wight spoke sharply from the doorway into the parlor. "That's its evil eye that stares about, to damn the innocent." Startled, Proserpina dropped me as she turned to him. I thudded to the floor and heard him growl, "The cat itself is mindless and has no will. Its evil eye rules it. The accursed beast!"

I scuttled behind the cast iron stove to hide in the dwindling woodpile and watched from the darkness as Mr. Wight hoisted himself upright. Eyes bulging at Proserpina, he shambled backward, out of the doorway and to another room where we were not, thumping his cane to help him make his way.

I did not come that night when Proserpina called to me but inched through the cracks in the walls, dodging the fiend's rattraps in the dark, out into the city streets. I had to make my way to the vermin's nests along the wharf and eat my fill of their tender reeking babies, to fortify myself for the contest ahead. The time of the final contest was drawing near. I could feel it.

I did not reenter Mr. Wight's home for two days. The service door through the back kitchen remained sealed shut. I dared not slip in through the cracks in the walls, for fear of stepping into an unseen trap in the blackness, nor dared I brave the front door for fear of being attacked by the fiend.

So, I waited and watched at the back, plotting to get my mistress to follow me away to safety. Perhaps I would snatch her shawl from her shoulders and run out of the back door, or, if it were shut, dash madly from room to room inside the house until she opened a door to put me out. Then I would snag her skirts with my teeth and claws and tug at her to come with me, as she had once before. Surely, she must trust me enough to come away. *She must.*

We must flee, alone this time. For there was no more time.

Such was my plan.

After two days of such thinking, as soon as a chance presented itself, I burst into the kitchen behind Mr. Wight, his arms loaded with kindling, chopped wood and a borrowed axe. I'd hoped to slip in unnoticed, of course, but he dropped the wood, clattering it all around me as I dodged between his legs, barreling toward Proserpina's threadbare shawl.

"Pluto!" my mistress screamed.

I glanced up at her face, stunned to see horror there instead of the delight I'd anticipated. She dashed forward, not down toward me but straight toward the lumbering man.

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I wheeled and looked behind me just in time to see his arms pinned above his head by my dear mistress, as she struggled to keep him from splitting Pluto's body in two with the axe.

I slipped into the crevices in the wall behind the stove and heard a hideous crack and spatter behind me, as of bone hacked and flesh torn.

I knew, without seeing it, that as soon as her brave arms faltered against his superior strength, Mr. Wight must have turned the axe upon my beloved Mistress Proserpina.

Her body thumped onto the floor. I felt her yearning love disperse like morning mist burned in sunshine and knew she was lost to me.

Stunned, determined even in defeat, I fled into the walls, slinking from room to room, clutching at Pluto's fur as I tracked Mr. Wight wherever he dragged Proserpina. I watched as he hammered at a weakened spot in an inner wall, tore down the bricks and propped her upright inside, and then stacked the bricks again to wall her into a makeshift tomb.

The fiend had at last plundered the wretched remains of the man.

The next day, as the last brick was cemented into place before her staring, drying eyes, I clawed my way up from between her feet, clinging to her skirt, her bodice, her useless shawl, until I perched atop her head.

There was air enough for a small body like Pluto's to live on, who knows how long, given the cracks in the walls and outlets from there to the street. I would bide my time and, with the strength of my faithful love of my mistress, draw my enemy's destruction down upon him from the furthest reaches of the universe. *Justice*, I thought with all the force of my will. *Vengeance*.

I am loath to confess it, but since Proserpina's body no longer held her blessed soul, I did not scruple against eating and drinking the festering corpse and its stagnant blood. In this way, for the last time, my loving mistress made Pluto's weakening body stronger and fortified my will to emerge as her avenger.

Each time I descended from atop her head to nourish Pluto's remains on Proserpina's rotting flesh, I reminded myself that revenge was the last act of kindness I could offer my darling. I willed myself to keep Pluto's body alive to bring about the reckoning.

And yet, the horrible void overcame me.

I confess I might never again have clawed my way up from the nothingness had not that fool, Mr. Wight, rapped sharply at my prison wall with his cane. He meant only to brag to the policemen who searched for the woman who'd been heard to scream some days before and who now seemed to have gone missing, according to suspicious neighbors.

But it was the clanging of his cane like a gong that summoned me from the abyss.

Recalled to my nightmare, I woke wailing in my own voice, hell and heaven in Pluto. For sanctuary. For my lost love. Against my detested infinite existence. *My poor dear Proserpina is no more. What am I without her?* I called out in an ancient tongue I had not realized I still knew.

Silence as dust moats settled about the body in the wall.

And then, muffled on the other side of the wall, I heard a policeman shout, "Good God! What's that? Hold there, you!" And the policemen began to chop furiously at the wall, dislodging the newly reset bricks from their fresh cement.

I clutched at Pluto's sagging skin for the last time and dragged my voice down from the world of spirits and gods to the cadences of a miserable meow as the first bricks were pulled away.

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The policemen fell back in horror at the sight of me, even more hideous, I have no doubt, than the ravaged remains of my rotting, gouged mistress.

The fiend who had done her to death stood behind the sweating policemen, staring at me and pointing with his cane. “It is a thing of evil,” he rasped, urging them to see me as he described, the knob of his cane shaking where he leveled it at my face. “See its glaring eye? Its evil eye? It is a curse, my nemesis! It made me kill her! I confess it! But I only meant to dispose of that cursed black cat!”

As policemen fell upon him, I slid for the last time from contact with the earthly remains of my dear Proserpina, leaving Pluto’s fur, flesh and bones like a blanket pooled beneath her tumbling corpse.

I have determined to search throughout eternity for her soul and for Pluto’s too, just in case some particle of them escaped our torment and now wanders, lost and confused. It is the least I can do for my beleaguered beloved and her faithful black cat.