

CHINA BLUE
David Foley

When Richard and Todd broke up, Todd got custody of the cat China Blue. The agreement was never written up or signed, but it was sealed with the animosity bred of disappointed expectations and entrusted to the disdainful probity that rejection fosters. The agreement was this: Todd would keep the cat in his care, feed her and see she got her shots, and Richard would pick up the bills. It was Richard's cat. It was a beautiful long-haired Persian for which he had paid what he alternately described as "a pretty penny" or, more coyly, "a certain amount." But when Richard had walked out of Todd's apartment, suitcase in hand and lips thin with stifled recriminations, he had been thrown on his own devices and, subsequently, on the mercy of a landlord who didn't allow cats. So until Richard could make better arrangements, China Blue had to stay with Todd.

She was delivered up on a warm spring day—a foretaste of summer really—with only the light breeze playing through the banana leaves to take the edge off the heat of the sun. In the courtyard of Todd's French Quarter apartment, the gardenias were just beginning to bloom along the redbrick walk.

The negotiations were cool and dealt mostly with the details of how the support payments were to be made, at what intervals, and in what varying amounts, depending on the changing needs of the cat. Richard held China Blue up against his chest and stroked her long fur. Todd kept on his face the whole time that mocking, malevolent look that he knew annoyed Richard so much. His curly black hair covered his head in a tight unforgiving weave, and his blue eyes glittered unkindly. "It's just a cat," he finally said, when Richard had gone on too long about visiting rights. ("I don't want to intrude," he was saying, "on your privacy, however...")

"Well then," said Richard slowly, "that's that."

"Yes," said Todd, more brusquely than was really necessary. "That's that." And scooping China Blue into his arms, he turned away.

He moved up the wooden stairway to the balcony of his slave quarter apartment. The sun lay in broad swaths across the pink stucco, and the ferns on the balcony swayed in the breeze. Todd gave China Blue's hair a proprietary stroke. "The gate's open," he told Richard. "You can let yourself out."

"I'm worried about China Blue," Richard told Elaine at the Napoleon House bar.

"Who?" said Elaine.

"China Blue. My cat."

"You have a cat?"

It was July and very hot. A ceiling fan turned over their heads. The bar's shuttered doors were thrown open to the afternoon sun. Todd had had the cat for three months.

"Yes," Richard said. "I have a cat China Blue. She's beautiful. A long-haired blue Persian."

"I've never seen her."

"She doesn't live with me," Richard explained. "She's with Todd, my ex-lover. My landlord won't allow pets, so Todd agreed to take her until I can find a place that accepts cats. I'm paying kitty support."

Elaine took a sip of her gin-and-tonic and set it down in the puzzle of wet interlocking rings on the oak table. "So," she smiled. "Why are you worried?"

Richard's brow furrowed; a strand of pale blond hair stuck humidly to it. "He won't let me see her. He's even stopped cashing the support checks. I'm afraid he might have done something with her."

"Like what? Tied her up in the attic and shaved little triangles into her fur?"

Richard only gazed solemnly back at her. "He might have given her away. She might," he said darkly, "have died."

"I'm sure she's fine. He's probably just forgotten to cash the checks. Call him up."

"I've tried calling him. He won't talk to me. He hangs up."

"Doesn't he like you?"

"He *resents* me. Naturally. We were in love."

"But he wouldn't kill your cat."

"No-o-o," said Richard slowly. "He's not *vicious*. It's just..."

"Well?"

"Well, he's a little strange."

"Your ex-lover?"

"Maybe 'strange' isn't the right word. Maybe I mean 'peculiar.'"

"What's the difference?"

"I'm not sure," he said.

"Well," said Elaine, pushing a mass of red hair back from her face and letting the breeze from the ceiling fan cool her forehead, "if he's that peculiar, why did you give him your cat?"

Richard looked uncomfortable for a moment. He followed the path of a young man passing outside the bar on the sun-battered street. "We were in love," he said. And in the bluntness of Elaine's gaze, he felt immediately how flimsy it sounded.

Within a month Richard, goaded by his worries about China Blue and the fact that his current apartment had no air conditioning, had found himself a cat-friendly apartment. It was just outside the French Quarter and had a little balcony facing out on Chartres Street. He could sit on his balcony on a nice day and look up through the Quarter, past the roofs of the Spanish houses and the spires of the Cathedral, to the high office buildings of the central business district, glittering distant and foreign in the sun, the clouds at their backs.

Elaine stood in the middle of the apartment, the evening of the day he moved in, and looked critically around her, one hand on her hip. Every once in a while she took a few short, brisk steps, heels cracking on the wooden floor. When she had finished her inspection, she pronounced, "It's cute. I like it. You need a rug."

"I've got one," said Richard. "It's rolled up in the kitchen." He sank disconsolately onto the sofa, among the framed prints he'd stacked there.

"What's the matter?" Elaine asked.

"I've got to get my cat back."

"Cat?" said Elaine, puzzled for a moment. "Oh. You mean Blue China."

"China Blue," Richard corrected her.

"Well, call your friend up and get him back."

"*Her*," said Richard. "And I've tried calling him. He won't answer the phone. He keeps hanging up. He knows I want her back."

"How can he know you want her back if he won't talk to you?"

"He knows," said Richard gloomily. "Things get around."

The truth was that Richard believed in the prescience of old lovers, a prescience rooted in an obsession that is not, by time or distance, easily diminished. If Richard had an image of Todd, it was of Todd sitting alone on his apartment balcony, sipping at a rum-coke while the light disappeared from the city and the courtyard was subsumed in night, until the only light left was the glitter in Todd's cold blue eyes indicating thoughts of Richard. Richard believed that love's habits are harder to kill than love.

"We'll have to go over there and get her," Richard sighed.

"We?" said Elaine.

"Well, I don't want to go alone. I'll need a witness in case he tries anything."

"He's hardly going to pull a gun on you." Richard looked up at her. "It's so damn hot, Richard," she said. "I've had a long day."

In the fading light Richard's face looked pale and sad. "I have to get my cat back," he said.

Elaine sighed. "Can I stop by my apartment and change?"

It was an awful mid-August night; it clung to them like hot wet rags. Wearing shorts and T-shirts, sweat-beaded legs bared to the assaults of mosquitos and gnats, they stole up to Todd's apartment building.

Their first stroke of luck was finding his gate unlocked. This, they reasoned, allowed them the element of surprise. They crept into the courtyard and up the steps to Todd's balcony. Stravinsky, softly played on the stereo inside, filtered through the window screens and into the night.

They knocked on the door. Soft footsteps came towards them, and for a moment the peephole in the door darkened, then went light again. More footsteps, and the stereo snapped off. For a while everything was still.

"He's not going to answer," murmured Richard unnecessarily. He brushed away a fern leaf that was tickling his leg and frowned at the door.

Suddenly a shape appeared in a lighted window at the other end of the balcony. A blue shadow paused on the window sill, arched its back, took a stiff balletic step or two, then leapt out of sight.

"China Blue," whispered Richard.

He banged on the door.

"Todd!" he shouted. "I know you're in there! I can hear you! Open the door! I just want my cat!"

Elaine put a hand up into her tangled damp hair and sighed. "I don't think he's going to answer," she said.

"Todd!" Richard began again, "I know she's in there! I saw her in the window! I'll get a lawyer! I'll call the police!"

Elaine shifted impatiently. "Todd!" she called. "You don't know me. I'm a friend of Richard's. We don't want anything but the cat. If I went in there, would you give the cat to *me*, and I'll bring it out to Richard?" There was still no reply. "What's the matter, Todd?" Elaine yelled. "Cat got your tongue?"

"Don't annoy him!" Richard hissed.

They heard the footsteps again. Then a light came on in another room.

"He's in the bedroom," Richard muttered. "Let's go around to the end of the house."

They climbed down from the balcony, followed the walkway to the back of the building, and stood under the bedroom window.

"Richard." A voice spoke down to them.

They looked up. Todd stood in the window, holding an object which Richard couldn't, in the dim light, make out at first. Then he realized it was China Blue's kitty litter, a shallow wooden crate lined with burlap that Todd and Richard had made together when China Blue was still a kitten. Todd emptied its contents into their upturned faces. The bedroom light went out, and he was gone.

"So that," said Elaine, "was Todd."

When Elaine had gone home—when she had rinsed out her hair and borrowed a clean T-shirt, when she had picked the last bit of kitty litter out of her eyelashes and made her last tasteless joke about it, when, with a quick peck on the cheek and a promise to call the next day, she had gone out the door and clattered down the stairs, Richard was left alone in his new and disordered apartment.

Slowly he began to lay his rug, to hang his prints, to unpack his books. All the while he thought of Todd.

Now he had a different image of Todd. He no longer thought of him as motionless on his balcony, letting the night pass around him as he mused. Now, in Richard's mind, Todd was active, ceaseless, moving from room to room in his apartment, indulging some unfathomable obsession. As he moved, now and then, a light would come on, glowing diffuse and ghostly on the humid air. All the while he thought of Richard; he seemed to wish him harm.

Richard feared for China Blue.

It had become a matter for the police. On Sunday morning Richard called Elaine and said, "We have to get the police. Let's have brunch, and then we'll call the police."

It was a beautiful morning, if hot; a perfect morning to put on your khakis shorts, your most pristine T-shirt or your polo knit, and go and join the brunch crowd; the kind of morning when the long-time lover or Saturday night's find looks equally well across a table laid with eggs, biscuits, coffee, and the Sunday paper. If Elaine and Richard lingered over their omelets and coffee, it was as much for the leisured pleasantness of everything around them as for dread of the ordeal to come. Eventually, though, the last of their eggs were wiped up with corners of toast, the final refills were drained from their cups, and the paper was folded and put away. Reluctantly, they left the restaurant, made their way down lush and sunlit Esplanade, let themselves into Richard's apartment, and called the police.

Officers Deveaux and Johnson proved willing to help. They came to Richard's apartment, a tall redhaired man and a pudgy freckled black man with a small moustache, and listened patiently to the story.

"The problem is," Richard explained, "I'm afraid he may hurt my cat."

"If he hurts the cat," said Officer Deveaux, "then you got me on your side. I don't like to see no one hurt a dumb animal."

Officer Johnson nodded and looked at his watch.

"Well, shall we go over there?" said Richard.

"Is there any way you can make him give us the cat?" asked Elaine as they walked up to St. Peter Street.

"We can't just take the cat," Deveaux explained. "If he won't give it up voluntarily, then you gotta go to court and prove it's yours."

"I can do that," said Richard. "I still have the receipt."

They arrived at Todd's apartment and rang at the gate.

"Hello!" Todd's voice hummed through the intercom.

"This is the police," said Johnson. "We have someone here who says you have his cat. We'd appreciate it if you'd give it back to him."

There was a long silence, and then the buzzer sounded. They pushed the gate open and went in.

"It's the second floor," said Richard, but there was no sign of Todd. The four of them stood among the banana leaves and gazed up at Todd's balcony.

Then from inside the apartment, they heard a cat scream.

"He's hurting that cat," Officer Deveaux noted.

A door opened, and Todd appeared on the balcony dangling China Blue by the tail. China Blue squirmed and howled, but she could neither escape nor reach her tormentor with her claws. Her blue, turbulent fur shone against the pink stucco.

"You want your cat, Richard?" said Todd.

"Todd! Put her down!" screamed Richard.

("That the cat?" murmured Deveaux.)

"You want your cat?"

"Please! Put her down!"

"Here she comes." And Todd's arm began to swing. Once, twice, three times, China Blue arced over Todd's head. Then he let go.

China Blue came yowling towards them, scrabbling at the air. Taking Officer Johnson's hat as she passed, she slammed into the courtyard wall, clawed her way along it for several feet, then dropped to the ground, streaking like blue lightning out the gate.

"That's assault!" yelled Johnson. "Get the cuffs! Call a cruiser!" And he charged up the stairs to the balcony while Deveaux barked something into his transistor.

Richard flung himself out of the gate. Outside, the dust of China Blue's passing was just settling, but she was nowhere in sight. Then Richard noticed a tiny drop of blood on the pavement and, two feet further on, another drop. China Blue had been wounded. He thought if he followed the drops of blood, he would find her eventually, in some narrow hiding place, licking her wounds, her blue fur matted with fear. Making little kissing noises, he set off down the street. A police cruiser passed him and pulled up at the curb.