

EMILY PAPE

Pablo

Some things in this world are unspeakably evil. My mother's cat, for example. A morbidly obese creature with fur reminiscent of the dust bunnies beneath the futon, the thing that stared intently at the door that led to the closet beneath the stairs.

His name is Pablo. Pablo likes to rake his non-declawed paws along just about everything I own, ranging from the comforter on my bed to the shoes on my feet. No one else's belongings, just mine. This is Pablo's equivalent of wiping his Cheetos-cheese-covered fingers along the back of my t-shirt and smirking while he does it, a signature to be discovered later in big obnoxious streaks that seem to say "Pablo was here."

Pablo also enjoys sitting on the TV remote when I am beating the last dungeon boss on my Xbox 360. Not just once in a while, not just occasionally. He does this at every possible opportunity. Pablo watches me patiently, measuring the focus I have diverted from his button-clad target in favor of the TV screen. Then the TV goes dark because it is always the power button he hits. At this point, after wrestling the remote out from beneath his fat ass and discovering that my character is dead and that I have not saved the game in three hours, Pablo and I look at each other.

I imagine my face says something like: "Why have you done this to me, Pablo?"

Pablo gazes back at me with ease and blinks slowly. Then a small smile creeps onto his face and he shrugs casually: "Because your misery is delicious."

So, because Pablo is a manifestation of furry malevolence, and

therefore enjoys shredding the precious little details of my life, it was only natural that he assumed the role of snitch this particular morning. His tail twitched steadily, his posture alert with his stare nailed firmly to the closet door. I watched him from the futon stationed at the bottom of the stairs, right next to the entrance to the closet, my fingers frozen on my controller, my animated warrior standing idly on the TV screen.

I could hear my mother walking out of her room upstairs. Her footsteps creaked down the hall, growing louder. All the while, Pablo stared at that stupid door.

You see, Pablo knew. Pablo knew just how utterly dependent my moodswing-prone mother's mental state hinged on being able to follow his orders. In his mind, she was a perfectly obedient meat puppet and did not require punishment in the form of claw shredding and button pressing so long as she continued to do his bidding. This meant that my mother would walk down the stairs, spot her angelic Pablo, and see that something behind the closet door was bothering him. And she would open it. And Pablo would smile.

I know that Pablo is evil. Pablo knows that I know. However, Pablo also knows that no matter how fat he is, he still resembles something that does not deserve to receive equal retaliation in response to his atrocious deeds. I don't know why an image of an innocent, defenseless creature comes to mind when I think about beating Pablo furiously with pillows. It just does. Most days he walks around the house, knowing full well that I outweigh him by more than a hundred pounds, and believes he is untouchable.

Today was one of the rare days Pablo was wrong. I came prepared.

I turned up the volume of the TV and brought up the pause menu, blaring generic adventure music; my mother had paused at the mirror at the top of the stairs, so luck was in my favor. I retrieved the spray bottle from beneath a pillow.

Pablo tensed. He turned his head and looked at me. Pablo's eyes are bright orange, like the evil Lord Sauron's eye from *The Lord of the Rings* movies. His pupils dilated, as if tempting me to stare into their collective dark abyss and cower in fear from the horrors that lurked within. He was testing me, judging whether or not I truly had the backbone to oppose him and receive the punishment he was sure to dish out later.

I got him right between the eyes, the spray bottle set to full blast. He did that funny little dance cats do when they get a jolt of surprise, jumping about ten feet back with his limbs and tail rigidly straight. Then he scrambled towards the laundry room, where he would probably sulk in his litterbox and plot revenge.

I hastily tucked the spray bottle back beneath the futon pillow as my mother determined that her hair still looked like hair before descending the stairs. She was dressed for work in brown slacks and a pale pink blouse.

“Turn that down,” she said as she walked down the stairs. I scrolled the volume on the TV down to zero, abruptly cutting off the game soundtrack.

She paused on the last landing. “Dylan, try to get some of your laundry done today, okay?”

“Kay.”

She frowned at my slouched form. “I mean it.”

“I know.”

She raised her eyebrows skeptically. “Mmm.” She walked down the remaining four stairs, her heels clicking as she reached the stone entryway floor.

“Do you want me to start supper tonight?” I asked.

“Yeah. I won’t be home until five at least. You know how it goes.”

“No problem.”

She slipped into her coat and retrieved her purse from the coat rack. Then she stopped her off-to-work shuffle, pausing to look for a shin-high feline.

“Where’s Pablo?”

“I think he’s in the litterbox.”

“Oh.” Her expression fell, just a little bit. I sort of felt bad and sort of didn’t.

“He’ll be here when you get back.”

She sighed. Pablo had her under his complete control. “I’ll see you later.”

“Bye.”

She took a final glance around for Pablo and reluctantly walked out the door. It clicked shut behind her and the house was suddenly very quiet.

In the laundry room, I could hear Pablo scratching around in his litterbox. Upstairs, my mother had forgotten to turn off the radio on her alarm clock and I could discern what sounded like Kenny Chesney echoing down the hallway. In the closet under the stairs, there was a muffled *thump* and an “ouch.” I shuffled down to the “save” option on the pause menu and saved over my last checkpoint. I exited the game, switching back to the Xbox home menu.

The loose gravel in the driveway crackled beneath the Trail Blazer’s wheels as my mother backed out. The door to the stairway closet cracked open. I waved him back; she might have forgotten something.

Pablo peeked around the corner, watching the closet door with shrewd speculation.

The Trail Blazer paused as my mother shifted out of reverse. I waited until she had driven down the hill towards the main road and was out of hearing range.

“Okay, now you can come out.”

Alex stooped out of the closet beneath the stairs, rubbing the back of his neck. I wondered why his mother, Ellen, hadn’t picked up on the fact that Alex had walked out to the bus stop still in his pajamas. She hadn’t though; he wouldn’t have made it out the door if she had, much less have been able to skip the bus stop altogether and walk the few hundred feet from his driveway down to my house. The public schools weren’t out for Thanksgiving break yet, but Alex had a tendency to stretch his breaks by a day or two.

“She said she was working until five, right?” he asked. I had let him in when my mom was still in the shower, since it wasn’t warm outside, but he couldn’t exactly reveal to my mother that he was skipping school; my mother and Ellen were too friendly for that.

“Yeah. Did you call yourself in?” I asked. Alex had a deep voice and could easily pass as a parent whenever he called the admissions office at school, if it even really mattered.

“Yep.” Alex grinned. Suddenly, he felt a hostile presence behind him and looked over his shoulder. He found Pablo still peeking around the corner, watching him.

“Hello, Pablo,” Alex said.

Pablo grumbled deep within his chest, his orange eyes blazing with annoyance.

“Yeah, I hate you too.” Alex turned back to me. “What do you want to play?”

I gestured toward the TV stand and the shelves on the side that housed my Xbox 360 games. “You pick.”

Alex lumbered over to the shelf. Pablo slinked out from behind the corner and glided over to stand behind him.

“Hmm... This one—”

Alex turned, game in hand, and very nearly fell flat on his face as Pablo wove in-between his legs and sauntered off.

A red flush crept up Alex’s face, his eyes darkening as he watched the high-held tail flash up the stairs. Then he looked back to me, questioning.

I held up my hands. “Pablo can do no wrong, in my mother’s eyes.”

Alex let out a sharp breath and opened the disc tray of the Xbox.

Over the course of the next few hours, it was strangely quiet upstairs. Perhaps I should have taken that for a bad omen, but Alex and I were too preoccupied making twelve year olds cry on Xbox Live. The sunlight streaming through the window grew brighter and glared on the TV screen.

“What time is it?”

Alex looked at his phone. “Almost one.”

“Seriously?” We were in a game lobby, waiting for the match to start.

The springs in the futon creaked as I got up and wandered over to the pantry in the kitchen. There were water bottles on the bottom shelf that were meant for packing lunches. I grabbed two and handed one to Alex when I sat back down.

The other people waiting in the lobby chattered on their mikes. Thirty seconds until the game started. The country station was still buzzing upstairs.

Alex seemed to notice it the same time I did.

“What is that?”

“My mom’s alarm clock.”

“No, not that...”

Then I heard it.

The wet, gurgling sound. It was coming from right above me, halfway down the stairs. There was a sinking feeling in my stomach even before Pablo emptied the contents of his onto my upturned face.

Alex gasped and flinched away. The futon shifted abruptly as he leaned back.

I numbly wiped the cat vomit away from my eyes and stared up at the cold, orange orbs that gazed down upon me. Pablo watched me the way a spider watches a particularly juicy fly, a self-satisfied smirk stretching across his features.

Alex fumbled with the controller and turned off the Xbox.

“Dude, *why haven’t you abandoned that cat in the woods yet?* That thing’s demonic.”

Pablo still stared down at me, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

So I looked straight back at Pablo and said, “Let’s do it.”

“What?” Alex asked.

“Let’s take a walk out to the woods.”

Pablo stopped smiling.