

"THE BLACK CAT"

By

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FADE IN:

INT. SMITH KITCHEN - DAY

OSCAR and Molly "SMUDGE" Smith live in a terrace council house that is in need of repair. Their home is clean, but is not and has never been tidy.

The front door leads straight into the kitchen. Watching the letter box is PLUTO, a black cat or, possibly, the personification of a malevolent spirit that communicates telepathically with its mistress. He has that sort of look.

A kettle is boiling nearby. When, "pop", the post comes through like a toaster ejecting toast, PLUTO begins to miaow, incessantly.

Finally, OSCAR comes over and takes the post. OSCAR is a secondary school teacher in his late twenties, wearing a tie and a short sleeved shirt that cost less than a replacement letter box.

The cat follows him to the kitchen table, where he starts flipping through the letters. Bills, final warnings, overdue credit card statements. He reaches a final letter, different from the others, and opens it to read. PLUTO jumps onto the table.

OSCAR

Oh no.

His head thumps on the kitchen table. He recovers, and puts the letter in his pocket. It crumples. He pours the coffee and picks up PLUTO.

OSCAR

Come on, Pluto. If we feed her coffee first she might not kill us both.

INT. SMUDGE'S BASEMENT - DAY

OSCAR knocks on the basement door with the toe of his show (he's carrying a mug of coffee and the cat).

OSCAR

Smudge? Are you decent?

SMUDGE

I'm working, Oscar!

OSCAR

I brought coffee and cat.

OSCAR pushes down the handle of the door with his elbow and walks down the stairs in SMUDGE's studio. There is a large desk with an artist's board, and a computer that is five years old but easily the most expensive thing in the house.

The walls covered in sample art and character designs from her webcomic "The Black Cat." SMUDGE may be talented - bright watercolours with energetic lines - but it's basically derivate manga bullshit.

SMUDGE sits at her computer. She is the same age as OSCAR, but looks older, and she wears jogging clothes several sizes too big.

SMUDGE

Come here Pluto.

SMUDGE switches windows on her computer and turns in her chair so that the cat can come to her, which he does. OSCAR follows down the stairs.

SMUDGE

What time is it?

OSCAR

Eight-Thirty.

SMUDGE

Wednesday evening?

OSCAR

Thursday morning. Going outside today?

SMUDGE

Nope.

OSCAR kisses her on the cheek. She strokes PLUTO.

OSCAR

Post arrived.

SMUDGE

Did you open it?

OSCAR.

Watcha working on.

He looks over her shoulder. On the computer screen is a spreadsheet showing profit and loss from her webcomic. There aren't a lot of numbers.

OSCAR (CONT...)

Hey, black numbers. Black numbers are good.

SMUDGE

I'm making less than minimum wage.

OSCAR

Internet money's like dog years. You've got to multiply it by seven.

SMUDGE

Is that what you're going to tell the bank?

OSCAR

(Moves over and starts looking at her drawings) These are great. Did Jones agree to cut the hosting charges?

SMUDGE

He did. He will. He's not competitive 'cause he won't host porn on his server.

OSCAR

And there you stand, the last bastion of decency on the internet.

SMUDGE

I'd be better off working in Starbucks.

OSCAR

For the uniform?

SMUDGE

For the free coffee. (She makes a mock disgusted face and puts down the coffee he brought)

OSCAR

Come help me feed the kids.

INT SMITH LIVING ROOM - DAY

OSCAR and SMUDGE make their way back up the stairs and into the living room.

The Smith's living room is not a place for human beings. There are many pets here; birds, goldfish, a small monkey, and a bowl for a dog that we can't see

As they talk, OSCAR works his way around the cages, feeding and watering the animals. SMUDGE follows him carrying PLUTO.

OSCAR

I could stay and have breakfast with you.

SMUDGE

You'll be late for work.

OSCAR

They all have iPhones. They practically teach themselves.

SMUDGE

If you're staying for breakfast then it's bad news.

OSCAR

Yeah. I'm sorry.

He hands her the crumpled letter from his pocket and gets back to the animals. She smooths the letter on her thigh.

SMUDGE

What for?

OSCAR

The union isn't going to pay.

Smudge stares at the letter without reading.

OSCAR (CONT...)

Hey, look, the paper offered a payment plan.

SMUDGE

I don't see why we have to pay their lawyers.

OSCAR

Because we lost.

SMUDGE

I lost, Oscar. I got fired.

OSCAR

And they were wrong. And you got better. And the union should be paying.

INT SMITH KITCHEN - DAY

The argument follows them back into the Kitchen. SMUDGE sits at the table.

SMUDGE

Was this all the mail? (She flips through the letters) Any good news?

The phone rings. SMUDGE is right next to it, but she does not pick it up. OSCAR goes past her and answers the phone.

OSCAR

Sure, she's right here, I can... Ok...

She hung up. Who's Poppy?

SMUDGE

Poppy Who?

OSCAR

Poppy who was just on the phone and says you need to come in this morning.

SMUDGE

Must be a wrong number.

OSCAR

Is it a job interview? You can tell me.

SMUDGE

No. No! I thought you supported what I was doing here?

OSCAR

Of course I...

SMUDGE

But you want me to get a job?

OSCAR

I want you to be happy...

SMUDGE

You want me to get a uniform and tell people to have a nice day.

OSCAR

Don't forget the free coffee.

SMUDGE

It's not funny.

OSCAR

Look, if you decide to go back to work I'll support you. There are other

newspapers in other towns. I can change schools. I'll go where you go, you know that.

But I think you should make the business work. You're too talented to waste your time working for someone else. These things take time. The comic is starting to bring in money, and those numbers were the best we've seen since you started.

We're managing.

I'll sell the car

SMUDGE

If you sell the car how will you get to work?

OSCAR

I'll steal a bike. I used to ride into college, remember?

He goes to the fridge to get some juice, avoiding meeting her eyes. What he sees in the fridge freezes him solid.

OSCAR

Smudge? Whose beers are these in the fridge?

SMUDGE

Yours? (Long Pause. SMUDGE looks at PLUTO.) Did you put them there, PLUTO?

OSCAR

You want me to take them away?

SMUDGE

It's ok, Oscar. You can have beers in the house. I'm ok.

Oscar clearly wants to say something more, but doesn't find the words, then chickens out and closes the fridge.

OSCAR

Watcha going to do today?

SMUDGE

Draw. Write. Say rude things about the union on the internet.

OSCAR

You'll be home all day?

SMUDGE

Where else would I be?

OSCAR

It's not a problem, if you want to go out. I can feed PLUTO.

SMUDGE

No you can't. And why would I want to go out? You're going to be late for work.

OSCAR

You sure you don't want me to take those
beers away?

SMUDGE

Get out of here before you get fired too.

He grabs his coat, gives her a kiss and heads towards the
door.

SMUDGE

Hey, Oscar?

OSCAR

(Popping his head back through the door)
Princess?

SMUDGE

I love you. Don't sell the car.

OSCAR

Dog years, Smudge. The bank will
understand.

OSCAR leaves. SMUDGE strokes the PLUTO for a bit, then
puts him on the table and looks at the letter. The cat
watches her until she can't stand it anymore.

SMUDGE

It wasn't a lie, PLUTO. It was a projection. The site will make money.

PLUTO is not convinced. SMUDGE gets up and checks out of the window as OSCAR drives the car away.

SMUDGE

Do you think it's safer to go out the back? (She looks back at PLUTO, who still isn't convinced.) Fuck you, PLUTO.

She pushes the cat off the table.

INT. POPPY'S PUBLICITY - DAY

Poppy's Publicity is based in two featureless rooms in a featureless warehouse smack back in the middle of a featureless industrial estate.

The first room is POPPY's office. POPPY is a middle aged woman in a Marks and Spencer's suit. She is being interviewed by two police officers, DI TIGGER and DI SHADOW.

POPPY's Office looks out over the second room via a large window that gives the impression of a police interview room, or a lab for aliens to observe the behaviour of monkeys.

SMUDGE comes through the front door into the second room, and then walks into the office without looking up. Everyone stops talking and stares. POPPY eyes widen and she shakes her head, as if she were trying to shake an insect from her nose. SMUDGE backs out and closes the door.

She trudges over to one of two tables that look like they have been stolen from a school. There are boxes of leaflets and boxes of envelopes. SMUDGE sits at her table, picks up one box of leaflets, and two boxes of envelopes.

At the other table sits FELIX. FELIX grunts into his beard as he stuffs leaflets mechanically into envelopes. He is hypnotically fast. On his T-Shirt is a Manga girl with impossible cleavage positioned for an up-skirt shot of her underwear. Emblazoned above the startled girl's pink hair are the words "Fuck Bitches."

SMUDGE starts stuffing envelopes. She lacks both the speed and the zen-like quality of FELIX. The clock on the wall anaemically struggles to move its own second hand.

FELIX

Hey. Hey, Smudge. Hey. Hey. Hey. Hey, Smudge.

SMUDGE

What do you want Felix?

FELIX

You got any cigarettes?

SMUDGE

No.

Time is passing. SMUDGE looks at her hands. Her hands are shaking. She looks back at the office. The police officers are still talking to POPPY.

SMUDGE

Felix, do you know what's going on in there?

FELIX doesn't answer. She goes back to stuffing envelopes,

but she cuts her finger. She opens a drawer, pulls out a plaster. She squeezes the finger and watches the blood. She puts on the plaster.

FELIX

Hey. Hey, SMUDGE. You got anything to drink?

SMUDGE

No.

FELIX

Bitch.

The police officers leave the office, followed by POPPY, and walk outside. POPPY comes back in, then goes into the office. She throws a paperweight at the wall.

POPPY

Fuck!

POPPY rifles her desk and empties out the filing cabinet. SMUDGE and FELIX continue stuffing envelopes. Try as she might, SMUDGE can't go as fast as FELIX.

POPPY comes over to SMUDGE and puts an envelope of money on the table. It's not a lot, low denomination notes that have been used elsewhere.

SMUDGE

What's this?

POPPY

Wages for this week.

SMUDGE.

I'm not done. You haven't done the count.

POPPY

It doesn't matter.

SMUDGE

But you haven't done the count. I can go faster.

POPPY

It doesn't matter. There won't be a count. I have to let you go.

SMUDGE

What?

POPPY

I have to let you go. You don't work here anymore.

SMUDGE

Poppy, please. I can stuff faster. I need the money.

POPPY

I can't help you.

SMUDGE

But what am I going to do?

POPPY

Something else.

EXT. POPPY'S PUBLICITY - DAY

A faceless industrial estate. SMUDGE sits on the curb by the road, the envelope of money on the floor next to her. She is peeling and replacing the plaster on her finger. The sunlight is too bright.

FELIX comes and stands close enough that he casts his shadow over her. He's clutching a larger envelope of cash.

SMUDGE

She fire you too?

FELIX

There's an off-licence by the garage,
right?

SMUDGE

Yeah. Good luck, Felix.

FELIX

Whatever. You got any cigarettes?

SMUDGE

I don't smoke.

Felix wanders off. SMUDGE takes one last look at his T-Shirt.

SMUDGE

Fuck bitches.