

THE WHOMPUS CAT

by B. J. Campbell

In the stillness after the snow, the sound of whispering down the road zinged past my ears like a rifle shot. I knew it had to be Millie May Staler and her big brother, Corbin, because they had walked home from school with me as far as the mailboxes, where we had waved goodbye. Now, drawing on all my stealth as a ten-year-old Indian scout, I crept soundlessly up over the small rise. Without snapping a twig, I oozed into place behind a big fir tree to discover the cause of all the secrecy they were broadcasting through the forest.

Corbin, who was busy looking right and left and over his shoulder, had the brown wrapped package opened by the time I saw it. Shiny things inside caught the light for a second, then vanished under what looked like red fur, and some blue cloth. I caught a glimpse of some cookies, too, just before they disappeared into Corbin's and Millie May's mouths.

"Look! A purph!" cried Millie May with her mouth full as she rifled through the packing in the box. Not knowing what a purph was, I craned for a better look.

"It's just a stupid blue purse," Corbin said, "full of dumb girl stuff."

"But it's beauteeful! I want it, I want it!" She was talking better now, and grabbing as Corbin waved the purse above her head.

"You know this isn't yours. If you take it home, you'll have to give it to Ma. Her name was on the package."

"Yeah." It was clear she didn't like the idea.

"Let's hide it," hissed Corbin, the evil genius. I wasn't surprised. Millie May hopped up and down, looking for a good place to store her treasure.

"There. In that stump, where the hole dents down in the middle."

So they stashed the blue purse in my cedar stump in my back yard and ran off down the road, plotting to come back for it later.

As soon as their voices died off over the hill, I pulled out the ill concealed purse and spread its entire glittering contents over the snow near the stump. Then I attacked the rotted stump with my bare hands, ripping off decayed hunks of wood and flinging them in a twenty-foot circle. A grenade under the stump couldn't have wrecked the landscape any better. I found an old piece of cowhide, plucked off enough hair for a credible effect and scattered it among the ruins.

Satisfied, I stepped back.

"Now, for the perfect finishing touches," I schemed. Doubling both fists so my thumbs were drawn down across my fingernails, I made prints in the snow, palms down, around the disaster area. In trapper fashion, I backed out of the scene, covering all my own footprints with my fistpaw-prints.

At last I was far enough away to make my last print and straighten up.

"Whompus Cat," I declared under my breath. "They do terrible damage,"

I could hardly sleep all night for glee, anticipating Millie May's terror when she came back for the purse.

At school the next day the air seemed electrified. Kids listened in small, rapt groups as Millie May and Corbin told about it, and each child wanted to be the first to tell each newcomer about the horrible animal loose in the forest nearby. Mr. Staler had surveyed the site, they said, as had another neighbor down the road, and those men said they'd never seen anything like it, in these parts, anyway. Naturally, I offered that it was quite probably a Whompus Cat.

"A what?" says Millie May, her eyes widening. She was a scare-cat anyway.

"They're about the size of a large bobcat," I said knowingly, "with a clump of hair and bone as big as a baseball at the end of their tails. If they attack, it's usually out of revenge for evil deeds, and they use that tail to whomp the daylights out of you."

“That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard of, Bob Campbell,” said Millie May. Her eyes were starting to tear up, so I continued.

“Whompus cats are rarely seen, and then only in the dark, but it is known that their legs on one side are shorter than on the other, like a SideHill Gouger. It helps them stay level when they creep around mountainsides,” and I paused here for dramatic effect, “in search of people who have done bad things, like stealing and lying.”

She went away whimpering, and I heard Corbin say he didn’t think revenge sounded like a valid cause for a cat attack. By the worried

angle of his eyebrows I could tell he wasn’t sure about that.

Of course, secrets are a lot more fun when somebody else knows, so I shared my triumph with Alice. After all, sisters are supposed to be allies in important times like these. However, Alice squealed, probably because I was having too much fun. Besides, Dad was getting a little testy about having to walk Millie May and Corbin and several other kids for a mile or so past the attack site after school four nights in a row. He tanned my rear, but we Indian Scouts are a tough breed.