



My Fair-Weather Friend

by: Karl J.

People don't rent the old lake house anymore. They say it's haunted. I don't know what they're talking about. I've been here since my ex, Brenda, killed me, and I've never seen a ghost.

The only regular visitor I've had over the past six years is a semi-feral old tabby I named Brendatoo. She and I have been pals ever since I scared off a fox that was stalking one of her litters. That was when I learned that animals could sense me.

Like my ex, Brendatoo is a fair-weather friend. In the case of Brendatoo, it's because she has a warm home up by the highway where she winters over. She only comes to visit me once spring brings its thaw. Brenda, on the other hand, is just cold hearted with no thaw in her.

So, yeah, my name is Jeremy Stadler, maybe you've heard of me. I was the Arid Pub comic of the week one time, and my online video channel made three different top one-hundred lists for up-and-coming comedians, including one list of the ten hottest millennials to keep your eyes on. Hurrah, I guess.

When I died the gigs dried up. It's hard to play a club in Akron when your spirit is stuck with your corpse near Klamath Falls.

I came to the Oregon mountains to work on material. My catch phrase, a world weary "hurrah" after detailing some dubious millennial achievement, hadn't caught on. My punch lines were losing their punch. My parents owned this little cabin on the shore of Delsa Lake. It was after Labor Day, after the summer rentals dried up. I didn't tell my folks I headed up there. Brenda and I made a road trip of it. As far as anyone else knew, I spent that fall in my studio apartment in west Denver. One of those old roadside motels that got converted after Colfax was no longer the main highway into town. So, yeah, when I disappeared, no one was looking for me in Oregon. Hurrah for privacy, and untraceable burner phones.

Speaking of burner phones, don't knock them. They may be cheap, but they come with cameras and text and built-in games. The little phone that came to my grave with me has been a lifesaver for this dead guy. Ghosts have an affinity for two things – coins and low-power electronics. You've heard about ghostly phone calls whispering down the line, right? Well, I had no bars at the lake, but some ghostly energy let me charge that thing up and play the preloaded games. I mean, I couldn't push buttons, but if I wanted the app to run, it ran.

Also, if you're interested, there were eight dollars and forty-seven cents in change within my range – and two incredibly old Spanish dollars. Sometimes I rolled coins across the floor of the cabin to play with Brendatoo.

Last spring, they activated a cell tower nearby. Suddenly this disassociated spirit was back in the world. Brenda, I soon discovered, still had the same phone number. First thing I did was text her the last selfie we took together. From the morning before I died. My phone card was expired, but that didn't matter to my ghostly little manipulations. I wanted the phone to work, and it worked. Hurrah.

If my heart hadn't been eaten by a porcupine years ago, its cockles would be warmed by the twenty-seven responses I got. Panicked, I'd say. Panicked responses.

That was it. That was my whole revenge plan. Scare Brenda. I figured she'd change her number and that would end it. Brendatoo came to visit that day. You know that creepy thing cats do where they stare fixedly at one point until you are sure your house is haunted? Well, I was hovering over that phone, slow charging the battery, when I noticed she had been giving me the stare for a while.

"What, you nut?" I asked her.

She stared some more. Here's the thing, if I really focused, I could get the gist of what she was thinking. Most of the time it was "I'm hungry," or "Let's play." Once it was "Save my kittens." But this time, it seemed to be, "Lure her back."

"How?" I asked. "She's in Denver. She won't come to Delsa Lake."

Brendatoo kept staring. The message was clear. I was a millennial slacker if I settled for one text's worth of revenge. The possibilities opened up to me, and I grinned in delight.

"You are right, Brendatoo. You are one smart kitty."

She smugly started grooming herself as if to say, "I know."

So, the fun and games began. Three a.m. mountain time, a text goes out. "U up?" Sunday morning, "Remember mimosas in the city?" At random, "If I can text u, I can call 9-1-1." And the crowning touch, "Still at Delsa Lake. Come back, I miss u."

Yeah, so I guess she was pretty creeped out. By that, I mean terrified. "Who is this?" "I'm calling the police." "STOP IT!"

But she kept her number active. I felt pretty dang good about the world. My buddy, Brendatoo, visited more often. When she curled up near me and purred up a storm, I would feel particularly happy.

Then one afternoon I heard tires crunching on gravel. It was Brenda. She'd accepted my invitation.

Okay, yeah, I have to admit, Brenda looked good. I mean, "hot" didn't mean anything to me anymore. But she was beautiful. Like a sunrise. Or a water moccasin. I recognized the look on her face. That look said stuff was going to get real. It said Jeremy was about to get taken down a notch. I'd seen that look a lot after I quit my assistant produce manager job at the grocery store and started telling jokes for a living.

But, I mean, what could she do to me? I was already dead, right? Just to let her know how glad I was to see her; I rained a handful of pennies onto the hood of her car. She barely flinched.

"Is that the best you can do, Jeremy?" she asked. "Throw coins?"

Her phone chirped in her purse. She pulled it out. My text read, "Welcome back, witch."

She snorted and put her phone away. She went to her trunk and pulled out an overnight bag. She headed into the cabin. Sunset barely tinged the mountaintops. Even though the drought was going strong across the west, the smell of illegal campfires scented the air.

Brendatoo sauntered across the yard and followed her namesake into the cabin. I did too. I wanted to see what my cold hearted ex was up to.

At the kitchen table she pulled a black marking pen out of her purse. She drew some weird design on the tabletop. She

pulled out two taper candles, lit them, dripped some wax on two little circles in her design, and fixed them to the table. Then she just sat there. If it was a summoning spell it didn't work. Or maybe it did since I was there. So, I just sat there, too. Right in front of her. With the final orange flames of sunlight sliding into the room, and her face framed by the two candles, Brenda looked Satanic. Except Satan was just a guy doing his job, whereas Brenda actually enjoyed being an evil jerk.

The candles hissed and flickered their private stories into the deepening dark. Brenda continued to sit. What was she up to? After ten minutes, or maybe forever, I don't know, I'm not really good with time in my current state, Brenda too hissed once, softly. Brenda looked down at the cat. She turned slowly away, tracing the cat's gaze right back to me. I swear, that woman made direct eye contact with me.

"There you are, Jeremy." She spoke quietly. "I can't have you harassing me like this. I'm an influencer, and I don't have time to be haunted by a no-talent dead comedian."

Okay. That kind of hurt. I mean, who was she calling dead? I preferred life deprived. If sounded like a disability I could maybe draw benefits for. Hurrah.

"So, here's what's going to happen, Jeremy. I'm going to figure out how you are contacting me. Then I'm going to stop it. Then I'm going to send you home into the bright white light of God's love."

Into the what? Oh, that's right. She used to watch spiritualists on daytime talk shows. She was going to exorcise me. And me without a gym membership.

"But first, let's catch up a little, shall we?" She pulled out the phone again. "I thought you might like to see this before you leave," she said. "Just a little memento of our last night."

The phone beeped as she punched in her password. She opened a video file and turned the screen to face me. It was a video of our very last night in the cabin. A video, I might add, made with neither my knowledge nor consent. I felt violated.

There I was, sleeping peacefully. Brenda looped a length of ribbon around my neck, that she tightened slowly.

I began to thrash.

She pulled the ribbon tighter.

I struggled to breathe.

My face turned purple.

My back arched.

I died.

She smiled and the video ended.

She said. "Too bad about your little accident. But the life insurance payoff was worth it" She pouted briefly. "Even if I did have to wait five years for you to be declared dead.

She got up. Went outside to the place where she had hidden my body and my stuff. It didn't take her long to find the waterproof duffel under the rock that had protected it from six years of rain and snow and curious animals.

She pulled out my phone. She flipped it open. The screen lit up. "Six years under a rock, and seventy percent power? I'm

impressed, Jeremy. If you'd had staying power like that when you were alive, maybe we'd still be together."

If I'd...? Gaslighting hag.

She clicked the phone shut, casually drew back her beautifully muscled arm, and threw it into the lake. She went back inside. She picked up the two candles bringing them slowly together until their flames merged.

"Now, Jeremy. Here's what you need to do for me. One last thing before I go back to Denver." Yeah, like I would do anything for her. Even if I could. I mean, I could give her all the change on the lot, I guess. "I need you to go home, Jeremy. Go into the light and go home."

As soon as she said it, it was there. A blazing white light, like an open door on a dark night. Distant, but beckoning. It didn't pull me, I just yearned to go to it.

"Go home, Jeremy."

She blew out the candles, packed up her overnight bag, and walked out. Just like that. But the white light drew closer. Her car briefly sang the song of its people as she unlocked her doors. Brendatoo screeched suddenly, hideously, painfully. I went out. Brenda was face down in the biggest patch of poison ivy on the lot. And Brendatoo was streaking off into the night.

I might have laughed. No, I did. I laughed.

Brenda struggled to her feet and gathered her overnight bag and purse. She stomped to the car, cussing cats, and ghosts, and nighttime, and gravity, and me. Her rented car rolled out of the yard up the drive.

Back inside, the light hovered over the table. It was both right there with me, and distant. I wanted to walk into it. I ached to walk into it. It would be so easy to forget my unfinished business and just go...

...Home.

Something clonked on the cabin floor. I looked around. Brendatoo perched proudly over her trophy. A cell phone. Brenda's cell phone. It must have fallen out of her purse when she tripped over the cat. Smart kitty.

I found out what an influencer was that night. The Brenda Blog had grown quite a bit since my time. So many platforms, and Brenda had a presence on them all. Over a quarter million followers.

You know what? When you are a spirit inside the phone, passwords don't mean anything. If you want an app to work, it works.

The caption I created said, "My last night with Jeremy." The video uploaded pretty quickly. And the password to every site somehow changed to Murd3r3r.

The light was still waiting. More urgent. Calling me. Brendatoo was giving me the stare.

The message was, "Go home now, friend."

So I did. Before I stepped into the light, though, I had time for one ironic last "Hurrah."

The End