

I, MAC

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Dear Eric,

Got the keys to your apartment and received operating instructions for the cat (turn the tail three times left, twice to the right) and got shown where Everything is. (You forgot to tell me what I'm supposed to feed it to.) Apparently there's a Universal Remote somewhere as well and that should come in handy... See you soon! Mac.

He put down the note as he finished reading it. He was a little miffed. And he was currently sitting in the middle of his apartment, apparently, on a couch - *his* couch, feeling slightly puzzled. A cat came in silently and froze as it saw him. It stood there, eyeing him with its glowing green eyes. What did he mean, 'operating instructions'? How on Mars did one operate a cat? It blinked at him and mewed softly. Turn the tail three times to the right and twice to the left? If he had to try that - cranking the tabby's tail - well, he had a pretty good idea the cat would object. He'd probably end up needing first aid for one thing. What was it, some kind of safe combination? And what the blazes was the Universal Remote for? The cat perhaps? And where was the idiot that wrote the note - Mac? Mac who? He didn't know anybody called Mac.

Hmm. He thought about that a minute more. Then again, everybody everywhere knows at least one person called Mac. (Mac Tavish or Donald or Farlane or Mac-something-or-other.) The Mac *he* knew was a chubby middle-aged, balding man who tended to smell of cheese mostly, sometimes onions. He was an insurance salesman who worked for New Mutual ISU on Io Station. Like most people who worked there for any length of time, he had a pale complexion scornfully referred to (by people who lived on atmospheric planets) as a moon-tan. And he was sure it wasn't *that* Mac, specifically. *That* Mac was still on Io station. Well he was when he left there two days ago.

He'd come back from the space port that morning after receiving the strange note in his email while on the business trip to Io Station. And now he was back here, wondering what it was all about. For one thing, he wondered where the damned cat had come from. He never had a cat before. At least he didn't when he left four weeks earlier. Cats didn't materialize out of thin air, did they? At least, he considered rather worried, not without the assistance of some kind of teleportation device... Did it come with this *Mac*? No, he thought - Mac had received um, operating instructions for it. But who from? And where the hell was Mac now?

The creature rubbed up against his leg and purred as he absentmindedly began scratching it behind its ears. What the blazes was he talking about? Where Everything is? *What* Everything? And why was it written with a capital E? Who the Edgar Allan Poe gave him the key to his apartment? And showed him where this Everything was. Hmm. And gave him um, operating instructions for the... uh, cat?

The apartment was not the way he'd left it. It looked like it had been lived in while he'd been away. It had a smell in it he didn't recognize and at first he gave the cat a few suspicious glances. But soon it seemed to him it was some kind of... perfume - aftershave, maybe. He reached down and picked the cat up. It was vibrating as it purred. He turned it upside down, and around and over and over. It just sort of sprawled as he did so, looking at him in the same superior way cats regard everything else lower than them (i.e. everything else). It was a cat all right. At least it seemed to be. It was shedding all over his favorite sweater as if trying very hard to convince him that it was. What the hell, he thought, what did he have to lose? It wasn't *his* cat anyway. He set it up on his lap on all fours, holding it steady with his left hand and grasped the tail with his right. The cat just stood there, giving him a disdainful sort of look as he began cranking its tail. Okay.

Three times to the left, two times to the right. The cat meowed. And that was all. Feeling like an absolute fruit loop, he let the cat go, apologized to it and decided to go fetch a drink just as the front door clicked open.

A cold chill went through his body as he realized he was probably completely defenseless and had no idea what was going to walk in to the room at any moment. Other than maybe harsh language, he had nothing to throw at his potential assailant. Well, okay – he could try throwing the cat at him as a sort of insane diversion – if he could still catch it in time. He grabbed the nearest heavy object off the coffee table instead and stuck it behind his back under a cushion. It was, technically, man's best friend - a porcelain dog, in the –er... seated position. But it was heavy, and had a rather pointed snout which he thought could come in handy if things went sour.

A stout male figure came in, staggering backwards under the weight of a swollen suitcase in each hand. He turned round and froze as he saw Eric sitting there. Eric gawked. It was Elvis. Or at best an Elvis look-alike. No, not *that* Elvis. It was his cousin, Elvis Sloane. It had been years since he last laid eyes on his least favorite cousin at his

uncles' home in Mars City. Decades in fact. He had many unpleasant childhood memories of hours of torture at the hands of his elder cousins Elvis and Yuri. There was the incident with the plastic cricket bat and their favorite pastime which consisted of swinging him round by the feet till he threw up. They called him their 'little lawn sprinkler'. He was only five. 'Fountain of Youth' had nothing on it. It had taken him years to get over it. He still hated heights because of it. His uncle would add injury to insult and spank him because he'd ripped up the lawn with his fingers in panic while trying to get away. His grip on the porcelain snout behind his back tightened, and not altogether involuntarily either. Elvis grinned and dropped the suitcases with a leaden thud.

"Cousin!" he cried throwing his arms open wide in greeting. Eric edged away as he began to approach. "How goes it?"

"Um, hello." He ventured, reluctantly letting go of the porcelain dog. There was no sign of Yuri, fortunately. The older of the two had always been the meaner, tougher one. Yuri and Elvis just tended to play little mister innocent and little Eric always got the blame - and smacks from Uncle John for being 'pedantic'. Their respective parents had arguments about their 'brat son Eric'.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Eric asked rising and still in shock.

“Just thought I’d come catch up on old times with me favorite cousin.” Smiled Elvis almost innocently.

“No I meant it,” said Eric. “What the *hell* are you doing here? And for that matter I think you meant favorite *target*, didn’t you? Like with the cricket bat, remember?”

“You can’t still be mad about that. Surely?” said Elvis taken aback. “Can’t even see a scar on you – all healed up.”

“Never mind that.” Eric snarled. “Who’s this Mac character anyway – and who the hell let you into my apartment?”

Elvis smiled. “That’s me. I’m Mac. I got the key from the floor manager.”

Blasted floor manager – he’d have to have a talk with him later.

“No, you’re Elvis. Elvis Sloane. I know you are because you’re the smarmy little bastard who kept tormenting me as a kid – and I still have nightmares about you incidentally. Still see your face before me as clear as day. That’s you all right – Elvis.”

“Yes,” said Elvis Sloan. “But people call me Mac because I’m a Mac-anic.”

“A – mac-anic?” Eric repeated slowly, puzzled. “Sure you don’t mean ‘*maniac*?’”

“No, I mean mac-anic.” said Mac. “Someone who fixes things.”

“Oh hell yes!” Eric exclaimed exasperatedly. “You fixed me all right – *whammo* - twenty stitches across the forehead – very nicely done!”

Elvis/Mac shrugged dismissively.

“Well we were just kids.” he said, edging towards the sofa. “I was only nine.”

“That’s the point, you sick bastard – I was only five years old! You were a homicidal bloody maniac! And a pathological liar – your dad hit *me* every time *you* did something wrong!”

“It was an accident!”

“Yes, I know – you didn’t mean to actually *break* the bat!”

“You’re a tough nut to crack, aren’t you?”

“Apparently not – *hello* – twenty stitches, remember? *And* a concussion!”

“Well that’s all in the past now, isn’t it? Come on, let’s put it behind us – “ he said moving towards him, hand outstretched. Eric suddenly longed for the porcelain pooch again, and hurriedly backed off. He wasn’t still afraid of Elvis, that was long ago – but he was damned if

he was going to shake hands with the man. Anyway, he weighed all of 90 kilograms, so he had his doubts about Elvis being able to swing him around *now*. And Elvis was about 40 years old already. Bad back probably. On the other hand, if he was wrong, his apartment might just need a new coat of paint.

“Could hear bells ringing for weeks.” He said softly, still backing away, Elvis still closing in. He reached the couch and flumped down into it in an undignified manner. His fingers instinctively closed round the porcelain dog and –

- *Crash!*

Elvis Sloane stopped in his tracks. His eyes seemed to stare at each other with mute surprise before he collapsed backwards with a muffled carpetty noise. Eric Hawthorne looked at the badly dressed heap of his family gene-pool lying at his feet. Then at the smashed remains of the porcelain dog on the carpet and the piece in his right hand. He was rather sad about the porcelain dog. All that was left was the snout. His mind suddenly racing, he looked round. The cat, who was lying sleeping on the kitchen counter, raised its head, beheld the mayhem that had just played out before it, yawned and then turned over to continue sleeping. He looked at the broken ceramic snout in his hand again. His knuckles were peculiarly white,

squeezing the object as panic began to take hold. *I've killed him!* He thought. But his mounting terror soon turned to disappointment as he saw his cousin's chest rise and fall in the slow regular pattern of one who is, obviously, not dead. Or perhaps not dead enough.

He checked the fallen man for a pulse. *Idiot*, he thought, *he's breathing isn't he?* Then again Eric had known so many men who breathed yet had no pulse. Or even a single warm spot on their entire bodies. Like most of the bosses he'd known in his working life for instance. Bastards! No, there it was. Slow and regular. There was no blood. Elvis seemed to be smiling faintly. He moaned. Damn him! *'Anyway, it was self defense,'* he thought in a characteristically Eric-like flat spin. *'The man just came for me and I swung and –'*

"What's going on here?" boomed a deep male voice from the doorway. Eric got such a fright that he jumped up, arms flapping, sending the snout flying across the room. It shattered against the kitchen wall tiles. Eric's shrill falsetto scream still fading from its traumatized hearing, the cat looked up at him with one eye open, its ears pulled flat. It yawned again before returning to its chosen activity, which seemed to be ignoring him and everything else in general. Well, he thought – at least that took care of the evidence, more or

less. And the source of the deep booming male voice at the door? Well as it turns out, that was his nosy next-door neighbor, Mrs Parks. She used to be in the army, a long time ago, when the sight of a female form in camouflage with red badges on was enough to send the enemy scurrying for safety. Her own side too, apparently. She was forever blaming him for the poor condition of her plants, which consistently seemed to prefer slow suicide rather than listen to her daily reprimands. The other tenants in general preferred to tackle twenty flights of stairs rather than spend two minutes alone with her in an elevator. Lucky for Eric, she was standing outside the door, talking to her pot plants. Harshly. He could imagine rows of petunias standing stiffly to attention, swaying slightly in abject terror while under inspection. No wonder they were always so pale and wilted. They reminded Eric of her husband. Poor old Mr Parks. They buried Henry last year, back on Earth. Sense-of-humor failure, apparently. Quite an expensive plot of land too, land being at a premium on Earth nowadays. Anyway he was probably a lot happier there.

Recovering his wits, Eric rushed over and quietly shut the door. What to do? What to do? He had to get rid of Elvis, preferably before the man woke up and asked him what the number of that hover bus was. Or worse yet, settled in to stay longer than he had already. Besides,

Eric was far too busy to put up with such inconvenience. He had just cut short an important business trip to find out what this was all about. And he would have a few more before long, so the sooner he wrapped this up the better. Hmm. An evil grin began to slowly spread across his face.

Elvis groaned as Eric began to strip his clothes off. He smelled of garlic. There was a slice of pizza in one jacket pocket, all gooey. *Yuck.* As he worked, feverishly, thoughts of all his misfortunes in life spurred him on, especially as he traced the origins of his misfortunes back to his dear cousins Yuri and Elvis Sloane. (Cut a bit away *here* with the hacksaw.) And as he worked, growing more determined as he did so, his grin became more and more pronounced. (Tie that end off good and solid.) *A mac-anic, eh? Fixes things, does he – well this time I'm going to fix him!* He remembered the time he wanted to join the air force but was too afraid of heights to make a success of it. (Stab it a few times to make holes with the screwdriver. That feels *good!* Okay, a few more times!) *Elvis*, he thought. After the cricket bat incident poor little Eric would begin to shiver uncontrollably at the sight of a cricket bat, so obviously cricket was out too. It took many years before he was more or less over it all. Got bullied by everybody at school, sometimes even the girls. Funny that he ended up selling

insurance in the end. Yeah. Real funny. Ha ha. Ironic. And how he *hated* selling insurance, peddling policies, doing follow-up visits and contract maintenance work, traveling all the time. All because of Elvis and Yuri Sloane, smirking and giggling while their father gave him another backhand for 'being pedantic'. Maybe, he thought, he should've gone into Law or even better, Law Enforcement. Ha! Then he'd fix the brutes! And thus, voila – his work was done. Now all he had to do was to put Elvis out of Eric's misery. Justice at last! *Ha ha ha ha!*

His eyes fell on the cat again, still on the counter. It was reclining there, looking at him with utter disdain. Some things never change, thought Eric, but I have! I should've done this years ago!

"What're you looking at?" he asked the cat, not seriously expecting a response.

"I," said the cat in warm mellow tones, "am looking at a crime in progress, a small man kicking a bigger man while he's down, a coward at work. *Meow*. Saucer of milk, please."

"Kicking him when he's down?" Mused Eric. "Didn't think of that. Thank you. What the hell, why no – "

With his leg in mid backswing, he paused – before tilting his head at a funny puzzled angle. He put his foot down again slowly and deliberately, then turned. The cat was still on the counter, licking its lips, looking expectantly at him.

“I’m sorry, did – did you say something?”

“I asked for a saucer of milk.” Said the cat again, before adding “Please? Oh and I almost forgot, *Meow.*”

“Guh – guh.” Went Eric, almost losing it altogether.

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak Idiot.” Quipped the cat flippantly. “Try speaking louder. Or slower. Or both. It usually works for Mrs. Parks. At least *she* thinks it does. At least she doesn’t say things like ‘here kitty-kitty’, it’s insulting. Sa-ay – I like what you did, nice work. The big bow is a nice touch. But isn’t pink supposed to be for girls? And what are all the frills for? Oh yes, um – *meow.*”

“What... what –” Eric stammered breathlessly. “do you keep saying ‘*meow*’ for? I mean if you can talk, um – silly question, you do talk... I mean, obviously... God dammit, bugger, damn!”

“Why, to blend in of course, silly human. Meow. I mean if I didn’t actually say ‘meow’, you would soon know I was... something else.”

Eric was now more confused and disconfuckulated than he remembered being in his whole life. Okay, so there's this cat in his apartment he doesn't remember having – the *cat*, not the apartment – and his idiot childhood nemesis cousin and personal torturer turns up and tries to embrace him, he bonks him on the head with a dog, er – porcelain dog, decides to take out a little vengeance on him and then this *cat* starts talking to him and hints that *it* is *not* in fact, a cat. *Of course it's not a cat, silly*, he chided himself. *Cat's don't talk*. Weighing the contradictory evidence of his senses and the last few decades of his life, he swallowed hard before venturing a question. To the, ah – cat.

“So if you're not a cat *what* are you?”

“Silly human.” Purred the um, cat. “I'm a *Catatian* of course.”

“A *Catatian*?”

“Species 42709A from Catatia.” Said the non-cat proudly. “Look it up in the Imperial star charts. The star my home orbits is called the Cat's Eye. Any resemblance to the feline species is purely co-incidental. Meow.”

“It's quite alright” Eric quavered. “I'll take your word for it.”

“My name's Catisha.”

“Bless you.”

“No, that’s my name – Catisha.”

“Oh. That’s nice. I’m Eric.”

“Meow.”

“Oh, bugger.” Sighed Eric dismally, sinking into the couch and almost instantly slumping back into the little grey heap he was earlier. Elvis would wake up soon and start redecorating his apartment – probably with Eric. Or his contents. And he was having a conversation with a cat. Oh boy.

“What’s the matter?” Asked his guest, an apparently illegal alien in the form of a pseudo house cat. There was a noticeable pause before it added “Meow. Sorry.”

“T.M.I.” Sighed Eric.

“Sorry, wot?”

“Too Much Information.” Eric huffed, resigned to the fact that he was probably going to get arrested, charged for attempted murder, assault, abduction and making a fool of a relative – who was probably going to wake up soon and pulverize him just to add injury to insult. And afterwards he was going to be dragged away to the *wah-wah* farm for talking to a cat he didn’t even have. The fact that it seemed to be talking back wouldn’t help his case any either. “I have a headache.”

“*Hmmmirrr.*” Said the cat. “Funny, I thought *he* would be the one with the headache. He he. Sorry. Meow. What are you going to do with him anyway?”

“Don’t start.” Pleaded Eric in the throes of his own private nightmare.

“I need to think a while. Think you could please *not* talk for a little while? It’s distracting.”

“*Hmmirrr.*” Purred the cat, settling down to continue its snooze. So, what was Eric to do about Elvis? What indeed?

He emailed a letter he hurriedly drafted in Elvis’s name to Cora and Bruce Sloane, Mars City, claiming that Eric had been very forgiving but despite this he had been overcome by guilt and shame for the shabby treatment he had inflicted upon his cousin (Eric) and felt obliged to join the Foreign Legion. He also pointed out that the minimum term of service in the said Legion was either 20 years or life, whichever came first. He then had Elvis’s baggage collected and sent back to Elvis’s home in Mars City, via Pluto Station, which was completely in the opposite direction and on the outskirts of the solar system. The Courier agent asked him if he was sure and he said yes, even though it would cost him four times as much as a more – um, *direct* route, and even though it was sent via the slow routes which

consisted of private contractors whose ships were slower and tended to break down frequently or get lost altogether. He did take out insurance on the parcel though, and stuck the slip under the big pink bow the cat had mentioned. After all, he charged everything to Elvis's account so it was really, really worth it. By the time the other courier arrived to collect the large trunk in the centre of his lounge, Eric had recovered his grin again. In fact, he was on the point of giggling uncontrollably as the two large men grunted and groaned under the weight. Once more, he took out insurance on the trunk and charged the whole lot to Mr. E. Sloane. As the robo-trolley trundled away down the passage and turned a corner, Eric slammed the door and did a short *'who's-yer-daddy'* dance which involved some hip swaying and stabbing his one arm into the air.

"Elvis has left the building!" He giggled, before pouring a glass of champagne from a big magnum bottle he'd been saving for a special occasion and settling down to wait.

A short while later, the Courier service realized that the trunk they had collected from number 3402 Saturn View Heights was in fact intended for number 3403 Saturn View Heights and the agents said *'oh, bugger'* and then hauled it all the way back again. They gave his door

a dirty look as they passed. One rang the buzzer at the delivery address and the door opened.

“Ye-es?” Said a deep voice from within.

“Special delivery, man - er, I mean *mam*.” Said one agent, holding a computerized clipboard with one hand and shifting a shabby peak cap backwards with the other. “C.O.D. just thumb-print here for me. Right thumb please.”

“Sorry, I don’t have a right thumb – lost it in action on Guatamalia Four. This one’s artificial.” Said Mrs. Parks.

“Okay then.” The agent agreed. “Left one then.”

“This one’s also artificial.” Mrs. Parks explained. “Lost it in action as well.”

“Alright then,” Sighed the agent at the end of his shift as well as his patience. “Please just press any remaining natural appendage that bears a traceable skin imprint against this pad.”

She reached across, held it up and promptly pressed the tip of her nose against it.

“There.”

“Thank you.” Said the agent. The robo-trolley unloaded the trunk practically on her doormat and the courier service shuffled off back to

their depot. Slightly surprised and somewhat bemused, Mrs. Parks eyed the trunk. It had a big pink ribbon wrapped around it, with a large bow tied on top. A tag on the lid said in bold anonymous block-letters: 'From a secret admirer.' She stood there, rubbing her hands thoughtfully trying to decipher the origins of this... gift. Then, wondering how she was going to get this thing into her apartment on her lonesome, she decided it might be lighter once she opened it and decided further action based on the merits of the contents. A short pull and off came the bow. Another tug and the latch came free. Then she lifted the wooden lid and let it flip back on its hinges. Underneath was a pink satin cloth. Interesting. Just as she reached out to pull this item aside, it seemed to erupt outward. Whatever was under it had been launched upright and was now waving appendages at her. Taken by fright, she jumped back and got a better look at her 'gift'. It was a tall fat man, naked except for a vibrant pink satin loin cloth tied fast with pink bows and ribbons. He stood there, moaning and groaning, wide-eyed and staring at the world around him in abject horror, his hairy chest heaving, his grimy fingernails clawing the air. Somebody had written 'Let's Get Kinky Lovebunny' on his chest and drawn a big heart underneath with an arrow through it with a bright pink marker. Mrs. Parks managed quite a convincing falsetto scream before setting about performing what she later described as a

'citizen's arrest'. But watching from the secure confines on the other side of a door security monitor, what Eric saw could be described as a reenactment of the Battle of Guatamalia about forty years previously. (A lot of good men died at Guatamalia. He'd been watching the History channel.) All the neighbors on the same floor came into the corridor to see what was going on. The Building Security staff had to subdue a screaming Mrs. Parks with a shock-stick to get her off a shrieking and whimpering Elvis. The police arrested the extremely puzzled man for lewd behavior and took him away for questioning, protesting all the way. Eric just sat there, even long after it was over, watching and grinning. Grinning and watching and giggling. Grinning and giggling and sipping champers. Sipping champers and watching and grinning and giggling. Pretty soon it was more about sipping champers and sipping more champers. He even poured some for the cat and giggled when it said 'thank you' and proceeded to lap it up in a convincingly cat-like manner. By the end of the magnum, his lust for vengeance satisfied and well pleased with himself, Eric rose and staggered off to bed. Justice had been done.

It was early the following morning that Eric awoke, feeling rested and fresh despite the amount he had to drink. He lay there pondering the peculiar dreams he remembered from the previous night. Elvis and a

talking cat and Mrs. Parks. What a combination. Brr. Must've been the snacks on the Ferry from Io Station. Next time, he decided, he would stick to raisins and peanuts instead. What a business. Imagine if Elvis *really* came to visit? Wouldn't that be terrible? Ha, imagine Eric *actually* putting Elvis inside a big wooden box! And the air holes, supposing they weren't enough to keep the man alive? What a mess that would be! A weight on his chest moved suddenly and yawned in his face.

"Eeeuw," he moaned. "I thought cat food smelled bad going in."

The cat turned its head and looked him in the eye. He froze. Just a second, he thought, I don't have a cat. But –

"Hello?" he said to the cat.

"Meow' said the cat, convincingly. Eric relaxed again, still confused about where the cat came from.

"Thank God!" Eric cried in utter relief. "It was all just a dream, a bloody nightmare!"

"Bad dreams?" enquired the cat, purring contentedly.

"*Aaah!*"

"*Oow!* My ears! What did you do that for?" Complained Catisha, shaking its head as it jumped to the floor and began walking to the

bedroom door. “You’re far too tense, you should learn to relax! We should get a cat. I never had a pet before, but they say having a cat around will help reduce your stress levels, you’ll see.”

Catisha left the bedroom while Eric was still screaming.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

Why not rush back to www.lulu.com/tinagirl and get some more of Tina’s work? Or try her dads books at www.lulu.com/theoengela. Her webpage is at www.tina.co.za and she has a blog at <http://lifentimez.blogspot.com>.

Thanx

Tina