

Heaven Knows

by James Como (August 2015)

He found the angel Raphael standing before him, though he did not know that this was an angel of God.

– The Book of Tobit, 5:4

Toby was a Very Old Man. Ever since his wife, who was the love of his life, had gone to Heaven many, many years ago, his joints did not work well, so he was bent over from the waist, and his spine had a huge lump at the top, so that he could not lift his head. That's why he almost always was looking at the ground, but that didn't matter very much since his eyesight was so bad. He moved very slowly. He lived with a Very Old Cat named Raffle.

His small cottage was close by the long, twisting river. That made it easy for him to get fresh water, though really nothing was easy for Toby. As for food, he did not need much. Every now and then some children from the nearest houses would drop a basket of food at his door for him and Raffle. He never saw those children.

Toby did have his own children, and even grandchildren, but they had all moved away. He had not seen them, or even heard from them, for many years and he did not know why. So his only company was his old cat. But Raffle was very good company, for he never left Toby's side. Toby would speak to Raffle, who would meow back, just as though he understood every word the old man said. So even though Toby was a sad man and Raffle was a sad cat, they were not as sad as they might have been if each did not have the other.

One day Toby woke up and, after taking a long time to sit up on his bed, walked more slowly and painfully than usual to the table where he had left some bread the night before. He began to talk to Raffle, who by then should have climbed up from floor to chair and then to the table to share the bread. But he had not. Toby looked around the room and called "Raffle, Raffle where are you? Time for breakfast." But Raffle was not there. Raffle was not anywhere.

So the old man went to the door and opened it and stepped outside. "Raffle," he called, "Raffle, where are you? Are you all right?" Then he heard a meow. But he did not hear it from his feet or from one side of the door or the other. No. He heard it from above his head! With very, very great pain Toby stepped out, turned around, and bent his neck back and looked up as far as he could. That's when he saw the cat standing at the edge of the roof looking down at him. Was he smiling?

"My goodness," said Toby, "what are you trying to do? How did you get there? Why are you on the roof?" All Raffle did was meow louder and louder, different kinds of meows, as though he were calling his old friend to come and get him. So the old man went to the side of the cottage where there was an old, splintered ladder, though not as old and as splintered as Toby. He dragged it to the front of the house and propped it to the edge of the roof where Raffle was standing. It took Toby a long time to do this. Then he began to climb, first one foot on a rung, then the other on the same rung, and so on. You can imagine how long this took the old man, for he had to stop very frequently. He had very little breath and the effort caused him great pain.

Finally his face was even with Raffle's. "What are you doing?" Toby asked. At that the cat put his head back and meowed more loudly than the old man had ever heard him meow and instead of licking the man's face, as ordinarily he would have done, he began to back up on the roof higher and toward the peak. The old man, who had not worried about death for a very long time (not since as a young man, with the help of a most unusual stranger, he very bravely had saved his father's life); he did not worry about it now. He knew that when the cat called it meant that the old man should follow. So Toby stepped off the ladder and, on his hands and knees (because that made balance easier than if he stood straight up), and of course very slowly, he began to follow the cat.

When Toby finally reached Raffle, at the highest point of the roof, he scratched the cat with one hand and with the other began to lift him. That is exactly when a strange tingling ran through Toby's whole body. Without thinking about it at all he stood straight up. And when he did he could see the horizon far away past the river. He wasn't dizzy at all, which surprised him. And as he gazed at the horizon his eyes began to rise up along the sky. He raised his head straight up and looked right at the sun, not quite yet at its peak in the sky. It dazzled his eyes, so that they seemed to spin. He saw flashes of colored light – blue and red – slanting across the sky like lightning. He saw figures, figures larger than mountains darting to and fro.

Through the sky and past the sun he saw the stars. He saw them spinning, moving all about each other as though in a dance, yet always traveling, backwards it seemed, as though they were unwinding. He saw with a clarity that had long ago forsaken him. It seemed to him that he was waking from a very sad dream.

Then he was aware of singing, high-pitched, melodious and unbroken. He was deathly afraid, afraid of dying, which he had not been for a very long time. He was slipping, then tumbling down the steeped roof towards its edge, and then falling off the roof, and he knew he was

dropping to his death. He did not think to pray or to remember his life, but neither did he scream. Instead, from the depth of his heart, his soul whispered, "no, please."

He had not fallen. He was where he had been, standing erect on the roof, gazing at the horizon. He would have been puzzled and relieved, but he didn't have time, for right then he realized many things. He slowly became aware of all that he was able to do, that he was standing straight, that his head was tilted all the way back, that he was seeing much farther than he could only minutes earlier. He found that he was without pain. He looked down at the cat and realized that Raffle too seemed much younger – so young that he leapt out of the old man's hands (where he had been all along) and ran down the roof towards the ladder. The old man followed and, believing that the cat would jump into his arms, stepped onto the ladder as nimbly as an acrobat and scampered to the ground.

There as he opened the door he began talking to Raffle. "We'll have some extra breakfast today," and in three steps instead of ten he was at the table. But then he noticed that there was no sound. No purring, no meowing, and – no Raffle. He rushed to the door and looked left, right and up at the roof, but there was no cat. Raffle was gone. Toby just stood there. By midnight, when still Raffle had not come home, Toby shut the door, went to his bed, lay down, and he cried. Finally he fell asleep.

He slept soundly, perhaps because he had been dreaming a wonderful dream of his wife. What finally woke him was loud knocking at the door. He sprang out of bed before realizing that of course Raffle would not be knocking and so it couldn't be the cat. Then who? He opened the door and found a day so bright, a sun so blazing at the horizon, that it blinded him. At first all he could see against the sun were profiles. And then he heard "poppa, poppa, how are you?" and "grandpa grandpa we've come to see you!" His daughter and grandchildren and even his son-in-law held out flowers and a new hat and some mutton.

Toby looked at the people and realized that he was looking at his daughter, her husband (a handsome, smiling man), and his three grandchildren, two girls and a little boy – and they were all smiling back at him, just as though he should have expected them. He did not know what to say, so he kissed each of them separately and invited them into his house. He followed and was about to close the door when he heard a slender high-pitched meow and looked down. And there, looking up at him with what surely must have been a cat smile, was a kitten that looked exactly as Raffle had looked when he was a small kitty. Toby shouted, "Raffle!" and Raffle said "meeuoww," which sounded just like a cat "yes." Then Toby said, "please, Raffle, come in and meet my family," and the cat did.

He did not know how it had all happened but he did know that somehow it would not have happened without Raffle. He had always known that the cat was very special indeed, he just did not know *how* special was this particular cat. Of course, he had always known that the cat loved him very, very much. Just how much? Not only had Raffle helped bring Toby back his younger days, making him once again spry and pain-free, but Raffle had somehow brought back the people Toby loved most. Well, all but one of course, his deepest love, who was in Heaven. Now when Toby would grow very old again, he would know deep in his heart that old age this time would not be painful and lonely and that for all the days of his life he would have with him those whom he loved, and that *after* those days were done he might once again behold the greatest love of his life.

And Raffle too, of course.

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