

# **Tales**

Andrew Clayton

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The Noise and the Shade

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# The Noise and the Shade

Tony looked up from his book at the unusual sound. He couldn't place it, but mixed into the background noise was a new source. As the washing machine motor stopped and it started to drain, he almost lost it, but there was that sound again.

He rose from his armchair and made for the kitchen. At the back door he could see a shape moving, silhouetted against the light from next door's security lamp. The noise, now louder, was a scratching that seemed to be coming from the scullery. The thought occurred, just as he opened the door, that no-one had sculleries these days. It was out of date, and so was he for having one.

Against the far wall, next to the washing machine and beneath the window, was a cat. The poor thing looked starved and beaten. Fur was missing around its haunches, and an ear was a flayed slice of bald skin. As it swung round its one-eyed defiance shook him.

It had been scratching at the wooden panel which had once been a cat flap. Tony had nailed it shut in seventy-two, when the last of the children's pets had finally shuffled off. Over the years several coats of white gloss had welded it tightly shut without any aesthetic gain. Fresh marks were quite plain on the surface of the paintwork, a clear warning that this animal was not only dangerous but well armed.

Tony slammed the door shut before the visitor could

escape. It was a loud, reflexive action, and there was a moment of quiet before the door shook with the impact of a now furious cat. He could hear it attacking the door and screaming abuse at him.

Tony grabbed the nearest thing to hand, looked at it, and put it down. An oven mitt wasn't going to be the solution here. He needed to get the damned thing out of the house, through the kitchen and out of the back door. If he closed the door to the hall, opened the back door and released it from the scullery, he could scare the poor creature out, and close the door behind it.

The cat had reduced its activity from sounds more suited to a blender, and was now just scratching again. He closed the hall door, padded over to the back door and unlocked it, making sure as he did so to leave the key in the door. No sense in letting the cat back in once out.

In one swift movement he pulled the back door open, his back to the blast of cold air, and reached for the scullery door. As it swung open, he heard the back door slam shut, but he could see the cat already making for a gap between his legs. It stopped, raised its tail and backed slowly away from him into the scullery again, hissing ferociously at something behind.

Only in his last moment did Tony remember the silhouette.