

## **This Cat Jumped**

By Virginia Cronk

I'm Trixie Pollitt, the oldest kid in my family. My parents are Gooper and Mae Pollitt. My grandpa and grandma are called Big Daddy and Big Mama by all of the adults, not just in the family, but in the whole world, far as I kin tell.

There are five of us kids already, and my mama's expectin' another one. That's what Mama says happens in a respectable family. Mostly it just means our house is always loud and someone's always in trouble. I go to the same school in Memphis my mama did. I'm in fifth grade and Mama says I'm old enough to know what I'm agoin' after.

Every day Mama reminds me I'm better 'n my classmates. She says I'm from good stock and that makes a difference, even if some people don't think so. She says girls are smarter than boys, so the teacher spends more time helpin' the boys 'cause they need it. When I raise my hand and the teacher don't pick me, Mama says it's 'cause she already knows I got the answer.

I never been invited to play at any girl's house after school or to someone's birthday party. Not once. My mama says that's okay 'cause I have two brothers and two sisters to play with at home. All we do is fight. I don't have friends.

The girls won't talk to me during recess. It makes me feel lonely. I could disappear and no one at school would notice. I ask Mama what to do and she says "Get right up in their face. Interrupt 'em." So, I do. I walk right up to 'em and ask if their mamas love 'em. They turn their backs on me and start whispering.

"My mama don't like Trixie's mama."

"My mama says I cain't play with her."

"Mine too."

"Trixie's mama only cares 'bout money."

"No Pollitt kids do good in school, and their mama don't care."

"They're all brats. They're mean."

“My mama says that Miz Pollitt don’t have to go sit in the front row with all of them children every time she comes to a school function. She gets all those kids dressed up but she don’t do nothin’ about their bad manners.”

At first, I’m ashamed. I think, what would mama do? Tell ‘em the truth. “All mamas are like that. Their job is to git the inheritance. No reason not to like my mama just because she’s better at it than your mamas.” The girls run away, giggling.

On Grandpa’s birthday, we go see him ‘cause he’s coming home from the hospital. It’s a big celebration ‘cause he’s been there a really long time. The grownups are whisperin’ he might die. So, my mama talks really loud. She keeps sayin’, “Big Daddy, we love you,” like she wants everyone to hear her. She makes us march round the airport pavement while she hums ‘Dixie’ and we play our kazoos. I don’t really know why we’re doin’ it. Some adults cover their ears.

When Grandpa’s plane lands, I wait for him to look at us. He don’t. He comes down the stairs and walks right past us. Straight off to Aunt Maggie. She’s standin’ far away from us next to her car and hasn’t even brung him a gift. She’s smilin’ and he’s giving her one of his grandpa hugs. Should ‘a been me gettin’ that hug. He gets in her car and leaves us. Aunt Maggie’s drivin’. Grandpa mighta thunk it’s right but my mama’s not lookin’ happy.

“What does he think he’s doing? Maggie isn’t even part of the family. She’s only Brick’s wife. Gooper and I don’t see Brick as part of the real Pollitt family.”

Yup. My mama’s mad.

We all git to Grandpa’s house and his party’s gonna start. Now I can make Aunt Maggie pay for gettin’ my hug. I put my hands all the way to the bottom of that big ole ice cream bowl. I scoop as much ice cream as I can and throw it at Aunt Maggie. “Gooper, look what Trixie did,” she says. And Daddy says to me, “Trixie, we’re eatin’ that ice cream. Did you wash your hands first?”

Aunt Maggie goes upstairs to their room to clean up. I walk all sneaky-like behind her and hide. She’s talkin’ to Uncle Brick ‘bout how she feels like a cat on a hot tin roof. I don’t know what that means, but Uncle Brick starts callin’ her Maggie the Cat. Then he tells her if she ain’t happy, she can jump off the roof. I don’t know what that means either. My mama and daddy don’t talk like that. They mostly talk about Grandpa’s plantation and say bad things about Uncle Brick.

That night, Grandpa dies. When it happens, they send all us kids to bed. I wanna know what they're talkin' about cause I never seen no body die. I sneak downstairs and hide behind a big post. On the way down, I see Uncle Brick just sittin' on the steps. I expect he'll tell me to go back to bed, but he just sort 'a smiles at me. He looks sad.

My father is yellin' at Grandma 'bout the inheritance. He keeps a sayin' that he will not go home till he has the deed to the whole plantation. Grandma almost cries. Then she stands up and gits right in his face. "You will never have the entire plantation. Just because you were my first born, doesn't mean you are the favorite, Big Daddy isn't even your father."

"Oh, Ma. Are you going to bring up that old story?" I don't know what he's talking about. I want her to tell the story.

Aunt Maggie walks down the stairs and goes to Grandma. She leans over, gives her a little kiss on the cheek, then slowly walks out' a the room. Everyone stops talkin'. Even my daddy don't have nothin' to say.

Mama says we all hate Aunt Maggie. Our whole family s'posed to hate Aunt Maggie and Uncle Brick because Grandpa loves Brick and Maggie more than us. I don't hate her. I say lots of mean things to her, like 'You can't have babies.' That's 'cause Mama tells me to. I like her. She's pretty and she's not a yellin' all the time. I wanna be like her when I grow up.

Trixie the Cat.

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Grandma died shortly after Grandpa. That was twenty years ago. Their contested estate remains under the control of his attorney who contacted me and asked me to meet him at the Pollitt's Mississippi plantation. It is my first time back since the day of Grandpa's birthday and death. I was ten. I have not just grown older since then. I graduated college and I rid myself of my Memphis drawl.

After Grandpa's death, his attorney George Barksden, contacted all the family by letter. Grandpa had granted him power over the estate by making him Trustee. Mr. Barksden wrote that he could see no equitable division of the plantation that would be acceptable to my parents, Gooper and Mae, since they wanted it all. His second letter to all of us said he had made decisions and was moving forward. He left the big house and the thousand acres surrounding it in the family estate. The remaining acres he would be selling to a developer.

It took almost ten years for a land deal to close, but when it did, the money from the sale came to everyone in the family. Four adults and six now-adult children each received a check for over a million dollars. Mae and Gooper didn't receive the intact estate they coveted, but with each of their children getting an equal share, my family received eighty percent of the total dollar value. Mama proudly bore six children and never loved any of us. We were just part of her reliable, long-range plan for acquiring more wealth. Now I know what she meant when I was ten and she said I should know where I'm going.

About two years ago, my daddy had a heart attack and died a bitter man. He considered his younger brother Brick a washed-up athlete, a drunk, a man unworthy of being his brother. Unworthy of carrying the Pollitt name.

I never heard Daddy or Mama refer to Grandpa as Dad, or Papa, or Father. Only Big Daddy. Their relationship was cold and focused on the inheritance.

Uncle Brick and Aunt Maggie had conversations with Grandpa and Grandma. They smiled at each other. Real smiles that make little wrinkles around the eyes. I believe Uncle Brick and Aunt Maggie loved Grandma and Grandpa.

Grandpa never finalized a will, but he made it known that he thought Uncle Brick should inherit everything. In the end, Grandpa left the distribution decisions to his attorney and my daddy celebrated. After my daddy's death, my mama, stayed on, living alone in their big house.

These days, her life is focused on reestablishing her role in Memphis society as her rich father's daughter and a former Cotton Queen. She touts her relationship to the Pollitt family while she waits for the rest of Grandpa's estate to come to her. Her greed is not sated.

Uncle Brick died in a car wreck a few months ago. After Grandpa's death, he and Maggie seemed closer. They remained in New Orleans. Uncle Brick never cared about the inheritance. Maggie cared about it, but she was interested, not obsessed. I have learned that jumping off the hot tin roof meant leaving Brick. She never did. She loved Brick and worked hard on making a happy marriage. It's too soon to know what Aunt Maggie will do now.

The last seven miles of my drive is along one side of the square that was Grandpa's land. Significant changes are evident. The 28,000 acres that he proudly called the richest land

outside of the Nile River valley are no longer fields of shrubs with white cotton bolls. The new roads entering it have signs announcing Pollitt Plantations, in gold script.

Vanquished fields of cotton extend farther than I can see. The rich soil is contoured and graded. Houses are being built. The promotional billboard promises five hundred gentleman plantations with grand southern-style homes, and land for horses, or private hunting grounds. It also shows a golf course with club house and a landing strip with facilities for private planes. Green spaces will have riding and walking trails. This is my mama and daddy's fault. If they hadn't been so greedy, the plantation could have been kept intact. The plantations are the Delta's culture and history.

It doesn't really bother me personally that the plantation's no longer whole. I don't feel any attachment to the old place. Every bad memory I have about the conflicts I observed as a child have been put away. I feel indifferent. It is sad to see a magnificent piece of property cut up. But the in-fighting is over. A case of good and bad cancelling each other.

I park my car in front of the house and let my gaze linger on the portico, move to the verandas, and then the upper galleries. I'm surprised by the feeling of nostalgia that comes over me. I don't harbor happy memories of visiting my grandparents, but it still elicits a feeling of coming home. The feeling quickly ebbs when I see that the house I know so well isn't even pretending to welcome me. The shutters are closed and locked. The immense front door which once opened to family, senators and scoundrels is secured with an ugly chain and padlock. The beautiful handblown glass panels Grandma brought from Europe are imprisoned behind a sheet of plywood. It is a house taken hostage.

The veranda railings are overgrown with fragrant jasmine vines which find their way to the columns and reach the gallery above. The only furniture on this porch, which hosted the last boozy gathering decades ago, is one shabby wicker chair. The house is a symbol of greedy family members, unwilling to do the work of owning a plantation, yet trying to hold a status secured in an outdated economy.

Half the childhood memories I made came from being somewhere I was not supposed to be. Spying on Aunt Maggie was a watershed moment in my life. It was the day I knew that Pollitt women did not have to be outrageous like my mother. Or a nobody, like my grandma, who faded into the walls in Grandpa's presence.

I wrap my hands around the veranda railing and intentionally pick at the peeling paint with my thumb nail. These hands are proud of work. Short nails. Old scars I don't remember

earning. Hands that do not pose or wave. I have the Pollitt height. I have the Pollitt blood. After years of therapy and hard work, I have lost the Pollitt avarice.

A woman stands at the far end of the veranda. Waiting. She does not wave at first. She seems rooted there.

When she finally lifts her hand, the gesture is small.

“Hello,” I call. “Who are you?”

She walks toward me, unhurried, her steps measured, as if she has walked this veranda many times and knows the number of steps it takes to cross.

“I’m Susanna,” she says. “I knew you would come back.”

Her voice is even. Not rude. Just matter of fact.

“You live here?” I ask.

“I stay here,” she corrects.

She looks past me to the locked shutters, then at the chained door. An act of taking inventory, the way Big Daddy might have read his cotton fields.

“No family has crossed that door since the funeral,” she says. “They came, took what could be carried, and left before night fall.”

“And after that?”

“The house settled, like land does when it’s no longer worked.”

Her clothes are plain and practical. She stands open, unguarded.

“My mother stayed on after Big Daddy, your grandpa, died,” Susanna says, not as explanation but as fact. “After Big Mama died, too. My mother lived in the cottage behind the big house. Close enough to watch it age.”

“And when she died?”

Susan lifts one shoulder. “I remained.”

“You aren’t family.”

“No, but I belong to the place. I belong to the land.”

The words feel old, inherited. I realize I know nothing about the people who served and labored in Big Daddy’s employment.

“Would you like coffee?” she asks. “Before you go inside.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Her cottage is small and orderly, free of anything that may have come from the abandoned big house. She pours coffee into thick mugs and sets one beside me. “You don’t remember me, do you. Your grandma didn’t approve of you playing with the help’s children. But we would sneak off and play tag.”

“I didn’t recognize you, but I remember sneaking off. My mother didn’t know, so I could enjoy myself like the child I was.”

She stands at the window, taking quick glances out at the land as if it’s waiting for her.

“You are the first Pollitt to return,” she says.

“I’m here on business.”

She nods. “I won’t ask what you expect to find. The land never gives back what people think it owes them.”

“I took a job in Chicago, then in Los Angeles, and finally in Manhattan, I had the same experience at each one. My coworkers made fun of my Memphis drawl. They were downright rude, calling me a hillbilly. They shunned me because I didn’t go to popular restaurants or spend my nights in the city’s hot clubs. I knew my upbringing had not prepared me for this kind of society. I quit my last job, sure I had broken the genetic chain tying me to Memphis. I want peace. I live close to the earth on my organic farm and pay my own way. This land owes me nothing.”

She receives my words the way earth receives rain. She absorbs them.

At last, she lowers her gaze. “Some things were never meant to be carried forward.”

“You don’t judge the Pollitts?”

“No,” she says. “I witness them.”

She opens the cottage door and steps aside.

“The house is ready for you now.”

I step inside and listen to the old floorboards creak and shutters rattle. “You sound like you are crying. I’m here to release you from memories of greed, drunkenness, illness and death. The greedy Pollitt family has released you. You can come alive.”

Through the study door, I see Grandpa’s desk. It’s no longer the Pollitt center of power. The top is empty, devoid of his papers and the framed photos Grandma curated. Even the omnipresent whiskey decanters and glasses, central to sealing deals, have been cleared. Desk drawers and filing cabinets hang open, as if in a last desperate act, my daddy plundered them.

There are no signs of the powerful man ‘Big Daddy’ whom I only called Grandpa. No hint at the questionable business agreements and political promises made over that desk.

Sitting in Grandpa’s chair, I am ten years old. The only good memories I have of childhood visits to this house are the brief moments being held on his lap, safe in his hug. I have a gnawing need to tell Grandpa what happened to me. I’m sure it’s not what he wanted.

“I left home when I was eighteen, with a scholarship and a single suitcase. Mama and Father saw me off at the bus station. None of my siblings came. Mother was weeping loudly and flinging her arms around. You’ve seen this act. She never hugged me or said goodbye to me, just turned and walked to the car. Father shook my hand, and said, without any warmth, that he was proud of me. He quickly followed his wife. My parents didn’t stay to see me leave and I never looked back.”

In my heart I hear Grandpa whisper, “I love you, Trixie dear.”

I close my eyes and take a final spin in his chair.

Climbing the graceful stairway, I am face to face with unfaded rectangles where family portraits hung. I’m not the only one this house has erased.

Grandpa's massive bed is missing, but I sense his powerful presence. The walls of the bedroom ooze with his laugh that filled any space, crushing out all other sounds. I loved that old man. He is the only person I thought loved me.

At the top of these stairs, I expect to face more feelings of abandonment. I await a recurrence of the buried resentment that my mother taught me to hold onto. Instead, I feel peace tinged with curiosity about the people who climbed these steps so many times. My family. I don't really know any of them. They certainly don't know me.

Pulling the brocade drape aside, I look over the plantation from this height. The transformed land looks tamed. I feel grateful to the attorney behind it. His decision was masterful. Cash is easy to divide.

There are footsteps. I hurry down the stairs as a well-dressed man with a briefcase walks toward me. "I'm guessing that you are Grandpa's attorney."

He inclines his head slightly. "George Barksden. Yes, ma'am. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Miss Pollitt."

"Trixie, please. Let's go into Grandpa's study. There are still chairs in there."

"Well then, Trixie," he sets the briefcase on the desk. "I appreciate you coming. I don't make a habit of asking people to travel unless the matter warrants it."

"When I began reviewing the current condition of the Pollitt estate," he confides, "I found you stand apart from the other surviving family members. Not geographically alone, but as a rational representative of the family. I thought it best to speak with you directly and without the others."

"I assume you want to sell off the remaining property and close the books on the Pollitt estate,"

"There are circumstances that deserve to be explained face to face, not by letter alone."

He opens the briefcase and removes a stack of papers. "All proceeds from the land sales were distributed at the time of sale. Those distributions were final. Legal fees, selling expenses, taxes, and liabilities were paid from the gross before disbursement. There are no additional assets forthcoming."

"What about the house? I know my family is expecting large checks."

He studies me briefly. His slight smile indicates that he is confirming a judgment he has already made. He holds up a flat hand, palm facing me.

“There is more. Your father, Gooper Pollitt, accrued significant gambling debts near the end of his life. Additionally, judgments were entered against his law firm after professional insurance coverage lapsed. Those judgments remain unpaid.”

I feel the weight of my aging father’s indiscretions fall heavy on my shoulders.

“His debts resulted in liens against this house. They exceed the property’s market value. In practical terms, the house is insolvent. There is no remaining Pollitt fortune. What survives is obligation.”

He lets that settle before going on. “I have brought closing statements and documentation, if you want evidence.”

“No. If Grandpa trusted you, I trust you.”

“I have prepared a letter to each of the eight remaining heirs outlining these facts. Each will be asked to acknowledge receipt and acceptance of the final accounting.”

He slides a document across the desk toward me. “I have yours here, if you would prefer to address it now.”

I read it carefully. Every sentence is exact. Every word earns its place. The estate is empty.

“This will be difficult for them,” I say. “They’ve been waiting a long time.”

“Yes,” he says gently. “I’ve found that waiting often does more damage than loss itself.”

“So, the entire estate is my daddy’s. That has been my mother’s aeipathy since she set her sites on marrying him over fifty years ago. She intentionally had enough children to ensure they would claim nearly all of the fortune. I doubt she expected the rest to be absorbed covering her husband’s debts.”

I sign.

He accepts the paper, nods once, and replaces it in his briefcase.

“I chose you,” he says, closing the case, “because I believed you would understand that this is not a matter of fairness, only of record. There is no place for arguments now.”

“I understand.”

Mr. Barksden pauses at the threshold. “For what it’s worth, I believe you’re the only one who truly left this place.”

He tips his head and walks away, his footsteps fading back into the plantation’s long memory.

“Goodbye, Grandpa,” I say quietly.