

Witches, Tsunami, Toxic Chemicals and Tossed Cookies

“We didn’t mean to get into trouble.
The trouble always found us...”

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pungent stanks...**

Mark Binder is the author of more than 20 books and audio books, including *It Ate My Sister*, *The Bed Time Story Book*, and *It was a dark and stormy night...*

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The Zombie Cat

Mark Binder

Light Publications

The **Zombie** Cat



Mark Binder

spooky fun misadventures
from the author of “It Ate My Sister”

The **Zombie**
Cat

Mark Binder



Light Publications

Key Characters and Places

My Friends and Family

David (Kovar) Kovar

Charlie (Fat Charlie) Johnson

Adam Siegel (my cousin and friend)

Jesus (Jesus) Gonzales Javier Ramon Monteiro

Sean Chang (the new kid from Fectville)

My Mom and Dad and Ellen (my older sister)

Dorothy (Mom's sister, my Aunt Dot)

Uncle Paul (Adam's Step-Dad)

Uncle Joe (Adam's Dad. Killed in Action)

Uncle Morris (My Mom's Uncle)

Grandma Flo (My Mom's Mom)

Others

Elsbeth Kovar (Kovar's little sister)

Desiree Johnson (Charlie's Sister)

Helen Beagle and Maria Santobol (teammates)

Officer James Johnson (Charlie's Uncle)

Mrs. Capamundo (our Principal)

Two Mayors

The CEO of Puritan Chemical
Corporation

The Witch

Places

Groston—the town where we lived

Jerome Marco Elementary—our school

Fectville—a wealthy rival town where “they” lived

Waredaca—our camp

Scarborough Beach, Rhode Island

The Tupperware Palace—our vacation house

Rewind

Way back. Waaaaaay back in the days before cell phones and smart phones. Before the Internet and the World Wide Web. Before digital games, first person shooters, massive multiplayer online role playing games and virtual reality.

Before GPS, satellite radio, and streaming audio.

Before tablets and laptops and personal computers.

Before ebooks, social media and self-driving cars.

Before videos and movies on demand. Before DVDs and CDs and VCRs and cable TV.

Before my family had a color TV...

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David Kovar's little sister called her cat Mr. Cuddles, but the rest of us called it Crusty. Crusty was a disgusting scabby old cat that had a torn ear and ratty fur. Sticky pus oozed from open sores all over its body before hardening into patches of yellowish crust—hence the nickname. Crusty wasn't a fighting cat, but constantly seemed to get stuck under fences and inside drain pipes. The fire department made regular trips to Kovar's house to get Crusty out of trees or to cut Crusty out of an old rusty fifty-gallon water barrel.

But the worst thing Crusty did was litter Kovar's house with hairballs. Talk about gross. Some were big clumps of cat fur, while others were small slimy balls of half-chewed grass and cat food. Crusty had a whole routine of running in through the cat flap, tearing around in circles, and

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then convulsing for five minutes before coughing up a glob of slime. It always seemed to happen when a bunch of us guys were eating snacks over at Kovar's. It didn't matter whether we were in the kitchen or in the basement. The cat would come in looking for an audience, and everything would stop while Crusty did its loud and revolting dance. My friends and I took bets on what would pop out. My cousin Adam always put his money on pure hair hairballs, though Kovar said that was statistically unlikely. Kovar's favorite bet was on a sixty-forty blend of cat fur and grass. I tended to wager that the glob would be goopy nuggets of semi-digested dry food. The winner was always Fat Charlie. (Yes, I know, you're not supposed to call a kid fat, but that was his nickname back then. We liked him and he didn't care.) Fat Charlie had a knack for predicting the composition of the spewed pellet down to the type of weed or grass the cat had eaten that morning. When we asked him how he did it, Charlie would shrug and say, "I just listen."

It was early summertime, and we were keeping cool by playing a manic game of

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slap jack in Kovar's basement lair when Crusty started doing its thing.

The cat hobbled down the steps, hacking as it went.

"Your cat's going to spew," Adam said.

Fat Charlie cocked his ear.

"Again." I agreed.

"As always," Charlie said, squinting with concentration.

"Crusty is not my cat," Kovar said, defensively. "It's my sister's."

"Twenty-five cents says it's a hairball." Adam slapped a quarter onto the table.

"It's always a hairball," Kovar said.

"Sort of by definition."

"A hairy hairball," Adam said.

"I noticed your Mom was using a generic dry food," I said, matching Adam's quarter. "I'm going for that."

Kovar looked thoughtful. "Cat hasn't been outside much." He nodded. "I'll go for a fifty-fifty on the hair and kibble." He put five nickels into the pot.

"What about you, Charlie?" Adam said.

Fat Charlie held up his finger. He was still listening.

Crusty was hurking and jerking like a slow blender grinding up a tough steak.

"Forty percent cat food," Charlie said.

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“Forty-five percent fur. Ten percent air conditioner filter...”

“Oh come on!” Adam said. “You can’t possibly know...”

“That’s only ninety-five percent,” Kovar said.

Charlie held up his palm. Turned his head.

We heard Crusty burble and wheeze.

“And a dandelion flower,” Charlie said, putting his money on the table. “Half-chewed.”

Crusty hurled, and Charlie collected his winnings with a smile.

I wish we’d had a video camera back in those days, so you could see how utterly revolting the whole thing was.

Despite everything, Kovar’s sister Elspeth still loved that cat, even taking Mr. Cuddles to bed with her every night, where it slept on a towel to keep the ooze off the sheets.

None of us could understand Elspeth’s affection. As far as we were concerned, Crusty was a living toxic waste heap. Even Kovar’s parents grumbled about the cost of frequent vet visits, expensive cat food

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because of picky eating, and thank you gifts for the Volunteer Fire Department.

But “Mr. Cuddles” never dropped any land mines in Elspeth’s room, nor in her shoes. Never anyplace she was going to step.

Crusty chose hairball targets with care. On a rainy day, when Kovar’s mom was running in with groceries, Crusty would lay down a slimy patch on the kitchen floor. When Kovar’s dad was getting ready for an important meeting, Crusty would drop a spiky ball with nettles and thorns on the carpeting in the master bedroom.

And Crusty always—I mean always—left a surprise in Kovar’s sneakers. It didn’t matter where Kovar hid his sneakers, Crusty would find them and make a deposit. Kovar once claimed that he’d kept his brand new Chuck Taylors in their box on the top shelf in his closet, and somehow Crusty still puked a load in the left heel.

“Mom!” Kovar yelled as he smooshed his sock into slime. “Crusty is disgusting! Kill it!”

“No!” Elspeth wailed.

“Put it down,” Kovar chanted. “Put it down!”

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“Honey,” Kovar’s mom said to Elspeth, “maybe it’s time to get a new cat.”

“I don’t want a new cat,” Elspeth said. “You gave him to me when I was born and you’re not taking him away!”

“All right.” Kovar’s dad sighed. “But I don’t think Crusty, I mean Mr. Cuddles is going to last much longer.”

Truer words were never spoken.

That evening, while everyone in Kovar’s family was watching a nature program called *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom*, Crusty tottered in from the kitchen, climbed onto Elspeth’s lap, rubbed its face against hers, climbed off, staggered as far as the television, flopped over and died.

And then, after it croaked, Crusty farted so badly that the whole family had to clear out of the living room with the windows open for forty minutes.

I know it’s sad, but when Kovar told us all the next morning, we couldn’t stop laughing.

“Dad had to put on his white hazmat bunny suit,” Kovar said, “and he used those long tongs he’s got for dangerous chemicals.” (Kovar’s dad was a chemical engineer, who kept a locked lab in a room near our basement hangout.)

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“Mom wanted to throw it in the garbage. Dad wanted to burn it. Elspeth wanted a proper burial, so Dad put the thing into a plastic box and filled it with disinfectant. Wanna see?”

“Wait,” Fat Charlie said. “You didn’t bury it yet?”

Kovar shook his head. “Dad wants to make sure we don’t bury anything toxic in the backyard’s soil. He’s already flushed the corpse twice. We’re going to have the funeral tonight.”

“I have got to see this,” Adam said.

“Me too,” I agreed.

Kovar took us over to his Dad’s lab, popped the lock with a hairpin, and opened the door.

In the middle of a long counter, inside a clear Lucite box, was Crusty. It was on its stomach, almost submerged in a thick clear liquid, but with its head sticking up out of the box, eyes open, staring straight at us. Creepy.

“It looks so natural,” Adam said.

Charlie whacked Adam on the shoulder.

“What?” Adam said. “It’s what you’re supposed to say when you see a dead body. Right?”

“Kovar,” I asked. “What are those wires

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coming out from the back of Crusty's head?"

"A biochemical brain experiment."

Kovar grinned. "I've hooked Crusty's brain stem up to a microprocessor, and I'm seeing what neurons and muscles I can activate with small pulses of electricity."

"You're kidding?" Charlie said.

"Nope." Kovar smiled, smugly. "Wanna see?"

Oh yeah, we wanted to see.

Kovar, in case I haven't mentioned it, was a bit of a mad scientist genius. He invented all kinds of cool things, including the Funnelator Mark IV water balloon launcher and the self-powered paper airplane. His parents encouraged his experiments by giving him a personal line of credit at the local Radio Shack electronics store to buy circuit boards and soldering irons. He'd built his own computer from parts way before all the rest of us even knew how to program.

Kovar led us to a circuit board with half a dozen controls and lots of wires in a twist-tied bundle that looped up the side of the Lucite box and into a small hole he had drilled into the back of Crusty's skull.

"Check this out," Kovar said.

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He flipped a switch, and Crusty's eyes closed.

"Cool," Adam said.

Kovar pushed a toggle, and one eye opened. He turned a knob and Crusty yawned.

"That is wild," Charlie said. "Freaky but wild."

"Watch this," Kovar whispered.

He started twiddling and tweaking, and punching buttons.

Both of Crusty's eyes shot open. Its tongue came out. Its ears went back.

Suddenly, Crusty stood up and began to convulse.

The disinfectant liquid in the box sloshed over the side, short-circuiting Kovar's device. Smoke began to curl from the peg board and a flicker of flame shot out of a capacitor.

Then, Crusty yowled.

We all took off. We ran out of the lab, out of the basement and up the stairs, except for Adam, who grabbed the emergency fire extinguisher and doused the whole table.

By the time we went back downstairs to check on Adam, the fire was out, and Crusty was submerged in foam.

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“Oh man,” Kovar moaned. “We’ve got to clean this up.”

“Who’s this we?” Charlie said. “I’ve got to go home and do my laundry.”

“Me too,” I laughed.

“Good luck,” Adam said. “You’re welcome for keeping your house from burning down.”

“Yeah, thanks,” grumbled Kovar. “You guys are still coming over tonight for the D&D all-nighter, right?” (We were too old to call it a sleepover.)

“Sure,” I said. “As long as we don’t have to attend Crusty’s funeral.”

Naturally, we had to attend Crusty’s funeral.

We had all eaten dinner at our own houses, but Elspeth had heard that we were sleeping over, so she had asked Kovar’s parents to wait to bury the cat until we got there, and then she asked us to be pallbearers. A look from Kovar’s mom, and we knew we didn’t have any choice.

It doesn’t really take four boys to carry one dead cat to a backyard grave, but we did it, trying not to giggle. Kovar’s

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dad held a tape recorder that was playing organ music. Fat Charlie kept making soft hairball-like coughing and choking noises, which really didn't help.

To be honest, I felt sorry for Elspeth. She was wearing black tights, black sneakers, a black skirt, and a black blouse, with black gloves, a black hat and a black veil. She had to be melting in the summer heat, but she didn't seem to mind.

Tears ran down her cheeks as she gave the eulogy.

"Mr. Cuddles was a good cat," she said. "He was my best friend. He kept me company and listened to all my problems. He always snuggled..."

She broke down. Kovar's mom hugged her. Her dad shoveled dirt over the box as it started to rain.

Kovar's folks took Elspeth out for ice cream. We went downstairs to play Dungeons and Dragons.

"That cat funeral was about the freakiest thing I've ever seen," Fat Charlie said.

"Amen to that," Adam agreed.

"Did your dad see the mess in the lab?" I asked, looking at the locked door.

"No. I cleaned it up." Kovar scowled.

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"It took me hours. Thanks for your help guys."

"You're welcome," we all chorused.

"I'm just glad that cat's dead," Kovar said.

As if in retribution for the snide remark, a sudden jolt of simultaneous lightning and thunder shook the house.

We all jumped.

Then we laughed.

"No no no," Charlie said. "THAT was the freakiest thing I ever saw."

"Did you plan that?" Adam asked.

"Oh yeah," Kovar said. "I am Thor, god of thunder! Bwahahaha!"

We waited, but nothing happened, except the rain got harder.

We were in the middle of trying to decide who got to pick which dungeon we were going for when the lights went out.

Kovar's family is nothing if they're not prepared. They've got a basement bomb shelter room stocked with six months of dried beans and barrels of water. They've got a spare power generator and battery powered emergency lighting.

The emergency lights came on, flickered, and then they went off too.

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“Oh come on!” Kovar said. “I recharged those.”

It was black in the basement.

“Kovar...” Fat Charlie said.

We could almost hear Kovar shrug.

“What? I thought I did. Nobody move. I’ve got some candles here somewhere.”

“Cool,” Adam said. “D&D by candlelight.”

Kovar blindly felt his way away from the table and blundered across the basement. We heard a drawer open. Then another drawer.

Then we heard Kovar yell, “OH MY GOD!”

We all screamed.

“What?” Adam said, jumping up into a karate stance.

(I knew he was doing that, even though I couldn’t see a thing. Our Uncle Morris was a former professional wrestler, and Adam had been taking lessons.)

“Crusty left me one last surprise,” Kovar said, grimly lighting a match and setting it to a candle.

Our eyes adjusted to the dim light.

Adam shifted out of his martial arts ready stance, somewhat embarrassed.

“What?”

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“What do you call that move,” I joked, “white tiger defends against putrid hairball?”

Adam whacked me on the shoulder, but smiled.

Kovar lifted his bare foot and we saw the slimy brown smear across his sole.

“Totally gross,” Fat Charlie said.

“I am so glad that cat is finally dead.” Kovar grabbed a paper towel and started wiping his foot.

Which was when the upstairs back door cat flap creaked.

“Did you hear that?” Adam said.

“No way,” Fat Charlie said.

We all listened. We could hear the rain falling. We could hear the silence of the house and the neighborhood. No humming refrigerators or air conditioners. Just the continuous sheets of pouring rain.

“It was the wind,” Kovar said. “Just the wind.”

The cat door creaked again. Louder this time.

“Whooooooo-eeee!” I whispered, making a low wind noise.

“Shut up,” Charlie said.

We listened. The cat door flapped open and flopped closed. And then stopped.

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We waited.

“Whoooo...” I started.

Charlie slugged me, hard.

“Ow!”

“Shhh,” Adam said.

That’s when we heard it.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Slush.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Slush.

Like one, two, three cat claws snapping across the kitchen floor, and something wet being dragged behind.

“No way,” Fat Charlie said.

“We’re imagining things,” Adam said.

“Whoo...” I began, but Charlie raised his fist and I kept quiet.

We listened.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Slusshh.

“It’s getting closer,” Adam said.

“Where’s your air rifle?” I asked Kovar.

“It’s where it’s supposed to be,” he said. “It’s upstairs under my bed.”

“Do you have any weapons?” Adam said.

Kovar shook his head. “My dad keeps all the real stuff locked away in the bomb shelter, and I can’t pick that lock, yet.”

“What about tools?” Adam asked, calmly. “Power drills...”

“There’s no power!” Charlie moaned.

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“Hammers? Chisels?” Adam said. “Nails we can throw? Rocks?”

Tap. Tap. Tap. Slusssshhh.

The cat flap in the door at the top of the basement began to creak.

Kovar handed Charlie the candle, but it immediately went out. We couldn't see a thing. It was as dark as black coffee at the bottom of a black mug.

“It's in here!” Adam said.

“OHmygodOHmygod!” Charlie began to chant.

Tap. Tap.

“I think it's on the stairs,” Kovar whispered.

I flipped the card table over sideways and shouted, “Get behind this!”

Thud.

Kovar started flicking matches, and everyone was moving.

Slusssshh.

We all cowered behind the card table, like it was a fort, except Adam, who resumed his fighting stance.

“OHmygod!” Charlie said.

“SHHHHH!” the rest of us whispered.

It went dead quiet, and we didn't hear anything at first but the sounds of our own breathing.

And then.

Tap. Tap. Thud. Slusssshhh.

How many steps were there? I tried to remember.

Tap. Tap. Thud. Slusssshhh.

My heart was pounding. I could hear the blood rushing through my veins.

Tap. Tap. Thud. Slusssshhh.

Finally, Kovar managed to light a match. He grabbed the candle from Charlie, lit it and held it up.

We all peeked over the edge of the table.

Standing three steps up from the bottom, if you can call a wobbling lurch standing, was the muddy dripping zombie body of Crusty the cat.

One ear perked up. One ear was off to the side. Its fur was spiked in patches, matted in others. The top of its skull was exposed and seemed to be half-eaten away by maggots, with a few pieces of wires sticking out of the bone.

Crusty's bleached-white eyes were wide open, and they immediately turned toward the only source of light, the flame of the candle that Kovar held.

We couldn't move.

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Tap. Tap. Thud. Slusssshhh.

Adam completely forgot every single kick, punch and block he knew.

Tap. Tap. Thud. Slusssshhh.

It plopped off the bottom step and oozed toward us across the narrow strip of concrete basement floor.

Tap. Its mouth opened. Its maw widened. We could see its sharp and broken teeth. Its tongue twirled and curled.

Tap. Its spine rose. Its lungs inflated.

Tap. Maybe it was just the dim candlelight, but it seemed as if Crusty was getting bigger and bigger.

Slusssssssssshhhh.

Then it stopped. Still. Staring at us with yellow and green flickering eyes and a wicked grin.

I don't think I'll ever forget the sound that it made.

You know that yowl cats do when you step on their tails? Take that wail, deepen it, draw it out longer, and put it through a blender. Then make that moaning sound louder and louder, like a clothes dryer full of banging wet sneakers.

Crusty was twitching and jerking and

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hurking and coughing like a ten-packs-a-day cigarette smoker.

Its body was inflating and deflating like a punctured rubber glove attached to a hospital oxygen respirator.

Its jaws opened wider and wider, like a snake getting ready to swallow an elephant.

“OH MY GOD!”

“DUCK!”

The candle went out. Everything was black. Again.

Then it happened.

All at once and for what seemed like five minutes, Crusty hurled.

The stream of splattering vomit gushed against the sideways table. It felt—and sounded—like a fire hose was blasting a torrent of blood and guts. We held on to the table’s legs and pushed back against the high-pressure splatter as the hairball continued to hit. It nearly knocked us over twice!

Then there was one last blurp. And then a thump. And it stopped.

Everything stopped, except our hammering hearts.

Nobody moved. Nobody wanted to move.

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Honestly, it was a wonder none of us peed our pants.

Finally, Kovar remembered the matches, and relit the candle.

As soon as he did that, the power came back and the lights went on.

We peered over the top of the table and saw the huge puddle of slime and the cat intestines leaking from Crusty's mouth.

That was it. All of us, every single one of us, threw up.

It was a complete barf fest.

I hurled French bread pizza. Kovar upchucked Kung Pao Chicken and Pork Lo Mein. Charlie tossed in homemade fried chicken. Adam regurgitated an entire bean burrito with cheese and lots and lots of avocado.

We puked until it hurt, and if we could have, we would have puked some more.

When it was all done, though, we felt better. A little bit.

The smell wasn't so bad, probably because of all the disinfectant Kovar's dad had used on Crusty's corpse.

But the mess was exactly as bad as you might think.

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“We have got to clean this up,” Kovar said, quietly. “Everybody helps.”

We all nodded numbly, and with dustpans and rags, mop and sponges and every single bath and beach towel Kovar’s family owned, we wiped the floor of the basement, the steps, and the kitchen floor clean.

The towels went into the washing machine.

Crusty’s limp corpse was scooped up, taken out back, and buried again. Even though it was still pouring, we stood in the rain, collecting rocks until we piled a huge cairn on top of the grave.

The rain felt good, washing away the muck and the stench.

We rinsed our mouths out in the kitchen sink, and then staggered downstairs, silent and numb.

Just then, the back door slammed and we all jumped.

“Sorry it took so long, the power was out at the ice cream shop,” Kovar’s dad was shouting.

“Did you see Mr. Cuddles’ grave?” Elspeth was saying. “It looks so nice.”

Kovar looked at us. He shook his head. He bit his lip.

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“What is all this water doing on the kitchen floor?” Kovar’s mom was yelling down the stairs.

We didn’t answer. We didn’t make a sound.

We just started to laugh silently, and didn’t stop until our sides hurt.

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