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The Letter Gods

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were green...like young apples from Grandpa's farm. In her heart this cat knew how to listen. She heard jays scolding in the yard out back. She listened to crickets and mice scampering in the pantry.

And best of all she listened to young girls. She kept all their secrets. She never left in the night when shadowy things moved in and out of slumbering bedrooms. She warmed cold feet and sang lullabies in purring harmony.

Then she grew sick and lost her fleeting speed. Some of her hair dropped off and what stayed on was dirty and drab. She couldn't eat and only her eyes remembered the dancing days of summers gone. She was not dead but dying, wanting to leave, to hurry on.

"Do you understand?" Em asked.

The cat lay frozen in her misery. She uttered smaller meows, pleas to her mistress.

She had done as her dad said: "Better to chloroform her than have her suffer."

Em took the chloroform and poured some onto an old white sock. She pressed the sock over Cleo's nostrils. The cat let go... her life darted across the basement floor and up the stairs and away. Her body sank into her chenille bed and Em knew she was dead. The pain left the cat for good. Em buried her in the yard.

Shortly afterwards Em watched her own green eyes become opaque, lost in the last days of summer. She felt afraid as shadows moved in her room at night. And then her body ushered in the first pains of new illness. She dreamed of white socks and girls who couldn't run and play. Em didn't tell her father of her pain lest he decide she must not be left to suffer, either. Em lay frozen in her misery. Her mind called out in the refuge of her room..."Cleo...Cleo... listen to me now...I will tell you a story. Once there was a beautiful girl. Her eyes were green like young apples from Grandpa's farm..."

Em took to spending long periods of time in her room talking to the memory of her now-

dead cat. She retraced her steps again and again, from the door to the window. Her conversations became whispers. All the while the empty place inside of her grew larger. The pains were frequent. Her appetite was small. Her mother coaxed her to take the pale foods...milk, eggs, potatoes, pudding, custard. Her father stared at her during dinner. He raised his napkin to his lips and cleared his throat frequently. Em avoided her father. She forced herself to smile when he raised his head and sent searching looks in her direction. Surely he knew she was not well. She ate her food and threw it back up in the bathroom at the end of the hall. Droplets of sweat ran down her forehead as she wiped her mouth with the white wash rag. Her fear chased her into the cool darkness of her bedroom where for the first time she cried real tears for herself and her cat.

One evening Em heard her father's step on the stairs. He tapped lightly on her door. She clutched her pillow in the dark. He opened the door and turned on the ceiling light. Em blinked her eyes to reject the intrusion of light. Her father had something cradled in his arms. He placed a small black kitten on her pillow. It mewed and purred at the same time. Em felt the touch of downy fur against her face. She almost laughed. Her father padded out of the room and closed the door. Em cuddled the healthy new kitten against her. There would be plenty of time. This cat was going to stay with her forever and ever. She was suddenly hungry, ravenous in fact. Her father had looked pale, she thought. His pants were sagging in the back now. Her mother was encouraging him to eat more but he shook his head, complained of nausea and headache. Em smiled. The white powder from their basement mixed in easily with his oatmeal. Every morning she mixed it in when she helped her mother in the kitchen. Oatmeal was her specialty. It was the only dish she knew how to make. Em cuddled the kitten to her and went to the kitchen to get it some milk. Her pain was gone. She walked quietly past her father's room. His light was out. The only sound in the house was the kitten purring against Em's chest.

The Letter Gods

by
Stefan Bilandic

Blows rang out. Jimmy and Billy were fighting. Jimmy was much bigger but Billy hung on like a tiger.

Words rang out. Jimmy and Billy were calling each other names between blows. Not very nice names, either.

Steps rang out. Jimmy and Billy had a father, and he was advancing down the hall. They stopped fighting, and quickly.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Father was a lawyer, and he liked to talk like one. "You should be ashamed of what you called each other."

Jimmy knew he shouldn't be picking on his little brother, and he hung back with

shame. Billy's eyes became bright, as he knew what was going to happen. Father gave Jimmy a spanking, and Billy was glad it wasn't him.

Red all over, Jimmy stalked off to his room. Just before he slammed the door, he called out one final snip. "God you...!"

"Yes?"

Jimmy turned around suddenly and saw a man sitting on his bed. The man looked like he might be one of Father's friends, wearing a business suit, and he smiled.

"Who are you?" asked Jimmy.

The man smiled again. "I am God U."

"God who?"

The man looked like he was thinking what blockheads little boys were. "Not God Who, God U."

Jimmy just stared at the man. Is he crazy? he thought.

"There are twenty-six gods, one for each letter," explained the man. "I am God U. You summoned me. Just a moment ago."

Jimmy still looked blank. Am I crazy? he thought.

"You called out 'God U!' and I came, as I was instructed to do."

Now Jimmy realized how the man had come. "What do I do with you?"

"I am God U, the God of petty disputes and minor bickerings, like the one you just had with your brother."

Jimmy didn't know what those big words meant, but he nodded his head.

Perhaps the man sensed Jimmy's doubt. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a piece of white paper. "My card," he explained, and handed it to Jimmy.

Jimmy saw those same big words on the card. It also said something about "Office 21, Heaven Building." But Jimmy didn't really look at that. He put the card in his pocket.

"Would you like to meet some of the other gods?" said the man, changing the subject.

"I guess so," said Jimmy. He began to be curious. "May I see God J for Jimmy?"

"Here I am," said a voice.

Jimmy turned around and saw another man coming in and closing the door behind him. "Hello," said Jimmy.

"I am God J," said God J, "the God of Birds."

Jimmy looked at God J and saw that he was wearing khaki attire, like a birdwatcher Jimmy now recalled having met once. I guess there really are gods, he thought.

"Jimmy!" called a fierce voice behind him.

Jimmy turned around (I'm tired of turning around, he thought) and saw God U and, next to him, a fierce-looking man in a soldier's uniform. "I am God W," said the fierce man. "That's Double-U. That means I'm twice as bad as God U. No minor bickering here. I am the God of War!" And he raised his hand threateningly.

Jimmy covered his eyes in terror. "Make them go away!" he screamed.

When Jimmy opened his eyes again, God W was not there. Neither was God J. Only God U, who sat on the bed, smiling. "Now: what may I do for you?" said God U.

"I don't know," admitted Jimmy.

"Oh dear," sighed the man. "This happens all the time. You did not really call me, did you? You said, 'God you,' not 'God U.'"

Jimmy nodded his head yes.

"I am not happy," said God U.

Jimmy nodded his head.

The man stood up and suddenly knocked Jimmy to the floor. Jimmy got right back up, but God U was not to be seen.

"Jimmy," said a voice behind him.

Jimmy shrugged and turned around.



There, in the doorway, was his father. "You fell out of bed," declared his father.

Jimmy looked at his bed, but the covers were not rumpled. No trace of where God U had been sitting could be seen. Neither Jimmy nor his father noticed a small white card that had fallen out of the boy's pocket.

"Then he wasn't here?" Jimmy said dubiously.

"Who wasn't here?"

"God U."

"Jimmy!" said Father in an angry voice. "Don't talk like that."

"Yes, Father."

"Now turn off the light and go back to bed." The father closed the door and left the room. He decided that he didn't understand little boys.

Jimmy, meanwhile, picked up God U's calling card and felt it thoughtfully. He had it one better. He decided that he didn't understand gods.