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A BILATERAL VIEW

Susan Huckle

THE CAT LEFT his warm circle on the corner of the bed and stretched his legs. It was broad day, far past time to eat. He watched the man still rolling about under the covers, sleeping in fits.

David had become skilled at stretching his sleep from the night well into the day in order to make time pass unwittingly. He could tether his unconsciousness for many hours like a tissue paper tent around him, but eventually distorted dreams would rout him from bed. This time he had dreamed of a bullfight and was relieved, for a moment, to awaken and remember himself. There was no bullfight. Today he only had to get a job, or else ask his mother for more money.

The cat travelled the floor to the room where they ate and found crumbs in his bowl, dust floating on his water. And when he marked the ground in his box, the sharp air rose and bit his nose, so that he tore out of the box spraying damp litter and growling. Lately it had come to this, so that he must send up loud sounds of discomfort. "See to me!" the cat cried.

After shaking kibbles from a box into the cat's dish, David knelt and ran his fingers through his pet's fur, smoothing the nape. It was gray, the color of doves. What a steady creature the cat is for me, he thought once again. They had been together since college. The cat had proved to be gentle and loyal for a tom, always ready to warm his master's lap. But the way things were now, the cat had become David's reason to get up in the morning, to go to the store for food, and to continue to live on his own rather than move back home with his mother. Mom had allergies to animals. David patted the cat on the head, stood and went into the bathroom.

The cat washed after eating, listening with one ear. His sounds revealed that the man had shuffled out of his bathing room, shed some cloth, and pulled other cloth onto his legs and middle. The cat watched him leave through the door to the outside and come back

with small, flat squares in his hands. Then the man sat down and was still, much the same as on other days. Nothing else to watch. The cat settled into a crouch, wrapping his tail around himself, and closed his eyes.

David stared at the papers spread before him and thought of eating a sandwich, thought of putting his slippers on his cold feet, considered cutting his toe nails, which were thinning the ends of all his socks. Instead he retrieved an empty box from under the bed, and used it to clear away an accumulation of papers, cards and receipts—a melancholy stack of white and yellow, punctuated with the color of birthday cards from his mother and grandmother, with gaudy mail-order catalogs, and with the three pink letters from Nancy McClanahan. She was Nancy Logan now. He put her letters on the very bottom of the stack, shoved the box in a corner and placed the new “Payment Due” statements from the mail in the cleared space on his desk.

Ten months now since the grant was cancelled, the one on which David had been employed—straight from college—to categorize pollen granules collected in Honduras. The job was like an extension of the best part of his schooling, only better; he had willingly worked twelve and fourteen hour days, learned to drink black coffee and use the University mainframe computer, was entrusted with a fistful of keys, and had been allowed to attend a scientific meeting in Omaha. David couldn’t then appreciate his remarkable good fortune as a botany major lucky enough to be employed in actual botanical research. Now it was November and his appreciation came painfully after the fact. Mom had given him money twice since August. He had started checking all of the classified ads in the newspaper, even the ones for night shift motel clerks and telephone solicitors. But there was one job in the bulky listings book at the University that he had not tried for, one technical research position that had been advertised for some time which both threatened and dared him daily. David wiped his palms and picked up the telephone.

The cat sat listening to the buzz of a fly wandering over the air, though the buzz was weak, and a slow fly was of no interest. So he listened to the man make noise at the black box, and rose from his crouch. He tried the man’s feet, but the feet would not rub him. He jumped into the man’s lap, but the hands stayed busy twanging the box’s curly tail and would not scratch his chin. The cat thumped his tail irritably, and finally draped himself over the man’s shoulders, where he could not be so easily ignored. But on the man’s face he saw pinches, and in the man’s voice he heard uncomfortable tremors.

“Hey!” David tossed the cat off his shoulders. “I’ve got to hurry.” Tweed coat and cordouroys would have to do, he was thinking. No

time to have his suit cleaned of cat hair, no cash for it anyway.

After washing, the man pulled fresh cloth on his body and did the other things he did when he was about to leave. The last was to push open a window just wide enough for the cat to pass through.

His usual rounds during the cold season did not take the cat as far from the rooms as when it was warm. Often he only trotted across the street and down along a row of big trees, where birds stayed in the branches, and beneath them, rabbits sometimes sat. Nothing today. The cat scratched his back by rolling on the ground, then slipped home again through the slit in the window.

* * *

Dr. Dailey snapped berry-flavored chewing gum. His tongue was bright pink.

"My funding is solid for three years," he said, "and it's renewable for two years after that if we're making good progress. Landing money for hypertension studies isn't hard these days. Hard part's keeping it. It's a competitive field."

"My father suffered from hypertension," David said.

"Oh?"

"It killed him."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Did it happen recently?"

"No. Years ago."

"That's a tough break for a boy. Now as I was saying, I really want somebody who will stick with the project for the duration. I invest a lot of time in training, if you see what I mean."

"Yes, sir. What exactly does the work involve?" David felt the end of his socks evaporating over his toes.

"Skillwise, manual dexterity and accuracy are the top of the list."

"I'm very good with my hands."

"We do rather delicate surgeries, implanting transducers in small arteries. Then we recover the animal, treat it with certain compounds, measure certain effects. It's practical research. I can show you in more detail later. Have a cat by any chance?"

"Yes."

"You realize of course that we work on cats. Will that be a problem? They are simply the species of choice for this sort of work." Dr. Dailey exchanged his exhausted chew for a fresh pink one, and as he made it pliant in his mouth, the air in his office bloomed with a ripe, saccharin smell.

"Gum?" he offered.

* * *

While the man was gone the cat visited the water bowl in the small room and drank of the water there that was cool and never dusty. Then he leapt atop one of the man's guarded places and looked around. This was where the man often sat and played, doing small things there with his hands. The cat sniffed piles of dried plants that lay about, clusters of petals. Some smelled bright, some tired. Some smelled bad.

There—the fly—whap, the cat slapped and lunged, showering petals. He swallowed the fly and bolted for cover when the man came through the door.

The man made loud noises at the fallen flowers, but not angry ones. He uttered instead the fluttering sound he made when he was pleased, though it had an edge that signaled caution. Then he brought out something in the eating room that smelled like cream.

"We're celebrating," David said to the cat. "The bastard gave me the job. So Mom'll be off my back. The landlord'll be off my back. I scream, you scream we all scream for ice cream. Here you go, cat. Try it."

The cat sniffed the cream and pulled back. It was hard with cold, like the ground outside.

"Well, you little snot. I bought it half for you. All right, wait until it's thawed then."

* * *

The days took on a new order; the man put food out early and left the rooms, the cat slept well by himself, and the man returned to the rooms at dark. But the man changed. He ate little and his face was pinched tighter. He began to talk to the cat with peculiar clicks and coos. He brought gifts: catnip and fancy fish, and sought out the cat when he first returned to the rooms, cradling the cat's head between his neck and shoulder, rubbing the cat's ears until he purred. Then the man would sit apart, hands idle, and become quiet. The cat watched him closely.

Now David often lay awake before dawn, before his alarm rang. He would feel the warm curve of the sleeping cat against his feet, and would try to decide how much he resented being on a schedule again, being at somebody's beck and call, not knowing how or what, where to look, fumbling with the unfamiliar. No. It was more that he was doing exactly the kind of thing that had caused him to choose plant study in the first place. It was seeing the cats after being anesthetized, their mouths so dry they were unable to groom themselves, their coats matted and scruffy. Not being able to tame the mean ones, comfort the frightened ones, take them all home. David was not an early riser.

His habitual waking in the dark, his seeing caged cats in his mind's eye was a measure, he was sure, of his misery.

* * *

At the end of one day the man returned to the rooms without gifts. When the cat presented himself, the man drew back.

"I can't look at you!" he shouted, throwing his shoe in the cat's direction.

David could see the cat's surprise and recoil. The human nature of the reaction infuriated him. He cursed, paced, went into the kitchen, started picking at a piece of fried fish he had brought home for supper.

The cat's mouth made water as he crouched under the bed and listened. There was sudden silence; the man rushed to the small room and banged the door shut behind him, then later emerged, coughing.

"Come on out, cat. Kitty, kitty."

The cat tucked his paws up against his chest where he lay.

"Please come out." The man returned to the eating room and rattled the fish in its box. "You can have the fish."

After a time, the cat could no longer resist. He moved very slowly from his cover. He ate the white flesh with his ears folded flat.

When he was finished, the man brought the cat into his arms. Water spilled from the man's nose and eyes, and wet his fur. The cat struggled to get out of the clutch, for the man had begun to put off a bitter smell that signaled warning.

"This was my first day, actually having to do it. Dailey's been training me up to now." David let the cat go and watched him position himself primly across the room to wash, his moist tongue smoothing the dove-gray fur until it was perfect. The cat looked back at him with oval knowing eyes. Making fists of his hands, David pounded them together.

"I swear to God, I'll quit tomorrow," he said.

The cat trotted to the window, and meowed to go outside.

* * *

The ground was firm with cold and dark under the row of trees, where one rabbit sat. The cat charged, but being full of fish, he pulled up short, then traveled in bursts of gallops for some distance. He reached a place far beyond the pines and climbed up blocks set before a door. He sent up sounds of announcement, hooking his claws in the front of the outer door, banging it slightly.

A light appeared and a woman opened the door.

"Well, look who's come to see me after all this time! I thought you

must've come to harm. In you go. We'll have a visit."

The cat knew the woman's eating room well because she used to be on his rounds in the warm season. Many times he had found her outside, sometimes moving ground around bushes with thick clusters of petals, sometimes marking bushes with water. She would have him come into her rooms and give him cream that was not hard with cold, but cool and wet, the most wonderful of all the things he had ever put over his tongue.

He watched the woman move about her eating room slowly. No scent about her signaled trouble, and her face lacked pinches. The room was ordered and dustless. The cat lay down with the woman crooning to him. Cream was nearby; he could smell it. He rolled onto his back, showing her his belly, his ease, his intent to stay.