

Approx. 4805 Words

The Cat Door

By

A.APeyton

They always say never fall in love with an artist... What the heck are you supposed to do when you're both some kind of artist? He was a painter, and I was working in Real Estate during business hours. In my downtime, I did level design for video games. Regrettably, someone needed to be grounded and work in the less fantastical world of a corporate office. It would not be James.

It would never be James...

His art, his infinite inspiration, couldn't flourish in the construct of Capitalism. So I kept my job selling homes. Real Estate isn't the cash cow everyone thinks it is. Not everyone got to work in the glass offices overlooking the beaches; where your after-hours offered you the lustering California sunsets, filled with bright life and music for atmosphere. My office isn't overlooking the beaches. It does have a lovely wide window, overlooking the jagged cliffs and crashing waves for atmosphere. It's when the lighthouse flickers on. That's when I get to watch the fog roll in from the Southern Pacific Ocean and begin the evenings.

There's a way that the intense radiance from the lighthouse carves out shadows that dance in the fro. I always thought the shadows of the waves were the real storytellers of the sea. The crashing of the waves silhouetted by the unyielding beam of the Lighthouse made for ferocious fantasies It created Ninki Nanka, sprang to life memories of Nessies, it summons Sassie from San Fran. The fog retold tales of Sirens riding on the ever-encompassing back of Jormungandr. It was fucking scary, and I loved it. My humble view, along with the overtime, helped.

The job came with a modest three-bedroom townhouse that was roughly two miles away from the office. A mortgage-free home in California is a steal. A rather large perk for a small Real Estate company. Three bedrooms, 2 baths with a huge backyard, and an just as large front porch. Across the road was a

rocky border just before what used to be the shoreline... Now, while beautiful... it's a jagged drop-off. Before, there were plans for a new development 15 miles from the cliff's shoreline. A neighborhood was going to have its own island, a mini Catalina, as a getaway. That was the intention, anyway.

The National Guard was called out to help with the search and rescue from the construction site. I remember seeing on the local news, dozens of helicopters flying out to the site and several boats picking people out of the water. I remember having to turn the television down because of the screaming. The screams weren't coming from where I thought were from. I don't think I was the only one, either. The screams weren't coming from the construction crew, that were thrown into the ocean by the initial explosion and eruption it was coming from the sinkhole. They didn't realize that the hydraulics stabilizers pierced underwater cave systems carved out by a series of hydrothermal vents. The sinkholes erupted on the ocean surface with steam blasting and frothing the surrounding seawater. A portion of the cave collapsed in on itself, and the ocean filled parts of the caves, causing sinkholes to appear at the surface

It was a cacophony of petitions. It sounded like hundreds, if not thousands, of cries for mercy and aid. Later, local oceanographers explained it was the sound of the water echoing through the caverns as it was being filed. As best as they could assume. The force of the water being sucked downwards was too powerful for any diver to explore. And for good reason, the drones that were sent into the hole didn't make it back to the surface. They suspected a human would not survive it. The intense heat from the thermal vents destroyed most of the sensors. There's a dry bottom, from what they could see before steam disintegrated the drone. That was some evidence that it was just water rushing in.

That didn't stop the doomsday conspiracies from coming through or even stop them from coming to the affected area and proclaiming it to be the work of god... or Satan. It really depended on who was there and what church they came from. It was always something of a treat to see Christians fight among themselves about who's work it was. I have a TikTok video saved where a couple of Pagans instigated a fight between all three, intending to get arrested. There was at least a bit of dark humor to be found about the matter. Until the screams became man. On the third day, the sinkhole multiplied.

On the third day, one more appeared parallel to the shoreline. Before anyone could suggest preventative measures, the cliff side started its untimely event. No one realized that the cave system didn't stop at the shoreline. One would imagine that experts should have thought of the idea... maybe they did and they didn't listen? Who knows? Multimillion-dollar homes fell, schools fell, the roads fell, and the people fell. The cataclysm could be heard at least three cities over in any direction. On the eleventh day, silence finally fell, and we were thankful. The sinkholes devouring the landscape shaving two miles of landmass off.

After six years of research and mourning, the area was ready to move on again. My company was one of the first to develop the area again. It's a lovely area. It's just dreadfully quiet outside of the waves

crashing below. Save for a few vehicles here and there. Some people have reservations about living here. James certainly did. If a precaution could be have been taken- they took it. James still hated the idea. He said something about the vibe blocking his creativity. At one point, he suggested going to a studio to work several miles away. I told him that was an incredibly ridiculous idea, and he was creating an unnecessary expense! An expense I would have to pay for. I love James; I do. But his art isn't what keeps the lights on, or the cats fucking fed. Despite being a stay-at-home cat-dad, he doesn't feed them. All three little adorable furballs rush me as soon as they hear me coming in the door. Loud little mews of distress, as if they hadn't eaten for days. Which sometimes may be the case if I leave on a company trip and leave them with James. When I'm absent, my sister or my bestie comes by and makes sure that three creatures are fed; if the fourth creature complains; they remind him he has thumbs. He gets so focused... so focused that he sometimes doesn't close the porch's screen door. We agreed to not have a cat door leading out because of the cliffs and the general fear of their curiosity....

For a time, I really believed he was just absent-minded; now... now it feels vindictive. Just to make me angry? Because I think that it's fucking insane for him to want to go to a studio when we made the third bedroom his damn studio. This house is mortgage free, this place not including the upgrades could easily go for a sickening 1.5 million dollars, even with the area being the subject of superstition and station. I only sold three homes last quarter. He sold 2 pieces of art totaling 500.00. His car payment is \$1200.00. Each of his projects ranges from \$2,000 to \$5,000 to launch... who pays for that? I do. Do I love my husband? I do. I merely ask that he feed the cats and make sure the fur babies do not get out... Each feline is an emotional support animal; their safety is imperative to me. Mite-o, Gorry, and Arcadia. A siamese, orange tabby, and a Bombay, respectively. Once again, I came home to starving cats, but I was only ambushed by the two. It was Arcadia that was missing. From the front entrance, I could see the reflection of the back porch door through a mirror and bay window. I screamed for James, as per normal, he padded out in his painter's apron, and he started the usual fucking apology until he saw the look on my face.

He's been blowing up my phone for the last two hours. I messaged all the neighbors, warning them about Arcadia. It was still daylight out, thankfully. It was only 4:30 pm, and the sunset was around 7. I didn't want to go home. It was still early, but I was fending off a panic attack. If I were to go home right now, seeing James would... I don't want to think about it. The safest place for me was going to be in my office. The office manager announced that ownership was delighted to give us the half-day for the holiday weekend; paid. Everyone bugged out of the office as if it was the last day of school. The office would be empty and I can decompress and sob if I needed it.

The parking lot was empty. Great. No one's there. I b-lined started for the door, unlocked it, and started my normal trot to the surveillance alarm. But it wasn't doing its normal chirping countdown.

“Did Mara forget to set the alarm?” I muttered, before walking back to my office and dropping into my chair. Regardless, I was there alone, and I was glad for it. I could finally let go of the ragged breath I had been holding on to.

“You know, the purpose of letting go for the day doesn’t mean you have to come back.” The phrase came with echoing footsteps towards the door, then stopped. “Oh dear, what has happened?”

Fuck. Did I really not see his car outside? Or the entourage of cars that come with him. It was the Ownership, or rather... just the Owner, without his council of investors. Benson E. Atwood. Developer and real estate mogul. He was at least 50 with salt and saltier hair, clean-shaven, and fit. A smile that can sweep anyone off their feet and make you forget owners can be absolute dicks.

Before I could think about it, I was already standing, offering an apology, and astutely dried and sucked away the tears and held that breath once again. “Mr. Atwood, I didn’t realize you or anyone was still here. I didn’t mean to disturb the assets. I just needed somewhere- I... lost my cat.” It was the truth. It was a stupid truth that I felt completely ignorant spilling it to the owner. “I-”

He raised his hand. “Follow me.” He exited the door frame and began walking towards the staircase that wound right overhead of my shared office space. Mr. Atwood glanced over his shoulder to make sure that I was still in tow. “Have a seat, Eira.” He pointed to the seating area facing the ocean. It was a plush Midnight Velvet Victorian chaise. I considered the office modern and minimalistic in terms of interior design. But Mr. Atwood’s office held a strange confluence of glass and steel along with scattered pieces of the antique or period statement piece. This was one such piece. It was terribly comfortable; I nearly sank completely into the cushions of the chaise.

I didn’t hear Mr. Atwood close the door, but I heard and seen him pour from the decanter on his desk. I watched him from the reflection in the window. I don’t know if he felt me staring, but he met my glances in the window as well, “Tell me about your cat.” He circled back to me with two drinks in hand; handing one to me as he sat in another ornate chair catercorner to the window and the chaise... “Hope you don’t mind scotch.”

“Thank you, Mr. Atwood-I,”

“Benson. Also, it’s okay to breathe. I don’t think you’ve taken a decent breath since I startled you. Now go on.” He interjected.

“Alright. Benson. Thank you.” I exhaled less shakily. Of course, I’ve been breathing the whole time, but I was holding on to something. Whatever that internal thing was, it left my lungs rattled. I

replaced that feeling with a slight burn from the scotch. “My cat... Her name is Arcadia. She’s a Bombay. Basically, an all-black cat even her nose and toe beans. She’s one of three of my emotional support animals.” I bit the inside of my lip from sadness, but most of all anger, I chose my words carefully. “My husband somehow forgot that he left the back door open.”

“Dreadful.” He simply said before taking a sip and handing me his phone. “Send me a photo of your precious little one and-.” He took the phone back and sighed. “My apologies. Nasty habit, I thrust this thing in the face of my assistant more than I actually use it.” He chuckled, unlocking his phone. He airdropped his contact information to my phone. “Send me a photo. I’ll have Jared alert the shelters and catchers.. Is she chipped?”

I nodded.

“fantastic.” he chuckled. “Leave it with me, certainly we don’t have o worry have too much. The area isn’t bustling with traffic or coyotes. You moved in most, if not all the residents here. You know them well enough; that they’ll return her. So.. why did you come here to the office, of all places?”

“Arcadia is extremely curious, and I’m afraid she’s going to fall. But this wouldn’t be happening if I had just gotten James the art studio further into town.” I took a sip and gave a cleaner exhale. “We had an argument about this happening once before. If I were to go home right now-”

“Say no more,” Benson stood, heading back to the desk, grabbing the decanter, and returned. “We have a few hours before the light show begins, and frankly, we both can use the company.” My boss filled my glass to the brim before he topped off his own.

“The light show?” The question seeped out before thanking him for the refill.

Benson nodded towards the lighthouse. “The fog rolling in with the light- makes for a spectacular show.”

“I didn’t think anyone else enjoyed the roll-in? Everyone else is too creeped out by the shadows bouncing off the fog. It’s like watching an old-timey puppet show... just with nature and a lighthouse..”

“Stars, you are in good company. There’s a sense of serenity here beyond.” Benson paused, then continued to sip his scotch. He did not finish his statement but simply meant... Beyond.

I was honestly lost, and he had no intention of finishing the phrase. It was weird, then I took another sip, and it made sense, simply just an absence of identifiable words to describe the indescribable sensation of wonder and peace that a mere fragment of nature can offer without point or purpose? Beyond? “It is brilliant, isn’t it?” I hummed.

Mr. Atwood and I spent all afternoon day-drinking in his office until he mentioned he was getting peckish. I ordered pizza and sushi for us since he continued to supply the scotch. He begged me not to; but I insisted. We talked about the oddities in his office, the clash of items. He explained that he’d love to travel, and he was a collector of sorts. He eventually revealed that he was an anthropologist before getting into development. The only reason he got into the industry was so that he could inherit his father’s fortune. I was stunned that he said something that candid to an employee, not even an associate. He snickered, lamenting that he actually hates being in real estate, but sees the benefits and capital gain. Those capital gains help fund his research excursions.

Benson stood with a comical hop, then shot a wink my way before nearly skipping over to the shelf above his desk. Apparently, he didn’t get to talk about his passion outside of money. Stealing from dead civilizations and writing about them and keeping at least one item before donating the rest to an institution of some sort... I wasn’t here to judge, I was here to escape James and spicy sadness over Arcadia being lost. Much to my constant surprise, he was providing quite an escape; we were drinking scotch that cost more than what I can make in a year; we were eating pizza and sushi and currently waiting for the sun to set over the ocean from an amazing view. It’s a nice moment aside from my nightmare.

He placed on the table an 8-inch statue, a cat. I gave a drunken pout. Any kitty talk was going to have that response before resuming. It was Bast, or I thought as much... There was something wrong with the interpretation. This Bast had three catheads, one forward and the others flanking. The catheads on the sides were upside down; and in one of its hands wasn’t quite ankh, but a perversion of such. The shape was off and the symbols didn’t look familiar and from the corners of the icon, I honestly couldn’t make it out, but possibly hands or fish tails? Benson watched the myriad of expressions until I was completely dumbfounded.

“Care to guess?” Benson mused as he rounded the chaise leaning over my shoulder.

“I... It’s an...” Noting I could say would be correct. “It’s another interpretation Bast? Or...”

“You’re not wrong. I found this interpretation in Sudan, Meroe. The Kush Kingdom. The former inhabitants had their own set of gods along with other Kemetic Gods. It was found in a temple

dedicated to Bast. Only a few homes had this with the Bast that we typically see for the period. But this one was uniquely..." He paused, looking for words or rather selecting his words. "It was hard to acquire, leave it at that. Not the point, turn it about. It's completely solid, no part of it's hollow. Look, it's happening." He tapped me on the opposite shoulder before circling back to the window. It was a terrible way to change the subject. It worked. This time, he sat next to me on the chaise. Right on time, he refilled our tumblers; I sat the idol back on the table. A chill ran down my spine.

"A toast to a brilliant evening, and many more like them to come, of course, without the precariousness of James. And the return of Arcadia." He raised his glass for me to meet.

"To that and more. And thank you for being such a gracious host. You really didn't have to." It was true, I was more than appreciative of the booze and the conversation and the peak at the human behind the wall of Ownership.

"Of course, I did. *Tenebrae No Ligare*." He gave an exuberant cheer. Then silence fell.

The Sun fell. It sank into a boundless and wet wasteland. It fell into the eternal rest until it clawed its way back to the surface to forget its nightmare of the deep. Now, it would just slip into blissful sleep. I didn't realize we never had the lights on when we entered the office. With the floor to ceiling window, there wasn't a need, but from this angle, it looked as if we were hovering above the ocean. We were in a room sculpted into the night sky to peer down and outwards. A bubble with a view of the darkness falling upon the world. We were in that tenebrosity, swimming with excitement. The Lighthouse light had yet to come on, the light from the surrounding buildings and streets could not reach the Beyond, as Benson had put it. The stars had even yet to break through the night just yet. However, we could still see the waves that break and sway formlessly. I would have expected to smell salt if the window were open.

I heard a heavy sigh as the main event rolled in. I didn't know the science behind the mist and the fog building over the ocean. Benson likely did, but at this moment, I didn't dare to ask or to speak outside of the occasional 'ooh' or 'aha' spotting a fish surfacing in the night. A thick blanket spread quickly. The wind rolled out the fog as if it were unfurling Cleopatra before Mark Anthony. With an inaudible pop, the unrelenting bright light of the lighthouse began its discovery of the surface of the ocean. The silhouette of the leaping and lapping wave created the show we were waiting for. I suppose, in Benson's delight, he started humming. It was a lower tone than what I could have given him credit for, but beautiful nonetheless... something else to be surprised about.

I don't really know how long we sat in the darkness of his office without a word between us as we gazed out into the Beyond. It wasn't until he pointed that the stars were finally emerging. He pointed out a few constellations, then I noticed that the humming had no break, and I realized that the humming was not coming from him. In the pitch, I looked down as his gaze was still outward. The hum, the low

vibration, came from the effigy, not my boss. He was going on something about fruit from the stars, something- fanciful.

“Its makin sounds.” I stammered drunkenly. “It’s... you weren’t humming?”

I couldn’t see him at first, even in the darkness, I should have seen his outline. He was sitting next to me, just a moment ago; now I can’t feel his weight on the chaise. Was I alone? He was just speaking to me.

“Watch your eyes.” He whispered huskily in my ear. Instinctively, I recoiled back and circled a loose coil behind my ear. Without missing a beat, the room slowly lit and the idol stopped humming. Benson was standing near the entrance of his office, gently sliding up the dimmer of the opposite side of the room. The grin relaxed into reminiscent of an afterglow, a satisfaction of a wanton desire being fulfilled. “remind me to tell you about that expedition. These little items are full of wonders and many more like it.”

“Do you need a cigarette?” It came out faster than I cared.

“What?”

“You look like you need a smoke”, I chuckled. “But also, I’ll keep you to that. The melody, though,” I returned my gaze back o the mutated Bast. “it’s catchy and haunting. This is haunted, isn’t it?” I pouted “I bet you have a gramophone.”

That seemed to snap him out of his euphoria into a fit of hearty laughs. “That’s a lot to unpack.”

That’s a LOT? Not this.” I pointed to the idol.

A sharp snort came from him, then cackled even more. “ Point made. Point made. One, yes, I need to smoke. Two, it’s not haunted. And yes, I have a gramophone at home... why?”

“Your entire home... is filled with demons. Your home possibly has no windows... sand whale family...” I muttered, standing, “Speaking of... I should get home. Though, you’ve given me n amazing time. And you better give me that story.” I chuckled.

“We’re not in any shape to drive, I’ll have the boys pick us up. Grab the coffee cups for me and fill them for the road. Given the circumstances, I believe the S2 would be fitting.”

“There’s...” I’m drunk, and I wanted to be as petty as possible and my boss was willing to instigate... When was this honestly going to happen again? Not that I didn’t believe him... minds change once the libations leave. So why not take his generous and petty offer? “Do it.”

He wasn’t kidding. Benson had a driver come to pick our drunken selves up from the office in a 1960s Bentley S2. The back doors were suicide doors. The color was metallic crimson and black gradient. It didn’t matter which angle you stood; it shimmered and glistened in the light. The trim was a rose gold, same as the interior. The interior, however, might have been actual gold against the matte black finish.

During the entire drive, I felt the unease travel back into my chest and the rage creep back into my heart. I could feel my nails digging into my purse. The driver hit a small bump in the road, causing me to scratch the sides of it.

“Don’t worry, we’ll find Arcadia and get you a scratch-free bag.” Benson continued to be extremely sympathetic and generous.

Part of me wondered... why or if he was expecting the sex. He was attractive, incredibly smart, and wealthy... he could get it if I wasn’t married.

Before I can give him my thanks again, the driver slowed down the car and indicated that we had arrived. I saw it clear as day. The fucking front door was wide open. The porch light was off. The foyer light was blighting again, another thing he neglected.

“That son of a bitch!” I seethed before bolting out of the car. I nearly tripped on the curb. I stumbled forward drunkenly but soon regained my balance and started running again towards the door again. Full of drunken rage, I wanted to do nothing else than tackle James and slap the shit out of him.

Benson was calling for me to either wait or slow down, neither of which I planned to do.

“Jame, you rotten bastard!” I echo beneath the broken foyer light. My seething rage was replaced with a cold wet sensation; I froze in my tracks.

The house was at least, from what I could see not only ransacked, but broken furniture and canvas on the floor, and what I hoped was paint covered the walls, but there were cats... cats I didn’t own. There

had to be at least 15 in the living room. All different shapes and sizes. Collared and not. I stood completely still as the creatures were completely unbothered. They were cats, after all. That wasn't what gave me reason to pause.

The marble white floor was stained with blood and ire. Meat... I don't want to know a chunk of something littering the floor. It reeked of copper, wet fur, and vomit. Nausea was curling in the back of my throat, I nearly expelled all of my stomach's contents. I needed to hold my shit together before I went spiraling down a hill that could get anyone around to get hurt. The pervading thought besides vomiting was to stay quiet and run. There was a trail of blood leading from the living room into the hallway. Fuck investigating that. Absolutely the hell not. Nope. I could see the reflection of the back door in the mirror. It was in pieces and the metal screening was warped and bent inward and twisted from the hinges. What the shit was in the house?

Before I could speculate, I heard the humming. It was coming from the hallway. It was the effigy that was left back at the office. No. This sounded very real. This sounded like a very near voice that played an ethereal tune upon its lips. The voice was like a thunderous sea whisper. It was yet kind but cruel. The distance humming painted the ocean breeze and summoned a whirling heat to match a summer day. It was a delightful dream of riches and demons from the deep and that sweet Beyond. I was now on the verge of singing along with the hidden voice when my trance was broken by the screaming of felines coming from the outside. Contrary to the ones now occupying my home, they were completely unmoved or bothered. I didn't want to know what they were all lapping up or even gnawing on. Finally, with enough wits about me to turn around, I slammed into Benson's chest. He grabbed my arm, pulling me out of the out and closing the door behind us.

"Cats are in the car! Careful and just get in!" he was dragging me around the yard with little resistance. Benson nearly threw me in the car and he followed.

There were three... three screaming cats in the front seat clawing and crawling to get into the back with us. Was it happenchance that all three were mine? They didn't stop screaming until the driver let down the window that separated the front and the back. The driver sped off as Mito-O, Gory and the missing, but found Arcadia crawled into my lap.

"What the fuck was that?!" I shouted trembling, "What I - I need to call the cops, There w-"

"We need to get you back to the manor. We'll call the authorities after." Benson interjected

"After?" I echoed.

"After I explain the expedition 7 years ago, and how I inherited my father's company."

