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4'100 words

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FEAT

by Taf Kadd

The Fool

In the end we don't know a thing

Do Androids dream of electric sheep?

Well, I'm only human, so I wouldn't know.

But I certainly did dream of sheep last night.

Although they didn't quite look like sheep as we know them, I know they were supposed to be sheep. Because I was counting them, and what does one count but sheep? You might say money, of course, but money does not jump fences, does it? And after everything I have been through recently, I know that I will never break the eleventh commandment any more, which is: "Thou shalt not judge a book by its cover!"

Anyway, here I am, sitting in my office, trying to concentrate on my work. Those last three months make that very hard, though. I had been dragged into an unbelievable experience and am still, somewhat to my own surprise, here to tell the tale. That makes it very difficult to reacquaint myself with normal life and its petty problems, tiresome routines and other people's certainties.

Although I was never one to believe in the supernatural or the occult, I never discarded its possible existence either. I even read the odd book about it. (Funny how one never gets to read the even book...) I've read works by or on Crowley, Castaneda, Wilson, Paracelsus, Heraclitus, Zoroaster, Agrippa, Bruno, Isobel Gowdie, and many more. And though they all made very good and interesting reading, I was never tempted to see them as anything other than entertaining stories.

However, when things subsequently turned out the way they did, I found myself forced to revise my view of the universe. I tried every conceivable explanation for the phenomenon I had observed and refused for a long time to accept the truth. In the end, however, I had to admit that there is more between heaven and earth than we generally assume.

But perhaps I'd better start at the beginning, to clarify things.

In the beginning, god created the heaven and the hearth...

Just kidding, I won't have to go back that far.

The Lovers

Happily ever after!?!...

It all started early one mild evening in March, when my friend and former school buddy, Timothy Truelove, rang me up.

"Any plans for tonight?" he asked.

"Nope!"

"Want to come along to a party?"

"Yep!"

When we met at the station, I was shocked by his tired, haggard look. His usually erect posture sagged. His blonde hair was a wild, unkempt mane. Dark rings around wild staring eyes in an unshaved face gave the impression of a badly disturbed, if not crazy, person.

"Holy shit," I said. "What's the matter with you?"

He gave me what must have been supposed to be a smile but turned out a grimace. "I suppose I must be looking like a madman; I wouldn't know, though; I haven't looked into a mirror for quite some time. This whole thing is driving me crazy!"

"What's driving you crazy? Don't keep me in suspense."

"It's about Abbey."

"Abbey? What about her? Surely she's not having an affair, is she? I mean, she's not the kind of woman to do such a thing." Tim and Abigail Grant, known by her friends as "Abbey" for her love of religious buildings, had been living together for about eight years, the last two of them in marital bliss.

"Oh no, it's not that at all! But how I wish it was. At least I could do something about that!"

"Now you are driving me crazy! What is going on?" I was almost bursting with curiosity now.

"It all began a few weeks ago, when she met this guy..."

"Whoa there," I interrupted him. "Hang on a minute! You just said..."

Now it was his turn to interrupt. "I know," he said, "but it's not that, I can assure you!"

"What is it, then?" I was getting impatient.

"If you could hold your horses for a few minutes, I would like to tell you!"

"Sorry, sorry! I'm all ears now."

"As I said," he continued, "she met this guy. He introduced her to a few other people, who had all joined to found a religious movement. Their High Priest is Calister, that's the guy's name, himself. They meet twice a week in a place they call the 'Church Of The Feline Goddess'. Abbey goes to mass each and every time. She told me they even have some kind of a bible. That was in the beginning; she rarely talks to me now. I fear they are drugging her up, because she is so quiet and distant and... different!"

"Have you talked to her about it?" I asked.

He looked at me with the patience of a man who has explained something many times. "I have talked to her about little else for three weeks. She listens. She nods. She makes tea and tells me not to worry and then goes back to whatever she was reading. Last Tuesday I told her I thought Calister was dangerous and she smiled at me as if I had said something slightly childish." He paused. "You cannot argue with someone who is entirely, perfectly calm."

At that moment he stopped, his eyes staring through me as if through a window. Obviously he was thinking of Abigail and the changes she had gone through.

I, too, let her play out in my mind's eye. Abigail laughing at something nobody else had found funny yet. Abigail feeding an entire baguette to a canal duck while Timothy told her it was bad for them, and continuing to feed it anyway. Abigail at three in the morning at someone's kitchen table, talking about whether cats dream. And now this.

After a few minutes I grew restless.

"Why don't you go to one of their masses and find out?" I asked.

With a shake of the head he snapped out of his thoughts and said: "That's why I rang you up. I'm sorry I lied to you, but it's not a party I want to take you to tonight. It's a mass in the Church Of The Feline Goddess! I haven't got the courage to go there alone."

I looked at him in astonishment. This was something completely new. Timothy, who was usually so direct and self-assured, needed support and was even beating about the bush to get to the point.

"You can, of course, still refuse," he continued, "and I wouldn't hold it against you. But before you make up your mind, you should hear the whole story. Because you don't know the most important part yet." He stopped, and for a moment something moved behind his eyes that I hadn't seen there before. Not grief, not anger. Something closer to vertigo. "And I want you to promise me something first."

"What?"

"That you won't laugh."

I didn't laugh. "Go on then."

"Do you know the definition of God, or rather, in our case, Goddess?"

"Of course!" I boasted. "I can even quote the Oxford English Dictionary for you." He looked at me in astonishment. "More or less," I backtracked.

"Well then, let's hear it," he urged, almost amused.

"In this context, of course, we're not talking about God in the Christian faith, but about God in so-called mythology, which the OED defines, more or less, as follows: an immortal higher being in human form, embodying a force of nature or a spiritual or moral power."

"In short: immortal and endowed with superhuman powers, isn't that right?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. "But what exactly are you getting at?"

"That this sect worships an immortal superhuman. And that is what worries me most. Because the cat goddess is none other than Abbey herself."

Wheel Of Fortune

The joker laughs as the stakes get higher

A red tiled roof, whitewashed brick walls, six windows on the front façade – in short, a perfectly ordinary house, were it not for that brass plaque on the door:

CHURCH OF THE

FELINE GODDESS

Ye who enter, abandon all!

We opened the door and stepped into a large, dimly lit room. By the flickering light of dozens of candles, we could see around thirty people engaged in all sorts of activities: some were sleeping, others were reading, and still others were chatting amongst themselves. Some were even indulging in lovemaking. Ethereal sounds emanated from the speakers of a stereo system and the air was filled with the sweet, pungent scent of incense, sex and marijuana.

Carefully, we made our way through the jumble of arms and legs, heads and bodies, armchairs, small tables and sofas. Suddenly, Timothy grabbed my arm and pulled me towards him, pointing to a book lying on a small table in front of us.

“Look there,” he whispered, “this must be their so-called Bible.”

I did as I was told, and a cold shiver ran down my spine: beneath the simple title “Feat”, a cat and a woman’s face adorned the cover.

The woman was the spitting image of Abigail!

I picked up the volume and opened it to look at the contents. That is to say, I wanted to look at the contents, but there was nothing there. Every single page was blank.

“What on earth is this?” I murmured.

At that very moment, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around and found myself face to face with a tall, slender man in his mid-twenties. His angular chin and high forehead gave the impression of an intelligent, energetic man. The look in his bright, clear eyes seemed condescendingly friendly and yet slightly mocking.

“Calister!” hissed Timothy.

“Ah, I see you know me.” The man laughed quietly. “All the better. I would kindly ask you to keep your voices down. You are disrupting the mass, and I cannot allow that.”

“Where on earth is there supposed to be a mass here?” I asked.

He smiled and turned away. “You’re standing right in the middle of it.”

What happened next was difficult to describe then and remains difficult to describe now.

The scattered, languid gathering we had pushed our way through seemed to gather itself without any visible signal — no bell, no word of command, no change in the music, which had shifted at some point into something slower and more deliberate, a single low note sustained beneath a melody that seemed to come from no particular direction.

People set down their books. Conversations ceased. Even the couple in the far corner, whom I had been carefully not looking at, went still. They arranged themselves in a loose circle, cross-legged on the floor or settled back into chairs and sofas, facing inward.

Calister moved to the centre of the room with the unhurried ease of a man in his own element and stood with his hands loosely clasped, waiting.

Then I saw Abigail.

She had been there all along — I understood that immediately, with a slight shock, the way you suddenly see a figure in a painting you thought was a landscape. She was sitting near the far wall in a low chair, wearing something pale, her dark hair loose around her shoulders. She looked entirely at ease. She looked, in fact, more herself than I had seen her look in months — more than Timothy had described her being, more than the haggard ghost he had implied. There was a quality to her stillness that I could not immediately name.

Timothy had seen her too. I felt rather than saw it — a slight change in the quality of his breathing beside me.

Calister began to speak.

His voice was low and unhurried, shaped for this room and this gathering, and I caught only fragments — something about cycles, about return, about the nature of the divine feminine, about what he called "the eternal leap." His congregation received it with the focused, slightly glazed attention of people who have heard something many times and are not so much listening as communing with a familiar presence. Abigail sat with her hands in her lap and her eyes half closed and her expression one of mild, untroubled contentment.

She did not see us. Or if she did, something in her current state made the sight of us no more remarkable than anything else in the room.

The music shifted again. Calister raised one hand, palm outward, toward Abigail, and the congregation turned to look at her as one, with a unanimity that raised the hair on my arms. She opened her eyes fully.

For a moment nothing happened.

Then the candles closest to her chair flattened and streamed sideways as if caught by a wind that touched nothing else in the room. The music lurched, recovered, continued. And the low chair where Abigail had been sitting was occupied, suddenly and without transition, by a cat.

A large cat, amber-eyed, its fur the precise shade of Abigail's hair. It sat with the composed authority of something that has always been exactly where it is and sees no reason to explain itself. It looked at Timothy.

I put my hand on Timothy's arm. He did not move.

Then Abigail was in the chair again — or perhaps she had always been there and the cat had simply been elsewhere and I had confused the two in the

uncertain candlelight. She was looking at her hands with a small, puzzled frown, the way one does after a thought that slips away before it can be caught.

I took Timothy's arm and steered him, gently but without discussion, back through the room the way we had come. Nobody watched us go. The music continued. Calister's voice resumed behind us, low and unhurried, as if we had never been there at all.

Outside, the night air was cool and ordinary and smelled of nothing in particular. We stood on the pavement for a moment without speaking. Somewhere nearby a real cat, an entirely unremarkable one, crossed the street and disappeared beneath a parked car.

Timothy looked at me.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I'm booking flights to the Philippines."

The Devil

That's the way it is?

We flew to Manila in early July and picked up our charter in Subic Bay: a twenty-four metre wooden motor yacht, teak from stem to stern, warm and unhurried and faintly absurd in her beauty, like a piece of fine furniture that had somehow learned to float. Her engines could push her to eighteen knots at full throttle, which felt entirely adequate for a holiday and would later feel like a cruel joke.

We spent the first four days island-hopping northward through the Babuyan archipelago, anchoring in coves of impossible green water, eating whatever the local fishermen sold us from their outriggers, sleeping deeply. Abigail seemed herself again — laughing, curious, barefoot on the warm teak, sitting on the edge of the stern deck with her fingers in the water. Timothy watched her constantly, but quietly, the way you watch someone you love who has recently been ill and is now recovered but not quite certified.

On the fifth day we found the island.

It had no name on our charts worth speaking of — a small black triangle, a depth sounding, a warning. A dark volcanic cone rising cleanly from the water about three miles off our port bow, perfectly symmetrical, wearing a thin ribbon of white steam at its peak like an afterthought.

"Is that what I think it is?" Timothy said.

"Dormant," I said. "Apparently."

We anchored in the shallows on its western side, where the water was green over white sand. Abigail sat on the stern deck reading. Timothy dozed. I watched the island and drank cold beer and felt, for the first time since the whole business with Calister, something very close to peace.

The first tremor came just before sunset.

It began as a sound rather than a sight — a low, grinding moan from somewhere beneath the water, felt as much as heard, the kind of sound that the earth makes when it is reminding you that you are a guest. The beer bottle in my hand chimed softly against the deck rail. Then the water around the hull changed colour, from green to a murky, sulphurous yellow.

Timothy was on his feet before I was.

"Start the engines," he said. Not shouted. Said. In the particular quiet voice he used when he was genuinely frightened.

I was already moving.

From the wheelhouse I could see the island's peak. The thin ribbon of steam had become a column, white at the base and darkening rapidly to brown and then to black. As I turned the key and felt the engines shudder to life beneath my feet, the first explosion came — not the theatrical Hollywood fireball I might have imagined, but something far worse: a deep, concussive thud that I felt in my sternum, followed by a silence so complete it seemed to press against my eardrums, followed by a roar that simply did not stop.

"Abigail!" Timothy was at the stern. "Abbey, get inside, get up here, come on —"

I had the engines running. I swung the bow away from the island and pushed the throttle forward. Eighteen knots. The engines gave everything they had, which in that moment felt like nothing at all.

Behind us the sky was wrong. That is the only way I can describe it. The colour, the texture, the weight of it — all wrong. A wall of dark cloud was rising from the island's shattered peak and spreading outward across the water, and beneath it, catching the last of the sunlight in a way that might almost have been beautiful under different circumstances, rivers of lava were finding the sea. Where they hit the water, vast clouds of steam rose hissing, and the sea itself seemed to boil.

The air temperature climbed. I could feel it on my forearms, on the back of my neck.

I pushed the throttle further, uselessly. We were already at full speed.

Timothy appeared at the wheelhouse door. His face told me everything.

"It's not enough," he said.

"I know."

"Can we—"

"No."

We looked at each other for a moment with the particular clarity that arrives, I have since learned, when there is nothing useful left to do. The roaring behind us was continuous now, layered — the volcano, the steam, the water, and beneath all of it that grinding moan, still going, as if the earth had simply decided to keep talking.

"Where's Abbey?" I said.

He turned. I turned.

She was standing at the stern.

She was standing at the stern, facing the volcano.

That was the wrong direction. That was the thing that made no sense, even then, even in the middle of everything. Timothy and I were facing forward, facing away, facing survival. Abigail was facing the fire.

She wasn't holding anything. She wasn't braced against anything. She was simply standing on that wide warm deck with her arms loose at her sides and her feet slightly apart and her face turned toward the burning island, and she was perfectly, utterly still.

I remember thinking: she's in shock. I remember thinking: I should go and get her.

I remember the deck moving.

Not with the sea. The sea was still beneath us — churning and discoloured and terrible, but still beneath us. The deck moved in a different way, a way that had nothing to do with water. It moved the way the floor of a lift moves when you are not expecting it — a sudden, certain, vertical displacement that your body registers before your mind does. Beside me Timothy made a sound I had

never heard from him before and have never heard since.

Then the heat hit us like a wall, and the roaring became something beyond sound, and I remember Abigail's stillness against all of it, her arms at her sides, her face turned away from us toward the fire, and I remember thinking with perfect clarity that this was the last thing I was ever going to see.

After that there is nothing. A gap, clean and absolute, like a page that has been torn out.

And then there was blue sky.

And open water in every direction. And the engines running, purposelessly, into a morning that had no volcano in it. And my hands on the wheel, though I had no memory of putting them there. And Timothy on the floor of the wheelhouse, pulling himself upright with the expression of a man trying to remember what century he is in.

I turned around.

Abigail was sitting on the edge of the stern deck with her feet in the water.

She looked up at us and smiled.

"I must have dozed off," she said. "How far are we from the island?"

We told her there had been a volcanic eruption and that we had managed to get clear in time. She accepted this with the mild interest of someone hearing about an event that happened to other people. She went inside to make tea.

Timothy and I stood at the wheelhouse for a long time without speaking. There was, as I have said, nothing to say. The volcano was still visible on the horizon, a dark smear against the evening sky, still producing that black column, still sending its rivers of fire into the sea. At this distance it was almost beautiful.

Timothy and I stood at the wheelhouse looking at each other for a long time, without speaking, without being able to.

We motored slowly northward through the last of the light and dropped anchor in a bay we had passed two days earlier. Abigail made supper and we

ate on the stern deck in the warm dark and she talked about what she wanted to do tomorrow and Timothy watched her with an expression I recognised but could not name.

The stars came out one by one above the South China Sea, enormous and indifferent, and somewhere behind us the earth was still burning.

I didn't sleep that night. I lay in my bunk and stared at the ceiling and listened to the water against the hull and tried, for the first time but not the last, to assemble what I had seen into something a rational person could accept.

I didn't get very far.

The Last Judgement

Out of the frying pan...?

Things changed rapidly, after we got back.

Calister had been involved in some nasty business and the police were out looking for him. Without leadership, the sect quickly fell apart. After a few weeks, the 'Church Of The Feline Goddess' had been turned into 'Feingold & Son, Undertakers'.

Abigail was her old self again, much to the joy of Timothy who himself soon returned to his former ways and looks. The morning after her incredible feat, she had awoken still not remembering the unbelievable yet wonderful thing she had accomplished. As a matter of fact, she seemed to have a blank of memory for the exact period of her acquaintance with Calister. We decided to hold back the truth. Timothy made up a story about an accident, telling her that the shock must have triggered this short term amnesia.

Everything was normal again and the future looked as bright as an atomic flash.

As I said, here I am, sitting in my office. I can't concentrate on my work for wondering. Wondering what is going to happen.

Especially after reading a certain article in yesterday's paper. Apparently, somewhere near the southern border, the police had to close down a building. There had been some friction between a sect, using the building as their church, and the people of a nearby village. Somehow, one of the villagers had been badly hurt. The members of the sect had been taken into custody.

The reference to the house as the 'Church Of The Goat-God' I first took as an allusion to Pan. But when I read the name of the High Priest, who had evaded capture, I knew it was not the greek god they had been worshipping.

Then, later on in the day, Timothy called, inviting me for supper.

After a luscious meal, Abigail went out to the garden to enjoy a fine, warm June night. Timothy and I were doing the dishes. Suddenly, I felt a certain urge.

Barefooted I walked silently across the thick carpet in the hallway towards the bathroom and passed an open window through which a faint sound reached my ears. I looked outside.

My heart must have missed a beat, then! Visions of the High Priest Calister came to my mind. For I heard the purring of a completely relaxed and happy cat. Yet, there was no cat to be seen!

But there was Abigail!