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## The Cat Lady

Sylvia Morna Freitas

The weathered woman sat in front of her glass window. A chestnut cat brushed against her leg, letting out a whine for attention from the floor. A white Persian sat snugly in her lap, the fluff ball purring contently in its partial sleep.

The woman looked across the street where a brother and sister played in the snow. Snow. One of the many physical reminders that helped her remember that she was here not there. The snow-colored cat in her lap suddenly shifted awake. It stood up unsteadily on the woman's arthritic legs before jumping to the floor.

She'd previously been using the sleeping cat as an excuse to stay seated, but now she decided it was about time to stop procrastinating.

Ms. Young knew she could often sit for hours dissecting every moment of her time in that place. That place. Somewhere she chose to go voluntarily when hundreds, maybe thousands, chose exile over impressment. She probably should've taken the hint, but she'd been young.

No. Not young. Too many faults were laid at the feet of youth. There were plenty of other young people who knew better than to head into a war-zone on some misguided sense of duty. What she'd been was sheltered. She'd craved experience--any experience. Thought it would be thrilling. At that age, new always fascinated her. Just as the jungle had at first, the concrete and organic ones alike, but both had taken advantage of her optimism. They'd left her the way she was now.

It was the biggest mistake of her life. Any good she managed to do, any experience or insight she gained, it wasn't worth it. Maybe that made her self-centered or cowardly, possibly even callous, but it was the truth. The few she managed to save probably wouldn't have minded slipping away, not after knowing the sort of lives they'd lead anyways.

The elderly woman stood slowly and painfully, the ever-present ache in her joints increasing. The cold air of northwestern Oregon was bad for her chronic arthritis, but she refused to move anywhere that was green, warm or humid. She refused to move anywhere that resembled that dreaded place.

Ms. Young often looked back at her first days in the foreign land and laughed. When she'd first arrived, the place had seemed nearly fantastical. She'd never seen flora and fauna like that before. It was beautiful in her eyes. Naive, unencumbered eyes. Eyes that hadn't thought to consider all the shadows the leaves cast, the vines

that wrapped and hung, the dense trees that brought visibility to zero.

Going in, she knew the jungle held some of the best mimics and camouflagers in the world. Snakes the pattern and texture of wood, spiders the color of dirt. What she hadn't realized was that this skill could be adapted by its people. There were times you couldn't tell a person from a tree.

And so many times she found herself wishing it was just a damned tree.

Her period of wonder ended about the time the first boot fell on a pressure plate. Awe turned to horror then, and it never turned back.

The woman rubbed her head and sighed, grabbing for her cane as she headed for the kitchen. The wood of her empty house creaked beneath her feet, soft slippers shuffling across it. Ms. Young had wanted a family—once. But something fundamental in her shifted after she went to that place. Her heart and mind became untethered, solitary things.

She could never explain it to someone who hadn't seen battle or death. How the senseless cruelty of it had settled its claws in her chest and slowly shredded her heart to pieces. In its place, a throbbing, twisted rent had made itself at home. Healed wrong. Now stiffened and wrenching where once smooth, unobstructed muscle reigned.

The pain of it was unutterable, and she wouldn't dare share it. Because it was hers. Private, personal. Loved. Something she would take out late at night and turn over in her hands so she could relish in its weight and its misery before putting it away again. No one would take it from her, for better or worse. Nothing and no one would take from her ever again.

Ms. Young opened up the cabinet next to the pantry, rooting around for the aspirin bottle. Her trembling fingers landed on the bottle and dragged it out. Its light weight immediately told her it was empty. She threw it away dejectedly, watching as it missed the trashcan and frightened one of her tabbies. An empty aspirin bottle meant it was time for her dreaded trip to the town mercantile.

Dansville, Oregon wasn't a small or isolated town, but it had that feeling to it. Everyone knew everyone and was, therefore, a little too up in each other's business. It was a problem she hadn't considered when she'd first come up here. But much like the jungles, the top layer of the tight-knit community disguised a much darker truth. A story of ignorance and intolerance spelled out into its foundation.

Seemingly to her, this was the birth certificate of every society, and usually, its epitaph, too. She'd yet to see one that had grown beyond it. By the very nature of the word community, she wasn't sure it was possible.

The woman slowly bundled up for the chilly weather, carefully slipping on the many layers. She grabbed her keys and shooed her two calicos away from the door before opening it.

People in town called her the resident 'cat lady.' She fit the bill. A crazy, old spinster who couldn't hold a pill bottle without it sounding like a maraca. The sort of person you switched sides of the street for just so you didn't feel obligated to wave hello.

Ms. Young hadn't intended to step into this character. It was just that she found cats calming and easy companions. She held nothing against dogs. But for someone who left the house as little as she did, it wouldn't be fair. And there was also the fact that dogs barked, and snarled, and attacked, and mauled, and killed and...What had she been doing?

Ah, right. Getting in the car.

The woman carefully navigated her way down the front stairs of her small porch. The ice beneath her boots cracked as she stepped onto her driveway. Much to the chagrin of her doctors, Ms. Young refused to move into an elderly home, even if it meant risking catastrophic injury every time she left her house.

One doctor, in an attempt to be helpful, had suggested she sign up for a local program for vets. They collected trash, salted and shoveled driveways, even delivered food. Ms. Young had considered it.

But when she went to the local VFW to enroll, the attendant had immediately begun asking for her husband's information, and when she'd explained she didn't have one, she received the most heartfelt of condolences and was told that the lady at the other desk handled widows.

Apparently, women of her age weren't veterans. She'd missed the memo informing her of the cutoff. Her mistake.

She left that place with a familiar bitterness on her tongue and vowed never to return. It brought back too many thoughts and feelings from that time. The isolation. The undercurrent of otherness threaded through every word, sentence, and order she received.

She remembered one trip, in particular, accompanying a unit of young men to her next post. They'd been forced to spend one night on the road in transit, sleeping rough. They built a fox hole but wouldn't let her share it with them. She was forced to sleep just outside, on soggy earth. While she slept, the mud rose

up around her, the jungle trying to take more of her, make her one of its own. Encased seemingly in the cold, clammy hand of Death himself, she'd woken up screaming.

It was absurd. She was aware. She'd been scolded harshly by a private once she worked herself free and calmed down.

Fool woman.

But everything had seemed alive over there. Even the mud.

Nowadays, Ms. Young never went out in the rain for fear that stepping on a soggy lawn would give her a heart attack. When she came here, to the blissful quiet of a frozen winter town, she'd thought perhaps some peace could be found.

But she should've known. The war was still going. For her it would never end.

She settled into her old Volkswagen, the worn-down stick shift from a time before automatics. She pulled languidly out of the driveway, smoothing her gloved hands over the leather steering wheel. The heat blew cold air on her exposed wrists and she shivered, aching muscles coiling even tighter in on themselves.

A horn honked behind her, and she realized the stoplight in front of her had long ago turned green. She peeled forward, the snow-frosted shop windows scrolling past at the edge of her vision. She pulled into the first spot she saw and parked, too weary to go any further, and aware it was quite a ways from where she intended to be.

