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ANDREA BIANCHI

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## CAT ON A COLD WOOD FLOOR

**I**N A SECRET corner of the apartment, where the crevice measures just the breadth of the extended whiskers of a cat, you hide while the worst is happening.

The danger arises first with a warning to your nose: the thud of the cinnamon candle toppling from the nightstand to the floor. The crash of the floor lamp shattering across the boards.

Then his voice, wild and loud, overpowering mine.

My tone falters, falls far below the soprano I reserve for conversing with your meows.

And then I go as silent as you. Your ears pointed, listening. Your paws tensed against the hardwood floor.

Until my fleeing footsteps shake the room. My hand rattles the doorknob. My cry for help scratches the hallway walls. Before his palm slams the door back into the frame. Hurls my body against the baseboards. Clatters my handbag to the dented wood.

The demolition of a home.

zzz

I LEAVE THE door ajar when I rush out. Too hurried to worry you will emerge, with the orange and black cats, from your hideaways. And in the stunned Sunday morning silence, you might try to follow the wisp of my perfume out into the corridor, out into the cold where I have escaped without even

my coat or purse.

Among its detritus, strewn beneath the chandelier in the entryway, you surely sniff at my wallet, my lipstick and my blush, missing only my phone and my car keys.

Until he gathers the pile into his hands and tosses it into the center of our bed.

Where I imagine you waiting, there on the mattress edge, your paws marking the spot where his hands pinned my neck, as you watch for my return. While the sun slants lower and lower through the windowpanes. Like eyes aghast, open wide.

ZZZ

HIS SHOUT EXPLODES a hole in the dark of the apartment.

“Where are you? Answer your phone,” he says. “The cats are fighting.”

His hiss is diminished in the voicemail, flat against my ear. But in our living room, the sound must flatten your tail, chase you the same way the orange cat scratches at your fur until you and the black cat become but a lump under the bedcovers. While the victorious orange legs stretch out on the rug in front of the fireplace.

But tonight, the grate stays empty, ashen, in a blackened hole.

ZZZ

THE FLAME OF his anger rises and falls with the next sunsets and sunrises. And in between, unpredictable like tongues of fire, he burns my ear with *bitch, fuck you*, then douses his cruelty with tears of penitence, murmurs of *love, love, love*.

“It’s morning,” he texts, mourning. “I should be holding you.”

So is he kissing, petting you, as I hide miles away at my brother’s apartment, then at my parents’ house? Or is he stalking the halls. Raising his hand to slap my surrogate. Lifting his shin to kick the innocent cat.

zzz

HE JOKED THAT it was cat porn, the video he sent me long before, when he had come home early from the office where he works with me, and you greeted him on the pillow, his hair buttery with styling balm.

You licked and licked, nudging your nose deep into his scalp. Rubbing your ears and whiskers up against his beard.

“Oh yeah, right there,” he moaned. “Here’s a close-up of the money shot.” And he chuckled, lifting his phone to your pink, sniffing nose, up to your slowly closing lids, up to the purring of your simple trust.

zzz

HIGH ATOP THE refrigerator, where the orange and black cats cannot leap, where I cannot locate you with my call, echoing in the empty apartment, your ears twitch at my return.

“I don’t want to do this, I can’t do this, I don’t want to leave,” I repeat to my parents in each room.

In the office, where I try to pry for one last caress the clenched weight of the orange and black fur from inside the sofa’s torn underside lining where they sleep.

In the bedroom, where I pick up the cinnamon candle and place it back into the candlestick, then gather my belongings littered on the still-made bed.

In the dark of the closet, where I sniff his shirts and suitcoats hanging in a row, with his shoes lined up below.

“Hurry,” my mother urges, fearing his unexpected return in this eerie middle of the workday.

“You have to do this,” my father demands as he lifts whole haphazard handfuls of hangered dresses and deposits them with a muffled thud into hampers and laundry baskets as some kind of makeshift suitcases.

And then a new cage coaxes you down.

ZZZ

I BEND MY head to the slatted plastic of your cage, squeezed between the boxes and baskets of my disassembled life in the backseat of my parents' SUV.

The windows blur with the familiars of my neighborhood, disappearing into the past. Where I cannot, will not look. At the home improvement center, where we bought brackets for the shelves he installed after hanging the new chandeliers. At the furniture shop, where we chose the mirror we smiled into together in the entryway.

I peer down through the prison bars at you. And like black holes in your gray face, your eyes look back, just as lost as me.

ZZZ

THE FELINE SPECIES, with your wild history and partial domestication, are creatures of habitat. Attached to territory, the experts say.

Yet are not humans, in many ways, the same?

The separation from him, from the orange and black cats, a loss of love as much as a loss of home.

ZZZ

"DID YOU TAKE Roxie?!" he texts in the evening.

Perhaps, before he even noticed the bare dresser drawers, he sensed your absence when he entered the empty apartment. And maybe he rushed to all your hiding spots. The top of the refrigerator. The cupboard at the end of the bathtub.

All vacant now.

"I didn't get to say goodbye," he says.

ZZZ

“FAREWELL TO A perfect little lady,” he writes beneath your photo that he posts on a website I keep bringing up on my phone.

“Sorry for your loss,” someone responds. Because people think that you have died.

But has not a death of sorts occurred?

“I could have killed you,” he will tell me later.

“I wish you had,” I will reply.

But now, I type below your photo only a simple phrase: “She loved you more than anything.” Speaking, in the pain of the past tense, for you, as much as for myself.

*zzz*

YOU SNIFF THE new food and water bowls on the linoleum of my parents’ kitchen, after I open the cage’s gate and carry you to the bathroom door, to the new plastic litter box. Purchased the previous evening at the pet supply store.

Where in the parking lot, I waited with my head against the headrest, as my neck pulsed with pain from every bump in the day’s long roads. When my mother drove me to the doctor, who documented the invisible injury of the throat, the purple bruises of the eye, the chin, the elbow, and the hip. And then a therapist asked me to condense into fifty minutes the enormity of him and me, our expansive passion that burst apart our spacious apartment, our vast future plans.

Plans that would have somehow collapsed into harsh, hard reality if I handled the inflexible plastic and admitted to the necessity of this new litter box.

So instead, my father carried it for me from the store’s fluorescent lights out into the long, dark night.

*zzz*

UNDER THE BED in my upstairs childhood room, you wedge your whiskers beneath the hem of the dust ruffle, still sprinkled with the roses I long ago selected when I dreamt of pink bouquets blooming in some future lover's hands, not purple bruises blooming beneath his palm.

In the morning, my cries rise through the vents to your under-bed hideaway. Until you emerge, your nose twitching with the cinnamon apple pies my parents warm in the oven to try to coax my appetite at the kitchen table where we convene.

Laptops and cellphones are strewn between the rejected delicacies that my father plates in front of me as your paws wind around the dishes on the tabletop. Which we humans lunge across, shouting above each other about listings, landlords. Looking for a new apartment. Or returning to him.

"You cannot go back," my mother cries. "He will kill you," she prophesies.

My father waves his outstretched arms, palms down, begging for calm.  
I set my mouth in a line.

*zzz*

A LINE OF books rises on my bedside dresser, where you calculate a leap so you can investigate the titles: on surviving abuse, repairing relationships. While in the accompanying workbooks, I try to decipher our chances for safety if we go back to the orange and black cats.

With your paw, you hold my place on the page when my phone lights the dark with his messages pleading for my return, and I turn my mouth to the pillow and whisper across the miles into his ear.

Then suddenly my mother's frame blocks the bedroom door.

"You will never change him," she declares, "no matter how many books you read." And she waves away the flimsy paperbacks on the mattress edge.

*zzz*

WHY NOT JUST throw the covers off, push past the doorframe, latch you into the carrier, snatch the keys from the counter, scrape the ice from my gray car stationed in the driveway, and retrace the asphalt highways all the way back home?

Where I can just pull from my handbag the pepper spray canister. Switch it with the cinnamon candle on the nightstand. And then just stay.

*zzz*

“I’M GOING BACK,” I announce when the flimsy written note that my mother demanded from the doctor can no longer exempt me from my office desk, only steps from his, where perhaps his wrath will trap me in the skyscraper’s back stairwell and send me careening down.

“You will quit after these sick days expire,” my mother instructed.

“But I can’t lose my job and my partner and my home,” I replied. Something must remain. The lamps on my downtown desk the only surviving simulacrum of home.

But when I leave for work with my father, who is to drive me to the suburban commuter train, before I kiss your nose goodbye, I slip the pepper spray into the side of my high-heeled boot.

*zzz*

ON MY STOCKINGS and coat cold from the train ride home, you rub your whiskers a few evenings later against my lover’s scent, mingled with the herbal fragrance of the tea shop. Where his big hands reached out to clutch my icy fingers twisting on the back corner table, hidden from the wintry lunchtime sun, after I at last acquiesced to his text: “We’ve suffered long enough. Let’s just be together.”

And then we came together later, slipped into a back bathroom, where his hands gripped my neck in the mirror while I watched him behind me, bending me. The way he used to in the mornings while you peered from



your bathtub perch as we giggled together.

The way we laughed tonight afterward as we sneaked down the back stairwell and then separated on the sidewalk to our now separate stations to catch the late, late trains.

“Working late,” I explain to my parents’ queries. And when I shut the bedroom door, the earthy scent of his body clings to me as I bend to kiss your head and unzip my dress.

*zzz*

FROM THE HEAPS of clothes and shoes beside the overturned baskets in the living room, I begin gathering outfits into a weekend bag. Clattering together my toothpaste and hairbrush, my boots and books. Zipping in all my grief.

So that after the rising wail of voices clashing every evening in discordant canons on relentless recurrent themes—my love for him, my parents’ prohibition—silence descends.

You curl your tail, waiting, one, two days.

Until I at last come back and gather you into my arms, and you attempt to detect the mysterious activities of my absences in the aromas drifting from my skin. The chlorine of a lonely hotel hot tub where my tears dissolved into the roiling water below. The salt of the city streets where I circled to search for red FOR RENT signs in the snow. The whiff of hotel rooms where I opened all the dresser drawers, and just to pretend I had a home of my own for two short days, I put my clothes away.

*zzz*

AMONG THE CONTENTS of my travel bag, perhaps you sniff the flimsy slip of paper I printed in the hotel business center, where I typed a kind of contract that I plan to present him over a sandwich at an upcoming workday lunch.

When he will take the slender pen I offer him, and at the bottom of the

unfolded note, he will find a place to sign.

“I promise never to hurt you again,” the paper states. And beneath, strong enough I believe to hold back any punches from his huge hands, stretches a thin black line.

But later, among my piles of papers and books that you try to topple from the dresser top, you might find a copy with his scent, but never his signature.

*zzz*

LATER, THEN, YOU must wonder at his musk on the hotel notepad and lotion I pilfer as mementos of stolen moments with him. When we pranced in matching bathrobes around a cramped hotel room—our makeshift, momentary home. Where our legs entwined on the borrowed mattress for the first time since he had last wrapped his arms around me in our own bed. Where the orange cat used to make peace with you and the black atop the comforter for only the hours between dusk and dawn.

But in the morning, the hotel sheets were an empty white beside me, and he was gone.

*zzz*

THEN ONE NIGHT, I leave you alone for far longer, after you tracked my laptop screen in bed each night switching from cheap hotel deals to rental costs for moving trucks.

The boxes rise high in our dining room as I try for days to untangle my belongings—my life—from his. Which is his spatula, which his towels? He does not answer, staying far away at his father’s home.

The apartment echoes eerie, emptying of my possessions as I lie later in the center of our bed, the cinnamon candles on either side. And while the orange and black cats curl in the other room, while you must dream of me miles away, I keep watch at the black ceiling, the black walls of my future

closing in, during the first of countless coming scuffles with insomnia, its dark marks later visible, like his purple slap, beneath my eyes.

In the morning, I throw the bedside candles into the depths of a trash bag, so you need never detect the scent of cinnamon again after its last faint traces on my hand.

*zzz*

ON MY FINGERS afterward, you rub your whiskers against my blisters, where I twisted the skin as I screwed together a new coffee table, a new chair for him. When I kneeled, pleading, on the floor of the apartment entryway, trying to decipher the impossible instructions to construct a new life and a new home.

“Will I have any furniture when I return?” he texts. Not knowing I am leaving him the sofa, the pillows, the mattress, the kitchen chairs. And the vintage floor lamp we selected as our first purchase for our new home. Where, in those early innocent evenings, he hummed along to the stereo as he unscrewed the rusted bolts and replaced the fraying wires until the light shone, unbroken, just like new.

*zzz*

“IT LOOKS LIKE a hotel in here,” he writes later when he returns. After I scrubbed the dishes, bleached the bathroom floor, hung a new curtain for the tub, swept every room one final time.

“Why are you doing this?” my brother asked, standing in the center of the apartment, after we had struggled beneath the boxes, the tables and the chairs, down the back twisting stairs, then up a hundred times again. “Why are you being so good to him? Isn’t it enough you promised to continue paying your portion of the rent?”

I continued the silent stroking of my broom.

But I whisper the secret answer into your pointed ears. I am hoping

someday to come back home.

*zzz*

As I DRIVE AWAY, behind the flat back of the moving truck blocking the view ahead, I nearly veer off to the snow-packed side of the highway. Nearly take the next exit and turn around.

*This is wrong*, my mind repeats with the whirring of the tires. *Wrong, wrong, wrong.*

*zzz*

SOMETHING SMELLS WRONG when my father deposits your carrier onto the cold wood floor behind my new apartment's door, where the walls crash into each other at a cramped diagonal.

You nose along the limits of the baseboards until their abrupt abutment with another wall in each segmented room, and you must catch in your nostrils the ashes of past tenants' cigarettes, the black pellets of mice droppings, the carcasses of dead bugs. As their sweet rot rises above the chemicals I spray onto the closet shelves and kitchen cabinets.

*zzz*

THEN THERE, IN the wrong room—displaced according to the name—the first bedbug falls dead onto the kitchen counter.

On the edge of the bed, the mattress choking the room, I sway, my fingers shaking, slipping on the digits to dial the pest company.

“If you’ve found one dead one,” the saleswoman says, “there’s almost definitely an infestation.”

So we wait.

Long sleeves and pants cover my skin under the covers to protect from the red segmented bodies slithering up underneath. Traps and detectors

arrive in brown boxes with a sickening thud. My phone's flashlight startles the dark at the hint of any itch inching up my toes. And I dig my fingers into your fur and tug out tufts to search for what could perhaps lurk underneath: black specks of flea dirt, rows of red raised bedbug bites.

The sweet, distinct smell emanating from the insects' glands wafts over to your nose from other units, where my landlord will later tell me the bugs are congregating, waging a battle against a terminator's chemicals behind the tall brick walls. Which you survey, from your window ledge, as you peer across the building's courtyard, laid out like a jail.

*zzz*

I ESCAPE.

Beneath the chain-locked back door, I fill your food bowl on the floor extra heaping high, so you will have to portion out the kibble for two, three days.

And then out into the winter sunshine, down miles of speeding highway, I rush back to him. To our old kitchen, whose aromas you will later investigate in the folds of my clothing that brushes his sleeve as we lean over the stove. And then in the living room, in the bedroom, our legs entwine.

But no matter the room, I remain faintly aware of the exit, and of my relation in the space to his big body, his huge hands, that could deliver at any moment a blow, or a caress.

Yet when he holds me on the rug before the fireplace, I smile as the flames dance, and as the smoke drifts up, like all my worries, and escapes into the starry sky.

*zzz*

DOWN IN THE cold one evening long before, as the smoke of his cigarette drifted up from the sidewalk outside our apartment building, he lifted his

phone to you.

“Kitten in one window,” he said, low and gentle, narrating a video he then sent up to me, waiting on the sofa inside. “Cozy fire in the next.”

*zzz*

SO CAN YOU fault me for the smoky, wood-fire scent that clings to my hair so often now after my time with him?

I am only going home.

*zzz*

“THIS FEELS LIKE home to me,” I tell him. “Can I stay longer? I think my new place is infested.”

“You’re crazy,” he interjects. “You can’t be here all the time.” Not on the sofa that I left him. Not in the rooms that I still secure with monthly withdrawals from my bank account. Monthly offerings of my love.

*zzz*

“PLEASE BE KIND,” I plead, my voice careening about my dark bedroom while you scurry beneath the bed, where I have started sleeping, long-sleeved despite the warming nights of spring, without leaving for his bed.

“Please see me,” I say.

His curses, muffled through the phone, slap my ear and flatten yours against the bottom of the box spring.

I spring up and shake the mattress above. “I’m a human. Treat me like a human,” I lash out, wild. Wishing for at least the domesticated deference that he reserves for your feline species, the orange and black cats. The caresses rubbed beneath your chins. The endearments sung out in his dulcet, falsetto tones.

ZZZ

HIS SILENCE SETTLES heavy upon the apartment then, its only sounds the scurrying of the rodents and the roaches within the walls.

Tonight, though, they echo with the voices of some unwatched film, while I lie on the sofa, and you curl your fur against my side. But my stroke is listless, subdued by the punishments of the workday, when my hand tapped, tentative, at his office down the hall, and he hissed at me to leave. This instant. *Now*.

Suddenly, his words burst onto the screen of my phone beside the screen of the unfinished film, and I spring up to open its message, to open myself to his final rejection, knocking me to the apartment floor.

I keel over.

Rise up and stomp the splintering planks.

“No, no, no, no, no,” breaks from my lips.

ZZZ

WHEN YOU LICK my lips to clean away the sobs with the bristles of your tongue, you must taste salt. It persists on my cheeks for weeks, despite your kisses, despite your purrs rubbing the contracted muscles of my arms. They end in clenched fists, pummeling the pillows on my bed with futile thuds.

On the mattress, I rock from my waist from midnight until dawn, back and forth, back and forth. Pace the short hallway from the bedroom to the living room, back and forth, back and forth. “I live here now,” I mutter, instruct, marvel. “I live here now. I live here now.”

And then I crumple to the floor. Reach out a frantic finger and stab at some dark detritus resembling, sometimes revealing, another dead bedbug.

And then I gasp for breath as the tears inflame my nose.

ZZZ

THE COLD, WET noses of the feline species possess millions more odor-sensitive cells than does a human's far inferior olfactory system.

"What are you when you can't smell?" I asked him once, curious for the word.

"Dead," he replied.

*ZZZ*

DEAD GRASSES CLING to the blanket I drag home at dusk each summer Sunday, when I lie alone in the mud of the nearby park and look up at the branches, stretching beyond the library books I hold above my head. To study forgiveness. Recovery. Reconciliation. Resurrection of a dead love.

Until one afternoon, when I return, a huge brown roach, instead of you, waits, stationary, in the center of the floorboards in the apartment entryway.

"I'm going to leave here," I resolve. And as I smash its crunching carcass into the floor, I still hope that he will reopen his front door.

*ZZZ*

BUT THEN, FROM our old apartment, the janitor calls one late autumn afternoon to tell me he has disconnected the chandeliers that hung above our home.

"He left them when he left," the janitor tells me later as he lays them in the trunk of my car.

"But what happened?" I repeat, refusing to believe.

How could my lover have discarded this apartment and its memories? Neglected his half of the rent. Abandoned the lights that he installed to sparkle above our little family: him and me and you and the orange and the black.

In boxes, the drooping crystals lie, as if in caskets, as I retrace the highway away from my once happy life for the final time.



Now I can never go home again.

*zzz*

BUT AS THE light of my laptop burns later in my bedroom dark while I search for a new place, you lay your paw across the keyboard, maybe to try to make me understand.

You have been here the whole time.

You will always be my home.

*zzz*

YOU CANNOT STOP me, though, alone at my office desk, still steps from his, on the gray winter morning when my screen lights up with images of a lofty high-rise condominium, for sale only blocks from our office tower. Blocks he maybe walks now, every day, to the train to his new neighborhood. And on the way—if I wait, if I make the down payment with the last of my savings, borrow the remainder from the bank—maybe he will stop to see me on his route home.

*zzz*

“WOULD YOU COME over?” His unexpected text links to a map of his new address, and my finger shakes as it traces the grid of the unfamiliar city streets on my screen.

Perhaps they can function as a kind of foundation, a kind of crosshatched floor, on which we can construct a new, dual home stretched across the sturdy city squares.

“When?” I reply.

But only his silence answers, like a locked front door.

*zzz*

SILENCE EXTENDS UP the lofted walls to the ceiling when I open my new apartment door.

“Here we are. Come on out,” I say.

You scurry past the gate of the carrier and lower your belly to the ground, where you can brace for an attack from a black or orange cat, or from a hulking man, lurking with his huge hands in some secret corner of this strange location.

But the space is clear, the windows tall and wide, opening to an expanse of springtime sky.

Up, up, you poke your nose. Sniff the air, with its lemon disinfectant. Investigate the baseboards and the walls, empty and quiet inside.

And then your nostrils cease their twitching and just breathe.

zzz

YOU TRY TO claim the place in the days afterward. Rubbing your face against the corners of the walls. Arching your back on the furniture.

And you slide your whiskers across the boxes where both the old and new chandeliers lie cushioned inside. Waiting for the day, a month later, when my father and brother will arrive to hang them up and light the rooms.

When two months afterward, a last cruel text will light up my phone.

But in the peaceful dark later that night, with your gentle purr vibrating the bed, I at last pause my restless tossing that has for so long shaken the mattress and disturbed your dreams.

I reach to the nightstand for my phone.

“Please don’t contact me again,” I reply to him.

Then I extinguish the blaze of the screen.

And we are finally home.

Where you can unclench your jaw in the morning in a languid yawn. Mirroring my smile.

And in the center of the wide, warm floor, you can stretch your whole body, all the way out.