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The Cat Lover 《貓戀人》

The earth is a chaotic void, an opaque abyss... God says there must be light...

“Last night, no, it was early this morning, I had a dream that this kitchen was on fire and the water tap was turned off. I used all my force to try to open it, but only hurt my hand.”

His back to her, he seemed to make a sound of humming as she talked, as if he were an insect. He stood at the door of the back balcony, his giant butt blocking the door like that of a woman after menopause, a flat pumpkin. Bunches of dried flowers were hung upside-down on the iron bars over the window. After the ravages of the month-long plum rain season, they were mildewed, blackened and smelly. She asked him to get rid of them, and he responded with a hate-filled stare. His eyes were those of a dumb bull.

A few days later, his cat was hanged by the neck.

Before the plum rains began, the air was usually humid and still. Temperatures changed a lot in the course of a day, and the mildew sprawled crazily all over the wall where the sun didn't shine. White paint peeled like falling cherry blossoms, joining the beads of water forming on the floor.

To pay back for his hateful stare, she did not stop by for several days. Nevertheless after a few days she took a detour through the back alley and turned her head up to look at the breadfruit on a tree high as a three-story building. At a first glance, a little bit before midnight, she thought she saw a stuffed Garfield toy swinging languidly, accompanied by the sound of water boiling on the stove. Her stomach stirred a bit, a sour liquid rising in her throat.

The community janitor rang the door. “Ma'm, all the neighbors come to me to complain about whatever kind of cult you are in that would lead you to hang a cat! It frightens them, they said if you don't take care of it they'll report you to the police.” There was no time to make clear that she was not the Ma'm he thought she was; she simply apologized again and again. He was sitting in the shadow of the lamp, exuding a rotten body odor in the dark. Suddenly he got up on his feet and rushed into the kitchen.

On a nylon rope a little bit thinner than a pinkie, the cat's body was like a big fish, turning as the rope twirled. As the carcass squeezed through the iron bars, she cried out. Some of its hair had been pulled off and flew away into the dim night sky like smoke.

He laid the cat on the tiled kitchen floor. Lying on its side, black bugs jumped out from the body, certainly not fleas. He backed off smartly to avoid them, then kept spraying insecticide around the cat's body. The spray made a sound, shi, shi, shi, the particles in the air made him cough. He called the cat tenderly: kitty, kitty. Kneeling on the cold floor tiles, his knees hurt as if inflamed.

Kitty, kitty, he wept, as if performing for the cat. His fat face, reminiscent of a meat pie, was washed by two streams of tears.

When he was a little kid, meat pies could only be found during the Midsummer Festival or at the weddings of his relatives. The alluring smell of lard pushing through the crust brushed with a coating of egg yolk. There were patterns on the crusts pressed out on wooden molds.

The rustling of insect wings sounded in her mind. She didn't know what she could do for him. The cat's closed eyes were like two narrow slits, as if it was taking a nap in the sunlight. Its fangs protruded from its face. He fondled its head, it was pliant because of the broken neck. Then he opened its mouth and pushed his thumb against its sharp fang. Blood oozed from his finger and stained the fur around the cat's maw.

Gusts of humid and warm air blew into the house, his body was like a light switched on, he shook as if electric currents were passing through him.

She warmed a cup of milk in the microwave, added a double dose of Stilnox, fed him coaxingly, then took his hand and led him to bed. He didn't let go, his sweaty palm glued to hers. It was like it had been before, only the back of her hand was stained with his blood. She rubbed his hand tenderly until he fell asleep, thinking about whom she should call to deal with the corpse. She expected that when he woke up he would look everywhere to find the cat and complain: "That motherfucking heartless cat escaped again. You'll see how I am going to give it a lesson when it comes back." Now his tears form a membrane under his eyelids.

After a season of many sandstorms the lamp's cotton shade was covered with a thick layer of dust.

The cat had been a stray cat. The first time he saw it on the corner of the alley he shared half of his tuna rice ball with it. It ate and from time to time lifted its thin shoulders and face to thank him with meows. The clear but soft voice sounded so wonderful. The third day, when it was close to the time he had fed it before, he felt the skin between his thumb and index fingers itching. He resisted petting it at first but after a week he became totally addicted to these feedings. At the end of the alley there was a construction site, cement trucks roaring past: he turned his head to look around and saw the cat stand across the street, staring at him. He couldn't tell whether its expression was emotional or emotionless. A concrete truck dripping wet concrete drove between them, bringing up sandy wind gusts.

The next day he waited for the cat where he had fed it earlier. He was wearing a pair of sky blue flip flops over white socks. Sunlight shone in his face, the sun from another universe.

The cat did not show up until a day later. From a distance its eyes glanced at him, its tail high up. With each step it took, the steely fit body made a beautiful wave. They shared a box of milk and didn't ever separate. The cat's pupils were like the eyes of a needle, the great myths of the universe to be discovered behind them.

Sunlight tracked his head, then neck and back. A big bunch of honeysuckle had climbed over the wall, a water sprinkler was heard from behind the wall. At this hour older housewives from the

neighborhood went to the market to shop for food, and the freshly blossomed yellow flowers saw them come and go.

To his surprise the cat walked him home. It stopped in front of his building and leaned its head to be cute but still self-restrained, suggesting, see you tomorrow.

Melancholy came to him easily and turned his body boneless, like a jellyfish. A gust of wind blew past the arcade. It was the first wave of the southern wind, and it carried excessive information and overly complicated codes, pollen thick as a woman's face powder, the humidity just right for viruses and mold. The wind's magic power was strong enough to stir the impulses in his bones and under his belly. The mix added up to unbearable weight. Now that the peak blooming season was over, the long and thin petals of almond-white flowers from a tree unknown to him were falling on the road in front of his building, only to be run over and soiled by cars. He did not know how he had survived each day: it felt like emotional bone splitting. The potted plant boxes began sending shoots among the green mosses, onions sprouted inches of green leaves, and the mold in his underpants that should have been laundered out a long time ago grew as thick as sticky cheese. He could smell his body's heavy, acrid odor. Life was the shadow of a dying light bulb, the fuse burning out once the switch was flipped.

The next day when he went downstairs he saw the cat right away, its starved body crouching. Out of excitement he shouted in his head, loud as the strike of a gong.

The cat let itself be carried home, huddled in his arms like a yoga master. When he entered the elevator, it lifted its front paw with a hint of panic. He lowered his head and gave it a sounding kiss, zeh-zeh.

To adore it and to make up to it for what it had suffered, every day he fed it a can of different kind of cat food: sardine, tuna plus veggies or tuna plus cheese, seafood, chicken, pig intestines or the combo. Soon its hair became the golden fur of a tiger, in the light of a hundred-watt bulb it shone like an aristocrat in royal attire. The staff of the pet shop warned him that the food he fed it might hurt it because its kidneys couldn't take so much. He was shocked and immediately cut down to a can every two or three days. Tuna plus cheese was its favorite.

To pay back the pet shop staff for saving his animal's life, he bought every toy they had on offer, chewy cat toys in ropey shapes, colorful fishes with bells, cat nip teasers in the shape of mice, fishing rods with butterflies, everything. But the cat didn't care; it took an indifferent glance and walked away.

"This cat has real world experience, it doesn't care about all that fake stuff made out of plastic!" he said in a loud voice, proudly.

"Um," she assented.

In good mood, he carried the cat around, crouched in a kitchen corner, smiling and watching her spin here and there, busy cooking. He actually was a better cook, and faster. When he studied overseas he and his roommates, also big eaters, took turns shopping and cooking, and he had learned how to cook. But he liked her to take care of him, and told her his hands itched when soaked in water. He said he'd teach her how to cook, "Cooking makes a place like home."

The word “home” made tears well up in her eyes. The big red brick stove from her childhood in her rural house was still a fresh memory. It stayed hot all day. Her mother had to stand on a stool to handle the huge wok and ladle; when the lid was lifted, her head, face and chest became wet from the steam. One hot day she heard something drop from the smoky black beam under the ceiling and didn’t know it was a snake until she stepped down from the stool. Her mother’s experience, and her memories of stepping over the watery or pasty shit of chickens and ducks made her think of the kitchen as a horrible place.

He taught her how to fry fish first. The oil sizzling in a hot pan, he said, “How you are going to learn cooking standing so far away from the stove? First, heat the pan and the oil so the skin won’t stick to the pan, or you will ruin the whole fish. Get closer, or you won’t do it right - check the fish’s eye, that fish is going to find you at midnight.”

To her every meal was a battle. The carrot slipped into the sink repeatedly as she was peeling it. He pursed his lips and grabbed the carrot from her. Holding it and the knife above the trash can, he peeled it neatly, the long strips never breaking. “You are torturing those vegetables,” he told her.

“Look, good food should look good, smell good and taste good. Vegetables can be chopped carelessly or carved cleverly. Check this out, don’t they look like the Mitsubishi logo? It’s very easy, try it.”

One time she felt out of her depth looking at a fresh chunk of red beef, an expensive steak from Australia. She couldn’t decide what to do.

“Everything is hard for a stupid person. Didn’t I teach you that the less you handle it, the more it will keep its original taste and freshness? Didn’t you ever get that?”

She got close to him to count how many seconds he’d wait before turning the steak. She bit her lower lip tightly, her heart beating loudly. She could feel his body heat while he was preaching. His eyes shone like the cat’s.

She saw the snake from her childhood, its coquettish crawl on the floor, a bit like the wrinkles on both sides of his nose.

She felt she was in her high school math class again. The teacher, with his strong Beijing accent, assigned her to solve the question. It was a trig function, but her head was filled with nothing except plaster, she couldn’t think of any way to solve it. Then the back of her head was punched like a nutshell explosion, her nose hit the blackboard, the white chalk powder glued to it.

She could still remember the question today. Chang San is going across the river from point A to point B, the straight distance between A and B is 80 meters, the distance between B and C is 60 meters, so, according to this graphic, what is the distance between A and C? And, if the speed of Chang San’s boat is ten meters per hour, how long does it take for him to go from A to B, and how long from A to C?

She was in the middle of a river, he was on the bank.

The sports outfits he liked to wear still kept his heavy odor, no matter how often she urged him to wash them. Now he sat back where he had been and his hand, like that of a senile eunuch, stroked

the cat from its head to the end of his back. He was calculating how much strength was needed: if he felt a stroke wasn't perfect, he'd continue rubbing the cat down to its tail, so the cat would have to leap and get away in a flash, like a spiritual serpent. The cat felt satisfied being petted so much, it slanted up its eyes, twitched its throat to make a low sound, then flirtatiously arched its back and straightened its shoulders, as if about to kiss him but having to restrain its impulse.

He was so happy he laughed, eyes becoming narrow slits in his oily, fatty, face.

They were behind her, and from time to time stared at her. He held its cat and whispered in its ear, "fish." The hunting nature of the cat was awakened, its eyes gleamed, its body coiled tight.

She couldn't help imagining the scene: "Go!" he would order, and the cat would jump, then arch its body like a tiger, grab her and gnaw her throat with a mouthful of sharp teeth.

She was crushing garlic with the back of a knife, her armpits wet with sweat. The pot of Russian soup was boiling, bubbles emerging from the pot one by one, as if asking for help before bursting. Suddenly she turned to look at him and realized that one of his hands was hidden in the private parts of the cat. Her face flushed, she too was burning.

The cat turned and rolled on his lap, its body soft like it had no bones at all. It spread its limbs, so similar to human arms and legs, and audaciously showed its pure white belly. Its tail, which for no obvious reason always frightened her, straightened up and then curled, curled then straightened. He leaned his head against the wall, his mouth half-open, eyes half-closed, as if himself feeling the pleasure he was giving the cat.

A beast after all, she thought, while standing on her toes to pull out a round plate from the top shelf of the cabinet.

"Wash your hands, dinner is ready."

The long teapoy stool in the living room was where they dined. They ate sitting on low wicker seats, as if in a playhouse. The cat sat with them, its paw over his knee, scrutinizing the dishes with its ears standing up, a solemn old woman.

He felt funny and laughed, "Ma'm, what do you think? Is the food passable?"

A movie about a man with many concubines was on the TV; he held the cat and lifted its right forepaw to point at her and mimicked the movie character, saying "darling Yen! Yen!" Then he made odd sounds, laughing. "Darling Yen, Yen." He stretched his leg and prodded her with his toes.

"What a pity that dish of dragon-beard greens is ruined." He said as he pointed at the cat's nose with his right finger. Her chopsticks froze in mid-air; she looked at the cat's bright but mysterious eyes. She did not understand what he meant.

"Cooked for too long, and too salty," he said to the cat, "not even you can take it." He turned to her, "didn't you know cats can't take salt? They'll die of kidney failure. Don't you know that proverb, 'cat eating salt'--it means doom?"

Chopsticks loosened in her hand, some rice dropped to the floor. She pulled out a tissue paper and stooped to wipe the floor. It took her a while.

Finally she sat back and put the dish of greens in front of herself. She ate it with big bites and the chopsticks clapping loudly.

After dinner he smoked a cigarette. He asked her to buy a wound ointment. "The last bottle is gone again? So fast." She inquired. He shrugged, then lay down on the sofa, all four limbs spread out.

When there wasn't any conversation between them, she felt she was watching him through reverse binoculars. They weren't like this before the cat had joined them. She looked around, the same house, the same lamp, the same transom window. She used to remind him about things: he must return three DVDs the next day, the electric bill hasn't been paid yet. She also told him when he should change his clothes. She urged him to take a shower or take the trash out. He obeyed, like clay without character.

Night wind intruded into the living room through the back door of the kitchen, much weakened when it finally reached them. Another frustrating day.

Ripe fruits dropped, cracking open as if a pregnancy terminated; the heartbeats weren't heard any longer.

He often played with the cat all afternoon. At times, unable to keep up with its persistent demand, he gave it an extra spoon of cat food. The food gone, the cat pulled in its neck and made a face at him while patting his hand with its paw, like a judge swinging a gavel in the court. Then it meowed to protest.

If its protest didn't work, it would start stomping his arms, and his shoulders. They fought on the already chaotic desk. They didn't take the time to clean up an overturned coke can or tea cup— the papers and books would absorb the wetness anyway. After some time, the dry papers and books became mines of corrugated stone. The desk was facing a window and a giant breadfruit tree in the yard of the opposite building. Shadows from the large inky-green leaves cooled down the air. They played. Sometimes he was like an obstetrician, checking the cat deeply or helping it labor, and the cat lay with its big belly up like a concubine waiting for the honor bestowed by its master. Sometimes the cat played the newborn baby replacing the new-born crown prince in the royal court as the result of a conspiracy. He carefully lifted it by its front legs, then put it down letting its butt rest on the desk. The cat was indeed an amazing being, the flirtatious face, the warm fur, the tender but unusually sinewy flesh, the eyes reminiscent of remote star constellations. He sighed; the only thing he could do was to gaze at it, fully focused, to express his affection. His look was hypnotic, relaxing and softening the cat completely. His palms supported its weight and warmth. He felt he was flying in this pleasure, wind gusts whizzing passing his ears as he flew above a sunlit boulevard along an azure coastline. Facing the coast were steep mountain ranges, but he flew without any difficulties, if he wanted to turn all he needed to do was to veer his body slightly, like a fully extended arch. . . A sparrow suddenly landed on a branch outside the transom window, and the cat's whiskers trembled.

When he slapped the cat in a reflex, it got up on its rear legs. In the sunlight the two figures tangled, attacking, dodging, leaping. The cat jumped down and took a defensive stance under the desk, but still spied on the hunter outside the cave. The hunter panted, out of breath.

That night he showed her the scratches on his arms and chest. Fine blood thread still oozed, like a craft master's intarsia. Pressing the wounds, he laughed in pain.

Fat was all over his body, his arms, shoulders, sides and belly. His nails were filthy, but he looked much better now. His cheeks and forehead were oily-bright and his eyes shone. When he took a shower, he whistled a fluid "Suriyaki."

The toy guitar in the corner suggested that they had had great fun, she thought. Looking around, she saw two top hats, one black silk and one bright purple, and a bow tie alongside a black-and-white-striped cane, it was a Marlene Dietrich cat. There was also a diamond queen crown, a plastic flower wreath, a pearl necklace, a hood and a sword. She looked on, finding a cowboy hat, a boy scout scarf, a colorful shawl sewed with golden bells, a flight attendant hat, a dark pink feathered scarf, a witch hat, a devil head ring with horns, a black leather jacket with nails and chains, an American police cap and a stethoscope. She squatted down to check them and her heartbeat quickened. She wondered if there was a set of translucent underwear somewhere.

The cat rushed out from around the corner, and she was shocked to see its hair dyed purple, red, blue and green. But the cat seemed not to be bothered when walking past her, it was self-confident like a mistress who had just made herself presentable while the maid was working.

After tidying up the place, she lay on sofa, all limbs stretching out, exhausted. She was copying his way of relaxing. She knew all her muscles from face down to her chest and butt were sagging, and her neck was so filthy she could just rub the dirt off of it. Her breath smelled like marsh gas, her wrinkly face could be compared to a spider web.

The cat posed, Sphinx-like, on an Indian cotton cushion. She was pissed off. But it stared at her, its whiskers twitching from time to time. She realized the contempt in the cat's stare, so she spread her legs apart pulling up her skirt and challenged: "what about that?" The cat turned its head, admitting she won.

She lifted her left leg, trying to mimic how he fuddled with the cat in that erotic manner. She had seen him press its chest and belly with his foot, shacking its whole body first, then squeezing its neck with his toes. The cat rumbled, its eyes narrowed. The dead leaves of the giant breadfruit tree fell. The cat stuck out its pink tongue to lick his foot, affection spilling from its eyes like river water.

But her movement only frightened it. The cat leapt to escape, quietly jumping to the transom window and hid in the dark night, looking down at her with its crystal eyes.

Another big leaf fell and hit her head. What she had yearned for now became a fish bone, stuck in her throat. She lay paralyzed in his chair, wrapping up a day of frustration.

Time became quicksand around her. She felt lonely.

During summer nights, a rare south wind blowing, the breadfruit tree leaves would rustle, practicing a long-lost secret language. Food was easy to find for birds in cities, and they had forgotten how to fly. There were no seeds in their excrement. They stumbled to rest here.

In their dreams, the southern wind became a fairy, flying freely through the house. Moonlight was no longer needed. The roots of the breadfruit tree deepened into the earth and caressed their building's foundation.

There were mould spots on the front of the wall clock. She was reminded that before the cat showed up he did need her company on ordinary but calm days. He had a mind of a beast after all.

He had been crying a lot. The south wind carried with it invisible spores, blended in with pollen beads shaped like tiny sharp cones. He had been crying because the skin between his thumbs and index fingers itched so badly, he scratched until it was raw. He had been crying as if an oar were being sucked into a whirlpool, he looked all over from tundra to volcano but did not find anyone else. His heart was gnawed by panic.

He had been crying, asking: Why? Why am I inside a depression? He held her hand tight, she was hurting but dared not say so. She shaped her pain into pleasure because in the tidy bed with its artificial fragrance there was still a blankness between them, a blank space where a cool wind was blowing. He was ice, she was fire. She was the guardian, the torch holder. Or, she was the door handle where people left their fingerprints and their sweat. Or, she was a tiny pebble in his shoe.

That was before the cat. It must have been a drifter then, eating trash for a living.

That was when she had been eager to change and wash the sheets and pillow cases, as if to maintain the bed's holiness. The night his illness came back she was with him while he was drifting, a loyal servant holding his hand and sucking out his distress through a siphon tube. When he fell asleep, she threw up in the old toilet with its black cracks.

Hearing the bathroom door open she sat up, her two legs now crossed. In the long wait for the elfin south wind's visit, she had lowered her heavy head. Beginning with the wrinkles on her neck, her body now began withering, dried particles of her body scattering.

In the hopeless, endless wait, her neck turned into dust and her head finally dropped, rolling off on the floor.

"Time to go," she said to herself, struggling to escape the quicksand of time. She kicked her own head around the floor.

"Oh." He was on the river bank, leaving her in the middle of the water.

He carried the cat, walked her to the door, lifting its right front paw: "Say goodbye to grand-auntie." The cat licked its maw, making a face at her while drawing a circle with its tongue. Then it turned its head and leaned on his chest.

The shade on the lamp next to the door had fallen to pieces, its base loose, the yellow light bulb hanging down like a bent flower bulb. She took the umbrella from the corner and hit it with the handle. Glass shards exploded like fireworks, some burning her face and shoulders.

In the flash of absolute darkness, the cat's pupils were glowing.

Translated from the Chinese by C.J. Anderson-Wu
