

The Cat in 3B

The call came at 9AM, always 9AM, the moment Greg turned on his work phone. Clara called it Feinstein-O'clock. It was a leaky faucet, a squeaky hinge, a groaning floorboard, a late-night party on the other end of the block that she only whined to Greg about because the police had stopped taking her calls.

Today it was a cat. "A violation of the no-pets policy," she said.

Greg told her he'd take care of it. He said it with so much reassurance, she didn't ask for a timeframe.

9AM the next day: she sounded urgent. She'd started claiming the cat was a... demon? Did she say *demon*? A kooky claim even by Feinstein's standards. Worse, she'd decided she was 'deathly allergic' to cats, which begged a mention the day before, if true.

Almost certainly, she was being dramatic, but even a 1% chance of killing someone and risking that kind of lawsuit would not do.

As he climbed the steps to the third floor, wood groaning under nylon carpet, something slowed his walk—guilt. The feeling followed him down the hall to 3B. He paused, his knuckle at the door. Victor Mason was alone in his apartment for weeks at a time. To interrupt his solitude felt like a violation, like throwing a rock in a mirror-smooth lake.

He knocked.

A TV-crowd roared. A cat meowed. Muffled behind the door, a grumble rose above the noise, “What do you want?”

“Mr. Mason, it’s your landlord. It’s good to hear from you.”

“If you wanted food,” said Victor, “you should have eaten at supper.”

Greg raised his voice at the door, “Mr. Mason.”

The meowing got louder. “Angel, stop! It’s okay, baby. It’s okay.”

“Mr. Mason!”

“What!” Victor called, “Jesus Christ, what, I’m watching the game.”

“I’m sorry, but—”

“I’m watching the game.”

“I only need a minute of your time.”

“Can you believe this?” He was talking to his cat again. “Sunday’s game time. Everyone knows that. Sunday’s game time, but no—here comes Mister I-Need-a-Minute.”

“Sir, I’m your landlord.”

“Wait for commercials.”

“What?”

“Pipe down, wait for commercials. Roman’s making an ass of himself.” The cat quieted, the game rumbled.

A slow breath escaped through Greg's teeth. No wonder Victor paid for his company. He had no capacity for dialogue. In one minute of conversation he'd managed to interrupt, complain, bark orders, insult, and dispense a brand of disrespect so casual it was hard to take offense. *Speaking in walls*, Greg called it, spewing words with no intent to connect.

He recalled the one conversation they'd had in their twelve year history. They were getting their mail, politely ignoring each other—or so Greg thought.

“Goddamn dentists.”

Greg flinched at the muttering to his right. He traced Clara's purple note to find where he left off. He used his fingernail so he wouldn't smudge her handwriting, and read with a smile.

“Buncha scammers, if you ask me.”

Greg had not. The rant came out of nowhere. He went to finish the note in his apartment.

“Fifty-two minutes!”

Victor was looking right at him; there was no getting out of it now. His face was a series of droops, with jowls, dangly earlobes, and long eye-bags that looked like clay—a face where no smile would stand a chance.

“Fifty-two minutes, they got me next to that damn dog. Just stinks and drools, is all I see. And they’re sayin’ it’s a service dog.”

“At the dentist?”

“Yes, the dentist!” Spittle hit Greg’s cheek. “Are you deaf? I said it’s a service dog. And they’re sayin’ full price, even at *fifty-two minutes*.” Victor held a letter up, flapping it in-hand. “Can you believe this?”

“No,” said Greg.

Victor shook his head with vigor. His gaze retreated inward. He looked like a broken robot, buffering, unable to compute, stuck in a repetitive motion—his head shaking, shaking, shaking, accompanied by a contemplative grumble.

He slammed his fist down on the mail slots. It sounded like a gunshot in the quiet wooden halls.

Greg’s hand reached out, he opened his mouth to protest, but too late. The slot for 3A was dented. *I have to fix that, you know.*

He might have said it. He probably would have said it to most anyone else. But on the few occasions he’d talked to Victor Mason, he had never gotten the sense of a receptive man.

The door opened, and out stepped a shirtless Victor Mason, sweat shining on his beer belly. Behind him, a white-furred cat was jumping at dust as it lit up in the sun.

“The game’s back on in two minutes,” he said. “I watched a soup commercial too. I don’t know why, but I did.”

“That’s fine.”

“Well, it’s gonna have to be. I’m not changing my day on account of some young kid, just decides he wants to talk.”

“Yes, I appreciate that you’ve been a good tenant, and you’ve paid your rent on time.”

“It’s your two minutes.”

“We don’t allow pets in the building. It’s stated quite clearly in the lease.”

The door shut. The crowd roared.

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What to say about Greg’s relationship in decline?

He didn't think of it that way at the time. *Healthy boundaries* was why Clara stopped coming over. *Comfort* was why she stopped talking at dinner. It was work to talk, after all.

But no, not for Clara. For her, words came with no more effort than water took to flow. Small talks, nervous yammers, political debates, silence fillers, any kind of talk a fella could name, she talked it at high speed. She talked to calling salesmen. She talked to the salvation army

people who rang the bell. Greg would stand seven feet closer to their destination, waiting.

That was the deal; she talked, he listened. Even if that listening became more passive over time, even if he no longer tried to keep up with the ceaseless barrage of words, it was all *fine*. Denial would cover the difference.

What to say about his relationship in decline?

The words became too many. And then they became too few.

On the morning that Greg marched to 3B for the second time, his denial began to crack. It started with an empty mail slot. No purple note (it was a purple *envelope*, actually). It had been two weeks since his last. It had never been that long before.

He climbed the creaky stairs to 3B. An empty feeling clung to him and came off him like a stink. If he was just sensing a rift, she probably saw an ocean between them.

He knocked.

Victor answered in a sleeveless white t-shirt with coffee stains and pit sweat. He looked Greg up and down, one eye narrowed in an expression that seemed at once thoughtful and stupid. “How’s the missus?”

Greg’s jaw tightened. “You should know I’m prepared to call the cops.”

“Easy, boy, just a question.” Victor turned and walked into his apartment, leaving the door open. “So let me guess.” He raised his voice at Feinstein’s wall. “It was *Feinstein*, wasn’t it?”

Greg stood at the door and answered, not a toe crossing in. “She’s allergic.” The funk of sweat and garbage drifted out and made him scowl.

“Mmhm. What’s your name, son?”

“*Deathly* allergic.” Greg put a pause between each word to emphasize, “*She could be killed.*”

“Name?” Victor disappeared behind a corner.

“Gregory Leminsky,” he called from the door.

“Your first name, you idiot.”

Greg was being goaded. He recognized it from his father who would drunkenly instigate yelling matches just to enjoy the argument. He recognized it from various angry tenants who had threatened litigation or worse. He said with a smile, “I’m Greg.”

“What do you know about Radon, Greg?”

The corner of his mouth twitched, his smile softened. He took a step into the apartment. “What did you say?”

“Radon. Limestone deposits. Surely a responsible landlord like yourself knows a thing or two about Radon.”

“Do you have a point?” As Greg spoke he heard irritation in his voice.

“See, I was looking at your basement the other day, or at least the part of it that’s an actual basement.”

Greg took another step in. The apartment was strewn with pilsner cans, and plastic bowls with gaudy colors. The ‘living room’ consisted of a recliner facing a box-shaped TV. “That basement stays locked.”

“It *did*.” Victor corrected. There was a heavy thud in the bedroom. Something growled low, something too large to be a cat. Greg took another step in, and leaned over to look down the hall. The door at the end was cracked. The vertical slit filled and emptied with shadows as Victor passed.

“Looks like you were *planning* a basement, but then you just blasted away whatever space you needed for a water-heater and a furnace. It’s awfully expensive clearing all that rock the right way, isn’t it?”

Fifty-thousand dollars expensive, you son of a bitch.

“And what you have left,” Victor went on, his confidence grating, “is a lot of blasted limestone leaking cancer-gas 24/7 right under all of our feet. Radon, Greg.”

“In a ventilated, sealed-off space,” Greg pointed out, “Whatever risk there *might* be is confined to a room that nobody goes in other than myself.”

“I’m not so sure the county inspector would see it that way, especially considering the door to that deathtrap isn’t even locked. Oh, I think I’d know people like that, just like I know some boys who were living downstairs, might want to know more about their withheld deposits.”

“Those apartments are filthy.”

“Carpet stains!” Victor spat. Another heavy thud. “Come on, girl, it’s different now.”

“I have all the picture evidence—”

“Pictures! He’s got pictures! You give me fifty bucks, and I’ll rent us a steam-cleaner with enough soap to clear out the whole first floor.”

“What you don’t understand—”

“Tell that to your pictures.”

Greg spoke louder, “*What you don’t understand—*” He paused. He was yelling at the hallway. Angry people were prone to all sorts of stupidity. He dropped his outstretched hand to his side, and continued softly, “...is that those were above and beyond—”

The door opened. What came out then he hardly recognized. The cat had grown, doubled in size. Its head had become wrinkled and

spotted, patches of bald pink showing where there had only been fur. There was a cold dullness in its slit pupils, in eyes that scanned robotically.

But what squeezed Greg's throat, what buckled his knees, what would splice his thoughts in the months after, was its gaping, hungry mouth. Behind its thin teeth was no tongue, no throat, only a solid black that defied the lighting—empty of insides.

Victor appeared behind it, and carried on like the carpet was really what mattered. "It's a shit material for a floor and you know it—hell, the whole world knows it, unless you like to vacuum twice a day and complain about allergies. Well, I sure don't."

The cat's mouth swallowed his gaze. To be eaten was to be unmade, not digested.

"And I'll tell you something else. I hinted at the fact that I know the inspector, she's my good friend's wife. But I think I was probably too subtle, so there you go."

Greg backed up until the wall hit him. "There's no need for all that." He fumbled at the knob. The cat stepped closer and twisted its head.

"Have a good—" Greg stumbled out of the apartment.

"Oh, I know, Angel," Victor Cooed from within. "I know, baby."

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A month went by, and Clara left him. It helped him forget about Victor and his fucked up cat. He focused instead on memories of his life before her. He'd been embarrassed by that lifestyle when they'd first met, and now it was reemerging around him—gas-station food, laundry piled up, dirty dishes, and all the humdrum depressive crap that came too easily when there was no one around to see.

The heater clicked on, air whooshing all around, the vents clicking and popping like mice running through the walls. He was in bed. Clara would have woken with an incoherent, high-pitched mumble, and moved closer. He would have smelled the kiwi shampoo in her hair.

He checked the mail slots. No purple note. He wondered if there would ever be another.

Best way to give a compliment, that's what Clara said about writing letters. Slips right in your pocket. No way to pay it back, no way to argue, nothing you can do but accept the words on the page.

Greg had countered that he could make corrections in red ink, or get his tenants to sign a petition declaring the document null and void. It made them laugh then. It was less funny now.

Feinstein called at the usual nine, but again around noon. A lightbulb in her kitchen had gone *cold*, and she was afraid of using the wrong wattage. If he couldn't be bothered to keep her from dying, she

said, he could at least be bothered to get his ass up here and change that bulb right away. It was the first time Greg could remember her cursing.

When he reached the last stair up, he stopped.

His camera. It hung by its wire from the ceiling with a busted lens.

And down the hall, the door to 3B was cracked open. From it, a sliver of gold light shone down the hall to his feet.

He brought up the footage on his phone: two time-stamps with movement.

The first time-stamp was two hours ago. He hit *play*. Victor's hooker strolled to the door, a pink coat to match her hair. She knocked on 3B and went in—end footage.

The second time-stamp played. The door swung open and slammed against the stopper. The hooker stumbled out of the apartment without her coat. Her purse dropped as she ran down the hall. She might have been sprinting if not for the heels.

Victor stumbled out after her, yanking his pants on. He grabbed her purse, and chased her out of frame. Ten seconds later, the footage blurred and went to static. 3:37PM—thirty-seven minutes ago. Greg watched it three times.

He could call the cops, but it wasn't quite evidence of anything. For all he knew, they could be making out in the parking lot, just out of frame. Greg shoved that image out of his mind.

He could ignore it. Go about his day and change the bulb. That sounded like sense.

Or he could peek in. Keep an eye on the front door footage, claim he was concerned for their safety if he got caught. He hadn't seen Victor or his cat since his last visit to 3B. How much of his memory had been a hallucination? With active footage of the front door, there seemed little chance of getting caught.

He walked the sliver of light to the door. He spotted a pot of spaghetti sauce sitting on an electric burner. He moved to get a better angle. Too narrow. With two fingers, he cracked the door open with a squeak.

It was almost the size of a puma. Sunlight shone red through big, goblin-like ears. Its bald head was so deeply wrinkled it looked to be wearing its brains on the outside. It touched its chin to the floor, eyes locked on Greg. One boney paw lifted, trembling. Ready to pounce.

It darted. He yanked the door closed. The beast crashed into it with the force of something heavier than it could be. It struck the door. Again it struck, hard like a brick.

Greg braced his back against it until the banging gave way to scratching and howling. He clasped his chest like it would slow his thumping heart. He slid down and sat, his back against the door.

The beastly sounds died away, and there was only a purring cat. Greg rested his head against the door and felt his heart-rate return to normal. The purring was too close; even coming from the other side of the door, it was a whisper in his ear. It was a comfort.

More than a comfort. It was a needle in his vein. The purring was... apathy. A near-lethal dose of the old fuck-it. It might have alarmed him, except—well, he didn't give a shit.

He was startled to find his hand resting on the knob above his head. A voice screamed in his skull not to turn it, but what of it? The voice was distant. Dismissible.

He grasped the knob.

The door of 3A opened. She was a bulky woman dressed for a nice dinner. Feinstein leaned out, a pink top and matching skirt, twiddling with a dozen pearl necklaces. A polite grin spread across her face. "Are you going to help me with this bulb, Mr. Leminsky?"

Greg caught a sudden inhale like he'd forgotten to breathe. His hand fell from the knob. "Jesus Christ." He looked at his hand like he blamed it. A hungry growl took the place of the purring.

He managed a few words between labored breaths, "Demon cat."

"As I told you."

Feinstein had always kept a tidy place. How could she not? She spent every waking moment in search of imperfections.

Now the place had been torn apart. Nearly all her furniture had been dragged to one side of the apartment, and stacked up or leaning against the wall—Victor's wall. It looked like the insides of a ship thrown to one side by a wave. And there were blankets—so many blankets—in every crevice, and piled up to the ceiling.

A sitting area remained apart, a couch with carved-out flowers and a nightstand. On it an ornate lamp glowed bronze, and a staticky radio sang Patsy Cline. It was tucked in the farthest corner, away from the bulwark of armoires and coffee tables, away from 3B.

Feinstein put on a kettle for tea. Greg sat on the sofa, and she next to him with her hands folded in her lap. Victor was 'just like her ex-husband,' she said. They were both 'rude, nihilistic adulterers,' she said, but Greg was pretty sure Victor had never married.

The kettle whistled. Her cloudy, cataract eyes rolled in their sockets, and she felt her way to the kitchen. Instead of pouring it into the tiny cups with tea-bags and dollops of honey waiting, she poured it out and restarted the process. A whistling kettle meant it was too hot.

When the tea finally arrived (enough for two sips), she closed her eyes and savored the scent.

Greg downed the honey-water in one gulp, and clinked the empty cup on the plate. “So what the hell was that?”

“As I said, it’s a demon.”

As much as that made sense, it was useless. Demons were not something he could call an exterminator for, take legal action against, nor interact with in any reliable way.

She sighed and looked away. She looked ashamed.

“Miss Feinstein?”

She spoke a single word: “Isolation.” She sat there like it explained everything.

“What does that mean?”

She sighed. “My son was talking to me. Before the cat became...”

A demon. Greg didn’t like saying it either. The more he said it, the crazier he felt. “Timmy’s your son?”

“Yes.” She breathed deep on the tea. “He was talking to me. Calling about once a month. Once a month is good for a kid, believe it or not.”

Greg wasn’t sure about that. If his mother were alive, he’d call her every week. Every other week, at least—or once a month, on the outside.

She snarled, baring white gums. “He married the wrong woman. You have no reason to care, I know that. But I’ll say it once, because it’s the truth. That woman turned my boy against me. And Timmy was all I

had.” Her scowling face managed a deeper scowl. Wrinkles showed between her wrinkles. “Angel knew it.”

“The cat.”

Her fingers whitened around her teacup. Her voice dropped to a near-whisper, so Greg leaned in close. “I was in the laundry room when I heard a growl. It thought it could have been—God, I don’t know, a wolf? Its footsteps were heavy. Then Victor comes in, talking to it like a pet. *She’s not ready.* That’s what he said.”

“Ready? Ready for what?”

“I don’t know, but he kept saying it. *She’s not ready. Not yet, baby girl.* I begged him, *get her away from me.* I could just hear this... snarling. but he wouldn’t talk to me. He just kept talking to that *thing*, saying, *she’s not ready.*”

Greg waited for more.

“I don’t know what ‘ready’ is, but I know what she wants.” Her eyes seemed to gain their sight as she spoke the next words. “She wants me isolated.”

“How do you know?” The question had leapt out of his mouth, but he already knew the answer. He felt it when—

“She would purr to me!”

Oh, *the purring*. Greg looked at the wall of furniture, wondering if the cat was purring as they spoke. He considered pulling a few blankets to see if he could hear something. He just wanted a little hit.

“Every night, she came right up to that wall and purred.”

The purring was anesthesia. It made Clara un-allowed. Hell, even his instinct for survival couldn’t get a word in edgewise when that shit was rolling. *Put me under, Doc.*

“And you know when it starts? When I think of my son. When I think of how he *hates* me. Or doesn’t care.”

Like how Clara didn’t care.

“I didn’t believe it at first. So I did some testing. I sat right next to that wall and started boohooing about how alone I am, and how much I deserve it. And you know what? Cat starts purring. Like a whisper in my ear. And I start following the sound. I’d have gone in by now if Victor didn’t keep his door locked.” She set her teacup aside with a shaky hand. “She *feeds* on isolation. She controls you with it.”

Enslaves.

“Go ahead, call me crazy. I’m just a crazy old woman, right? I was right about the demon, wasn’t I? *Wasn’t I?*”

“Yes you were.” He looked her over and tried to find sympathy. It did not come easy for a woman like Feinstein. *Boo hoo, I’m blind*, had been good for about a month, until she started calling the cops on other

tenants for vacuuming their floors too aggressively. “You need to move to another apartment.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“It’s no charge.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“You can’t stay here.”

“They found me in the laundry room, it wouldn’t help.”

“Miss Fein—”

She held up her index finger like it formed a shield from Greg’s words. “This has been my home for twenty years. Long before you showed up. I’m not going anywhere.”

He’d always heard about people living in war zones or refusing to evacuate for a natural disaster—old fucks with nothing left to care about but their own doggish, territorial instincts. Here it was in the wild, with the same stubbornness, and the indignant proclamations of Victor Mason.

Outside the apartment, the wooden hall squeaked. Victor was back. The squeak became a groan, then footsteps, thunderous and slow. It was an odd sensation, to feel trapped in his own building, paralyzed on that flowery sofa.

It was an *angering* sensation. His hand gripped the night table, ready to bear his weight. He wanted to march to door, and barge into the

hall, and tell tell Victor to get the hell out his building, and take his cursed fucking cat with him.

His hand relaxed. He snuck to the door and saw Victor through the peephole, limping and out of breath. Mud on his jeans. They listened to the footsteps pass.

After a minute, Greg snuck out and hurried for the stairs, minding the squeaky floorboards. His thoughts raced, but one thing was clear as he fled down the stairway to his own apartment. Litigation and lost business be damned, Victor had to go.

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He sat at his dinner table, elbows on his knees, phone in hand.

What would he say if he called the cops? That call could not include the words, *demon cat*.

It would have to be reported as a legitimate health or safety concern. He could claim an allergy, he supposed—a *severe* allergy, so they couldn't ignore it.

A *deathly allergy*, he thought, realizing Feinstein had given him the exact same lie.

But a landlord didn't have the rights a tenant did. The best he could hope for was a warning, a fine, a misdemeanor charge—nothing that would solve the problem quickly.

His hand was getting his phone sweaty, he put it away. His fear of the cat had been a vague thing, a weirdness to shudder at and dismiss. Even during the tussle, he was only reacting, the fear more a compulsion than a feeling. Now his mind wondered. What might have happened if Feinstein hadn't opened that door? Could it slam him into the wall? Could it tear flesh with its bite?

He imagined Clara's reaction to his death. Her face contorted with grief, maybe a tear. Her hands covered her face, her posture crumpled, and she keeled over sideways and landed her head on the arm of another man. That man was a silhouette with a presence like a blackhole. Greg steered his mind away to avoid getting caught in the wake.

The silhouette was gone, but Clara wouldn't leave. It was six weeks ago. As he cleaned up dinner, she sat in the empty chair he stared at now, sipping wine. He had expected her to hurry off to work, but there she lingered, like she was waiting for something. Something Greg had not provided.

Now he didn't want to wallow in his own skull. *Now* he wanted to tell her that something was seriously wrong in 3B, and it was about a cat, but it was about him too. *Now* he wanted to tell her what he saw in

the warping face of that cat, the face of all humanity, scowling back at him with horror for all his silence, his unlike-ability, his emptiness. *Now* he wanted to talk. Why couldn't he have wanted that before?

He watched his past self wish Clara a good day at work and head for his room. Dumb, stupid, idiot, stupid fuck.

He would have told her everything. *Greggy*, she would have softly said, and scooted that chair over so she could wrap her arms around his side. Her breath would have warmed his neck, her kiwi-shampooed hair would have tickled his nose, with just a hint of tobacco from the cigarettes she liked to “sneak” when she went to the bathroom. He would have rested his cheek on her head, and she would have rocked him, right there at the dinner table, and warmed his hand with hers, and told him everything would be wonderful because she'd be with him forever—if she were there.

But there was no hand on his. It astonished him somehow that he should take up all the space of his apartment, just a man scowling at his dinner table. He might as well be packed away somewhere, or stacked up with all the other vegetables like logs on a wood-rack.

“Jesus Christ.” He slapped the table hard to cut the silence. Lows like this were not acceptable. Pontificating over his loneliness—*gross*. His self-respect had been on the decline since the day he met that damned cat.

Then he made a decision that made him smile.

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In the movies, leaving an anonymous tip always involved someone in a phone booth with a trench coat and concealing hat. There were no phone booths in town. Besides, he had evidence, of a sort.

He grabbed the tape with the footage of Victor running down the hall after his hooker. He grabbed the broken camera too (he wasn't sure why, but it couldn't hurt). He printed out a note with one line: *Victor Mason is a dangerous man, please investigate.*

He felt like an amateur criminal. He thought about writing, *Anonymous Tip* on the envelope. He debated on the likelihood of them using handwriting analysis to track him. Fingerprints. Almost certainly not, but he wasn't comfortable with even a tiny risk. He wiped down the camera and tape, stuffed it all into a heavy-duty envelope addressed to the police, and dropped it in a public mailbox.

As soon as he got back, he pulled a document from his files, one he'd typed up months ago. The header read in large bold print, NOTICE TO EVICT.

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Greg knew a squatter when he saw one, and Victor was definitely a squatter. On paper, he had sixty days to vacate, but with the right objections, that could drag on for months.

The trick would be in avoiding the third floor until he was gone. The trick in *that* was avoiding Feinstein for so long. He'd been practicing this for years, and now was his time to shine.

A week went by, and she didn't call. Not once. On day eight, Greg went to bed with it stirring in his mind.

On day nine, he awoke to a knock. His tongue was puckered sour from last night's wine. Another knock, from the front entrance down the hall. *A cop?*

The thumping formed a drumbeat. Not a cop. He went to the kitchen, ducked his head in the sink, and lapped water straight from the faucet. He dressed lazily, in defiance of the continued thumping. He pocketed his earplugs—a defense against the purring which he'd started wearing almost constantly.

At the end of the hall, next to the front door, the dented tin slot for 3A stared back. No mail in any slot. He pushed open the front door, and a gust of cold cut through his t-shirt like tissue. It was a young guy with a square head, and a pearly-toothed smile. It was the kind of beaming smile that can jostle you, the kind you try to look behind to see what else

is there. He spoke in a waiter-like, performative tone. “Hi there, are you the landlord?”

“I am.”

“How are you doing today?”

That was a daunting question, like a spotlight hit, and someone said, *be bubbly*. And what the hell kind of person knocks on a stranger’s door to ask how they’re doing?

“Sir?”

“Good. I’m good.” *Was that so hard?*

“A beautiful day, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it’s good.”

“Great week, weather wise.”

Greg flattened his tone. “The week is also good.”

“I don’t mind it a little chilly myself...”

He’s still going.

“...You can always put on more layers, but at a certain point, you can’t keep taking them off, know what I mean?”

“No, man.” The words tumbled out, high-pitched. “I’ve heard that before, *you can always put on more layers*, but no, I still hate the cold. Is this why you woke me up at *seven o’clock*?”

“Well, no—”

“Because I’d prefer to sleep. Sleep makes my *whole day*. So now my *whole day* is screwed up because of some kid, just decides he wants to—”

He was doing it. He was speaking in walls. He breathed deep and said, “I’m sorry.”

The guy rambled on unfazed. “Oh, yeah, that makes sense, I totally get it. And I really hate to wake you, but they got me pulling doubles over at the campus ER, so this is past my bedtime. That’s so weird, right?”

Not really, but Greg summoned the energy to nod.

The kid clasped his hands together, and made a sudden shift to a solemn tone. “Eleanor Feinstein—she’s a tenant of yours?”

Eleanor. Her name was Eleanor. He supposed he’d read that a long time ago on her lease and in setting up her paychecks, before he’d automated it. He supposed that, but if he’d heard *Ellie* or *Elaine*, he’d have supposed that too. “She is.”

“Well, I’m sorry to say, she’s been found... were you close?”

“No, she’s just a tenant,” said Greg, his voice constricting. There was only one way that sentence was going to end, but still he braced himself.

The stranger's voice became a flat desert. "I'm sorry to say she's been found dead."

A whimper escaped, involuntary as a hiccup. Whatever denial Greg had been living in for the past few months vanished in a single word: *dead*.

And still, he knew it was more than that. *Murdered*.

The kid went on. Something found in her blood. Something the cops couldn't identify. Those facts got locked away for later use. Feinstein had been *murdered*. The word looped in Greg's head until he believed it.

The kid rested his hand on Greg's shoulder, and Greg allowed it. A stranger's touch usually felt invasive, but not this time. The man had smiled while Greg was being a jerk; maybe that had earned a rare trust.

"How did it happen?"

"Heart attack."

Classic, Greg thought. He almost said it out loud. "And who are you?"

The kid clapped his shoulder and nudged Greg towards the stairs. "Oh, I'm her son." He held out his hand, his fingers cozy and fat. "Tim Feinstein, great to meet ya."

When the door swung open and revealed the bulwark of furniture, Greg explained in a tone of finality, “Noise complaint.” He ignored Tim’s inquisitive stare. He’d gotten good at ignoring people.

Tim gave it up and inventoried his mother’s place with half a mind—the other half yammering about the patients he’d had in the ER. He plowed through Greg’s disinterest with sheer persistence until there was little choice but to get curious. It turned out, of all the junkies Tim had worked with, those on bath salts were his very least favorite. Whataya know.

Every once in a while, something in the apartment caught Tim’s eye and sparked a memory. His babbling slowed as a haunted look crept across his face. That look came as he rubbed the face of the grandfather clock (stacked in the bulwark.) It came again when he turned on the radio and listened to a minute of the pre-set station. *Dream a little dream of me-e-e*. It came again, oddly, when he rifled through a tray of Oreos.

Greg didn’t ask. His baseline was not to pry.

Before Tim left, he said something that would nag the following night. He was taking a last look at the apartment, ruminating, seeming half-asleep. “She wasn’t so bad, once you learned to tune her out.”

Greg laughed. It was a genuine laugh, better than he’d had in weeks, then he stopped—Tim’s jaw was clenched with the discomfort of

his own words. It wasn't quite a joke. The bitterness was about ten percent too genuine.

Love was one thing, but deserving or not, some people were plain miserable to be around. Neurotics, psychotics, complainers, downright bummers, you name it. Greg had known perfectly nice people whose words simply made others groan. Those were the ones that should get a cat—at least, Greg had been comfortable with that perspective a short time ago.

But a cat wasn't enough, was it?

~ <> ~

He enjoyed wine alone that night, and found himself in that manic drunken state that comes five minutes before certain sleep. His apartment was overrun with wine bottles and single-serve pizza boxes. He'd gone full Victor—or at least, he was on the edge of the cliff and looking over.

She's not ready. That's what Victor had said about Feinstein.

Greg understood it in that moment. The wine that had warmed his stomach went cold, revealed its toxicity, leaking outward and into his veins. Clara. He thought of Clara. It cracked his drunken joy, but it didn't make him cry. Not this time. Not even close.

It wasn't worth it to be lonely anymore. She was gone. Fantasies of her return were poison. Her kiwi hair was irrelevant. He had nothing left of her. Even the grief was gone, but he found himself staring into the space it had occupied, a hollow in his chest.

He was *ready*.

Ready to be pushed off the cliff. To meet the depths below. To be made irretrievable.

When he woke the next morning, he found himself determined to—it was hard to even think it—*make a connection*.

What an embarrassing goal. Having friends was always fashionable, but making them didn't feel like an adult activity. It all made him cringe, but cringes could be wrong sometimes.

It started with self-improvement, yada yada. He took the day off, hit the gym, and cleaned his place. Dinner was ribeye with asparagus, portobellos on top. He said, "*mmm*" while he ate. He molded his thoughts into a motivational book-on-tape.

He called friends he hadn't talked to in years. They'd long since found fancy jobs and married fancy wives. There was something new forming between them, a pressure—a *performance*, like they were both worried that one bad conversation would prove they had lost touch. It could be surprisingly easy to nullify a friendship. When the conversation

ended, the mutual assumption was clear, it was time to go back to their separate lives.

He went on a date. The dam in conversation broke and he excitedly regaled her with stories of his past. An hour later, she excused herself flatly. Reviewing the date, he realized his every story had been about Clara.

Fear of death could motivate quite a lot, but it made making friends even harder. It made him try too hard. In most of life, trying hard was a good thing, but this was a vital exception. And when trying failed, the only thing left to try was not trying.

So again the wine flowed, and the pizza-sweats became a part of his routine. It wasn't depression; it was *strategy*.

Back at the edge of the cliff, he looked down. He wasn't sure what he saw in the shadowy depths below, but it was starting to look... pleasant.

~ <> ~

The town emptied out for holiday break. The college kids on the first floor did the same, and the second floor had been vacant for weeks. With Feinstein gone, business was what Greg called, *waiting*.

At 5PM, through the rain-splattered windows, it looked dark enough to be midnight. The winter had been snowless, the week had been grey, and dreary weather was a good time to get shit done.

Greg was on his knees with a crowbar, grunting and prying, tearing out the floorboards in 1A. 1B needed the renovation more, but he liked it vacant, as a buffer zone from his tenants.

He was alerted by a shadow. It was only a flicker in his periphery, but it made him shudder and turn.

Two standing lights shone on lumber, paint-cans, and tools. Behind the lights, it was dark, except a soft glow in the window from the Christmaslights down the street. Nothing moved but raindrops on the glass.

He was safer with the earplugs in, he'd decided, but it hardly felt safe to be deaf. He turned to his floorboards, only to check behind him five more times.

What could get in? The door was locked. It wasn't a fortress, but neither was Victor a master criminal. He'd have to break that door down, and Greg had his crowbar handy, not to mention a generous assortment of power tools lying around...

Another shadow. His heart thumped. It sounded underwater in his plugged ears. He gripped the crowbar tight, his eyes darting.

What about the cat? Feinstein had said it got into the laundry room. Greg had assumed Victor let it in, but no—she wasn't *ready*.

The air ducts. It had to be the air ducts. He checked the ceiling: nothing but tiles.

Sweat formed on his brow, then stung in the cold air. He wondered if it was nearby, purring. He wondered if it was purring to him *right now*.

If he could get to his phone—

He turned. Paint-cans. Lumber. Maybe it was another shadow, he wasn't sure. His body was calling the shots.

If he could get to his phone, he could hit *911* and run. No fake allergies, no explanations, just get their asses here. He went for the kitchen counter—it wasn't there. He was *certain* he'd put it there. Something moved it.

Run.

He did. He darted for the door and swung it open.

Victor filled the space of the doorway with his hands on hips. He was all dressed for the winter, looking down with that *can-you-believe-this* expression.

Greg planted his foot forward, and brought the crowbar back.

It seemed to alarm Victor. He didn't see the earplugs, and he only saw the crowbar at the last second. He tried to bring up his hands, but it was too late.

Greg swung with all his force and felt the crunch of a tooth through Victor's cheek.

His scream cut right through the earplugs. He reeled back into the hall, hands on his mouth. He spit out some pieces of tooth, and drew a line of blood on Greg's boots. Greg pulled the crowbar back and aimed for his temple.

Something hit Greg in the back like a cannonball. He was on his stomach, the wind knocked out. Angel was on him, claws like knife-points, rigid and razor sharp. They thrashed at his cheeks, his temple—his ears. It was after the earplugs. Greg screamed, he flailed, he rolled on his back and tried to wrestle it off. It was like trying to pull the hair from his head—maybe he could do it, but it would mean dragging those claws through his own flesh.

The cat shredded his earlobes until they dangled wrong, and the back of his neck grew wet and warm. It couldn't get the plugs out. It kept thrashing, but it couldn't get them out.

So Greg did. He threw the blood-covered plugs across the room and let the purring in.

The purring was the bottom of the cliff.

~ <> ~

A standing light shone on Greg. A shadow passed and made him blink, then a pair of large hands patted him down. A damp towel ruffled his hair and wiped his face, stretching and mashing his cheeks. It came off sticky and red. A moan came out, high-pitched and alien, more pleasure than pain.

Victor grabbed him under his armpits and leaned him up against the wall. He stood over, sweaty and flush. The fork of the crowbar left twin gashes that shined from cheek to jaw. His mouth was stuck in a droop on one side, bloody gauze stuffed into the gap between his teeth.

“You know, I went and thought about all that eviction nonsense.” His voice was muffled through the gauze, words coming out in mostly vowels. “I thought, *Victor, you’re being unfair. You were a downright dog, breakin’ in that basement and showing your impatience with that young man.*”

Greg could feel the ‘*but*’ coming from a mile away. Everything else was to make it sound legit.

“*But,*” said Victor. “You know what else I thought? *I been here twelve years*, is what. *This boy’s going ‘round, rippin’ off kids*, is what. Can you believe it?” His pitch hit that indignant high. His mouth was hyperactive; it opened and closed too much, and shook his cheeks as if screaming every word. “I’m here, minding my business, payin’ my rent. Then here you come with that eviction notice, like you’re the big man.

Big man Greg. Probably dipping in that rent, takin' extra? That's what I'd do."

Greg was no stranger to shady landlord practices, but *dipping in that rent* was a made-up phrase.

But what did it matter? Victor was in the zone, a booming proselytizer, speaker of truths—giving his speech from the bottom of the cliff, the audience above too busy to listen, too distant to hear anything but wailing on the wind.

On Victor preached. He grew louder, his face shaking with more intensity. Out poured the words, then more after that, then so many words that Greg couldn't believe they kept coming, pronounced properly enough, and put together roughly in sentences, as if to convey meaning—yet all they did was spray blood and spittle in his face. He ranted until he was raging, then he raged until he was physically exhausted, hobbled over, the top of his head a patch of hair surrounded by a sweaty white scalp.

A voice came to mind, a voice that had been calling out the whole time, too quiet to hear. *Get the fuck out!* But it was only a voice in a dark cellar, Greg at the top of the stairs. He closed the door with a shudder.

The towel was back. It came down white and came up red. Gauze were wrapped around his head, then a hat placed on top of that, the kind

with the big ear-flaps. Victor slapped Greg's arm. "Say goodbye to this ugly-ass place."

The voice cried out again, *Run!*

And remove the needle? He knew he should. Of course he did, like a smoker knew, *that's bad for you*. But *the purring*. It's not that he couldn't run; he didn't *want* to run.

Angel floated across the room. Greg got on his shaky feet, and followed her into the hall, Victor leading the way. He followed her past the stairs, past the coat-racks on the left. He followed her to the mail-wall, empty in every slot except a single envelope—a purple note, there in the slot for 1C.

He stared at the envelope for a long time. Victor and Angel looked back with narrowed eyes.

He could imagine what it said. Clara wasn't writing to throw herself back into his arms. She wasn't about to confess some feelings that Greg would prefer her to confess, and for that matter, to have. She was worried, was all.

Victor stepped towards the mail slots and reached for the letter.

There was the cliff's edge. Standing at the precipice, Greg looked back. A small crowd intermingled, the faces of people he'd known, most of them from so long ago they hardly seemed real. High school friends. A middle school crush. His mom. His mom was only a concoction,

fragments of childhood memories stitched together to give him a story. But everyone needed a mom.

Victor grabbed the note and pulled out a lighter. He flicked, and flicked, and the flame took.

There was Clara. She was working on the letter, cigarette in her mouth. She'd dropped the sneak-smoking and taken up open smoking, because who was she fooling? Maybe she was writing about the time they snuck in the campus library and rearranged all the books. They felt guilty for torturing that poor librarian. They felt guiltier for being glad they did it, because the memory was just too good.

His leg twitched. His arm. The start of a smile warmed his face.

The flame licked the corner and caught. Fire crawled up, and the envelope began to peel away to ash. Beneath it, the letter began to darken. Under the orange glow, Greg caught a glimpse of the words withering.

'I always love y'

The purring was... noise.

What he did to Victor then, he could not say. He remembered charging. He remembered Victor crumpled beneath him, holding his mouth, fresh blood streaming over his fingers. Greg's arm was torn out of its socket, his hand burnt, clutching the remnants of his purple note.

A slash in his calf brought him to his knees. The cat was on him, but Greg got it by the neck. He wrestled it, he pushed it away. He squeezed, he squeezed so hard, but the neck was a wooden thing, and the flesh wouldn't give beneath his grasp. The slashing came, splitting flesh. The pain spread from his wounds and became a nausea, and a chilling of his limbs.

There was nothing to do but hold on, and hold on Greg did. He held on until the claws didn't cut so deep. He held on until its neck became soft, and sprouted fur, and he felt a pulse under his index finger. He held on until it shrank and weakened, and he handled it like a toy, until there was nothing in his hands but the neck of an ordinary cat—the same frisky white-furred thing he first saw in 3B. It wriggled and tried to scream just the way a cat does when it's getting strangled.

His grip loosened. The cat squirmed away, and darted up the stairs.

“Angel,” Victor called, weakly. He was too hurt to move. “Angel,” he said again. “Come on, baby.”

But she wouldn't come.

~ <> ~

He was greeted in the campus ER by none other than Tim Feinstein, who was happy to have a *snoozer of a patient*.

That was before Greg tried to take off his hat. They had to cut the hair around one mangled ear, leaving it caked on the fabric. Tim looked at the ear-wounds for a long time. He must have still been working on his *seen-it-all-before* face. He grabbed an otoscope, flipped on the light, and started digging. “So what’s the explanation we’re going with here?”

“Cat attacked me.”

“Mmhm. Inner ear looks okay. I can stitch you up, and put most of this back where it belongs. You might consider a cosmetic surgeon if you’re worried about... symmetry.”

Greg sighed. “I guess I’ll try out asymmetrical for a while.”

Tim doped him, stitched him up, and wished him luck. Greg turned to leave, but something stopped him. It was in Tim’s voice, his demeanor. The grief had hit him. It could have been a wild guess, but before Greg could doubt it, he was already blurting out, “I’m really sorry about your mom, man.”

What the hell are you doing? She just died, he doesn’t want to think about—

Tim grabbed him in an awkward hug.

It was a little much, a little cheesy, though good things are. Greg said, “okay, okay,” until the hug stopped.

Cheesy hugs aside, there was no better high than saying *the right thing*—that rare and special set of words that made a person light up,

even if out of grief. Those words were accomplishments, each one a point of pride. Now he had another few to add to the collection.

That was a high worth chasing.

~ <> ~

It was a warm Christmas morning, and Greg got a present he didn't expect. He woke to the sound of rumbling and heavy footsteps overhead. He dressed and went to the stairs to listen. Knocking. Yelling. Victor yelled back.

He was being arrested.

The cops dragged him out of the building, limping in his underwear. He told them all the reasons they were making a huge mistake. He asked them again and again if they could believe this. The cops didn't answer, but it seemed like they could.

They kept looking at Greg. The head bandage was hard to downplay. He declined to answer questions, but couldn't help but watch the show from the walkway. The sun flashed between clouds, and birds squawked in the oak tree that dominated the yard.

Victor ranted at the cops as he always did, but that's what struck Greg as strange—it felt little different than his spiel about carpet. He was

at ease with going to prison, relaxed in his state of rage. It was his homeostasis.

They cuffed him and sat him in the back of a cruiser. They lingered with Victor's window down—watching Greg, watching Victor.

Why did he walk over to the car? Talking to Victor had never yielded a single positive result. Still, the compulsion was there, just as it was for Victor to keep babbling despite his words having long ago turned to noise. He supposed it was his last chance.

“Well, you’re just having a merry little Christmas, aren’t you?” Victor said as Greg approached.

He’d had worse.

“You think you won, don’t you?”

Greg’s brow furrowed, just a little.

“Well, I spanked you pretty good, and don’t you forget it. Radon? Hah!”

Victor saw Greg’s smile and grumbled, “Yeah, yeah, Soak it in, pal. Like I give a fuck.” He was prone to all sorts of colorful vulgarities, but something about the word ‘fuck’ escaped that old-timer grumpiness.

“You seemed like you gave a fuck,” said Greg.

“Well, I don’t.” He clung to his apathy like a frightened lover.

“About the cat. You seemed like you gave a fuck about her.”

“I don’t give a *fuck!*” His veiny eyes bulged, his cuffed hands shook, trying to gesture. “That’s my faith, Greg. It’s the only faith that’s guaranteed to pay off.”

Greg was about to point out, *hey Victor, you’re on your way to prison, you idiot*—but if Victor was true to his faith, if he gave no fuck, then what harm could prison do? The man had his bases covered.

He would just never be loved, was all.

Greg told him so. The sun ducked behind a large cloud, and the car pulled away. He never saw Victor again.

~ <> ~

Greg had a bad feeling as he walked the hall to 3B. He’d avoided it for two weeks, and repeatedly called Victor’s daughter to pick up his things. There had been no response.

The door cracked open, and everything was there—the recliner, the dirty dishes and neglected garbage (now extra-pungent and gathering flies)—all of it, including Angel. She sat in the window cill. White fur. Photogenic.

How did it *die*?

He thought of the corny endings to old *Star Trek* episodes—it turned out the evil alien was feeding on the crew’s feelings of malice

towards one-another, or their anger, or distrust. Then they had to focus on good feelings and togetherness, and the crystalline entity, or sentient glowing cloud would be defeated.

It didn't make for much of a plan. What could he do, break into Victor's apartment and then have a great conversation? Hope the energy of their companionship would make the cat cry out, *meowwww!* as it faded away into the ether? He put his faith in a more practical solution.

He had to kill the cat. He *would* kill the cat. He would blow its brains out with a shotgun. He wondered if he could handle the kick-back on a shotgun. Or if he could properly train himself to use one in a day or two.

He pictured himself doing it. He pictured the pellets turning its bony body to scraps. He pictured a bloody gouge where its eye had been, and another just under its nose, in the gum of its mouth. He pictured the blood spraying the window—no, the bullets would go *through* the window, hitting God knows who.

For that matter, the walls and floors of his complex were hardly bullet-proof. No angle seemed like a safe choice. His hands were shaking just thinking about it. Guns were out.

Knife? Hard no. It didn't matter how much he hated something, he wasn't about to cut into living flesh with a blade.

A baseball bat. That was the way. With one good whack (and a *crunch*, he realized with a twitch of disgust), he wouldn't even have to check on the results. Just *whack, turn, run*. He made it a chant. *Whack, turn, run. Whack, turn, run.*

Whack, turn... no. No, he wasn't about to whack, turn, and run. That wouldn't solve this any more than an exterminator.

He pushed the door open. The cat looked his way and meowed with interest. He meowed back, and approached, slowly.

"Here, kitty," he said as he neared, and reached out his finger.

Angel hesitated, her head twitching back. She sniffed and nudged his finger with her head.

He scratched her fluffy cheek, and she purred.