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LIFE REGARDED AS A JIGSAW PUZZLE OF HIGHLY LUSTROUS CATS

Michael Bishop

Your father-in-law, who insists that you call him Howie, even though you prefer Mr. Bragg, likes jigsaw puzzles. If they prove harder than he has the skill or the patience for, he knows a sneaky way around the problem.

During the third Christmas season after your marriage to Marti, you find Howie at a card table wearing a parka, a blue watch cap with a crown of burgundy leather, and fur-lined shoes. (December through February, it is freezing in the Braggs' Tudor-style house outside Spartanburg). He is assembling a huge jigsaw puzzle. The Braggs give him one every Christmas. His challenge is to piece it together, unaided by drop-in company or anyone else, before the Sugar Bowl kick-off on New Year's Day.

This year, the puzzle is of cats.

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The ESB procedure being administered to you by the Zoo Cop and his associates is keyed to cats. When they zap your implanted electrodes, cat-related memories parachute into your mind's eye, opening out like fireworks.

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The lid from the puzzle's box is Mr. Bragg's -- Howie's -- blueprint, and it depicts a population explosion of stylized cats. They are both mysterious beasts and whimsical cartoons. The puzzle lacks any background, it's so full of cats. They run, stalk, lap milk, tussel, tongue-file their fur, snooze, and so on. There are no puzzle areas where a single color dominates, a serious obstacle to quick assembly.

Howie has a solution. When only a handful of pieces remain in the box, he uses a razor blade to shave any piece that refuses to fit where he wants it to. This is cheating, as even Howie readily acknowledges, but on New Year's Eve, with Dick Clark standing in Times Square and the Sugar Bowl game only hours away, a man can't afford to screw around.

"Looking good," you say as the crowd on TV starts its rowdy countdown to midnight. "You're almost there."

Howie confesses -- complains? -- that this puzzle has been a "real mindbender." He appreciates the challenge of a thousand-plus pieces and a crazy-making dearth of

internal clues, but why this particular puzzle? He usually receives a photographic landscape or a Western painting by Remington.

"I'm not a cat fancier," he tells you. "Most of 'em're sneaky little bastards, don't you think?"

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Marti likes cats, but when you get canned at Piedmont Freight in Atlanta, she moves back to Spartanburg with your son, Jacob, who may be allergic to cats. Marti leaves in your keeping two calico mongrels that duck out of sight whenever you try to feed or catch them. You catch them eventually, of course, and drive them to the pound in a plastic animal carrier that Marti bought from Delta, or Eastern, or some other airline out at Hartsfield.

#

Penfield, a.k.a. the Zoo Cop, wants to know how you lost your job. He gives you a multiple-choice quiz:

- A. Companywide lay-off
- B. Neglect of duty and/or unacceptable job performance
- C. Personality conflict with a supervisor
- D. Suspicion of disloyalty
- E. All, or none, of the above

You tell him that there was an incident of (alleged) sexual harassment involving a female secretary whose name, even under the impetus of electrical stimulation of the brain (ESB), you cannot now recall. All you can recall is every cat, real or imaginary, ever to etch its image into your consciousness.

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After your firing, you take the cats, Springer and Ossie (short for Ocelot) to the pound. When you look back from the shelter's doorway, a teen-age attendant is giving you, no doubt about it, the evil eye. Springer and Ossie are doomed. No one in the big, busy city wants a mixed-breed female. The fate awaiting nine-year-old Jacob's cats -- never mind their complicity in his frightening asthma -- is the gas chamber; today, though, you are as indifferent to the cats' fate as a latter-day Eichmann. You are numb from the molecular level upward.

"We did have them spayed," you defend yourself. "Couldn't you use that to pitch them to some nice family?"

#

You begin to laugh.

Is this another instance of Inappropriate Affect? Except for the laughing gas given you to sink the electrodes, you've now been off all medication for . . . you don't know how long.

On the street only three years after your dismissal, you wept at hoboes' bawdy

jokes, got up and danced if the obituaries you'd been sleeping under reported an old friend's death.

Once, you giggled when a black girl bummed a cigarette in the parking lot of Trinity United Methodist: "I got AIDS, man. Hain't no smoke gonna kill me. Hain't time enough for the ol' lung cee to kick in, too."

Now that Penfield's taken you off antipsychotics, is Ye Old Inappropriate Affect kicking in again? Or is this fallout from the ESB? After all, one gets entirely different responses (rage and affection; fear and bravado) from zapping hypothalamic points less than 0.02 inch from each other.

Spill it, Adolf, Penfield says. What's so funny?

Cat juggling, you tell him. (Your name has never been Adolf.)

What?

Steve Martin in *The Jerk*. An illegal Mexican sport. A joke, you know. Cat juggling.

You surrender to jerky laughter. It hurts, but your glee isn't inappropriate. The movie was a comedy. People were *supposed* to laugh. Forget that when you close your eyes, you see yourself as the outlaw juggler. Forget that the cats in their caterwauling orbits include Springer, Ossie, Thai Thai, Romeo, and an anonymous albino kitten from your dead grandparents' grain crib on their farm outside Montgomery. . . .

#

As a boy in Hapeville, the cat you like best is Thai Thai, a male Siamese that your mama and you inherit from the family moving out. His name isn't Thai Thai before your mama starts calling him that, though. It's something fake Chinese, like Lung Cee or Mouser Tung. The folks moving out don't want to take him with them, their daddy's got a job with Otero Steel in Pueblo, Colorado. Besides, Mouser Tung's not likely to dig the ice and snow out there. He's a Deep South cat, Dixie-born and -bred.

"You are who you are," Mama tells the Siamese while he rubs her laddered nylons, "but from here on out your *name* is Thai Thai."

"Why're you calling him that?" you ask her.

"Because it *fits* a cracker Siamese," she says.

It's several years later before you realize that Thailand is Siam's current name and that there's a gnat-plagued town southeast of Albany called, yeah, Ty Ty.

Your mama's a smart gal, with an agile mind and a quirky sense of humor. How Daddy ever got it into his head that she wasn't good enough for him is a mystery.

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It's her agile mind and her quirky sense of humor that did her in, the Zoo Cop says, pinching back your eyelid.

#

Anyway, Daddy ran off to a Florida dog-track town with a chunky bottle-blonde ex-hair dresser who dropped a few pounds and started a mail-order weight-loss-tonic business. He's been gone nine weeks and four days.

Thai Thai, when you notice him, is pretty decent company. He sheathes his claws when he's in your lap. He purrs at a bearable register. He eats leftover vegetables -- peas, lima beans, spinach -- as readily as he does bacon rinds or chicken scraps. A doll, Mama calls him. A gentleman.

#

This ESB business distorts stuff. It flips events, attitudes, preferences upside-down. The last shall be first, the first shall be last. This focus on cats, for example, is a *major* distortion, a misleading reenvisioning of the life that you lived before getting trapped by Rockdale Biological Supply Company.

Can't Penfield see this? Uh-uh, no way. He's too hot to screw Rockdale Biological's bigwigs. The guy may have right on his side, but to him -- for the moment, anyway -- you're just another human oven-cake. If you crumble when the heat's turned up, great, zip-a= dee-zoo-cop, pop me a cold one, justice is served.

Thing is, you prefer dogs. Even as a kid, you like them more. You bring home flea-bitten strays and beg to keep them. When you live in Alabama, you covet the liony chow, Simba, that waits every afternoon in the Notasulga schoolyard for Wesley Duplantier. Dogs, not cats. Until Mouser Tung -- Thai Thai -- all the cats you know prowl on the edges of your attention. Even Thai Thai comes to you and Mama, over here in Georgia, as a kind of offhand house-warming gift. Dogs, Mister Zoo Cop, not cats.

Actually, Penfield says, I'm getting the idea that what was in the *forefront* of your attention, Adolf, was women. . . .

#

After puberty, your attention never *has* a forefront. You are divebombed by stimuli. Girl's faces are billboards. Their bodies are bigger billboards. Jigsawed ad signs. A piece here. A piece there. It isn't just girls. It's everything. Cars, buildings, TV talking heads, mosquito swarms, jet contrails, interchangeable male callers at suppertime, battle scenes on the six o'clock news, rock idols infinitely glitterized, the whole schmear fragmenting as it feeds into you, Mr. Teen-age Black Hole of the Spirit. Except when romancing a sweet young gal, your head's a magnet for all the flak generated by your media-crazed century.

"You're tomcatting, aren't you?" Mama says. "You're tomcatting just like Webb did. God."

It's a way to stay focused. With their faces and bodies under you, they cease to be billboards. You're a human being again, not a radio receiver or a gravity funnel. The act imposes a fleeting order on the ricocheting chaos working every instant to turn you, the mind cementing it all together, into a flimsy cardboard box of mismatched pieces.

Is that tomcatting? Resisting, by a tender union of bodies, the consequences of

dumping a jigsaw puzzle of cats into a box of pieces that, assembled, would depict, say, a unit of embattled flak gunners on Corregidor?

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Christ, the Zoo Cop says, a more highfalutin excuse for chasing tail I've never heard.

#

Your high school is crawling with cats. Cool cats, punk cats, stray cats, dead cats. Some are human, some aren't.

You dissect a cat in biology lab. On a plaster-of-Paris base, guyed upright by wires, stands the bleached skeleton of a quadruped that Mr. Osteen -- he's also the track and girl's softball coach -- swears was a member of *Felis catus*, the common house cat.

With its underlying gauntness exposed and its skull gleaming brittle and grotesque, this skeleton resembles that of something prehistoric. Pamela van Rhyn and two or three other girls want to know where the cats in the lab came from.

"A scientific supply house," Coach Osteen says. "Same place we get our bullfrogs, our microscope slides, the insects in that there display case." He nods at it.

"Where does the supply house get them?" Pamela says.

"I don't know, Pammie. Maybe they raise 'em. Maybe they round up strays. You missing a kitty?"

In fact, rumor holds that Mr. Osteen found the living source of his skeleton behind the track field's south bleachers, chloroformed it, carried it home, and boiled the fur off it in a pot on an old stove in his basement. Because of the smell, his wife spent a week in Augusta with her mother. Rumor holds that cat lovers hereabouts would be wise to keep their pets indoors.

Slicing into the chest cavity of the specimen provided by the supply house, you find yourself losing it. You are the only boy in Coach Osteen's lab to contract nausea and an overwhelming uprush of self-disgust; the only boy, clammy-palmed and light-headed, to have to leave the room. The ostensible shame of your departure is lost on Pamela, who agrees, in Nurse Mayhew's office, to rendezvous with you later that afternoon at the Huddle House.

"This is the heart," you can still hear Osteen saying. "Looks like a wet rubber strawberry, don't it?"

#

As a seven-year-old, you wander into the grain crib of the barn on the Powell farm. A one-eyed mongrel queen named Sky has dropped a litter on the deer hides, today stiff and rat-eaten, that Gramby Powel stowed there twenty or more years ago. Sky one-eyes you with real suspicion, all set to bolt or hiss, as you lean over a rail to study the blind quintet of her kitting.

They're not much, mere lumps. "Turds with fur," Gramby called them last night,

to Meemaw Anita's scandalized dismay and the keen amusement of your daddy. They hardly move.

One kitten gleams white on the stiff hide, in a nervous curl of Sky's furry belly. You spit at Sky, as another cat would spit, but louder -- *ssssphh! sssssphh!* -- so that eventually, intimidated, she gets up, kittens falling from her like bombs from the open bay of a B-52, and slinks to the far wall of the crib.

You climb over the rail and pick up the white kitten, the Maybe Albino as Meemaw Anita dubbed it. "Won't know for sure," she said, "till its eyes're open."

You turn the kitten in your hands. Which end is which? It's sort of hard to say. Okay, here's the starchy white potato print of its smashed-in pug of a face: eyes shut, ears a pair of napkin folds, mouth a miniature crimson gap.

You rub the helpless critter on your cheek. Cat smells. Hay smells. Hide smells. It's hard not to sneeze.

It occurs to you that you could throw this Maybe Albino like a baseball. You could wind up like Denny McClain and fling it at the far wall of the grain crib. If you aim just right, you may be able to hit the wall so that the kitten rebounds and lands on Sky. You could sing a funny song, "Sky's being fallen on, / Oh, Sky's being fallen on, / Whatcha think 'bout that?" And nobody'll ever know if poor little Maybe Albino has pink eyes or not. . . .

This sudden impulse horrifies you, even as a kid, *especially* as a kid. You can see the white kitten dead. Trembling, you set the kitten back down on the cardboard deer hide, climb back over the crib rail, and stand away from the naked litter while Sky tries to decide what to do next.

Unmanfully, you start to cry. "S-s-orry, k-kitty. S-s-sorry, Sk-sky. I'm r-r-really s-sorry." You almost want Gramby or Meemaw Anita to stumble in on you, in the churchly gloom and itch of their grain crib, to see you doing this heartfelt penance for a foul deed imagined but never carried out. It's okay to cry a bit in front of your mama's folks.

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I'm touched, Penfield says. But speak up. Stop mumbling.

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For several months after your senior year, you reside in the Adolescent Wing of the Quiet Harbor Psychiatric Center in a suburb of Atlanta. You're there to neutralize the disorienting stimuli -- flak, you call it -- burning out your emotional wiring, flying at you from everywhere. You're there to relearn how to live with no despairing recourse to disguises, sex, drugs.

Bad drugs, the doctors mean.

At QHPC, they give you good drugs. This is actually the case, not sarcastic bullshit. Kim Vaughan, one of the psychotherapists in the so-called Wild Child Wing, assures you that this is so; that antipsychotics aren't addictive. You get 20 milligrams a day of haloperidol. You take it in liquid form in paper cups shaped like doll-house-sized coffee filters.

"You're not an addict," Kim says. (Everyone at QHPC calls her Kim.) "Think of yourself as a diabetic, of Haldol as insulin. You don't hold a diabetic off insulin, that'd be criminal."

Not only do you get Haldol, you get talk therapy, recreational therapy, family therapy, crafts therapy. Some of the residents of the Wild Child Wing are druggies and sexual-abuse victims as young as twelve. They get these same therapies, along with pet therapy. The pets brought in on Wednesdays often include cats.

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At last, Penfield tells an associate. That last jolt wasn't a mis-hit, after all.

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The idea is that hostile, fearful, or withdrawn kids who don't interact well with other people will do better with animals. Usually, they do. Kittens under a year, tumbling with one another, batting at yarn balls, exploring the pet room with their tails up like the radio antennas on cars, seem to be effective four-legged therapists.

One teen-age girl, a manic-depressive who calls herself Eagle Rose, goes ga-ga over them. "Oh," she says, holding up a squirmy smoke-colored male and nodding at two kittens wrestling in an empty carton of Extra Large Tide, "they're so soft, so neat, so . . . so *highly lustrous*."

Despite Kim Yaughan's many attempts to involve you, you stand aloof from everyone. It's Eagle Rose who focuses your attention, not the kittens, and E.R.'s an untouchable. Every patient here is an untouchable, that way. It would be a terrible betrayal to think anything else. So, mostly, you don't.

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The year before you marry, Marti is renting a house on North Highland Avenue. A whole house. It's not a big house, but she has plenty of room. She uses one bedroom as a studio. In this room, on the floor, lies a large canvas on which she has been painting, exclusively in shades of blue, the magnified heart of a magnolia. She calls the painting -- too explicitly, you think -- *Magnolia Heart in Blue*. She's worked on it all quarter, often appraising it from a stepladder to determine how best to continue.

Every weekend, you sleep with Marti in the bedroom next to the studio. Her mattress rests on the floor, without box springs or bedstead. You sometimes feel that you're lying in the middle of a painting in progress, a strange but gratifying sensation that you may or may not carry into your next week of classes at GSU.

One balmy Sunday, you awake to find Marti's body stenciled with primitive blue flowers, a blossom on her neck, more on her breasts, an indigo bouquet on the milky plane of her abdomen. You gaze at her in groggy wonderment. The woman you plan to marry has become, overnight, an arabesque of disturbing floral bruises.

Then you see the cat, Romeo, a neighbor's gray Persian, propped in the corner, belly exposed, so much like a hairy little man in a recliner that you laugh. Marti stirs. Romeo preens. Clearly, he entered through a studio window, walked all over *Magnolia Heart in Blue*, then came in here and violated Marti.

My wife-to-be as a strip of *fin de siècle* wallpaper, you muse, kissing her chastely on one of the paw-print flowers.

#

You sleep on the streets. You wear the same stinking clothes for days on end. You haven't been on haloperidol for months. The city could be Lima, or Istanbul, or Bombay, as easily as Atlanta. Hell, it could be a boulder-littered crater on the moon. You drag from one place to another like a zombie, and the people you hit up for hamburgers, change, MARTA tokens, old newspapers, have no more substance to you than you do to them, they could all be holograms or ghosts. They could be androids programmed to keep you dirty and hungry by dictating your behavior with remote-control devices that look like wrist watches and key rings.

Cats mean more to you than people do. (The people may not *be* people.) Cats are fellow survivors, able to sniff out nitrogenous substances from blocks away. Food.

You follow a trio of scrawny felines down Ponce de Leon to the rear door of a catfish restaurant where the Dumpster overflows with greasy paper and other high refuse. The cats strut around on the mounded topography of this debris while you balance on an upturned trash barrel, mindlessly picking and choosing.

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Seven rooms away from Coach Osteen's lab, Mr. Petty is teaching advanced junior English. Poetry. He stalks around the room like an actor doing Hamlet, even when the poem's something dumb by Ogden Nash, or something beat and surface-sacrilegious by Ferlinghetti, or something short and puzzling by Carlos Williams.

The Williams piece is about a cat that climbs over a cabinet -- a "jamcloset" -- and steps into a flowerpot. Actually, Mr. Petty says, it's about the *image* created by Williams's purposely simple diction. Everyone argues that it isn't a poem at all. It's even less a poem, lacking metaphors, than that Carl Sandberg thing about the fog coming on little, for Christ's sake, cat's feet.

You like it, though. You can see the cat stepping cautiously into the flowerpot. The next time you're in Coach Osteen's class, trying to redeem yourself at the dissection table, you recite the poem for Pamela van Rhyn, Jessie Faye Culver, Kathy Margenau, and Cynthia Spivy.

Coach Osteen, shaking his head, makes you repeat the lines so that he can say them, too. Amazing.

"Cats are digitigrade critters," he tells the lab. "That means they walk on their toes. Digitigrade."

Cynthia Spivy catches your eye. *Well, I'll be a pussywillow*, she silently mouths. *Who'd've thunk it?*

"Unlike the dog or the horse," Coach Osteen goes on, "the cat walks by moving the front and back legs on one side of its body and then the front and back legs on the other. The only other animals to move that way are the camel and the giraffe."

And naked crazy folks rutting on all fours, you think, studying Cynthia's lips and wondering if there was ever a feral child raised by snow leopards or jaguars. . . .

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Thai Thai develops a urinary tract infection. Whenever he has to pee, he looks for Mama pulling weeds or hanging out clothes in the back yard, and squats to show her that he's not getting the job done. It takes Mama two or three days to realize what's going on. Then you and she carry Thai to the vet.

Mama waits tables at a Denny's near the expressway. She hasn't really got the money for the operation that Thai needs to clear up the blockage, a common problem in male Siamese. She tells you that you can either forfeit movie money for the next few months or help her pay to make Thai well. You hug Mama, wordlessly agreeing that the only thing to do is to help your cat. The operation goes okay, but the vet telephones a day later to report that Thai took a bad turn overnight and died near morning.

Thai's chocolate and silver body has a bandage cinched around his middle, like a wraparound saddle.

You're the one who buries Thai because Mama can't bring herself to. You put him in a Siamese-sized cardboard box, dig a hole under the holly in the backyard, and lay him to rest with a spank of the shovel blade and a prayer consisting of grief-stricken repetitions of the word please.

Two or three months later, you come home from school to find a pack of dogs in the backyard. They've dug Thai Thai up. You chase the dogs away, screeching from an irate crouch. Thai's corpse is nothing but matted fur and protruding bones. Its most conspicuous feature is the bandage holding the maggoty skeleton together at its cinched-in waist.

This isn't Thai, you tell yourself. I buried Thai a long, long time ago, and this isn't him.

You carry the remains, jacketed in the editorial section of the *Atlanta Constitution*, to a trash can and dump them with an abrupt, indifferent thunk. Pick-up is tomorrow.

#

One Sunday afternoon in March, you're standing with two hundred other homeless people at the entrance to Trinity United Methodist's soup kitchen, near the state capitol. It's drizzling. A thin but gritty-looking young woman in jeans and sweat shirt, her hair lying in dark strands against her forehead, is passing out hand-numbered tickets to every person who wants to get into the basement. At the head of the outside basement steps is a man in pleated slacks and a plaid shirt. He won't let anyone down the steps until they have a number in the group of ten currently being admitted. He has to get an okay from the soup-kitchen staff downstairs before he'll allow a new group of ten to pass.

Your number, on a green slip of paper already drizzle-dampened, is 126. The last group down held numbers 96 to 105. You think. Hard to tell with all the

shoving, cursing, and bantering on the line. One angry black man up front doesn't belong there. He waves his ticket every time a new group of ten is called, hoping, even though his number is 182, to squeeze past the man set there to keep order.

"How many carahs yo ring?" he asks. "I sick. Lemme eah fo I faw ouw. Damn disere rain."

When the dude holding number 109 doesn't show, the stair guard lets number 182 pass, a good-riddance sort of charity.

You shuffle up with the next two groups. How many of these people are robots, human machines drawn to the soup kitchen, as you may have been, on invisible tractor beams? The stair guard isn't wearing a watch or shaking a key ring. It's probably his wedding band that's the remote-control device. . . .

"My God," he cries when he sees you. "Is that really you? It is, isn't it?"

The stair guy's name is Dirk Healy. He says he went to school with you in Hapeville. Remember Pamela van Rhyn? Remember Cynthia What's-her-name? When you go down into the basement, and get your two white-bread sandwiches and a Styrofoam cup of vegetable soup, Dirk convinces another volunteer to take over his job and sits down next to you at one of the rickety folding tables where your fellow steet folk are single-mindedly eating. Dirk, who, as far as you're concerned, could be the Man in the Moon, doesn't ask how you got in this fix, doesn't accuse, doesn't exhort.

"You're off your medication, aren't you?" Your hackles lift. "Hey," he soothes, "I visited you at Quiet Harbor. The thing to do is, to get you back on it."

You eat, taking violent snatches of the sandwiches, quick sips of the soup. You one-eye Dirk over the steam the way that, years ago, Sky one-eyed you from her grain-crib nest.

"I may have a job for you," Dirk says confidentially. "Ever hear of Rockdale Biological?"

#

One summer, for reasons you don't understand, Mama sends you to visit your father and his ex-hair dresser floozie -- whose name is Carol Grace -- in the Florida town where they live off the proceeds of her mail-order business and sometimes bet the dogs at the local greyhound track.

Carol Grace may bet the greyhounds at the track, but, at home, she's a cat person. She owns seven: a marmalade-colored tom, a piebald tom, three tricolor females, an orange Angora of ambiguous gender, and a Manx mix with a tail four or five inches long, as if someone shortened it with a cleaver.

"If Stub was pure Manx," Carol Grace says, "he wouldn't have no tail. Musta been an alley tom in his mama's Kitty Litter."

Stroking Stub, she chortles happily. She and your mother look a little alike. They have a similar feistiness, too, although it seems coarser in Carol Grace, whom your balding father -- she calls him Webby, for Pete's sake -- unabashedly dotes on.

A few days into your visit, Carol Grace and you find one of her females, Hedy Lamarr, lying crumpled under a pecan tree shading the two-story house's south side. The cat is dead. You kneel to touch her. Carol Grace kneels beside you.

"Musta fell," she says. "Lotsa people think cats are too jack= be-nimble to fall, but they can slip up too. Guess my Hedy didn't remember that, pretty thing. Now look."

You are grateful that, today, Carol Grace does the burying and the prayer-saying. Her prayer includes the melancholy observation that anyone can fall. Anyone.

#

Enough of this crap, Penfield says. Tell me what you did, and for whom, and why, at Rockdale Biological.

Givin whah I can, you mumble, working to turn your head into the uncompromising rigidity of the clamps.

Adolf, Penfield says, what you're giving me is cat juggling.

#

Alone in the crafts room with Kim Vaughan while the other kids in Blue Group (QHPC's Wild Child Wing has two sections, Blue and Gold) go on a field trip, you daub acrylics at a crude portrayal of a cat walking upside down on a ceiling. Under the cat, a woman and a teen-age boy point and make hateful faces.

"Are they angry at the cat or at each other?" Kim asks.

You give her a look: What a stupid question.

Kim comes over, stands at your shoulder. If she were honest, she'd tell you that you're no artist at all. The painting may be psychologically revealing, but it refutes the notion that you have any talent as a draftsman or a colorist.

"Ever hear of British artist Louis Wain?" Kim says. "He lived with three unmarried sisters and a pack of cats. His schizophrenia didn't show up until he was almost sixty. That's late."

"Lucky," you say. "He didn't have so long to be crazy."

"Listen, now. Wain painted only cats. He must've really liked them. At first, he did smarmy, realistic kitties for calendars and postcards. Popular crap. Later, thinking jealous competitors were zapping him with X-rays or something, the cats in his paintings got weird, really hostile and menacing."

"Weirder than mine?" You jab your brush at it.

"Ah, that's a mere puddy-tat." Then: "In the fifteen years he was institutionalized, Wain painted scads of big-eyed, spiky-haired cats. He put bright neon auras and electrical fields around them. His backgrounds got geometrically rad. Today, you might think they were computer-generated. Anyhow, Wain's crazy stuff was better -- fiercer, stronger -- than the crap he'd done sane."

"Meaning I'm a total loss unless I get crazier?" you say.

"No. What I'm trying to tell you is that the triangles, stars, rainbows, and

repeating arabesques that Wain put into his paintings grew from a desperate effort to . . . well, to impose order on the chaos *inside* him. It's touching, really touching. Wain was trying to confront and reverse, the only way he could, the disintegration of his adult personality. See?"

But you don't. Not exactly.

Kim taps your acrylic cat with a burgundy fingernail. "You're not going to be the new Picasso, but you aren't doomed to suffer as terrifying a schizophrenia as Wain suffered, either. The bizarre thing in your painting is the cat on the ceiling. The colors, and the composition itself, are reassuringly conventional. A good sign for your mental health. Another thing is, Wain's doctors couldn't give him antipsychotic drugs. You, though, have access."

"Cheers." You pantomime knocking back a little cup of Haldol.

Kim smiles. "So why'd you paint the cat upside-down?"

"Because *I'm* upside-down," you say.

Kim gives you a peck on the cheek. "You're not responsible for a gone-awry brain chemistry or an unbalanced metabolism, hon. Go easy on yourself, okay?" Dropping your brush, you pull Kim to you and try to nuzzle her under the jaw. Effortlessly, she bends back your hand and pushes you away. "But that," she says, "you're going to have to control. Friends, not lovers. Sorry if I gave you the wrong idea. Really."

#

"If the pieces toward the end don't fit," Howie tells you, "you can always use a razor blade." He holds one up.

You try to take it. Double-edged, it slices your thumb. Some of your blood spatters on the cat puzzle.

#

A guy in a truck drives up to the specimen-prep platform and loading dock behind Rockdale Biological Medical Supply. It's an unmarked panel truck with no windows behind the cab. The guys who drive the truck change, it seems, almost every week, but you're a two-month fixture on the concrete platform with the slide cages and the euthanasia cabinet. Back here, you're Dirk Healy's main man, especially now that he's off on a business trip somewhere.

Your job is both mindless and strength-sapping. The brick wall around the rear of the RBMS complex, and the maple trees shielding the loading dock, help you keep your head together. Healy has you on a lower dosage of haloperidol than you took while you and Marti were still married. Says you were overmedicated before. Says you were, ha ha, "an apathetic drug slave." He should know. He's been a hotshot in national medical supply for years.

"We'll have you up in the front office in no time," he assured you a couple weeks ago. "The platform job's a kind of trial."

The guy in the truck backs up and starts unloading. Dozens of cats in slide

cages. You wear elbow-length leather gloves, and a heavy apron, and feel a bit like an old-timey Western blacksmith. The cats are pieces of scrap iron to be worked in the forge. You slide the door end of each cage into the connector between the open platform and the euthanasia cabinet, then poke the cats in the butt or the flank with a long metal rod until they duck into the cabinet to escape your prodding. When the cabinet's full, you drop the safety door, check the gauges, turn on the gas. It hisses louder than the cats climbing over one another, louder than their yowling and tumbling, which noises gradually subside and finally stop.

By hand, you unload the dead cats from the chamber, slinging them out by their tails or their legs. You cease feeling like a blacksmith. You imagine yourself as a nineteenth-century trapper, stacking fox, beaver, rabbit, wolf, and muskrat pelts on a travois for a trip to the trading post. The pelts are pretty, though many are blemished by vivid skin diseases and a thick black dandruff of gassed fleas. How much could they be worth?

"Nine fifty a cat," Dirk Healy has said. That seems unlikely. They're no longer moving. They're no longer -- if they ever were -- highly lustrous. They're floppy, anonymous, and dead, their fur contaminated by a lethal gas.

A heavy-duty wheelbarrow rests beside the pile of cats on the platform. You unwind a hose and fill the barrow with water. Dirk has ordered you to submerge the gassed cats to make certain they're dead. Smart. Some of the cats are plucky boogers. They'll mew at you or swim feebly in the cat pile even before you pick them up and sling them into the wheelbarrow. The water in the wheelbarrow ends it. Indisputably. It also washes away fleas and the worst aspects of feline scabies. You pull a folding chair over and sort through the cats for the ones with flea collars, ID collars, rabies tags. You take these things off. You do it with your gloves on, a sodden cat corpse hammocked in your apron. It's not easy, given your wet glove fingers.

If it's sunny, you take the dead cats to the bright part of the platform and lay them out in neat rows to dry.

#

Can't you get him to stop mumbling? Penfield asks someone in the room. His testimony's almost unintelligible.

He's replaying the experience inwardly, an indistinct figure says. But he's starting to go autistic on us.

Look, Penfield says. We've got to get him to verbalize clearly -- or we've wasted our time.

#

Two months after the divorce, you drive to Spartanburg, to the Braggs' house, to see Jacob. Mr. Bragg -- Howie -- intercepts you at the front gate, as if apprised of your arrival by surveillance equipment.

"I'm sorry," he says, "but Marti doesn't want to see you, and she doesn't want *you* to see Jake. If you don't leave, I'll have to call the police to, ah, you know,

remove you."

You don't contest this. You walk across the road to your car. From there, you can see that atop the brick post on either side of Mr. Bragg's ornate gate reposes a roaring granite lion. You can't remember seeing these lions before, but the crazed and reticulated state of the granite suggests they've been there a while. It's a puzzle. .

..

#

As you lay out the dead cats, you assign them names. The names you assign are always Mehitabel, Felix, Sylvester, Tom, Heathcliff, Garfield, and Bill. These seven names must serve for all the cats on the platform. Consequently, you add Roman numerals to the names when you run out of names before you do cats:

Mehitabel II, Felix II, Sylvester II, Tom II, and so on. It's a neat, workable system. Once, you cycled all the way to Sylvester VII before running out of specimens.

#

As a fifth grader in Notasulga, you sit and watch a film about the American space program.

An old film clip shows a cat -- really more a kitten than a cat -- suspended to a low ceiling by its feet. It's a metal ceiling, and the scientist who devised the experiment (which has something to do with studying the kitten's reactions to upside-downness, then applying these findings to astronauts aboard a space station) has fastened magnets to the cat's feet so that they will adhere to the metal surface.

The scientist has also rigged up a pair of mice in the same odd way, to see if they will distract, entice, or frighten the hanging kitten. They don't. The kitten is terrified not of the mice (who seem to be torpid and unimaginative representatives of their kind), but of the alien condition in which it finds itself. Insofar as it is able, the kitten lurches against the magnets, its ears back, its mouth wide open in a silent cry. On the sound track, a male voice explains the import and usefulness of this experiment.

No one can hear him, though, because most of the other kids in Miss Beischer's class are laughing uproariously at the kitten. You look around in a kind of sick stupefaction.

Milly Heckler, Agnes Lee Terrance, and a few other girls appear to be as appalled as you, but the scene doesn't last long -- it's probably shorter than your slow-motion memory of it -- and it seems for a moment that you *are* that kitten, that everything in the world has been wrenchingly upended.

#

"I know it *seemed* to you that evil people were trying to invade and control your thoughts," Dr. Hall, the director of Quiet Harbor, tell you. He pets a neutered male just back from a visit to the Gerontological Wing. "But that was just a symptom of the scrambled condition of your brain chemistry. The truth is. . . ."

#

Fatigued, you slouch out the rear gate of Rockdale Biological. Your apartment -- the three-roomer that Healy provided -- is only a short distance away. A late-model Lincoln Town Car pulls alongside you as you walk the weed-grown sidewalk. The tinted window on the front-seat passenger's side powers down, and you catch your first glimpse of the raw-complexioned man who introduces himself as David Penfield. An alias? Why do you think so?

"If you like," he says, "think of me as the Zoo Cop."

It's a permission you don't really want. Why would you choose to think of a well-dressed, ordinary-featured man with visible acne scarring as something as *déclassé* as, Jesus, the Zoo Cop. Is he a detective of some sort? What does he want?

The next thing you know you're in the car with Penfield and two other tight-lipped men.

The next thing you know you're on the expressway and one of the Zoo Cop's associates -- goons? -- has locked the suction-cup feet of one of those corny Garfield toys on his tinted window as a kind of -- what? -- mockery? rebuke? warning?

The next thing you know you're in a basement that clearly isn't the soup kitchen of Trinity United Methodist. The next thing you know you're flat on your back on a table. The next thing you know you don't know anything. . . .

#

. . . Marti's body is stenciled with primitive blue flowers, a blossom on her neck, more on her breasts, an indigo bouquet on the milky plane of her abdomen. You gaze at her in groggy wonderment. The woman you one day marry has become, overnight, an arabesque of disturbing floral bruises.

"Marti," you whisper. "Marti, don't leave me. Marti, don't take my son away."

#

Penfield, a.k.a. the Zoo Cop (you realize during your descent into the puzzle box), isn't a real cop. He hates you because what you've been doing for Healy is vile, contemptible, *evil*. So it is, so it is. He wants to get Healy, who hasn't been around this last week at all, who's maybe skipped off to Barbados or the Yucatan or Saint-Tropez.

Penfield is an animal-rights eco-terrorist, well-financed and determined, and the ESB zappings to which he and his associates are subjecting you are designed to incriminate, pinpoint, and doom old Dirk and *his* associates, who obviously deserve it. You too. You deserve it too. No argument there. None.

#

Christ, Penfield says, unhook the son of a bitch and carry him upstairs. Dump him somewhere remote, somewhere rural.

#

You visit the pound for a replacement for Springer and Ossie, gassed three or

four years ago. The attendant tells you there are plenty of potential adoptees at the shelter. You go down the rows of cages to select one. The kittens in the fouled sawdust tumble, paw, and miaow, putting on a dispirited show.

"This one," you finally say.

"Cute." The attendant approves. Well, they'd fire her if she didn't. The idea is to adopt these creatures out, not to let them lapse into expendability.

"It's for Jake, my son," you tell her. "His asthma isn't that bad. I think he may be growing out of it."

#

"Look at my puzzle," Howie says, yanking the razor blade away from you. "You've bled all over it. . . ."

-- Michael Bishop