

A CAT HORROR STORY

By Gardner Dozois

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DARKNESS. THE SMELL OF grass, and wet earth, and fog. The night moved through the clearing like a river. A few distant pinpricks of stars overhead, faint and far and pale. Somewhere down the hill, the grass rustled as a mouse fled through it, but the People were not hunting tonight.

Eyes gleamed in the night. Occasionally, a tail would thump the ground, once, twice, and then fall still. Very occasionally — an act of bravado — one of the People would slowly, ostentatiously, lick a paw. Then stop.

You could smell the excitement in the wet air, the uneasiness, the fear.

The wind brought the distant sound of a dog barking, and the ears of the People pricked forward instinctively, but, on this night of all nights, there was certainly no time for dogs.

Somewhere down below, in one of the human lairs at the foot of the hill, you could hear a human[1] calling for one of the People in that shrill mixture of human talk, strange wet noises, and oddly garbled and nonsensically out-of-context phrases of the True Tongue that humans used to try summon the People who were lair-mates with them, but none of the People were interested in Food tonight, even the fattest or the hungriest of them, not even when the human made an enticing rattling noise with a Food. Opening-Stick against a Cold Round Thing of Food. After a while, the human ceased his plaintive calls, and there was silence again, except for the human sounds riding the night air: doors slamming, voices, the annoying clamoring and shrieking of the Noisy Dead Things with which the humans insisted on cluttering the lairs, the growling of the Fast Dead Things which the humans kept as slaves and actually encouraged to swallow them! (although they made the Things spit them up again later) . . . but the People were used to those sounds, and ignored them.

At last, when the sharp smells of excitement could get no stronger, when their eyes could grow no wider or wilder, and when their tails were beginning to lash with impatience with a noise like a strong wind slashing through the branches of trees, the full moon rose, immense and pale and round, its pockmarked face pitiless and remote and cold, and that creel orb was reflected full and bright in all the watching eyes of all the People who waited below.

One of the People stretched and yawned, showing all his teeth. His name was Caesar[2], and he was known as a good hunter, and a fierce defender of his territory. In fact, he had a bloody feud of long duration and rich tradition going with Jefferson, whose territory adjoined his own, but Jefferson sat quietly beside him now, and did no more than turn a slightly disdainful glance at Caesar's display of teeth. This was

no time for fighting, or mating, or for territoriality. The Hunter Light, the Death Light, The Night Face, That-Which-Lights-the-Way-to-Kill, was in the sky, and that had always meant the same thing, for uncounted generations back to the beginning of all.

It was time to tell stories, under the cold, watchful gaze of The Night Face.

“This I have seen,” Caeser began. “I was hunting with the tom named Bigfoot, and we came to the place where all the grass stops, and for almost as far as you can see, until the trees start again far away, the ground is fiat and hard and smells of Dead Things. I warned Bigfoot that this was Ghostland, the territory of demons^[3] and monsters, but his hunting blood was up, and the hunting is good under the trees at night, and he would not listen. And so we went out across the hard, bad-smelling stuff. Out into Ghostland.”

Caeser looked away for a moment, out toward the far horizon, then turned his eyes back to the People. “We walked out across Ghostland. The Dead Stuff was cold and hard under our paws, and we could hear our claws skritch on it. The wind carried the voices of ghosts as it whined past us. Suddenly, there was a bright light, far away, but coming closer. Closer! I froze with fear, but, in his eagerness, Bigfoot went on. There was a growling noise, louder and louder, like all the dogs that ever were born, growling at once. And then there was a light, blinding me. The light! So bright, so close, as if The Night Face had fallen from the sky down on top of me! Then a Fast Dead Thing went by with a roar that shook the world and a blast of wind that nearly knocked me over, and with a smell of burning. I heard Bigfoot scream.”

Caeser paused, and the rest of the People crept a step or two closer to hear him. “When the Fast Dead Thing was gone,” he continued, “I went back, step by slow step, to see what had happened to Bigfoot.” Caeser paused again, significantly. “He was dead. The Fast Dead Thing had crashed him. His guts were everywhere, torn from his body, and his blood was all around. The middle of his body was flat, as though it had no bones in it anymore. He was mashed into the dead black ground of Ghostland, in a puddle of his own guts and blood. On his face was a look of fear and horror such as I hope never to see again.”

The People shivered. After a moment, Caeser said, “Then I heard it coming back. The Fast Dead Thing. I saw its light. It was coming back from the way it had gone. Coming back for me. I’m not ashamed to tell you all that I ran like a kitten! And ever since then, when I go near Ghostland, I can hear the Fast Dead Thing hunting for me, roaring back and forth, hunting through the night to find me.”

There was an awed silence, and then a young queen named Katy said, “I hear they can get you anywhere, the Fast Dead Things.” She looked around her nervously: “Even inside the lair: There are some of them who can follow you right in, and get you even when you’re inside. My mother told me that she used to get chased by a little one that roared and whooshed and tried to pull her tail.”

“That was just a Small Roaring Thing” a tom named Poorer said. “The humans play with them. They’re not really dangerous — though, of course, it’s better to stay away from them, just to be safe. But the Fast Dead Things, now — they can kill you even when they’re asleep!”

“Nothing can kill you while it’s asleep,” Jefferson said.

Pooter bristled, then licked his foot in a slow and insulting way that might have been provocation for a fight on another evening. “Yes? Well, I have seen this. There was one of the People, her name was Lady Jane, and she went near one of the Fast Dead Things at night, while it was sleeping. And she crawled inside the top of the Thing, because the night was cold, and it was warm deep up inside the Thing. And in the morning as I was watching a human came and made the Fast Dead Thing swallow it, and then the Thing woke up.” He shuddered. “It growled, and then it roared, and then Lady Jane screamed, and I smelled the hot smell of her blood. The human got out, and made the Thing open up its smaller mouth in the front, and then he lifted Lady Jane out. And she was dead. Dead, and cut into pieces! Her head was cut nearly all the way off, hanging by some fur!”

“Dead!” some of the People moaned. “Dead!”

A scarred old fetal tom named Blackie, who had one ear tom nearly to rags, said, “You don’t need Dead Things to kill you, young ones!” He lashed his tail and made the clicking and smacking noise that signified deep contempt among the People. “Humans will do the job readily enough! Yes, your precious humans, the things you all live with, willingly! When I was a kitten, some humans put me in a sack[4], and threw me in the river. Ai, the horror of it!” He shivered and shook himself convulsively. “It was dark and hot and smothering, and I couldn’t breathe, and then I was falling, twisting and tumbling and falling, and there was no air to breathe! My claws were sharp in those days, People, lucky for me, and I ripped my way out. But then I was in the water! In the water! I was under the water, with it all around me — over my head! I had to swim, swim for my life, and I nearly died before my head broke the surface and I could take a breath, and then I had to swim for a long time before my feet found the ground again, and all the while the water was pulling at me, sucking at me, trying to pull me down to death!”

A low growl went around the circle of the People. Their eyes gleamed.

“My human goes in the water every day,” a young queen named Spooky said. “On purpose. She lets it go all over her! She doesn’t try to escape at all! Sometimes she sits under the water, with only her head outside it!”

The People moaned in horror. “At, they are strange creatures,” Jefferson muttered. “Strange!”

“But those were Rogues, those humans who tried to kill you,” a young tom named Bangers said, somewhat uneasily, as though seeking reassurance. “We’ve all been chased and kicked by Rogues now and again, or had stones or Hard Clattering Things thrown at us. That doesn’t mean that our humans would hurt us. My humans wouldn’t hurt me. They like me! They feed me and pat[5] me whenever I want them to!”

“I had humans once, too, later on,” Blackie said bitterly. “They fed me and they patted me — and then they cut my balls off!”

Bangers hissed involuntarily, and many of the People blew their trails out to several times their normal size.

“It could happen to you, too, young one!” Blackie said. “Don’t you think it couldn’t! You think you’re safe with your humans because they feed you and give you a warm place to sleep, but you never know when they’re going to turn on you and torture[6] you. You’ll never know why they do it, either, but sooner or later, they will. They all will. None of them are any different!”

“They wait until you’re sick,” a burly tom named Hobbes said. “They wait until you’re feeling really bad, and then they take you to the Pain Place, to the Torture Place, and they hurt you more —”

Another tom shuddered. “It’s true! The humans there stick things up your ass! And they stab you, with things that hurt! And they drain your blood out of you!”

“They cut you!” a queen named Jasmine said, her voice thrilling with horror. “They cut you open! My humans took me there, to the Pain Place, with all its bad smells and its sick smells and the sounds of the People screaming in agony while dogs sit around and watch them, and they left me there, locked in a Box-You-Can’t-Get-Out-Of, and I went to sleep, and when I woke up, my belly had been slashed open! I could feel the cut, deeper than a cut from any fight. It hurt for a long time, even when my humans came and got me and took me back to the lair again. It hurt for a long time!”

They were crouched close together now, almost touching their heads in a circle.

“They kill People there, too,” Blackie said. “The humans kill them. And not just the humans who live in-the Pain Place. Your precious humans. The very same ones who live with you and give you Food. They kill you, themselves!”

There were a few wails of protest, and the People pressed closer together, shuddering.

“I have seen it,” Blackie continued inexorably. “When they cut my balls off, in the Pain Place, before they took me back to the lair and I ran away, they brought my lair-mate in, an old queen named Stuff who had lived with the humans before I joined them. Our humans brought her in, and they held her down while she fought to get away, both of them held her down, and then another human stabbed her with a Pain Stick, and she struggled for a while, and then she died! I could smell that she was dead! They’d killed her! Our humans! They held her down and killed her — and they patted her while they were doing it!”

Someone moaned with dread, and then fell silent.

“And that’s what will happen to all of you! Every one of you! If a dog or a Fast Dead Thing or some other kind of monster or demon doesn’t get you, then, at the end, your own humans will kill you!”

This was almost too much. They pressed close together for comfort, too scared even to wail or moan now.

There was a crazed light in Blackie’s eyes. “I saw Stuff’s ghost last night. I often see it, after dark. Her fur is like ice, like frost on a winter morning and her dead eyes give back no light . . .”

The moon was high and full above them now, and it seemed to tug on their souls, as if it would suck them out through the tops of their heads and up into the mysterious depths of the night sky, where they would fall forever through the dark.

“Yes!” a tom shrieked. “Yes! I have seen it! Its feet leave no mark on the grass when it walks, and its eyes are like deep pools of black water! And one night, when everyone slept except me, I could hear it outside, scratching on the door, trying to get in —”

A huge Dead Thing went by overhead, roaring, a blazing light flying through the night sky like a terrible gazing eye, seeming to pass almost close enough to touch, and the People crouched low on the hillside until the monster had rumbled away into distance and was gone.

In the sudden shocked silence, Caesar said, almost with satisfaction, “The Ghostway is around us, always.” And the People shivered deliciously, and moved closer in the night, and told their stories until the moon went down, as they have for a million generations, and as they will for a million more, until the Earth goes cold, and even the People are forgotten.

1. In the True Tongue, the word we render here as “human” is more closely expressed as “Bad-Smelling. Foodgiver-and-Lair-Mate-Who-Speaks-Loudly-and-Moves-Slowly,” although that also is a loose translation, and subject to variation in local dialects.

1. This was the name his humans had given him, of course. The True Names of the People are impossible to reproduce here, as the verbal element is only a small part of each name, and perhaps the most insignificant part, the really vital information being conveyed by body posture, the speed and stiffness of movement, the position of the ears and tail, the pattern of ruffling or twitching of the fur, and, most importantly, the hot rich smell of the anus, and the lingering, eloquent tang of urine.

1. The human word “demons,” of course, has associations with Christian theology that the actual phrase in the True Tongue does not share, but it will serve to give an impression of something both malefic and enigmatic, an incomprehensible force that kills you with terrifying casualness, for unknowable reasons — if for any reason at all; this is more vivid in the speech of the People.

1. “False Skin “is about the closest you can come to this in the True Tongue, which doesn’t allow for much precision in distinguishing between one sort of thing made of cloth or fabric and another; some dialects will allow reference to blankets as “False-Skins-That-You-Sleep-On. “All this is as nothing compared to conveying some sense of what the human word “river” actually translates to in the True Tongue — the literal “Moving Big Water” does little to convey the sense of horror and supernatural dread with which the People regard such bodies of water, as though they were an unholy and dreadful anomaly in the natural order of the world.

1. Actually, “groom me,” in the True Tongue. The People consider humans to be bizarrely handicapped creatures since they must groom with their hands rather than with their tongues. They are widely pitied for this, although there is derisive speculation as to why this is so — in fact, in one dialect, the generic term for “human “ translates to “Those-Who-Must-Groom-With-Their-Paws-Because-Their-Breath-Smells-So-Bad.”

1. In the True Tongue, the word for “torture” also implies a sort of willful, capricious, malevolent playfulness, and a highly refined aesthetic appreciation of the pain you are inflicting; if you’re ever seen one of the People with a bird or a mouse that they’ve caught, you get the idea.

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We’re pleased to have some short fiction from Gardner Dozois. His short stories are too few and far between. Although he has won two Nebulas for his fiction, he is perhaps better known for his award-winning editing skills. Every month he edits an

issue of Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, and each year he compiles The Year's Best Science Fiction for St. Martin's Press. His most recent work of book-length fiction is a short story collection, *Geodesic Dreams: The Best Short Fiction of Gardner Dozois*, published by Ace

In "A Cat Horror Story," Gardner takes on a difficult alien viewpoint—one that exists close to home.