

Dying

by Michael Marshall Smith

Hell, it could be human.” “On the street?” Miranda countered, tilting her head at him as he shrugged her coat on. “Where were you brought up?” She was excited, and not bothering to hide it.

“Stranger things have happened. I think it’s a fake. I mean, for a start, what’s with the black-and-white shit?”

Miranda laughed, and he swiped at her. “No pun intended. But why isn’t it on video?” By now he too was bundling his jacket on, and enthusiasm was clearly getting the better of him as he reached for reference books to bring along.

“I don’t know. That’s what we’ve got,” I said. “And that’s what we’re going after. Come on, let’s move.”

Ten minutes after receiving the transfax we were out of the door. A government car was waiting outside. Chen and I jumped into the back and as soon as Miranda was in place we shot off toward the MegaPort.

The car was broadcasting a siren on car-communication wave, and the other road-users were automatically shunted out of the way. It would only take about 15 minutes, but even that seemed too long. That would make it nearly half an hour after the fax, an hour since the find, before we even left the country. Miranda chatted breezily with the droid driver, not really listening to his answers. Chen faxed a copy of the photo through to Central and got half a division of forensic imagers working on it. I stared out of the window at the passing gray, drumming my hands on my knees. Maybe this time, I thought as always, maybe this time.

I can’t really blame Chen for going on the way he does. I’m just as bad. Pessimism is a defense mechanism, a protection against the near certainty that after a brief flurry of joy we’ll be coming home empty-handed again. As the years go by, and even the hoaxes get fewer and farther between, even I find it difficult to keep the flame burning. Miranda’s good for us in that way. She’s younger, newer on the job. She still believes, and that keeps us going through the long periods we spend watching the transfax tray, hands near the phones, waiting for no one to call. She doesn’t know that a few years ago we’d get a call every other month, not once or twice a year. She doesn’t realize that it’s not that time is running out; chances are it’s already gone. Even the hoaxers are losing interest. I know that, in my mind, but I must still have a little faith tucked away somewhere. As must Chen, though in his case I’m not sure it’s faith.

Miranda wrenched round in her seat to face me.

“If you don’t stop that tapping I will have to kill you. I’ll regret it for a while, but I will have no choice.” I pulled her hair briefly, took the phone from Chen and

called our destination. They were already on standby and waiting for us, though we wouldn't be there until four at the earliest. As I knew they would be. I was only calling for something to do. The guy I talked to looked tense and expectant, and there were a couple of soldiers milling around restlessly behind him. I wondered how they were going to kill the time until we got there.

Finally the car pulled to a halt outside the international terminal. As a waiting official led us toward the entrance, Chen murmured to me.

“Didn't hear back from forensic yet.”

“Must be a good fake,” I said.

“Yeah.” We looked at each other for a moment, smiled tightly, and hurried across the concourse.

They'd held the MegaMall for us, and it rose as soon as we were inside. We stood by the window, watching the city fall away below us, and that kept us occupied for a while. The Mall took about five minutes to get up to 30,000 feet, then paused before starting its steady progress forward. As soon as we were over the ocean we turned away from the view.

“Christ,” said Miranda. “Now what do we do.”

“We shop. We stroll. We mingle with passing holiday-makers and exchange pleasantries.”

“The fuck we do,” Chen said tersely. “We drink coffee and smoke a lot. This way.”

The middle level of the Mall was crowded, and it took us a while to thread our way to an escalator to the higher galleries. A man juggling oranges passed us on the way up. They appeared to be on fire. Chen stared at him with some enmity.

“Street theater, compliments of the airline,” I said. “Very popular this year.”

“Not with me it isn't.”

“How long is this going to take?” Miranda asked. She was craning her neck and looking down across the Mall. About a thousand people flocked and wandered around the lower tiers.

“Two hours.”

“Shit.” She glanced at me, looking drawn. I shrugged. This was only her second call-out, and already she was beginning to understand. However quickly we moved, it wasn't quickly enough.

We found a coffee bar with a balcony and sat looking out over the main concourse. We sat in silence for the most part, though Miranda and I talked a little

about how the arrangements would go once we got there. I didn't have to talk to Chen about that kind of thing. He knew. He sat a little apart, staring straight ahead, and waited out the flight. I knew what he'd be thinking.

Five years ago when fairly drunk, Chen and I had sat down with some old maps and tried to work out where a real sighting might be most likely to come from. We'd taken into account the way the Cities had developed, climatic conditions, previous populations, everything that might be relevant, and a few things which definitely weren't. In the end we'd honed in on what used to be called the Congo, now just another region of AfriCity. Since then there'd been nothing from the region, and we'd sort of forgotten about it. Now, of course, that's exactly where we were going. In a way I wished Miranda would go away for awhile, do some shopping or something. But only briefly, and only because of that drunken night. I was glad Miranda was there. She deserved to be as much as we did.

About half an hour in, a uniformed flunky approached the table, holding a phone. It was for Chen. He listened and nodded, shifting himself around in the wicker chair. Then he replaced the handset and tipped the phoneboy. Neither Miranda nor I spoke. Neither of us wanted to hurry the news that we might as well turn straight round at the other end.

"Well," said Chen, eventually, lighting yet another cigarette. "The photo's genuine."

"But?" I said, as professionally as I could.

"But as for the object, they can't tell."

I nodded. Miranda turned to me.

"What is it with you guys? Why do you have to keep doing this? You heard the man: It's genuine."

"It could be a genuine model. A genuine fake."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it's happened before. Five times."

"Six," Chen said, waving for more coffee.

"But," I said, "we've had over sixty faxes that were complete fakes. Mocked up in a lab, no object there at all. So it's rare anyway."

"And there's a chance it could be real?"

Her eyes were too wide, her mouth too ready to smile, for me to say anything crushingly realistic. Chen wasn't looking at me, but he was waiting, too.

"Yes," I said. "It could be an animal's."

I don't know why it falls to me to say the word. I try not to. We all do, especially Chen. Most of the time we just talk about "them" or seeing "one." We have books lined round the office, floor to ceiling, with pictures of every one imaginable, every one that existed. Chen knows the names, habits, and particulars of about five thousand. I've tested him, and he does. Sometimes we talk about them, try to describe them to each other, speculate about which one we'd most like to see. But most of the time it's "them." Another protection mechanism, another way of not hoping too much.

Chen and I are funded by the World Government. We're secure; it's a high priority. Miranda is a student on secondment from PsychStat. She's been on secondment for rather a long time now, and we pretend she isn't in when they call to politely inquire when she's coming back. She's caught the bug from us, and it's a rare bug, so we let her stay. Not a lot of people know about us, but it's no secret. Our job is to watch, and to wait. Our job is to sit in our office, listening for the phone, watching the transfax tray, in case someone, somewhere, sees an animal. And if someone says they have, we do what we're doing now: get the hell out there as quick as we can. And then, of course, we troop home again, because they're all hoaxes. Everybody knows there are no animals anymore. A chimpanzee called Howard was the last one, and he died seventy years ago.

What can I say? We fucked up. We thought we could go on building the Cities, planting and growing concrete and steel until it covered every square inch of every continent, without it ruining the world. We thought, or seemed to, that the animals would get by, find a way of coping. We let people kill them for skins, or ornaments, or food. We let tourists carve initials on their homes. We talked about economic necessity, about quality of life for humans. If push came to shove, we thought the zoos would be enough.

But they weren't. Turns out the animals." didn't like the zoos so much after all. They put up with them for a while and then, as if on cue, they all gave up and rather pointedly died. Then we looked around the cities we'd wrought and realized that they were empty. Between the teeming people, down the sides of the endless streets, above the continual gleam, there was nothing left but space. Suddenly we realized we were alone, and beneath the ever-present clatter of humankind, the world seemed very quiet.

To some of us, anyway. I guess most people around today don't care that much. After all, they've never known any different. I haven't. There's not been a single confirmed sighting of an animal in my lifetime.

The thing with me was my grandmother. She was a rather strange old lady, or as my mother would have it, "bonkers." But she also had a lot of time for me, and I for her, and she told me things about her life that I don't think anyone else ever knew.

The story I could hear time and again was about how she saw a cat once,

when she was a little girl. She was walking home from school, through the S734 sector of AmerCity, when she saw a small shape slink round the corner in front of her. She stopped dead in her tracks, and stared at it. Something, about a foot high and covered in short gray fur, sat and looked back at her from about ten feet away. It had green eyes, long hairs growing out of its cheeks and a thin tail which it curled neatly around its feet. It was not, my grandmother realized, human.

Very quietly, she squatted down so as to see the animal on its own level. It carried on looking at her gravely, sniffing slightly. My grandmother looked and looked, noticed the way the pupils in the eyes ran up and down, saw the sturdy little paws planted firmly together; and then the creature moved. Holding her breath, and a little frightened, my grandmother watched as the animal sloped carefully toward her, following an invisible curved path as though it was walking along a street she couldn't see. It paused after a few feet and cocked one of its ears, as if listening. Then it walked right up to her.

Not really knowing what to do, my gran carefully raised one of her hands until it was in front of the animal's face. Equally carefully, the animal pointed its nose forward and sniffed her hand. It pushed forward with the whole of its head, rubbing its face against her knuckles, bending its head round and making a soft and throaty humming noise. It looked up at her and made an odd sound, like a door falling open in an abandoned house, and then it rubbed its head against her hand again like a kiss.

There was a noise behind her and my grandmother turned to see a man walking across the intersection about twenty yards back. Her mouth was half open to say something, to call him over, and then she clamped it shut. When she turned round the animal was gone, and she never saw it again.

She ran home then, and burst into the kitchen shouting. At first her folks thought she was telling tales, but the more she told them the more they had to admit it sounded like a cat. They sent out a search party and looked for five hours, but they didn't find it.

My grandmother spent the rest of her life wishing the man hadn't chosen that moment to cross the street and make a noise, and that she'd known that what cats liked was to be tickled behind the ears and rubbed under the chin. She may have been the last person who ever saw it, and she wished with all her heart she could have said goodbye from us in-the proper way.

And she told me about it, and I listened, and here I am today. Because although everyone knows there can't be any animals left now, there are those of us who still look. We have the faith. I do, anyway. Chen has something else.

Chen may have seen an animal. He thinks he did. Thirty-five years ago, when wandering around a disused sector in AfriCity, he saw a shadow move high up in a tower where the floors had caved in. A shape swung across a gap. His glimpse of it lasted less than four seconds. He was doing a lot of drugs at the time, but he says it

wasn't like that. He knows how unlikely it is, but he thinks it might have been a primate. Something stirred the air, something that wasn't him moved with a mind of its own. It was something different, something that wasn't us, wasn't part of the noisy machine that chugs away in our tiny claustrophobic world. He stopped doing drugs then, because he realized what he was trying to escape from, and what he was looking for. He's been searching ever since, at first on his own, and then officially. As I said, it's not faith with him. it's need. It has been his life, and it's the nearest he's got to something that makes him happy.

Governments give us money and all the backup we could ever need. We have Intercontinent Passes that mean customs and immigration can just fuck right off as far as we're concerned, and I could mobilize an entire army if I had a good enough lead. Nothing I asked for would be too much, now that it's too late.

"So," I said. "Chen. Best guess?"

"Difficult to say," he said, enjoying every word. This was making it official, and was a kind of ritual we've developed over the few times it's got this far. "To a degree it depends on the size. There's nothing to give us any scale."

"But a mammal."

"Definitely, Could be a dog, cat. Could be a primate. Shit, it could be loads of things. Why the fuck couldn't they have sent us a video?"

It was frustrating, that. The color of the feces might have told us something, though if there was an animal still alive somewhere in AfriCity, its diet would hardly have been that recorded in the old books. We'd always received videos in the past, though it must be said that three of them turned out to be footage of fakes and the other two alleged specimens were never found.

The faking thing is weird. So few people on the planet think about animals anymore. There's not a lot of point. But some of them must go out of their way to pretend they're still around. I used to wonder why they would do that, why people who had never seen one should try to keep the memory of animals alive through faking their tracks and feces. Then I considered what I do for a living. Maybe it isn't so different.

Miranda was drumming her fingers hard on the table. I raised an eyebrow at her.

"Christ," she said. "Why does this have to take so long?"

None of the other passengers seemed in much of a hurry to leave the Mall when we landed at AfriCity. I'm not surprised. What they'd disembark into would look exactly the same as where they'd been for the last two hours, and the same as where they'd come from. It was like walking down a long street that was the same at both ends. I don't know why they bother.

Either way, we had no problem surging out of the MegaMall first. I started to get my pass out but it wasn't necessary; a delegation was already waiting for us at the gate. We shook hands hurriedly and then with one mind started to trot toward the exit of the terminal.

Introductions were made in the car, which was open-topped and looked like an old-fashioned Jeep. The man in charge was a Lieutenant Ng, from the local security forces. He seemed fired up and capable, but also deferential and eager to do the right thing. They usually do, which is strange, really. None of us has seen an animal, with the possible exception of Chen. Our only advantage is book learning, and the fact that we spend our lives preparing for this kind of thing, guardians of the flame who spend their whole time looking for a match. Maybe that's it. In a way we have a quest, an old-fashioned mission of a hopelessly romantic kind. Things like that sit oddly with brushed concrete and neon, seem to stand out in an eerie light like buildings in front of a storm. Perhaps that commands respect, or something.

The lieutenant got out a map and showed us where we were going. The sighting of the object had allegedly been made in AfriCity 295, a disused sector about an hour's drive away. As soon as the report had come in a corps of local soldiers had cordoned the area off. Nothing could have come out, and even more importantly, no one could go in. Someone who got to an animal before we did could have set their own price. They could almost literally ask for the world.

When we were buckled in, the driver put his foot down hard and we pelted off down the street. People in the street looked up vaguely to watch the car speed by, then hurried off toward the stores. There's always something new to buy, always something new. Ng watched them with an odd expression on his face, and I realized that despite being in the army, he was one of us, one of the people who'd like to see something old, every now and then. After a moment he looked across at me and pointed downward at the road.

"This is where the river used to be," he said.

I wondered how he could tell.

The sectors started to go to seed after about 40 minutes. There's no reason for it, as far as I can tell, but it happens everywhere, and it seems it always will until we need every single square inch all the time. One day a sector will be buzzing and full of life, then suddenly it will be a place where no one lives deliberately. Within a few years it will be empty, but there are too many people for anywhere to remain like that for long. So in a couple of years it will be redeveloped, made new again, and people will start to move in. The population shifts around the planet, year by year, almost as if we have to move a little, every now and then, as if migration is a need that never quite went away.

It was getting dark by then, and I was glad to have an escort. Caring about a legend is the preserve of the comfortably off, the socially integrated. The kind of

people who live in the interzones aren't going to give a shit. A long time ago Chen and I received a call and came to an area like this near what used to be New York in AmerCity. We nearly didn't make it out again. The call was a fake, planted to draw people in. We lost all our gear, Chen spent two weeks in a hospital and since then we don't go in without ground support.

Then, fairly abruptly, the sector was empty. Even the rubbish drifting down the street looked old and forgotten, though it could only have been a few years since people moved out. Ng conferred on a communicator and got specific street instructions, and then we turned a corner to find that we were there.

I could tell something was wrong before the car stopped moving. About ten soldiers stood in formation in the middle of the deserted and crumbling crossroads. Ng said something irritable under his breath, and suggested we stay in the car for a moment. He climbed stiffly out and walked up to one of the soldiers. Like Ng, the soldier was wearing a beret, presumably meaning they were of the same rank. Chen looked across at me and raised his eyebrows. I shrugged and lit a cigarette.

A few moments later Ng returned. Though immaculate with military professionalism, he was clearly fuming.

"The corps will be accompanying you into the sector," he said.

"Hold on," Chen started immediately. "That's simply not possible."

"They can't," Miranda said. "They'll scare off anything within a mile radius."

Ng looked at me.

"The corps," he said again, "will be accompanying you. The sector is dangerous, and you must have protection." He clearly didn't believe this, and I didn't either.

"Political?" I asked. He inclined his head slightly.

"No way," said Chen. "Fuck the politics. No fucking way. Jesus, if you think we can take the risk of blowing . . ."

"Lieutenant Hye will oversee the operation. He assures me that his men are trained for quietness."

"I don't care how damn quiet they are, that's not the point," Miranda shouted. I held out a hand.

"It's been hours already. We're here. There's no point wasting time when we can't change the situation. Let's go."

I hate having to be right the whole time, but someone has to do it. Hye's men were indeed quiet. As Chen, Miranda, and I walked down the center of the road three abreast, I had to keep checking behind every now and then to see if they were

still there. They were, fanned out across the road. And they were carrying guns.

“What is this shit?” Chen asked, quietly.

“What Ng said, I guess. Some pointless political game.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I.”

When we’d been walking for about five minutes, Ng appeared soundlessly behind us.

“We are now in subsector 4. The sighting of the material allegedly took place within this area.”

“We don’t know where?”

“No. The photo was left without any further statement.”

“Okay. See if you can get them to drop back a little further.”

They did, but not much. Following standard procedure, Chen and I headed toward the sides of the road, looking carefully at the ground. Miranda walked down the center, keeping half an eye on the road but mainly casting glances up at the walls of the buildings on either side. Many were empty shells, and a few looked as if they’d been burnt out. This sector’s demise had obviously been more violent than most.

After about two hundred yards of proceeding in this fashion, I began to see a glow in the twilight up ahead, which meant habitation. I stopped.

“We’ve passed the core of the disused area.” The theory Chen and I worked on was that if any animal was still alive it would tend to seek out places as far away from humankind as possible, for its base, at least. Though it might veer toward inhabited areas in the search for food, we reasoned that it would want to sleep somewhere safe.

“Do we turn round?” Miranda asked. She was looking balefully at the soldiers, who had also stopped and were standing in a line ten yards away.

“Yes,” Chen said curtly, rubbing his chin. “Then we fan out down each of the side streets we’ve passed. Then we go into each building and look on each floor.” Miranda looked up at the fading light.

“Maybe we should ask the soldiers to . . .” Suddenly Miranda stopped, an expression of what looked like terror on her face. She pointed wordlessly behind me. “Oh my God.”

I whirled round and stared at the shadows at the base of the building about

five yards away.

“What,” I said. “What?”

The wall disappeared in a stroboscopic blaze of rifle fire. Line after line of pink arcfire sliced into it until the whole of the front of the building crashed down. I stumbled backward, falling into Miranda, and the two of us crouched down until the noise had stopped.

When I looked up, Chen was marching furiously up to Hye.

“What the FUCK,” I heard him scream. “What the flying blue fuck do you think you’re doing?” I leapt up and ran toward him. Hye stared impassively at Chen, and then shoved him hard in the chest. Chen wavered, but didn’t fall, and launched himself at the soldier.

Luckily Ng got there in time and yanked Chen away. I grabbed Chen’s arms and tugged him backward. He was kicking and shouting and I almost couldn’t hold him. Ng square up to Hye.

“Explain,” he barked.

“Fuck you.”

“Explain,” Ng repeated, face twitching, “Or this goes very high indeed.” Hye looked at him with contempt.

“I have orders” he said, “From higher than you know. I have orders to protect the population.”

“Whose orders?” I shouted, preparing to pull rank. I have papers for this sort of eventuality, though this was the first time it had arisen. Hye ignored me.

“If any animal exists,” he said to Ng, “it will be diseased. The population no longer has immune responses to many of these diseases.”

“Bullshit,” Miranda said. She sounded a lot tougher than I had. “There were virtually no animal diseases that could . . .”

“The population will be protected.”

Ng’s face was about a foot away from the other officer’s, and he was staring at him with hatred.

“Who gave you these orders?”

“Need-to-know basis.”

“I don’t believe you, Hye. I don’t believe in these orders. I believe you want to hunt.”

“He’s right,” Chen said suddenly, too calmly. “Ng’s right. This fucker wants to be the last hunter. He wants the last trophy.”

“It’s off,” I said. “We’re going home.” Miranda stared at me.

“We can’t. I saw something.”

“Maybe.” Then there was a small explosion and we all started shouting at each other. If there was anything here it’ll be on the moon by now, hiding under a rock. It’s off. I’m not finding something for this fucker to shoot it.”

“You will find it,” Hye said, turning to look at me for the first time.

“No.”

“Yes,” he said, and moved one hand slightly. Silently, ten guns were raised.

We walked in silence down the first side road. Ng walked a few yards behind. His shoulders were set, and he walked by himself. Behind walked the soldiers. Some of them spoke softly to each other every now and then, and there was the occasional laugh, but mostly they were as silent as before. I hated them, completely, utterly, and quietly.

“What did you actually see?” Chen asked eventually. Miranda sighed.

“It could have been shadow. It looked as if something moved. About three feet high. That’s all I saw, and I barely saw that.”

“Dog?” I asked.

“No.”

Chen looked up at her. I hoped for his sake that she wasn’t mistaken.

There was nothing to be seen in the side road. We turned round at the end and walked back up it, and then crossed to the other side and did the same. Then we moved down the central strip and did the next road. There was still enough light to see, but I reckoned we only had about another hour.

Halfway down the next road I turned to find Ng on my shoulder again.

“The light will be going soon,” he said.

“I know. It’s over, I’m afraid. There’s no way we can traipse through all the buildings in time. Even if we could, even if there is an animal, it’s not going to show with ten men with guns padding behind us I don’t care how quiet they are. Animals could hear things we can’t even imagine.”

“And they could sense things.” Chen added, not looking up.

Ng looked at him.

“You know that?”

“I believe it.” Ng nodded, and then dropped back.

Another five minutes took us up and down the next side street. I felt stupid, and impotent. There could be something here, and all we could do was walk around, waiting for it to lollop in front of us, when that’s the last thing it would do. If it existed. which it almost certainly didn’t. For a moment I felt complete despair, and knew in my heart of hearts that there were no animals anymore There couldn’t be. They simply wouldn’t fit in this world.

We turned into the last side street and I heard Miranda sigh. I reached out and took her hand, and she looked at me. There was something wrong tonight, and we all knew it. It felt like it would be the last time we did this. Something about the soldiers behind us. about Hye, about the whole fucking world, said that the gaps were closing and the old dreams had been squeezed out. We walked to the end of the road, watching the sidewalks carefully and scanning the buildings, and then we turned. The soldiers, guns still at the ready, echoed our progress, walking to the end of the road and then turning to follow us.

About twenty yards up the road Ng scared the life out of me by suddenly speaking from directly behind me again.

“Run very fast into a building on the side. Good luck.” I turned to look at him. He smiled and nodded us forward.

Suddenly there was a shout behind us. I tugged Miranda’s hand and gave Chen a shove and we sprinted for the nearest building. A shot fizzed off the lintel of the vacant doorway we stumbled through but we kept on running, weaving through the debris and out the other side.

“What the hell . . .”

“He’s still alive,” Chen panted. “Three have gone after him. Run. RUN.”

We ran. On impulse I steered us across the main strip and then into a long burnt-out building. The shouts behind weren’t getting any farther away, but they were spreading out. They didn’t know where we’d gone. We all winced at each hissing shot, but so long as they were still firing, we were still alive. And so, hopefully, was Lieutenant Ng.

We had to duck out of the building at one point onto the road, so we crossed quickly and slipped into the row on the other side. By this time we’d begun to double back on ourselves. The sound of shots was coming less frequently, and the muted shouts seemed more distant, too.

When we came up against the next intact wall, Chen stopped abruptly.

“Have to stop a second.”

I glanced round, and then stopped, too. My chest was aching and Miranda was barely on her feet. Realizing I was still holding her hand, I let go of it.

“We’re as far away as we’re going to get without leaving the subsector. A minute, then walk. We have to keep moving.” They nodded wearily at my being right again.

“Ng. Why?” Miranda asked, pulling the back of her hand across her forehead.

“Because he wanted to,” Chen said. “He wasn’t one of them. He knew what we were here for.” I nodded.

“I hope to fuck he’s all right.” Chen looked at me. We knew he wouldn’t be. A shout echoed in the street outside, still the other side of the strip, but nearer.

“Time to move.”

I poked my head nervously out of the remains of a door. The street was clear, and we slipped round into the next section of the building. We could only get a few yards, and then had to cross to the other side. As Chen checked the street, Miranda turned to me.

“What are we going to do? I mean, do we stay, or what? Are we still looking?”

“I don’t know. Chen, is it clear?”

“We’ve got to look,” Miranda said desperately. “We have to.”

“Miranda, they’ll kill us if they find us. Chen, is it clear, or what?”

Chen was standing with his head and shoulder poking out into the street. He was absolutely motionless.

“Chen?”

He half-turned his face toward us then, but his eyes didn’t move. Miranda and I soundlessly took a step toward him and looked out into the street.

It was nearly dark now, as dark as it ever gets on a planet with a hundred trillion light bulbs. The street outside was deserted and quiet. The soldiers had obviously regrouped, and were no longer making any noise. They were trained men, and they had set about finding us as they’d been trained to do. Quietly, efficiently, and terminally. If anything, the silence meant we were in even more danger.

But that wasn’t important to any of us. Sitting in the middle of the road was a cat.

I’ve seen countless photographs of cats. They’ve always been what I wanted to see most, and I’ve probably looked at more images of them than any man alive.

But as I stood and stared I didn't see the photos or reference books. I saw exactly what my grandmother saw. It was an animal, about a foot or so high, covered in fur and with green eyes that caught the remains of the light. And I saw it wasn't human.

"Oh shit," Miranda moaned. "Oh shit." She was crying. I was, too, I discovered. Chen just looked, and looked. He hadn't needed faith. He'd known. I don't know whether he saw that primate years ago, and I don't think it matters. He'd just known.

The cat looked back at us, and then glanced down the road. I looked, too, but there was nothing there. The soldiers were creeping toward us from some other angle. The first we'd know, I suspected, would be the last we'd know. I didn't give a shit.

Miranda caught her breath as the cat stood up, turned round, and walked about a yard away from us. No, I thought. Please. Not yet. The cat looked at us again. Chen straightened up and stepped out into the road.

"Chen, what are you doing? You'll frighten it."

"Come on," he said, without looking round.

We stepped out into the road behind him. The cat stood up again and walked slowly across the street. We followed it, and it didn't seem to mind. Instead of going straight across, its path curved up toward the left, and I smiled, remembering old stories again.

When it got to the other side the cat clambered up onto a doorstep, turned to look at us, and then vanished into the building. We looked at each other, and followed, eyes locked. This was going to end soon. It had to.

The building was a shell, about twenty yards across. The cat wandered into the center of the floor and then sat again. We stood in front of it, just looking. It didn't mind us. It didn't seem to mind.

Then there was a soft sound from out of the shadows, and there were two.

We had cameras. We had video. We didn't use them.

Chen squatted down on his heels. The cats looked this way and that, and one of them raised a paw to lick it briefly.

"Oh," Chen said then.

From out of the shadows behind the cats there came a shape. It was about three feet high, and it stood on two legs. Its body was covered in dark brown fur, apart from around the face, and its arms were surprisingly long. It ambled drunkenly across the room, reeled slowly around the cats, and then came and stood in front of Chen. With Chen crouched down they were about the same height, and just stared

each other in the face. The animal stretched out a hand, and then plopped it on Chen's head. Chen reached out to take the other hand. It was a chimpanzee.

Chen let the chimp rootle round in his hair and pull his nose, and I watched, darting my gaze over to the cats every ten seconds or so. I put out my hand to Miranda. She wasn't there.

She was standing a couple of yards away, looking in a completely different direction. About a car length from her stood a white horse. Behind it was something I suspect was a rabbit.

"Chen," I said. He stood up and came over, accompanied by the chimp, who seemed to be mimicking the way Chen walked. Or maybe Chen had always walked like a chimp and I'd never known.

Behind the rabbit there was a small clump of squirrels who were rolling around in the dust and swiping at each other. We walked past them because we could see that in the gloom there were others. We went another few yards, and then stopped.

The horse was joined by another two, and then the three of them moved aside to let a pair of small dogs wander through. There was a noise up above and we looked up to see a small pack of monkeys larking around, turning and rolling over the remains of a steel support. A gorilla sat up against the wall, watching a small group of rats who were beetling toward him. When they reached him they sniffed, seemed to confer and reach a decision of some kind, and then immediately set off in another direction. Two long necks swayed and a pair of giraffes walked slowly around in a large circle, followed by a sheep. Miranda squawked when something touched her neck, and we turned to see that it was the trunk of an elephant.

There were more, some whose names I didn't even know. Chen might have known, but I didn't ask. None of us spoke. We just walked slowly round the cavernous interior of the building, surprised at every turn by something new. Still they milled around us, and they were all different, and they were all alive. Eventually the three of us, surrounded, halted in the center, and just stood. We'd come looking for an animal, however small, however final. And here we were in an abandoned building, in the midst of about a hundred.

There was a shout outside, and then the sound of a shot. We all ducked unthinkingly, but none of the animals even flinched. The first cat reappeared by my feet, and started to walk toward a door in the outside wall.

"No," I said urgently. "No." It turned to look at us, and then continued, threading its way through the animals. We followed.

The street was light after the building, and thirty yards away we saw the body crumpled in the middle of the road. It was Ng. He was dead. The soldiers were advancing from the other side of the strip, ten abreast, right across the road. The cat stopped in the middle of the street, and we stopped behind it.

There was a sound and we turned to see one of the horses stepping out into the road. It was followed by a dog, and then by the monkeys. They all walked slowly but purposefully, out into the center of the road. Then they started to walk down toward the main strip, toward the soldiers.

“Don’t.”

But they all came out, in pairs, in packs. The giraffes and the rats, several rabbits and four wolves. They all came out and walked down the road without a sound. The road was full, almost crowded, as rank after rank of animals marched down the street. When the first of them reached the crossroads, the soldiers were already there.

The soldiers didn’t see them. They just kept slowly advancing, and between the gaps the animals slipped. The farther away they got, the harder it became to see them. They became translucent, like ghosts, but they weren’t. They were there. The soldiers simply couldn’t see them, and the animals brushed past them like a mist. I saw Hye in the center of the road, looking impatiently around him. He looked through goats and cats, horses and rhinos. A giraffe seemed to walk right through him. He didn’t see it.

Eventually the stream of animals began to thin out, and we knew it was nearly over. Chen’s chimp took a step forward, and I saw he was still holding Chen’s hand. Chen didn’t hesitate for long. He nodded at me, and smiled at Miranda, and then he walked off down the road, with a dog to one side and a rabbit following up behind. He passed Hye without even looking at him. Maybe by then he was seeing something different.

As the soldiers drew to a halt, confused at the emptiness around them, the first cat stood up. I bent down to it, and I tickled it behind the ears. I stroked its back and I rubbed its chin, and it made that sound for me. Then it walked off down the road, tail erect. There would be no retreat. It stopped by Ng’s body and looked back at us, and then it disappeared off up the street.

We surrendered, to soldiers who seemed quiet and withdrawn and didn’t meet our eyes. Some fever had passed, and Hye and his men escorted us back out of the sector with distant civility, though he must have known I would report what had happened. I don’t know if any action was taken; as always, I suspect they have bigger problems on their minds down there.

Miranda went back to PsychStat two days later. I see her occasionally, but not often. Our paths don’t cross, and I spend most of my time painting now. I’m not very good, it has to be said, but I’m working at it. Maybe in time I’ll be able to show what the photographs can’t.

I live in what used to be the office, though it’s not an office anymore. That’s all over. The world has finally lost interest, and it’s finished. I don’t have to look anymore. I know.

The animals are still here. They always have been, and they always will be. They just won't ever let us see them again. Or maybe they were never here, and maybe they never went.

Maybe it was us who died.