

The cat

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I still wasn't asleep at 3:30 when the cat howled again. It was a short, moving-from-low-to-high pitched howl just outside our door, which droned on for ten minutes every hour and a half. This was the sixth time in a row I've stayed over at my girlfriend's house on a random weekday night and the cat was howling, not meowing. I was convinced it wasn't normal—not by the way I was able to detect even the smallest of sounds in the night, as if my peripheral awareness was at its most alert right before I fell off the cliff of consciousness and into troubled sleep, but by the way it was repeated like this every time I was here. Either the cat knew I was in the room it didn't have access to, and hated me for it, howling to drive me sleepless and insane, or it simply went on like this every night. "Just leave it be, just leave it be," my girlfriend always said. How could she sleep like this? I couldn't leave it be. Not again. The cat had to be silenced.

I checked to my left, stared into the darkness until the dim outline of my girlfriend's body became a clear silhouetted figure rising and falling to the steady rhythm of deep sleep. No worries there. "Owwwww," went the cat again. Pulling my side of the covers off, I resisted the urge to storm to the door, and instead crept out of the bed one foot at a time. Other times I'd tried to surprise the cat with quick movements had been futile; it had just scurried away and had come back to howl again less than two hours later. The door glowed with beige light around its edges. The hallway light had been left on. "Owwwwwuh."

I tripped over what must have been several pairs of pants on the floor, but caught myself on the bed. My girlfriend didn't move. I took a few more steps over some sweaters and shoes. I felt very light then, as if I could glide across the floor. I imagined the cat, just outside, just in front of me, looking up, ears cocked to the left, wondering what these series of soft sounds were. The shuffling noises, the stronger smell of the human. I breathed slower, quieter, and opened the door not violently.

"Rrrreowwwwhwow." There it was, pattering a metre away from me to stand in front of another bedroom door just down the narrow hallway. "Rrrreoww." It looked so soft, so innocent then, this howling creature of thick grey fur, matted and tangled into a plump ball of hair sitting before the door. Black slits between

yellow marbles, and a flattened, dark-grey snout, whose hairs blended into tufts of white-grey around her lower cheekbones. White whiskers. I carefully measured my footsteps, said, “there there, here here” as I approached the cat, bent down, and picked it up with both hands. “Rrrreoww.”

This was the first time I’d woken up from the noise of the cat and been able to see it, interact with it, without it running off. I walked down the hall and into the foyer and living room. Outside, thick, heavy snow crystallized in the deep cold and sparkled under white moonlight, which poured through the window in broken panes across the wooden floor. It was quiet. The cat wasn’t purring. Afraid to make any noise and wake up my girlfriend and her roommates, I tip-toed towards the long couch that extended from one edge of the room to the other, and put the cat down on the arm. That was its favourite spot during the day. “Rreow.” It looked up at me, wagged its tail slowly to the left, to the right. A soft rattling sound. It started to purr.

“Why aren’t you quiet? Why the howling all the time?” I said to it. I didn’t know what else to do. It was almost four in the morning. I had gotten up to stop the cat, and now I was talking to it. I hadn’t expected it to let me pick it up. I sat down beside it, began to pet it with my left hand. I felt not fully awake, still somehow asleep, but my actions had carried me here with such intent. I felt bizarre, like I were hovering. “Wouldn’t this be funny,” I said to myself—thought about the kind of face my girlfriend would make if she came out right now and saw me, in my boxers and without a shirt, petting the cat on the couch. She’d probably just go back to bed. She’d laugh and think me ridiculous and go back to bed. She wouldn’t care. She had to work early in the morning too. She was opening up the restaurant, and I had to get to class by 09:00.,but it didn’t matter to her. She could put up with the howling cat even though we both knew that we were both wakened by the creature in the middle of the night, tossing and turning in bed, pretending to be asleep, sighing out of feigned slumber and not out of frustration at being awake. I pet the cat more firmly, felt the small curvature of its spine, the taut back, but I had gotten up this time. I had gotten up, not she. I wouldn’t let the disturbed sleep bother me anymore; I could never handle it during the day, the weight of my eyelids, the lethargy of my exhausted body that subdued any thinking power I could muster with overdoses of black coffee, the anger at not being able to understand a lecture, having to read and research with a heavy pen and a blinding white computer screen, checking my phone for nothing. The howling of the cat. And she just let it happen. I felt the back of the cat’s neck now, gripped it with the whole of my hand. This thing, this stupid thing that had kept me up all these nights, it was sitting here, purring

beside me. Did it know what it was doing? Did it know what damage it was causing to me? Did my girlfriend know? My girlfriend who did nothing about it?

I switched my grip and lifted it into the air with both hands, shook it left and right, twisted it upside down and flipped it. It tried to meow and screech and howl all at once, but the sudden violence I inflicted upon it surprised it completely. The only sound finally coming out, a strained, gurgled gasp as I flipped it again with my hands. I grappled its shoulders and neck with my right hand, raised it up and pounded it down against the couch once, twice, three times, and threw it against the wall left of me. The silence of the night only made the thump of its body hitting the wall that much louder, and it landed on the other couch on its front, still, quiet, and eyes shut, its head laying down, crooked to the left just on top of its left paw. It wasn't moving.

I stood there, staring at the white rug just below the couch, dumb and motionless in the blue moonlight. The clock above the bookshelf was incredibly loud then. I was surprised I had just noticed it. I had just killed a cat. My eyes darted around and stared down the darkness of the hallway. Had I turned off the light to my girlfriend's bedroom? I waited for the ruffling of sheets, the rumbling of feet as she rushed to see what the matter was outside, shouting a whisper of, "What's going on? Is everything okay?" I waited longer, every clock stroke the tap of a metronome against my skull. Nothing came, no sound. I was alone.

Trembling, I turned around again. I had just killed the cat. I was breathing fast, like tumultuous wind scraping past bare trees in the dead of night. I slowed it down to a drawn-out, controlled inhale and exhale. My heartbeat uneasily obeyed and fell into a softer rhythm. Pulling my eyes up the rug, past the darkness beneath the couch, light opaquely reflected off its worn, beige leather, I fixated on the motionless left paw. "Oh no," I thought. "Oh no." I fell to my hands and knees, shaking and convulsing with silent anger. No pain. Only worry. This stupid cat, it had made me do this. Look, look how annoyingly elegant and sure of itself it even looked in death, as if it were resting, asleep on the couch, only a couple of feet away from its favourite spot. "An emperor without a realm." I almost chuckled to myself as I remembered that line of poetry—how absurdly uncontrollable one's thoughts were—and began to move towards the cat one hand and knee at a time.

I couldn't skip class tomorrow again, not when it would have been the second time this week, I thought. I was so tired, but this cat—it hadn't been tired. No, it had wailed and howled beside our door. I had shut it up. That's it. I had just shut it

up. Look at it, that scrunched-up face. Getting closer now, I counted its white and grey whiskers. Maybe ten. I hadn't even known whose cat it was. Maybe my girlfriend had told me, but I couldn't remember. It wasn't her cat. It must have been one of her roommates', people I never saw because they were barely here, but I'd never seen the cat go into their rooms. It would always sulk around the house, patter around corners, sit on the couches. It was the house's cat. The cat belonged to the house.

Who was I, in this pale moonlight, crawling on the floor towards a dead thing, away from my girlfriend slumbering innocently, a whole dark hallway away from me? My girlfriend. The actress of nothing, but I hadn't stayed my anger. Instead I had let it drive my arms and operate my hatred, inflicting it on this cat. I had hated it, and it was dead. I had taken action, and was crawling, on all fours, to its outcome. My hands and arms looked red. I caught myself holding in laughter at the exhilarating hilarity of the idea that my first powerful act of free will was to kill a cat. It was really dead. What was I going to do now? It was not daylight yet. I had time. Could I open its eyes again? What colour had they turned? Leaning forward, almost falling over I reached with an outstretched hand, past the shadows of the twisted trees refracted in the dark moonlight, to feel the hardness of its forehead, the dry nose, and the motionless jaws.

The eyes opened.

Their yellow malice widened into surprise and fear, and the cat sprang off the couch as I yelped and jolted upwards into standing position, bending backwards, but then floating completely upright again. It ran around the corner, skidding on the hardwood floor, and disappeared into the incompletely renovated, abandoned basement. Another vacuum of silence. I ran around the other corner, past the foyer, and towards the basement. Its white light was on. I could see it stretch across the walls and fade off as it met its absence near the back door. I held my arm outstretched towards the basement, reaching for that light, but thought better of it. The cat was alive still, and I needed to sleep now. I tiptoed down the dark hallway over the thickest boards of the hardwood flooring to minimize the screeching. Opening, closing the door. It was all dark. My girlfriend's silhouetted figure was on the other side of the bed, so I climbed in immediately and glided my hand down her left side, petted down the wrinkled blankets. Sleep overtook me. I paused at the top of her left shoulder, past the curvature of her spine, and gripped it with the whole of my hand as I faded into a noiseless mirage of thick, piling snow.