

# CAT HEAD

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Early afternoon.

Your parents won't be home until evening.

You have the house to yourself.

You sit at the kitchen table, looking out into the backyard.

At the rear of the yard, in a bed of yellow and purple pansies, a whiskered cat's head, upright on the mulch, swings side to side, looking around.

Where's the rest of the cat? How can just its head live? But the head definitely is alive, you see that, standing now against the window. Your knuckle raps against a pane. The head keeps glancing around. Rolling back to look up as a cardinal flies over, red and wings, weight taloning around the spindly branch of a nearby Bradford pear, leaves lowering.

You open the back door, lifting up on the brass knob so the hinges won't squeak. You don't want to scare the head.

It's really nice out. You didn't realize, sitting inside.

Stepping off the patio, you walk out into the cheerfulness of Spring, the cool air, the busyness of bees, the small noises and short fragrances of the garden. You feel the warmth of the sun on the crown of your head, your shoulders.

Slipping quietly around a tall blue point juniper, you tip toe to the yellow and purple pansy bed.

The head's still there, black and gray stripes, pudgy face, dark eyes, triangular ears rotating. When you're a yard away, the head swivels in your direction, eyes tracking up your shorts and shirt to your face.

The eyes look calm, inquisitive as to why you're here.

-Meow.

A meow can say a lot. This one just says hello.

-Are you all right? Are you okay?

The cat's eyes examine your stance, returning to your eyes. It doesn't meow again.

You get down on your haunches in front of the head, carefully reaching your right hand forward, lowering it as you go, towards the head.

The brown eyes watch the slow overhead jet squadron of your fingers.

Should you pet the head? What if it tries to bite? What if petting rolls the head over?

You keep leaning forward, knees now on the mulch, hand lowering, until three fingerpads touch down on top of the head.

The fur is soft, thick. You scratch the top of the head, carefully. The head's brown eyes swing up, watching the undersides of your fingers. No other reaction for a moment, then a cautious purr. Soon the eyes are squeezed blissfully shut, the sides of the head rotating between your hands as you stroke and scratch, fingers occasionally twanging the stiff whiskers.

-You're a good boy. Such a good boy. What happened to the rest of you?

-Meow.

-Are you trying to tell me what happened to your body? Is that what you're trying to do?

-Meow.

You laugh, happy now, scratching under its jaw, the head's ears flattening, eyes still squeezed shut, head stretching backwards so you can stroke the soft-furred throat, all the way down to where the throat rises from the earth.

Digging your fingers down into the soil by the bottom of the throat, you realize there's still more body, buried.

Petting the head distractedly now, with your left hand, your right fingers push down into the soil, feeling the furred buried body breathing against your fingerpads, abrasive dirt against your nails, as you try to determine how much of the cat is intact.

You clear the dirt from around the head, freeing the bony shoulders. The head tilts to one side, struggle on the

furred face, one long, brown-gray front leg pulling out of the ground.

-Oh!

Pushing a finger under the armpit of the leg still trapped, until the tip of your finger pokes out the other side, you lift gently, the cat's free leg braced above the ground, trying to help, eyes squeezed shut. With a final, lopsided pull you lift the whole long body out, legs kicking, dirt spraying away from claws.

You fall onto your back from the sudden release, still holding the cat by his armpits. He walks across your chest, tilting his head, watching you laugh, hops off.

-We did it! You're free!

The cat comes back from sniffing a purple and white pansy, rubbing against your bare knee, head down.

-I thought you were just a head. You're not just a head.

The cat sniffs the mulch, head bobbing. Maybe he has to pee. You should give him a name. What would be a good name? A glance at the distant back door. Maybe not.

-Hey!

The cat's back at the hole you pulled him from, sniffing, front paws sliding forward, sinking.

You fling yourself across the pansies, grabbing the cat's rear leg, ground sagging under your weight, hole widening, earth under your elbows falling away, your shoulders falling through, knees banging against the rim of the hole. You fall through, falling down into darkness, hands in front of you, fingers spread, scream between your teeth.

Splash.

Underwater. Hands waving slowly over your head, roar of pressure in your ears, weight of your sneakers holding you down.

Trying to get to the surface. Trying to get to the. Trying.

Burst of breath as you break the surface. Breaths like childbirth, head on the dark water, current drifting you

farther away from the round, yellow opening far above.

You swing your head around on the gray surface of the water. In your wake, catching up, the cat paddles furiously towards you, fur spiked.

-Here. Here.

The cat reaches you, claws his way onto your soaked head, ten points of pain climbing your scalp, his weight momentarily dunking, back underwater, your sputtering lips.

You glide down the subterranean river, feeling the cat's weight vigorously shake atop your head, settle into a rocking motion with nostril sounds. Is he cleaning himself on top of your head?

You're swept along faster and faster, paddling weakly, unable to stop the forward suctioning.

Banging against the clay and rocks at the turn of a bend, you bounce out into the middle of the underground river, cat digging his claws into your wet scalp, for traction.

Up ahead, you see the river end halfway in the distance, hear a roar.

What's happening?

You're almost upon it before you realize you're being sucked towards the curved white edge of a waterfall, wide as the mouth of God.

Over you go, little speck.

Falling, tumbling, banging against the falling water, knees hitting your teeth, elbows between your legs, lips bouncing off your heels.

Splash.

Spinning underwater, struggling to find where up is, hands clawing through the underwater weight, trying to find a hold in the water, but no luck, lungs twin giants standing in your chest, you spin out of the water, spinning across the beach, rolling in the sand, slapping against the wet wall of the cavern, bouncing back onto the sand.

You stop moving.

Solid ground. Did you fall asleep?

You place your palms against the sand. Push your chest off the beach. Wet, gritty hair across your face, shirt and shorts soaked.

Glance up.

At the shore, huge bubbles slide by.

Half a mile backwards, a waterfall so tall and wide, its very existence frightens you.

A few sand angels away, the cat uses its right front paw to toss sand backwards, burying three criss-crossed stools.

-Are you all right?

You look in the direction of the voice.

A thin girl a couple of years younger than you stands barefoot on the beach, in a white tennis outfit, arms and legs bare, blond eyebrows drawn in concern.

-Where am I?

Her look of concern increases. - You're right here.

She steps closer, toes sinking in the sand. -Are you all right? Her face is intelligent. Pretty. Broad forehead, slight eyebrows above blue eyes, pale lips. At her age, her straight body bends just barely to curves.

-I... But what can you say?

-Would you like a jewel?

-What?

She barefoots across the brief beach to the glowing cavern wall, thin hands grasping a bright color, pulling it free.

She brings the color over to you in both hands. Flat planes, edges.

-Eat this. She plops the jewel in your hand.

You feel the energy in your palms.

You take a small bite. The consistency is like Jell-O. The jewel tastes like, tastes like, what is it? Steak juice. Wow.

You eat the whole jewel, pushing the flat planes into your mouth. Palms

empty, you lick your tongue around your teeth.

Off-handedly she says, -These are the pure jewels. Once they get to the surface, up there (blue eyes rising to the high roof of the cavern) -they shrink and harden. And lose their properties.

You feel wonderful. Better than you have in years. Loved, worthy of respect, capable, excited about what life offers you. You remember what you forgot as a child.

-We have to hurry, okay? The river rises in the afternoon.

Taking your hand, she leads you down the beach, alongside the rush of the river.

You feel funny being led by a girl, and one younger than you, but by the time you both arrive at the rift in the rock she's been tugging you towards, you've found more and more to admire about her, the way she scrunches her eyebrows very sincerely while trying to come up with a truthful answer to your questions, the pleasing lilt of her voice, her finely-shaped temples, thin blond pulse in each. Within the rift, quite narrow so you have to wiggle through it one in front of the other, she in the lead, you both come, buried deep within the mass of rock, to a clearing.

In front of you, narrow-hewn steps.

She retrieves from the rock a short white candle, scrapes it across stone until the wick pops into yellow flame.

-Follow me.

Up the steps to a dark wooden door.

Her small hand works the iron latch, fluid muscles at the back of her shoulder moving under her skin, until the latch tilts at a slant, door swinging heavily inwards.

Past the doorframe, she holds aloft the short white candle.

A musty smell, not unpleasing.

Beyond the yellow sphere of light, rows and rows of tall, wide bookshelves, squarely surrounding the two of you.

-Where are we?

She twirls around, more prettily than necessary. She likes you, you think with a thrill.

Above the candle flame, her young face, yellow flickering across her features.

She brings her right index finger vertical to her mouth, top knuckle resting against her lips, eyes above alive with joyful glee.

-Shhh!