

White Cat, Black Dog

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Black Dog

For Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, who held the door open

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The White Cat's Divorce

(The White Cat)

All stories about divorce must begin some other place, and so let us begin with a man so very rich, he might reach out and have almost any thing he desired, as well as many things that he did not. He had so many houses even his accountants could not keep track of them all. He had private planes and newspapers and politicians who saw to it that his wishes became laws. He had orchards, islands, baseball teams, and even a team of entomologists whose mandate was to find new species of beetles to be given variations on the rich man's name. (For if it was true that God loved beetles, was it not true He loved the rich man even more? Was his good fortune not the proof of this?)

The rich man had all of this and more than I have space to write. Anything you have ever possessed, know that he had this, too. And if he did not, he could have paid you whatever your price was in order to obtain it.

All men desire to be rich; no man desires to grow old. To stave off old age, the rich man paid for personal trainers and

knee replacements and cosmetic procedures that meant he always had a somewhat wide-eyed look, as if he were not a man in his seventies at all but rather still an infant who found his life a cascade of marvelous and surprising events. The rich man had follicular unit transplantation and special creams to bleach age spots. For dinner, his personal chefs served him fish and berries and walnuts as if he were a bear and not a rich man at all. Every morning, he swam two miles in a lake that was kept by an ingenious mechanism at a comfortable temperature for him throughout the year. In the afternoons, he had blood transfusions from adolescent donors, these transfusions being a condition of the scholarships to various universities that the rich man funded. In the evenings, he threw lavish parties, surrounding himself with people who were young and beautiful. As he grew older, his wives grew younger, and in this way, for a time, the rich man was able to persuade himself that he, too, was still young and might remain so forever.

But although a man may acquire younger and ever more beautiful wives who will maintain the pretense that he, too, is still untouched by age, this rich man had, a long time ago, been married to a first wife, and this first wife had had three sons. The three sons, having been raised with every advantage by caregivers and tutors and therapists and life coaches paid to adhere to the best principles of child-rearing, were attractive, personable, and in every way the kind of children that a father could have regarded with satisfaction. And yet the rich man did not regard them with satisfaction. Instead, when he looked at his three sons, the youngest of whom was now nineteen, he saw only the proof of his own mortality. It is difficult to remain young when one's children selfishly insist upon growing older.

To make matters worse, his sons were all in residence at the house where the rich man was spending the winter. The eldest was in the middle of an acrimonious divorce (his first) and the second was hiding out from the media, while the third had no good reason at all, except that he truly loved his father and wished for his approval. (Also, he had flunked out of university.) Everywhere the rich man turned, a son was underfoot.

At night, he began to be visited by a certain dream. In this dream, the rich man was troubled first by the notion that he had a fourth child. And in the dream, no sooner had he had this notion than he became aware that this fourth child, too, was a guest in the house, and although in the morning the rich man found he could never remember what this child looked like—Was it small or tall? Was it long and slender or so enormous it blotted out its surroundings? What was the sound of its voice?—he knew this last child was Death. In the dream, the rich man offered his child Death all he had in return for more life, but nothing the rich man had to offer was of interest to Death. The only thing Death desired was the company of its father.

Sometimes the rich man had this dream three or four times in one night. By day, he began to detest the sight of his sons.

At last, in perplexity, the rich man turned to consultants to assist him with the problem of his sons, and by the end of the week, a most elegant plan had been put in place. The rich man, in accordance, summoned his three sons to his side. Once he had embraced them lovingly and they had discussed the news of the day and the foundations and boards of which his sons were nominally the heads, he said, "My sons: although it is true that I am in my prime, and although I know it pains you to contem-

plate, a day must come when I retire into private life and take up a hobby like growing orchids or hunting the most dangerous game or sending unmanned vessels into the sun to see what happens, and, although it is farther off still, yet it is ever drawing nearer, a day in which an expert team will cryogenically freeze my body as well as the body of my current wife until such a time when medical advances can resurrect me into some unknown hellish future in a body that can satisfy more than three women at a time while also battling apocalyptic mutant lizards and conquering whatever remains of the New York Stock Exchange.”

His sons exchanged looks with each other, and the youngest said, “Dear Father, it seems impossible to us that you will ever be any less vital than you are at this moment.”

The rich man said, “Nevertheless, a time must come when all things change. And when I think of the future, there are two things I desire above all else. One is to name my heir. My second desire is for a companion to be a comfort to me in the years of my decline.”

The oldest son said, “Pardon me, Father, but are you telling us that you are to marry again?”

The rich man said, “No, no! Alyssa and I are quite happy. What I wish for is, simply, a dog. The smallest, silkiest, most obedient and amiable dog a man has ever possessed. I have decided to task you, my sons, with this errand. You will have a year and a day to scour the earth for such a dog, and at the end of that span, whichever of you procures it, I shall leave you everything that I own.”

“But, Father,” the second son said, “dogs make you sneeze. Which is why we were never allowed to keep them as pets.”

"The most amiable and hypoallergenic dog," the rich man said firmly.

For the consultants had pointed out that if the rich man's sons were sent far from his presence, it might seem as if they had never been born at all. Once the rich man had ruled out filicide, being possessed of a tender heart, the consultants had devised a quest: a kind of beta experiment to see if the rich man's quality of life was improved with no sons underfoot.

The rich man's three sons agreed in the end to do as their father asked. The oldest said, "Our father has accumulated so much money that even if he must name one of us his successor, the other two will never want for anything."

The middle son said, "Possibly our father is suffering from dementia, but at least his request, though bizarre, is harmless."

And the youngest said, "It isn't as if I have anything better to do."

The sons bid each other goodbye, agreeing that whichever one brought home the most charming dog, the other two would be good sports about the whole thing.

THE TWO OLDER SONS had many adventures during the next year, but it is with the youngest son that we are concerned. Because he harbored romantic notions about America and the open road, he borrowed his father's cherry-red roadster and set off with an old copy of Kerouac and a small duffel bag of dog treats. He had no particular destination in mind—in fact, without realizing it, he behaved as he habitually did when he played video games, which was to pleurably explore a new environ-

ment and see what it had to offer him. He visited suburban strip mall pet stores, animal shelters, convention center dog shows, breeders of every stripe. And thus, in the first three weeks of his journey, he came across many delightful dogs, and often he drove away with a puppy even more adorable and lovable than any he had previously encountered. Eventually, because the roadster was too small to hold all of his dogs, he bought an old camper van and had a carpenter furbish it with cabinetry so that each dog would have its own berth. The roadster he pulled behind on a trailer hitch. In the camper, he slept at rest stops and campgrounds, and as he traveled, he posted updates to Facebook and then checked, over and over again, to see if his father had liked them.

By the end of the first month, the rich man's youngest son was in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, where rumor had it there was a kennel owner who had successfully crossbred fennec foxes with teacup spaniels. He paid a small fortune for a silky red puppy with enormous paws and ears, the rest so negligible he drove away with it sleeping inside his coat pocket. As he passed through the town of Creede, it began to snow heavily, and the road became treacherous. He had never before been responsible for anyone else; now his car was full of dogs, all of whom loved him and most of whom needed house-training. To his surprise, he was discovering that being loved could be just as productive of anxiety as the lack of it was.

When he consulted a map, he found he was near the part of Colorado where his mother's family had once owned a ranch. The youngest son had few memories of his mother. His father had won full custody after the divorce, and not long afterward,

his mother moved back to Colorado, only to die in a car accident on a rainy night. She'd been decapitated in a highway collision with a poultry truck. After the funeral, the oldest brother had told the youngest that the reason for the closed casket was because they had never found her head. (Or was it that they'd never found her body, and so the casket contained only her head?) The youngest son had had nightmares for years.

The spot where his mother had died might even have been here on the very highway upon which the youngest son now found himself, the snow hurtling down in such a way that he began to feel, peculiarly, as if he and his dogs were not living creatures at all but only small figures posed inside a snow globe. (Had he felt this way before? Yes. Hasn't everyone? Couldn't this be the explanation for how we find ourselves trapped? Unable to make changes for the better? Separated from everything we desire by an unyielding barrier?)

The youngest son drove on. Even estranged from ourselves, we still engage in the small mechanical motions of a task that has been set (as when a hand picks up a snow globe and gives it a good shake).

The snow came down, enveloping the whole world. The camper's windshield would grow opaque, glittering with ice, and so the youngest son would pull over and scrape the shell of ice off and then drive a little way farther until he had to pull over to do the same again. His clothing quickly proved inadequate to the weather, and all the dogs were tired of being cooped up in their berths. They whined, begging to be let out. The smallest dog of all still slept peacefully inside the youngest son's coat pocket, however, as if nothing bad could ever happen, and

the youngest son took this as a sign that he, too, should trust in Providence and keep on, though he was beginning to run low on gas.

An hour passed, and the snow did not let up. The gas light came on, and the youngest son began to wonder if he had somehow left the main highway without ever knowing. Over the sound of the radio and the van's windshield wipers, he fancied he could hear soft voices, although it had been some time since he had seen another car or truck on the road. When the windshield grew heavy with ice again, he pulled over and turned off the ignition. He stepped out into the snow and stumbled into a drift so deep it reached past his knees. Snow swirled around him so briskly, he had the sensation some great beast was circling him, its soft white flank brushing against his side affectionately. *If only it were not so cold*, he thought. *If only there were a place my dogs and I could take shelter.*

If only, he thought he heard a voice say. *If only if only if only if—*
“Hello?” the youngest son said. “Is someone there?”

The little dog inside his coat pocket poked its head out, yawning, and then, before he realized its intent, it had leapt down onto the snow.

Although the snow was powdery, the little dog was so very slight, it rested upon the top crust like a red feather on a white coat. The youngest son, so much heavier, stumbled, his hands outstretched. He fell onto his knees and the dog danced forward, out of reach, catching snowflakes in its mouth.

“Oh, come back!” said the youngest son. When he stood, the snow was at his waist.

The dog began to run along the top of the snow. The youngest son waded through the drift after it. The cold bit at him, and

snow found its way through the layers of his clothes the more he moved, so that he might as well have been as naked as a baby. He could barely make out the reddish dot of his dog ahead of him, and when he turned to look behind, he could not see the van at all. *I have made a terrible mistake*, he thought. He knew he should turn back. Surely he would be able to follow his tracks back again.

But the youngest son could not bear to abandon the little dog that had slept so sweetly all afternoon in his pocket. He could not call its name, since he had not given it one yet, but he called out endearments, entreating it to return to him.

It seemed to the youngest son that he heard those voices again, all around him in the snow, repeating his endearments back. The dog heeded neither the youngest son nor the voices but trotted on as if it knew exactly where it was leading him.

And now the youngest son thought that he could see where the dog meant them to go. Ahead were lozenges of greenish light, pressed out against the sugar veils of snow like jewels. As he drew nearer, he saw these were enormous houses made all of glass, and when he drew near enough to one to enter through a door—also made all of glass—the dog stretched up against it, pawing to be let in, and he saw that it was not a house for people at all but a greenhouse.

When he opened the door, a mass of warm, wet air rushed out, instantly transforming into crystals of ice in his hair and beard and eyelashes.

Inside, everywhere he turned, were row upon row of cannabis plants. But this was not the strangest thing, to find a pot farm in the middle of a blizzard. Stranger still were the people tending the pot plants, who were not people at all, but cats

dressed in lab coats who stood on their hind legs, wielding clipboards and garden shears and harvesting buckets.

The little dog began to bark loudly, and at this interruption, every cat in the greenhouse turned and stared in astonishment at the youngest son. If there had not been a blizzard outside, he would have turned and run away, but instead, in his desperation, he cried out, "Please! I need your help!"

Hearing this, the cats put down their tools and advanced toward him. The youngest son picked up his dog, not entirely sure whether the cats were friendly. They did not speak, but one of them gestured to the youngest son, who said, "I abandoned my van back at the side of the road. The tank is empty, and the van is full of young dogs who will freeze to death if I do not bring them to safety. Please, can you assist me? I have AAA, but my phone has no reception out here."

A handsome tabby laid its paw upon the youngest son's hip. It looked up at him and then at the door. He understood he was to leave, and despair overwhelmed him. Nevertheless, he turned as the cat directed and, tucking the little dog back into his pocket, he and the tabby went through the door into the snow.

To his relief, the cat did not abandon him to make his way back to the road but rather indicated a cleared path. They walked along it past half a dozen greenhouses, each, the youngest son imagined, full of cats tending seedlings or mature marijuana plants. Or perhaps not cats but mice or ferrets or intelligent fruit bats. Anything seemed in the realm of the possible here.

At last, they came to a ranch house, where inside there was a cavern-like great room with a fire roaring in the stone hearth. The tabby led the youngest son along a hallway to a room where

the bed was already turned down. There was a comfortable armchair, too, with a table beside it, and on the table was a tray with soup and bread and cheese and a bottle of wine. The door to the bathroom stood open, and through it the youngest son could see a steaming bath.

He said to the tabby, "But my dogs—"

The tabby made a gesture as if to indicate that this, too, would be attended to. It took the youngest son's hand in its paws and examined it carefully for frostbite. Then, satisfied, it made a bow and left the room, closing the door.

The youngest son stripped off his wet clothing and got into the bath. He stayed there until he was warm again, and then, climbing out, discovered that someone had placed a pair of flannel pajamas upon the bed as well as a thick robe. He dressed, finding the provided clothing to be exactly his size, and then stood beside the window, feeding bits of bread to the little dog.

As the youngest son looked out, he saw a strange procession emerging from the snowstorm. Two dozen cats, all in scarves and winter hats, were making their way toward the house. Each held a small dog tenderly in its arms. So great was his relief beholding this rescue that a profound lassitude came upon him, and he sank back into the armchair where he fell asleep.

All through the night, he dreamed he heard the voices in the snow again, murmuring lovingly. He dreamt someone stroked his face and picked him up and carried him to his bed. In the morning when he woke up, the little dog was on one side of the pillow beside him, licking his face. Otherwise, the bed was so very comfortable that he would have imagined himself to be back home again.

"What a strange dream I have had," the youngest son said to his dog. "Cats who walked around like men do, and greenhouses, and chasing you through the snow."

"Oh, but it was no dream at all," said a feminine voice, and gave a small cough quite close to his ear.

When the youngest son turned his head, he saw that on the other side of him, even whiter than the bed linen, was a beautiful white cat with emerald-green eyes.

"Please don't be afraid," she said. "You somehow found your way here to us in the middle of a blizzard. And pray don't be concerned for your dogs. They are well looked after."

The youngest son sat up. "What manner of place is this?" he asked. "And what manner of cat are you?"

"Quite an ordinary sort of cat," the white cat said modestly. "The mechanics of how I can speak are really of no great interest, and I'm afraid that I don't really understand it myself, in any case. Suffice it to say, my people and I have lived here for a good many years. We make our way in the world as growers of *Cannabis sativa* and *Cannabis indica*, as well as several hybrids of our own engineering. As you may know, marijuana is legal in Colorado. Our label, White Cat, is known for both its efficacy and its strength. Do you know it?"

Not wanting to be impolite, the youngest son said he thought it rang a bell. Truth be told, he was more of a casual user than a gourmand.

"I would be pleased to give you a tour," the white cat said, "and to reunite you with your dogs. How pleasant it is to be given the chance to host an animal lover such as yourself. We receive so few visitors here."

And so, out of a feeling of enchantment as much as polite-

ness, the youngest son allowed his hostess to show him around the premises. The day was bright and clear and everywhere the white snow sparkled, but even the snow was not as white as the white cat's fur.

The youngest son visited his dogs and went outside to play with them. He sampled various blends and products, and when, after that, he grew hungry, he was given such a feast—quails' eggs poached and placed on beds made of saffron and flower petals, rabbit kidneys and mushrooms and dates on long skewers, fish the size of minnows with bones so soft he did as the cats did and ate them whole—he could hardly move.

The white cat said that she could not possibly consider allowing him to leave for at least another day. And so he spent the evening in the company of cats, playing board games and drinking games, while his dogs lay panting and happy on the flagstones beside the hearth. In the morning when he woke up, once again the little red dog lay to one side of his head and the white cat on the other. Outside, it was snowing.

It snowed that day and for three days more, and the white cat informed him that the roads would be impassible. After that, she would not think of him leaving, for on the weekend was a harvest festival. And after the festival, it was someone's birthday, and one of the greenhouses was done up as a disco with colored lights, and cats of all description wore festive hats. There were snowmobile races and ice skating on a lake, and the youngest son's dogs were so very happy that the youngest son could not bear to take them away in the camper again. Weeks passed and spring came and then summer and still the youngest son stayed. He went hiking in the hills with the white cat and he helped in the greenhouses and in the evenings he toked up and listened to

the cats pick out old folk songs on their guitars and banjos. Like his dogs, he was happy.

AS A CHILD, PETS had been forbidden to the youngest son. Rats and mice were vermin. Birds were bad luck. Cats were aloof and parasitical. They produced dander that could cause skin rashes or fits of sneezing. Their feces carried disease. The youngest son, as he acquired and cared for puppies and more puppies, had been pondering his father's desire for a companion dog. Did this request represent some sea change: did his father, so self-possessed and all-possessing, at last long to love and be loved? The youngest son was only five years younger than the middle brother, six years younger than his oldest brother, but that distance had always felt unbridgeable to him. They were close to each other in a way that, loving them both, he envied. Like his father, they did not need him. Unlike the youngest son—and having each other—they had never seemed to need the approval of their father.

But: all the time the youngest son remained with the white cat, he barely thought of his father at all. It was as if he had come under some easeful enchantment, until one morning he woke up and saw that snow was falling once more and realized with a shock how much time had passed.

"Dear white cat," he said. "Tell me, what is the date?"

The white cat said, "It is the second of December, I believe."

"Then I have stayed too long," the youngest son said in a great panic, "for I am due in my father's house tomorrow morning."

"If it must be so," the white cat said, "then let it be so. I will book a ticket for you out of Denver tonight."

The youngest son groaned and put his head in his hands. He

said, "You are the kindest of cats, but it is even more complicated than that, I'm afraid. I must bring my father a dog, the most charming and amiable of all the dogs, and I don't know how I am to decide between them."

But really it was that he did not know how he could bear to be parted from any of his dogs. The little red dog was, of all of them, the smallest and most extraordinary in every way, but the youngest son loved the little red dog dearly. And though he would never have admitted it to himself, he worried that his father might not love the little red dog as much as he ought to (or even at all).

"That is no problem," the white cat said briskly. "There is no need to choose among your dogs, because I know of one that is smaller and yet more delightful. You have only to trust me, and your father will be most satisfied with the dog that you bring him."

Though he had spent less than a year in her company, the youngest son trusted the white cat with all of his heart.

Therefore, he said goodbye to his dogs, telling the little red dog to look after the white cat while he was away. He embraced all the workers in the greenhouse and packed a suitcase, and then it was time to go. The white cat had the cherry roadster brought up to the house. While the youngest son had been sojourning with the cats, she had had the car detailed and given a tune-up, and it looked as if it had just come out of the factory.

The youngest son knelt down and the white cat climbed up on his knee. She purred in his ear while he wrapped his arms around her.

"Come back," she said. "For I will miss you every second you are away."

"I could want nothing more," the youngest son said and meant it. And then, embarrassed, he added, "But I do not see a dog. Which is totally fine! The little red dog can come with me."

The white cat said, "Not at all! Here is your dog." And she gave him a macadamia nut still in its shell. When the youngest son held it up to his ear, he heard a faint bark.

"When you come before your father and only then," the white cat said, "crack the macadamia shell and you will have your dog. But make sure you have not packed any edibles or weed, because although marijuana is legal in the state of Colorado, we've heard from our customers that they sometimes encounter difficulties getting through airport security."

AS IF ALL THE happiness of the previous year had been only a passing dream, the youngest son woke up the following morning in his father's house. He ate breakfast with his brothers, who had had many adventures during their searches. He admired each brother's dog, a Chihuahua and a teacup dachshund, though neither seemed to him to hold a candle to the little red dog he had left behind.

When his brothers asked what kind of dog he had brought for their father, he hung his head and demurred. Neither did he say anything of his own experiences.

When the breakfast table had been cleared, the rich man came into the room, yawning and scratching his head. His beard was coming in white. He wore a white bathrobe. Although he had genuinely been quite pleased to have his sons home, this morning he was out of sorts once more. That last child, Death, had visited him in his dreams the previous night and in conse-

quence he had already spent the better part of the morning on the phone with his consultants.

"Go on, then," he said to his sons. "Let's get this over with."

The oldest son and then the middle son introduced the rich man to their dogs. He patted them with an air of dissatisfaction, then said to the youngest son, "And you? Or couldn't you be bothered?"

The youngest son reached into his pocket for the macadamia shell. While his father and brothers watched, he placed it on the breakfast table and then rapped it sharply with a spoon. The shell cracked open and out sprang a white dog among the plates smeared with egg yolks, citrus rinds, toast crumbs, and red jam. It was no bigger than a beetle.

"Well!" the rich man said, suppressing a shudder. He liked neither beetles (not even those named after him) nor, to be sure, dogs. "Certainly, that is a very small dog. Is it housebroken? Can it do tricks?"

Oh, it could. It turned somersaults and walked on its hind legs. The youngest son threw a sugar cube and the little dog fetched it back.

"Excellent, excellent," the rich man said. But the youngest son could not help but notice that he was frowning. "It is clear you have brought me exactly the sort of dog I wanted most. The others, too, are fine specimens, though perhaps not quite as out of the ordinary as this fellow. Never mind, I shall keep them all. And now, my sons, I wonder if the three of you would indulge me in one more thing. It has occurred to me that if I am to retire, then I must throw a retirement party, and that will take some planning. Let's aim for a year from now. And what I most desire is that the three of you go forth once more. I wish

to wear at this party a suit of cloth so fine, so tightly woven, that no one has ever seen its like. Scour the earth! The fabric should be so fine that one could pass it through a wedding ring. Whichever of you brings back the finest suit, that son I will make my heir."

Although this had not been the agreement, because the rich man's sons were just as obliging and amiable and well bred, in fact, as the dog their father had claimed to want, they complied with his request and went out into the world again after embracing each other. Privately, the youngest son vowed this time he would find the thing that would make his father love him at last. (Perhaps the little dog had been too little? There was something uncanny about its size, was there not? It was diplomatic of his father, really, not to choose between the three dogs. This way, no one's feelings had been hurt.)

The youngest son would do better this time. But first he would return to the white cat and thank her for all of her help.

WHEN THE YOUNGEST SON arrived once again at the white cat's establishment, he found a fire on the hearth and good smells coming from the kitchen. The white cat herself was sleeping beside the window that looked out on the drive. The little red dog was beside her. She woke up and stretched as the youngest son came in. "I've been so worried about you," she said. "Tell me how it went."

The youngest son sat down on the window seat beside her. The little red dog licked his hands and face, and tears came to his eyes, although he could not have said why. "It was fine," he said. "But I'm so glad to be back."

And despite his intentions, the next year passed for the youngest son in much the same way as the first, until at last the white cat came to him and said, "I'm afraid it's time you went back to your father's house."

The youngest son felt a wave of absolute dread pass over him. Though he knew it was undutiful of him to feel this way, he said, "Perhaps I shouldn't go. I was supposed to bring him back a bespoke suit, the most admirable suit of clothes made out of the finest fabric anyone has ever seen. He said he wanted a suit that would go through a wedding ring, and to be honest, that didn't seem like something that could possibly exist."

The white cat looked at the youngest son with her knowing green eyes. She said, "Of course not. Just like a talking cat couldn't possibly exist. Or a dog small enough to fit inside a nutshell."

The youngest son said thoughtfully, "Or pot macaroni and cheese."

"I still think that's a bad idea," said the white cat, "although innovative. In any case, I've booked your ticket home. He may be a terrible person, but he's still your father. And inside this pistachio shell is the suit that he wished for."

"But you don't have his measurements," the youngest son protested.

"Really not a problem," said the white cat.

ONCE AGAIN, THE YOUNGEST son returned to his father's house with a nutshell in his pocket. Things were just as they always were, which is to say the rich man seemed as busy and distracted as ever, and the youngest son felt much the same as he

had for most of his life, as if only the very smallest part of him was visible, and that part of him remained childlike, insignificant, and desperately needing something that he would never truly deserve nor ever find. Not even in a nutshell. Did his father look older? Yes, just a little older. His brothers, too, were older, and so the youngest son supposed that he must be older, as well.

In the last year, the youngest son had discovered he had something of a green thumb. He'd been experimenting with hybrid grafts: stone fruits and a particularly hardy strain of White Widow. (He'd named the result Calm Kardashian.) Which was to say, all the greenhouse cats treated him like a valued colleague. But in his father's house, he could have been a ghost. When he asked after his stepmother, the rich man said, "Sometimes it turns out you never really knew someone," and began to enumerate the virtues of the wine that they were drinking.

"Where are your dogs, Father?" the youngest son asked, persisting. His brothers looked at each other but said nothing.

"The divorce settlement," the rich man said. "Your stepmother took all three. Such a shame. It really broke my heart."

And perhaps the rich man missed either the dogs or else his ex-wife, because it seemed to the youngest son the next morning that his father had not slept well. For the first time, it seemed to the youngest son his father was an old man, and that one day he might even die.

The rich man said to his sons, "Bad news, I'm afraid. I left most of the party planning to your stepmother and you won't be surprised to hear that she absolutely botched it. So I've postponed my retirement. Anyway, there's just too much work to do right now."

The middle son said, "Don't you want to see what we brought you?"

"Yes, yes," the rich man said. "Fine." He waved at them to present the results of their quests.

The suit of clothes the oldest son had acquired was red brocade and yet so light it might have been made of parachute silk. The middle son had commissioned a black suit of some synthetic material embedded with microfibers that stored sunlight and then produced their own radiance. But then the youngest son took out his pistachio shell and cracked it open, and inside was a suit of green velvet so finely made and so au courant that it was clear to all he had surpassed his brothers again.

The rich man was no longer wearing a wedding ring, of course, but he poked the hem of the suit jacket through his signet experimentally, and his sons watched as he proceeded to pull the entire jacket and then the pants through the ring. He said, "It's a bit showy, isn't it?"

But when he tried it on, he could not help looking pleased. He'd always been a peacock of a man.

"I've been thinking that a wedding party is better than a retirement party," he said. His consultants, of course, had come up with another quest. They'd suggested something illegal, like enriched plutonium, in the hopes the sons would end up imprisoned, but the rich man had a tender and whimsical heart. "So why don't the three of you come back same time next year with a bride? And whoever brings back the prettiest, wittiest bride, I will name that boy my heir. Perhaps I'll even wear this suit to the wedding."

The three sons exchanged looks and then agreed to do as the rich man asked them.

"It's like we're enacting a reality show for him," the oldest brother said as they were being driven to the airport. He added, in an aside to the middle brother, "Although harder for you."

"What is he talking about?" the youngest son said. "Why is it harder for you?"

The middle son said, "He means because I'm gay."

"Oh," the youngest brother said, realizing he didn't know his brothers at all.

The middle son said, "So I'll bring back a groom and not a bride. At least I'll get points for originality. Although what are the odds this time he actually names an heir?"

"Fifty percent," said the youngest son. The oldest son said, "Point two five percent."

But they all agreed that, whether or not the rich man kept his word, this was the last time they would be their father's errand boys.

"Three strikes," the oldest son said.

The middle son said to the youngest son, "And if you bring back a girl in a coconut shell, I am going to kick your ass. No more of that shit, okay?"

"Okay," the youngest son said. He was fairly sure he wouldn't come back at all once he got to the white cat's ranch.

AND FOR THE ENTIRE year that followed, he played with his dogs, and he helped in the greenhouses, and he partied with the white cat and her workers, and never thought once about his father's request. The white cat, seeing that he was interested, began to instruct him in the mysteries of bookkeeping and inventory management, and they were both very pleased to

find that he had a knack for the business side as well as a green thumb.

But when the year was up, the white cat came to him and said, "Tomorrow is the day that you must return to your father's house."

"I don't want to," said the youngest son. "I'm happy here. In any case, there's no point. I was supposed to bring home a bride, and oh, look—I haven't got one. And don't tell me that you have a yogurt cup or Kinder Surprise egg or whatever with a girl inside it. I don't want the world's tiniest bride. Maybe I'll get married someday, but I'd prefer to get married to someone who at least comes up to my shoulder."

The white cat had been laying on her back in a beam of sunlight, listening to the youngest son while her tail went back and forth. "Never mind the bride," she said. "Take me back with you to your father's house. I'll admit it: I'm curious. I'd like to see him."

"What?" said the youngest son. "Absolutely not. Curiosity killed the cat, remember?"

The white cat said, "But satisfaction brought her back." And she kept on until at last he agreed that he would go home and bring her on the plane with him in a cat carrier. The white cat insisted, also, that he bring with them, unopened, a particular piece of locked luggage, narrow and long as if it contained an unusually large bong.

When they arrived at the rich man's house, the white cat asked to be let out of her carrier. The rich man was at his office, and the two older brothers had not yet flown in, and so the youngest son and the white cat toured the rich man's house and then the grounds of the estate.

"Nice," the white cat said, looking at a waterfall that plunged into a pool of glittering pebbles where each pebble was, when you looked closely, a semiprecious stone carved into a miniature and flattering likeness of the rich man's head. "Though a bit ostentatious for my taste."

"He has other houses," the youngest son said. "If you liked, we could leave right now. I could take you to one of the other properties."

"No, no," the white cat said. "I'm quite content here. And so looking forward to meeting your family at last." But in fact, when they got back to their suite, she fell asleep in the youngest son's open suitcase and refused to wake up for dinner.

The rich man and his sons dined informally on the veranda. The oldest son had grown a salt-and-pepper beard, and the rich man remarked on it with displeasure again and again.

The oldest son smiled, though, and only said that the woman he loved found it distinguished. It is possible an observer out in the darkness beyond the chandeliers that hung in the trees might have mistaken the four men at the table for brothers. Or perhaps even mistaken the oldest son for the father of the other three. But cats, of course, have keener eyesight than that.

When the youngest son got back to his rooms, he found the white cat on his pillow. "Sometimes I think my dad is kind of an asshole," he admitted.

"But you love me," the white cat said, and yawned so widely she seemed to be all mouth.

"Yes," the youngest son said. "I do."

"And you trust me," the white cat said, and the youngest son agreed he trusted her absolutely.

"Then promise me that tomorrow you will do whatever I ask you to do."

"Okay," the youngest son said. He lay down on the bed beside her. "Just don't ask me to wear that cashmere sweater even though I put it in the suitcase. I know you guys all said it looked sharp but I don't think it's really me. Also, don't ask me why I stutter around my dad sometimes. I think I just get kind of nervous."

He closed his eyes before the white cat could even agree.

She arranged herself around the crown of his head and began to groom his hair as if he were a kitten. She said, "You know I would never do anything to hurt you."

She waited to see how he would answer, but the youngest son was asleep. The youngest son slept soundly all night long, but the white cat did not sleep at all. In the morning, she bade him open the locked case, and when he took out the sword that was inside, she told him what he must do. The youngest son refused again and again, but she reminded him of his promise the night before and once again told him that everything would come right in the end if he obeyed her.

At last, the youngest son said that he would do as the white cat asked and they went down to their appointment.

The two older brothers were already with the rich man. It was clear that he was in an apoplectic rage at the middle brother, who stood there in the morning room holding hands with another man.

The youngest son saw, with some surprise, that his oldest brother had brought his ex-wife.

"I suppose I ought to ask which one of you is the bride," the rich man said with great disgust.

"No," the middle brother said. He, too, was very angry. "You really ought not to. And if you can't be civil, then we'll just leave."

"And I suppose you are proposing to marry this cat!" the rich man said to the youngest son.

"Not quite," the youngest son said, and he lifted the sword he had carried downstairs and cut off the white cat's head with one blow.

After that, there was a lot of commotion and screaming, but when everyone saw the result of the youngest son's actions, they fell silent.

"Perhaps he did it with CGI? Like a magic trick?" the oldest brother's ex-wife said. "Kind of show-offy, but a neat effect."

For where the white cat had been, there was now a young woman, entirely naked and very beautiful.

The youngest son took off the green cashmere sweater that he had worn after all and gave it to the young woman to put on. It exactly matched her eyes.

"Extraordinary!" said the rich man.

"Thank you," said the young woman, and smiled.

After that, suitable clothing was found for her, and there was a luncheon. The rich man had the young woman who had been the white cat sit beside him so that, he said, he could get to know her better. He directed the youngest son to sit beside the middle brother and the middle brother's fiancé, who worked in the hospitality industry and owned a chain of boutique hotels. The oldest son and his ex held hands throughout the meal.

After lunch, the rich man invited everyone down to the stables where he personally selected a mount for the young woman.

And by the time dinner was over, the rich man called his youngest son to his side.

"Look here," the rich man said. "This has been the strangest day of my life. One of my sons says he's going to marry a man. And then you chop the head off a cat and suddenly she's the most beautiful, charming girl I've ever seen. I'm completely smitten. Head over heels. And it's clear that the two of you are absolutely wrong for each other. I mean, she says you thought she was a cat the whole time! Anyway, a minute ago, I proposed to her and she said yes. What do you think of that?"

The youngest son said he didn't know what to think. Everything was topsy-turvy; he had the feeling he had been played. The young woman who had been the white cat joined them then. She took the young man's hand in hers and said, "I know it's very sudden, but this feels as if it's what I've always wanted. It's as if your father and I have known each other all our lives."

The youngest son said, "Is this what you truly want?"

The rich man, thinking that his son must have addressed this to him, said, "I knew you would understand."

The young woman smiled and said, "It is."

THE RICH MAN AND the young woman who had been the white cat married the very next day. The young woman wore vintage Balenciaga and the rich man wore the green suit his youngest son had brought him in a pistachio shell. Everyone said that he didn't look a day over sixty.

During the party afterward, the youngest son went up to his bedroom and smoked a very large joint. He did not feel as if the

rich man had stolen the love of his life. But he did feel as if his father had stolen his cat. He had loved the white cat very much. He wasn't sure how he felt about his stepmother.

Still, when she came into his room, he did not protest when she sat down on the bed and put her arm around his shoulders. She said, "Your father has decided to postpone his retirement."

"Imagine that," the youngest son said.

His new stepmother said, "I've bought you a plane ticket back to Colorado. I expect to be busy for a little while, so perhaps you can run the business for me?"

The youngest son said, a little irritably, "I wish people would stop telling me what they think I should do."

"I think you should do what makes you happy," his stepmother said. "But it may take you some time to figure out what exactly that is. You might as well stay on the ranch while you're thinking about it."

"Sure," the youngest son said.

"Do you still trust me?" his stepmother said.

"Not really," the youngest son said. But then, in spite of himself, he said, "I don't know. Maybe."

"Good," his stepmother said and kissed his cheek. "I promise everything will work out for the best eventually."

AND FOR THE NEXT few years, everyone was reasonably happy. The oldest son and his ex-wife remarried, having discovered that they were happier being unhappy together than they were being unhappy apart. The middle son and his fiancé also married and never felt the need to speak to the rich man again. The youngest son returned to the white cat's ranch and rebuilt the

website as well as pioneered a series of recipes that eventually became a cookbook much beloved of stoners. He had been surprised to discover all of the cats on the ranch, like their boss, were now human, though they did not seem to want to talk about how this had happened. All the dogs, however, were still dogs. But then, dogs are more reliable in their nature.

As for the rich man, he felt younger than he had in years. He had a beautiful bride who loved him devotedly. To express this devotion, she presented him with the most exquisite presents inside walnut shells, or in quails' eggs. And whenever their sex life palled, she would invite him to cut off her head, and the result was always pleasing. She became taller, or blonder, her figure more curvaceous or more boyish in a way that never failed to inspire new desire in him. Sometimes it seemed to him that she grew younger, as well, which he found intriguing. What is more pleasing in a late marriage than novelty? He would chop off her head in the evening, and voilà, there she would be, a lovely stranger. They would enjoy each other's company all night long, and then in the morning he would chop off her head again and she would be just as she had been.

The rich man began to imagine a new life with his new bride. He even imagined, one day, that he might want to have children again. He imagined his wife as a mother, how beautiful their children would be, how she would pack their school lunches inside a pecan or a hazelnut. How charming that would be. The only problem he saw was that he was growing old despite his most valiant efforts. How sad it would be were these hypothetical children to lose their father at a young age.

Thinking of this, the rich man began to dream again. He dreamed that his young wife presented him with a nut and asked

him to crack it open. But inside the nut was that last child of his, the child whose name was Death.

One day, the rich man's wife, sensing that something was troubling him, begged her husband to tell her what was wrong. And though he did not wish to burden her, at last he confessed all he had been thinking.

His wife listened silently, and then said, "If we let our fear of death stop us from doing what we wish most to do, then what is the point of living? For longer than you know, I have imagined what it would be like to have a family with you."

"I fear nothing," the rich man said. "And yet, I wonder. You have never explained the mechanism properly to me, but each time that I cut off your head, you are reborn. Or so it seems to me. I have begun to wonder about that."

"I often wonder about it, too," his wife said. "To be honest, I don't understand how it works. But I'm content to know that you find the results pleasing."

"Does it hurt?" the rich man said.

The wife said, "Oh, a little, I suppose. But only the least little bit. Like pulling a tooth. Or slamming a finger in the door. A bad paper cut. The first time I was decapitated, I'll confess, was not the best day of my life. But these days I'm quite used to it. How many times have you beheaded me now? One little chop, and it's done and over and I don't think of the pain again. Indeed, when I am myself again I feel brand new, as if I've had a pleasant day at the spa."

"Interesting," the rich man said. "Do you suppose that it would have the same restorative effect on someone else?"

"I imagine that it would sting no matter who was under the blade," his wife said.

"You misunderstand me," said the rich man as patiently as he could. "I meant, should someone else have their head cut off with that blade, would they be reborn good as new?"

His wife said, "I suppose they would!" She looked struck by this idea.

"Imagine the possibilities," the rich man said. "There would be no need for doctors or medicine. A cure for the common cold!"

His wife said, "What a head for business you have, my darling. Though it might seem to many an unorthodox procedure."

"I wonder, though," the rich man said, "were we to cut off my head, might I be made younger?"

"Yes," said his wife. "But I like you just the way you are now."

"And yet I think you might like me even better were I closer to you in age," the rich man said.

And the more they discussed it, the more he overcame his wife's understandable reluctance. In the end, they decided that very night they would dismiss all of the servants and the rich man's wife would cut off her husband's head.

The wife fetched the sword down to the lanai after supper, and the rich man joined her there.

"I don't know how I feel about this," she said.

The rich man got down carefully to his knees. "Who hasn't wanted to cut off their spouse's head at some point in their marriage?" he said. "Just remember, no matter how many times I've cut off yours, my feelings for you have never changed. How many bodies have you inhabited now? I've known and loved you every single time."

His wife knelt down beside him and kissed him on the forehead. "In that case," she said, and got up and brought the blade

of the sword down on the rich man's neck. His head flew off and landed in the hot tub.

IN THE MORNING, WHEN the serving staff returned to the rich man's house, they found the body of their employer on the lanai. It took them longer to find his head, which had been a little cooked in the hot water. His young wife, to whom he had left his entire estate and who had presumably killed him, was missing—the only living being on the property was the white cat found crouched beside the sword that had decapitated the rich man. She had licked it nearly clean. There was some discussion of whether or not she should be humanely put down, but after all the sons had returned home for the last time for their father's funeral, the youngest flew back to Colorado, the white cat in a carrier under his seat. She lived a long and contented life there with the youngest son, although she never said another word. When she died many years later, he buried her under a simple tombstone with no name on it at all.