

HUMAN VERSUS FELINE

How did I come by this story? Did somebody tell it to me? Did I read it in a forgotten book or in the inscrutably detached gaze of a cat? Was it a dream that I remember to this day? Perhaps all of these together? I cannot say. All I really know is this: Every time I meet a cat--or rather a cat meets me, because a cat that does not want to see me is a cat that I too shall never see—I remember again that story of the cat, the dear Lord, and the human being.

It was the end of the penultimate day of creation; the sun, which of course already existed like all stars, was just setting for the fifth time, when there, on God's colossal, clay-incrusted potter's wheel, sat the cat, all finished. It was magnificent, smaller than the tiger, but even more splendidly striped, its fur thick and silky from its rosy nose to its bushy tail; its whiskers, boldly curved, delicate and elastic like spun silver, bristled up to the two discs of the irises that gleamed in a phosphorous green and held the black ellipses of the pupils like matching kernels. Its padded forepaws stood close to each other; without blinking it looked Jehovah God up and down and up again, as if He were not frighteningly huge, with ethereal flashes playing all about Him.

Whether it was because God had finished work for the day, that is to say that He was by now a little exhausted from the labor of creation, or because, like any true artist, He did take a little pride in the view of His creature, the last one for the day, or because, seized by a sudden suspicion, He wanted to test the cat, who can say? At any rate, He lowered the lids over His stern, but infinitely benign eyes, His long lashes casting the shadow of mercy on the creature with its brown and black stripes, and God spoke: "Cat, thou art a balm to mine eyes. And because a good mood is coming over me, seeing, as thine appearance maketh evident, how good I am at kneading animals, and because furthermore thou seemst nimble, undaunted, and hungry to me, I shall grant a privilege to thee alone among all the creatures I have made so far. Thou, cat, mayest catch mice, for there will never be a shortage of those brazen rodents in the world . . ."

"Bah," the cat grumbled, "nothing but mice, what a boring diet!"

And God, already raising His eyebrows, cleared His throat, but then—in a voice no longer quite so mild—He said: "Well, because it is thou and because I feed the birds anyway, even though they neither sow nor reap, I shall concede a little bird now and then to thee, who dost not sow and reap any more than they do."

"Hmm," the cat griped, "mice or birds every day and then again birds or mice the next, that will be pretty damn dull. How about gnats?"

"Pshaw," the dear Lord rumbled. "I suppose thou meanest *bats*. Or did I just mishear thee because thou hast such a husky voice?—But o.k., play the

monkey before the owl, go lie in wait and waste whole nights, and shouldst thou really ever catch such a little bloodsucker, enjoy the treat, pitiful morsel of fur, skin and bones that it is.”

The tip of the cat’s tail started to wag, from its now raised paw the sharp claws stuck out, signaling, however, anything but fervent gratitude. “If that’s how it is, Lord,” the cat hissed, “then it just makes me want to eat humans too.”

If words had failed Him at this impertinence, then the dear Lord would not have been the dear Lord. O no! Taking a deep breath, He gave the cat a look so piercing that it had to lower its eyes, and then God burst forth: “Hast thou taken leave of thy senses, thou bonsai beast? Nothing doing! First of all, I have not even done the human, and secondly he shall be the crown of creation. Eating humans is strictly prohibited. And that’s the end of it.”

“But I want to! I want, I want, I want . . .,” the cat wailed; its eyes had a poisonous greenish gleam, the hair on its back bristled and crackled, its tail was waving back and forth like a palm tree in a hurricane.

“No,” thundered God.

“Yes,” yelled the cat.

That went on for a while. Finally, it occurred to the dear Lord that He had spent an entire hour arguing with a cat. He was ashamed, for He had to admit that even though He was after all the dear Lord His behavior was even more ridiculous than that of the enraged little beast. – Was the cat so presumptuous because it was so beautiful? Or was the exact opposite true? Indeed it did not

bespeak too much discriminating instinct on the part of the animal that it dared to conduct itself in this way before its creator, becoming more disrespectful, more demanding, more obnoxious from one minute to the next and stomping on His nerves with both forepaws, albeit alternately. – Perhaps, God admitted with a touch of self-criticism, this kitten is not, after all, quite the success that I thought it was initially. But retrofitting is beneath the dignity of a genius. And besides, I know something that it doesn't know . . . God cast a surreptitious look over at His desert hourglass; He wanted to take a dram of something strong and then rest to be in shape for the last day of genesis, on which the great task of making the human being was to be performed, something in His own image, after all. Use a ploy, He told Himself, the cat is vain enough to fall for it, and then to the cat He said: "Thou winnest, sweetie. I'll let it pass. So, o.k., go ahead and eat human beings. But before thou bumpest one of them off, thou wilt have to say three Our Fathers for me, and very reverently, I tell you, slowly and distinctly to the last word."

"Yeah," the cat squealed with delight. "No problem. And then he'll be history, the human."

Gracefully as no other cat after it, God's animal jumped off God's potter's wheel, slipped between the Lord's legs and was swallowed by the clear starry night.

Ever since, the cat has sought our company, hunted mice in our houses, cellars, and sheds, put dead birds in front of our beds and ever so rarely even a bat. And when the human it has chosen sits down to take a little rest from *his* labors, the cat leaps onto his lap, curls up, closes its eyes to be able to concentrate better, and immediately starts purring off the Our Fathers; it prays and prays and prays, but every time falls asleep before it finishes.