

# BEHIND BLUE EYES

BY SEAN NASTA

“You need to leave your apartment more.” The needling tone bled through the phone.

“I do get out, I just don’t enjoy it,” Synthia replied. She looked around her apartment. It was meticulously tidy and sparsely decorated. This was more than just an apartment, it was her fortress against the world.

“It isn’t healthy to sit in your bedroom working all day only to spend the rest of the night inside and alone.” Synthia’s sister Clara continued chiding her over the phone.

“I don’t spend all day working in my bedroom,” Synthia snapped but did not mention that the other places she worked were her living room and

the balcony. “And just because I work from home doesn’t make me a recluse. My life is just how I like it. I don’t rely on anyone. I take care of myself.”

“You’re not taking care of yourself though, you need to be around other people. The last time you isolated this much... we both know how it ended—”

“Yeah, I get it.” Synthia cut her sister off, not wanting to be reminded of old wounds.

“Don’t get angry with me.” Now Clara was scolding. “I’m not calling because I enjoy lecturing you. I’m trying to help you, to get you out of your shell so you can actually live your life.”

“Thank you so much for taking the time to check on your shut-in sister, and for reminding me what a piece of shit I am,” snapped Synthia.

“I’m sorry, you know I don’t think you’re a piece of shit. You’re my sister, I love you.” Clara’s voice lost its harshness.

There was silence between them for a while.

“What if you got a pet?” Clara’s voice became cheerful.

“I couldn’t handle a dog.” Synthia grimaced, thinking of the mess.

“It doesn’t have to be a dog. It could be a hamster, a fish, or maybe a cat.”

“A cat doesn’t sound terrible. I’ve always liked cats,” Synthia admitted, a spark of optimism in her heart.

\*\*\*

It took a month of excruciatingly thorough research before Synthia had the courage to make

an appointment with the animal shelter. When Clara had first suggested the idea, she'd fantasized about welcoming a small friend into her home. She hoped that taking care of another living thing would push her past her own boundaries. Perhaps caring for another being that loved her unconditionally could conquer her inner fear. When she finally called the shelter, they asked for proof of residence, income, and permission from Synthia's landlord. Though petty tasks, they posed a challenge for her. But that didn't stop her, and the next Tuesday morning she had an appointment. The night before, Synthia threw up after a panic attack.

Before leaving the next morning, she stood in front of the mirror by her door. Her clothes were too large and dark. Her hair was black and tightly curled, but still managed to extend in odd directions from her head. Clara spent hours and

hours in salons having her hair maintained, but Synthia just didn't have the energy. So with unkempt hair and frumpy clothes, she left her apartment, a kitty carrier in hand.

The Uber driver was curious about the carrier, and Synthia stiffly answered his questions, focusing more on the tightness in her chest than her answers.

The shelter was almost more than she could handle. It was filled with loud people, strange smells, and barking dogs. But she persevered and approached the welcome desk.

"Hello, my name is Synthia Walters. I'm here for a 10:30 appointment," she said, smiling faintly.

The woman behind the desk was tired and middle aged, neither of which diminished her smile.

“Of course. Are you here to pick up a puppy or a kitty?”

“A cat, please.”

“All right. Why don’t you follow George over there. He can show you our kitties.”

The woman gestured to a teenage volunteer. George wore a brightly colored shirt with the name of the shelter on it. He led Synthia down a hall through double doors. On the other side was the acrid smell of cats, dozens of which inhabited small cages lining the room. Half meowed as soon as they saw George, asking for treats or a scratch behind the ear.

They were mostly adult cats, though there were plenty of kittens with high-pitched mews. Some had unkempt fur and the undeniable tragedy of aged things. Many pressed against the bars of their cages, desperate to be noticed, loved, and

rescued. George prattled off names and temperaments as they walked past each cat. Synthia looked into their eyes, hoping for a spark. Then she felt a tug on her shirt. Turning, she saw that a small orange cat had extended a paw and hooked a claw into her sweater. She stood frozen, horrified by this thing touching her, but unable to break loose. George stepped quickly over and unfastened the claw.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “They all want a home so badly.”

“It’s all right,” she lied, fearing that none of these cats would do, that each of them would be too clawing, too needy. Her heart started beating faster, she couldn’t get enough air, and the room began to close in.

But then she felt it, the undeniable pressure on the back of her neck, something watching, and

the mounting panic subsided. She turned and locked eyes with a pair of sapphires in a field of snow. This cat, unlike the others, did not seem excited by Synthia's presence. It sat in the back of its crate, watching with shining blue eyes. Its fur was remarkably white, despite the filth of the shelter. But it wasn't albinism. As Synthia stepped closer, she saw the skin around its eyes was black, making them stand out even more. She remembered the chapter of a book that spoke about the supernatural quality of whiteness, how it was both the symbol of purity and a prelude to death. But she disregarded maritime tales and moved closer still.

“What can you tell me about this one?” Synthia asked. The cat sat watching, neither pawing at the cage nor meowing.



“Not too much. She’s very quiet, we think a few years old. Completely house trained,” said George.

“She’s beautiful.” Slowly, Synthia extended her finger to the cage. The cat, as if mirroring her, leaned in and pressed a cold wet nose against Synthia’s finger and purred.

“Oh wow, she’s never purred for anyone, let alone touched them.” George had a pleased look.

“I bet you say that to everyone who adopts a cat.” Synthia managed to smile.

George was flustered. “No, no, I mean this one has been really standoffish.”

“Does she have a name?”

“No, somebody dropped her off in a cardboard box a few weeks back, and nobody’s been interested in her,” said George.

“Well, then I’ll have to give her a name,” said Synthia.

\*\*\*

Synthia watched with fascination as the small creature crept from the carrier into the open space of her apartment. With curious eyes, the cat surveyed the sparse decorations that made this Synthia’s home. Potted plants sat happily by the window, well cared for. Everything here was precious to Synthia, and she feared what changes the cat would bring. The whiteness of the animal contrasted against the room. Synthia thought that the ivory fur was so light that even in a field of snow it would shine. The cat looked around the room, taking in its surroundings. Though the creature moved purposefully, there was no hesitation. In a moment, this apartment became shared between them.

“Do you like it here?” Synthia asked.

The cat turned to her and blinked slowly.

“Well, why don’t I show you around?”

She walked around the apartment, talking to the small creature, explaining things. The cat followed her and seemed to pay attention, looking back and forth from Synthia to what she pointed out.

Once they returned to the living room, Synthia sat on the couch and the cat leaped up beside her and lay down.

“May I pet you?” Synthia asked, and in affirmation, the cat slowly closed its eyes.

With gentle affection, she stroked the small cat, delighted by the softness of its fur. They sat for a time, sharing the moment. Synthia felt a warmth in her heart and hope. As she pet the cat, a few strands of hair stuck to her hand, and she noted

to herself that she would need to vacuum away the loose hair. White fur falling like snow.

\*\*\*

Synthia's heart jumped when she saw the text message from Salima. A friend from work, Salima was one of the few people whose presence Cynthia actually enjoyed. Still, she had never come by Cynthia's apartment, not even to meet out front and catch an Uber together. Before getting the text, Cynthia had been tidying the apartment, though it didn't need it. That was, except for the white fur that showed where the cat had been. Aside from cleaning the litter box, the fur was the only thing she minded about her new pet.

The cat, sensing the unease in Cynthia, rubbed affectionately against her leg. Cynthia stroked the small creature and smiled. She stepped out of her apartment, walked down the stairs, and opened

the front door of the building. Salima was already there, waiting in the threshold.

“Hey! How’s it going?”

“Great, ready to get going,” Synthia answered, smiling.

“Actually, do you mind if I use your bathroom?” Salima asked, dancing in place.

“Oh, uhm...”.

“It’ll be just a second,” promised Salima as she pushed past her.

“Sure.” Synthia started up the stairs, silently panicking, wondering if there were any messes that had escaped her notice. “It’s just down the hall on the right,” Synthia said and Salima rushed into the apartment.

Synthia was alone now, waiting for her guest, wondering what would happen next. Despite her best efforts, her apartment had been invaded, and she had no idea what to do. Hopefully once Salima was done they would leave. In no more than a minute, Cynthia considered a dozen scenarios, none of which she could control.

“Your place is beautiful!” said Salima as she left the bathroom.

“Yeah, just how I like it.”

“It’s so tidy.” Salima meant it as a compliment, but Cynthia said nothing in return. The silence built in her chest as she searched desperately for something to say.

“Thanks,” she managed.

“Do you like the building?” Salima asked.

“Yeah, the water pressure is good, uhm, rent isn’t great though. I get lots of work done.” It was so painful for her to think up small talk. She wanted to leave for the bar. Synthia’s heart started beating faster. She felt tightness in her jaw muscles. Salima was asking questions, looking around the apartment. Synthia wanted to leave but didn’t want to seem standoffish.

“Who’s this?” said Salima suddenly, and Synthia saw her salvation.

“Oh, that’s my pet cat, I just got her.”

“Yeah, you told me. I forgot because you keep this place so clean. It doesn’t look like a cat lives here at all.” Salima knelt beside the cat and began to stroke it.

“I vacuumed just before you got here.” Synthia was glad that the attention was off her. “She gets her fur on everything.”

“Oh, but it’s such a lovely coat.”

The purring cat provided a focal point so that Synthia could sit outside the glare of attention. Synthia pet the cat as well, and smiled at Salima, her anxiety forgotten.

\*\*\*

“Well, look who’s back for round two of happy hour!” Synthia’s heart raced as a coworker called out to her, but she forced a smile and took the offered seat. The rest of the table, other colleagues and their partners, greeted her warmly before returning to their conversations.

“I’m glad you decided to come out again.” Salima gave Synthia a warm look then signaled the waiter to take their drink orders.

Synthia nodded, feeling a sense of pride for pushing outside of her comfort zone.



“Yeah, I figured I should be a little more adventurous,” she said, then ordered the same drink as Salima.

“Well, we’re glad to have you here. Maybe you’ll become a regular,” her coworker replied cordially.

Despite the tightness in her chest, Synthia enjoyed the night and people around her, daring to go outside herself and make conversation. For them, it was yet another night at the group’s favorite bar, to her it was a triumph.

That night when she finally lay in bed, the room swam around her. The cocktails had been easy to drink and helped her swallow her anxiety. But now she was starting to regret them as the room spun. Then she felt something by her feet, the welcome but not quite familiar presence of the cat. Synthia sat up on her pillow to look. Even in the dark room where all the borders blurred, the

white fur was clear, defined. The small, purring creature was the only fixed point in the wildly spinning room.

Synthia didn't remember falling asleep. Instead, she drifted into the strange formless world of dreams. It must have been a dream, because the small white cat, unnaturally clear in the darkness of the night, began to grow. It abandoned its little size and became like a tiger crawling over the covers. The beast perched on Synthia's chest, pressing against her breast, exhaling wet, warm breath. It was as if a great blanket of snow had fallen over her, a blanket that insulated her from the cold.

But beneath this warmth was fear. The cat's teeth reflected the faint light that came in through the window, shining cruelly. Synthia worried that they would clamp around her neck. But the mouth stayed still, and instead the cat, which should have

felt like a crushing weight, began to melt like a white winter field, seeping into Synthia until neither of them remained.

\*\*\*

“Hello, oh I missed you.” Clara said as Synthia opened the door to her apartment. She was overwhelmed as Clara wrapped her in a hug.

“I missed you too. Let’s go inside,” she said.

“Of course.” Clara walked in, pulling her suitcase behind her. As always, she was dressed sharp, her hair held in an impossibly perfect style. “I wish I could have spent the night, but the office has me on a tight schedule.”

“That’s all right. It’s nice just to see you,” said Synthia.

The sisters sat together on the couch. Clara looked around the apartment. “I love how you’ve

decorated, it's so different from Mom and Dad's."

"Yeah, just how I like it." Synthia knew Clara was being honest. Her sister appreciated everything streamlined.

"How's work going?" Clara asked.

"Good, I've been the most productive member of my team this month."

"Well, that's hardly news, you're always at the head of the pack," said Clara.

"Yeah, and I proposed some changes to our workflow and system. My boss liked them so much he's implementing them," Synthia admitted.

"That's wonderful, really wonderful." Clara smiled. "And how's life?"

“I didn’t know you believed in life after work,” joked Synthia, and Clara laughed.

“You’ve got me there, but you know what I mean. Are you seeing anyone?”

“No,” Synthia said quickly, “but I’ve been going out to happy hour once a week with my coworkers. You remember Salima? She’s been making an effort to include me.”

“Wow.” Clara looked at her sister with pride.

“You’ve made some great changes. You even look a little different. Have you done something with your hair?”

“No, I mean, I’ve had an easier time combing it, but I haven’t tried anything new.” Synthia self-consciously touched her hair. It had been giving her much less trouble lately.

“Have you dyed it?” Clara leaned in, looking at it closer, in response to which Synthia recoiled slightly.

“No, why? Is it lighter?” She was thinking about her appearance now, focusing on every imperfection she presented to her perfect sister. The visit had been going so well, but the inevitable cause of distress had wormed its way in.

“I think so,” said Clara, smiling. “Come on, don’t be embarrassed about dying your hair. It looks nice, you don’t have to pretend.”

“I’m not lying,” Synthia snapped, and a tense silence followed, growing between the sisters, morphing into a fight.

But then a soft meow called their attention. The small white cat was sitting on the floor, though neither sister had noticed it enter the room.

“Oh my goodness, she’s beautiful,” said Clara, her voice an octave higher than before. “Will she let me pick her up?”

“I think so.” Synthia was delighted. Clara leaned down and picked up the cat. She pet the small animal who purred in response.

“She has such a beautiful white coat.” Clara kept doting on the cat. “Do you love her?”

“I do. I was worried she was going to disrupt everything, but having her around makes me so happy,” Synthia admitted.

“So, you’re saying I was right?”

“I guess I am. Knowing she depends on me helps with the anxiety. It pushes me beyond myself.” Synthia felt at ease.

“Oh, I just noticed. Your cat isn’t perfectly white, is she?” Clara exclaimed.

“What?” Synthia was startled.

“In her fur.” Clara showed Synthia where the pure whiteness of the cat was marred in a few places. The once perfectly ivory hair now had dark brown at its roots.

“I hadn’t noticed that.” Synthia looked closer.

“Well, she’s such a lovely cat anyway. What’s her name?” asked Clara.

“I don’t know,” said Synthia. “She hasn’t told me yet.”

\*\*\*

There were other changes besides the few marks in the white. But the animal seemed healthy, which visits to the vet confirmed. She had gained weight, which they said was to be expected once she settled into her new home. She hadn’t grown fat, just slightly larger.



“What should your name be?” Synthia asked the cat as they sat together on the couch. The cat blinked slowly in response, as if saying the time had not yet come. The apartment had changed slightly to accommodate its new inhabitant. There was a carpet-covered play structure, a few toys scattered across the floor, food and water dishes. As Synthia made these concessions to her pet, she felt herself changing, opening her heart to another, and exposing herself to a new fear, that perhaps she had given too much.

But the benefit had been so apparent. Her crippling fear had been replaced by manageable anxiety, and she was becoming a better version of herself.

\*\*\*

“You’re sure you’re ready for this?” said Salima over the phone.

“I don’t know, but I hope so,” Synthia said nervously. She sat at her computer, endlessly rechecking the notes and slides for tomorrow’s presentation. It had gone beyond double or triple checking. She had reread each word at least a dozen times.

“You haven’t been to the office for months. Maybe you should just come back to get used to things before giving a presentation,” suggested Salima.

“There’s no time for that. It’s scheduled for tomorrow, and dammit I’m going to do it tomorrow. I’m tired of being so afraid. The only way it’s going to stop is by being brave and putting myself out there.” Synthia swallowed the trembling in her voice.

“That’s great Synthia, really. You’re going to do amazing.”

*You're going to do amazing*, Synthia repeated to herself as she lay in bed that night, staring at the ceiling. She checked her phone and sighed. 3:00 a.m. was creeping up and she still didn't feel tired, despite taking the pills her doctor gave her for insomnia. She knew if sleep didn't come soon it would affect her performance tomorrow, that it would make the anxiety worse. The thoughts about tomorrow kept her from sleeping, and the cycle of doubt repeated.

Then she felt a familiar pressure by her feet as the cat leaped onto the bed. The white of its fur almost glowed in the night. With a hand on the animal's soft head, ease finally came to Synthia, and all around her the pressure of darkness fell in.

The morning came in just a second, as if no time had passed while she slept. Synthia sat up quickly and checked her phone. It was 7:05, another ten minutes until her alarm went off. Energized, she

leaped from bed and began preparing for the day. She'd laid her outfit out beforehand, but she'd left her laptop unpacked so she could check the presentation one last time. Despite her normal nausea, she managed to eat a decent breakfast. Ahead of her schedule, which would have her arrive an hour early, she jumped in the shower. The warm water calmed her like a kind embrace. After wetting her hair, she lathered it in a shampoo that was supposed to straighten her tight curls. Her fingers passed easily through the strands.

After her shower, she wrapped herself in a towel and stood in front of the mirror, wiping away steam. Then she screamed in surprise. Her dark hair had a two-inch wide streak of white running down from her forehead.

In horror she touched it, then opened the shower to read the shampoo bottle. It said nothing about

bleaching. Tapping at her phone with wet, shaking hands, she looked up possible causes but found only unhelpful and confused information. A weight was bearing down on her, crushing the breath from her body. The thoughts she couldn't control gathered like a storm, a mind unbridled.

There was no time to dye her hair, no way to hide it. She'd have to endure the sudden change and push forward. It was such a cruel joke of chance, for something like this to happen when she was doing so well. She sat on her bed and tried to control her breathing. Despite her efforts, she cried, jaws clenched against the tears, as the storm of anxiety broke. Her body heaved and her heart raced. Covering her face, she wept.

But something pushed away the clouds of dismay. She felt the warm, purring cat sit on her lap, looking up with concern. Synthia wrapped her arms around the small creature and felt its soft

purr in her chest. Despite the torrents of anxiety, her confidence grew. This was a small problem, something she could handle. Her little cat was with her, and everything would be all right. After a few moments, she shook her head and stood, the cat lightly jumping from her lap. Synthia declared that the fear in her chest wouldn't stop her.

\*\*\*

“Hey, how're you doing?” asked Salima once Synthia came into the office.

“Nervous,” Synthia admitted, and noticed her friend staring at the streak of white in her hair. Salima didn't mention it.

“You look a little pale... Are you sure you're up for this?” Salima couldn't hide her concern.

“I have to be.”

Half an hour before the presentation was scheduled, Synthia was fastidiously preparing. Everything was ready, but still she found little tasks to distract her from the mounting tightness in her chest.

As time passed, people slowly trickled into the room. Synthia greeted them meekly until every seat at the large conference table was occupied, save for the head. Then the company director came in, jauntily taking his seat, smiling as he said hello to people.

“Synthia!” He grinned with confidence. “I love what you’ve done with your hair.”

She froze, the smile on her face strained as she fought to keep from touching the streak of white. The tightness in her chest started to seize her, but she pushed through.

“Thank you,” she said, conscious of every eye in the room focused on her appearance. Finally, she met Salima’s gaze, and the feigned grin became genuine.

She started slowly, describing her proposal. When the director asked her to speak up she winced but spoke more firmly. After a while, she could see genuine interest on people’s faces. They weren’t looking at her as a flawed person but as a competent colleague. The words, once jolted, came freely as she continued.

Forty-five minutes later, the presentation was over and she was shaking hands with the director, uncomfortably accepting compliments. Despite the morning’s unexpected twist, the pressure of standing in front of so many people, and the crush of her anxiety, she had persevered.

\*\*\*



“I did it, I really did it,” she shouted as she entered the apartment. The cat ran to the door, curious at Synthia’s unprecedented expressiveness. It gave a small chirp as Synthia picked it up and cuddled it close. “You helped me so much my cute little cat, helped calm me, comfort me.”

The cat purred delightfully and looked up with shining sapphire eyes. Synthia noticed with a start that the dark spots had grown. Starting above its left eye and running down its back, there was a streak of black. She put the cat down and stood back, her hand touching the streak of white in her hair, a matching negative.

Hours of searching online suggested no cause for the sudden change in both cat and owner. The purring little beast seemed unharmed, and after her success, Synthia felt too elated to worry. Perhaps it was just some fantastic coincidence, an

outer expression of inner connectedness between the two. Suspicion of the little creature snuck into Synthia's mind, an inkling that the cat had somehow caused this change, that perhaps a small part of her had been exchanged. She looked at it, sitting at the foot of her bed, lacking its once completely white fur. The cat looked up, and Synthia saw those sapphire eyes, with their vertical slits of black. They stared at each other, unblinking, and a soft whisper of a voice spoke to Synthia. What it said she couldn't tell, but she knew that, in the fortress of her mind, there was something present.

\*\*\*

"I'm just not feeling great," Synthia said over the phone.

“It’s not anxiety? Don’t let it stop you from having fun. We haven’t seen you in two weeks,” Salima replied.

“No, really I’m just not feeling great,” Synthia lied, holding the smile on her face.

“All right, we’ll miss you. Feel better and I’ll see you soon.”

“Sure, tell everyone I said ‘hi.’ See ya.” Synthia hung up and ran back to her mirror.

The streak of white had grown. Nearly half her hair was bleached like snow. Worse was the fine white fur that had started growing on the back of her hands, along her arms, legs, and back. She had clogged three disposable razors doing her best to remove the fur, but there was no stopping it. Feeling something against her leg, she looked down.

Her pet was rubbing against her, gazing up lovingly. The cat's streak of black had grown as well, and its fur had somehow shortened from its original length. If that had been the only change, Synthia could bear it, but the creature's limbs had grown, its face rounded, its ears shrunk. Each day, it was less a cat and more an apelike creature.

*What's happening to me?* Synthia thought to herself. She turned, looking at the creature. *What are you doing to me?*

"I don't know," came a voice, startling Synthia, making her step backwards as if it had physical force. Had she really heard it? Or had it echoed in her mind? Where had the thought come from? Her subconscious, or perhaps it came...

"Don't be angry." She heard it again, a whispered voice, consoling, seductive.

“Stop it,” Synthia shouted at the cat, which jolted, frightened.

“It’s not my fault,” the cat said, or Synthia heard it speak.

“How can I stop it? Make it stop,” she begged.

“I don’t know.” The whisper was repeated. Now Synthia knew it wasn’t just stealing her shape, but her voice as well.

\*\*\*

Despite the warmth of the season, when Synthia left her apartment she was wearing long sleeves and a hat. A surgical mask covered her face and the horrible white fur that was growing on it. The clothes, which were usually just a little too large had become very oversized. The clothes had not grown, as she first thought. She was shrinking.

After buying enough groceries for at least a month, she called an Uber and rushed back to her apartment. Once the door was bolted and her world was safe from prying eyes, she took off her clothes.

All along her arms and legs, sprouting from her eyebrows, and now covering her back was the soft white fur that had once been the cat's.

Beneath this fur, her skin was bleached of its color, a conquering swath of unnaturally white skin, beyond bloodless.

She collapsed in tears, falling on the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut. As she lay weeping, the cat came creeping from the shadows. Its cold wet nose pressed against Synthia's skin.

Synthia screamed in response, recoiling from the cat, from the creature she was becoming. The cat

was quite large now, still slender, with long limbs and torso, sparse white fur covering a body that had become darker, more human.

“Get away from me,” Synthia cried.

“Don’t be cruel,” the cat said in a trill, unnerving voice. “I’m still your friend.”

“Then why are you doing this to me?” sobbed Synthia.

“I’m not doing anything. I’m changing too. After all, I’ve lost most of my beautiful fur, and my claws are gone. What is a cat without its claws?”

The creature crawled closer, pressing its head against Synthia’s leg, purring. She’d once thought this was a sign of affection. Now she knew it was the sound of delight at trapping prey.

\*\*\*

“Salima called me the other day,” Clara said over the phone. “She says you haven’t been to the office in weeks, and you guys haven’t gone out either. Are you all right? I mean, you were making so much progress. It just seems like you’re reverting.”

“I’m not.” Synthia kept herself from snapping. “I wasn’t feeling well, I thought it wasn’t anything, but it turned out to be the flu, so I’m just isolating.”

“But you can’t still be contagious?” said Clara.

“I know, but I’ve still been feeling sick, and the doctor said I shouldn’t push myself,” Synthia lied.

“You do sound different. All right, as long as you’re doing what the doctor says. Are you still working remotely? Don’t work too hard,” said Clara.



“Yes, I’m working on my computer. And I take frequent breaks,” promised Synthia. She had been working diligently. It was one of her few distractions. Recently it had been difficult to type, and she’d changed to tapping one key at a time. Her hands had shrunk, just like the rest of her. She was now almost completely covered in white fur. All that was left of her dark curly hair was one small streak of black. Her nose had receded while her ears grew to points and elongated. She had to bite on her hand to keep from screaming when she discovered the tail growing at the base of her spine.

“Who was that?” asked the cat after Synthia hung up. The creature was standing on its hind legs, leaning against the bedroom doorway.

“My sister.”

“Did you tell her about us?” the cat asked, sapphire eyes flashing in the low light.

Synthia slumped in her bed. “You know I didn’t. You know I’m too much of a coward.”

“Not a coward, dear. Intelligent. What do you think your sister will say if she sees us like this? Either she’ll run screaming in fear or call in doctors. Then everyone will see what a freak you are. You’ll be recorded in medical books as a curiosity for the whole world to gawk at. Isn’t it better just to stay here, where it’s safe? Where you have control?” As it spoke, the cat walked to the bed where Synthia lay then curled up beside her. Instead of a strange simian creature, it looked like a small child wearing a disguise. Synthia couldn’t tell if the mask hid the feline or human side.

“Isn’t it better to stay here, with me?”

\*\*\*

“Synthia please come to the door,” said Salima, knocking at the apartment door. “I just want to see you, to see that you’re all right.”

“I’m fine.” Synthia strained her voice, trying desperately to sound like her old self. “Please just go away. Please.”

“What’s wrong? Why can’t I see you? Have you been hurt? And don’t give me any of that contagious stuff,” Salima insisted.

“Just please trust me. Give me some time, it’s just a rough patch,” Synthia answered.

They waited silently on either side of the door, until Salima relented. “All right, but I’m going to call you tomorrow, and you’re going to have to come out of the apartment soon.”

Synthia knew her friend was right but didn’t dare leave. The changes had gone too far.

But she still had her work, still met her deadlines. She used it as proof of her worth. Even now, Synthia was still more productive than her colleagues. So she toiled ceaselessly, and in the effort found the last remnant of herself. It was harder now, because her hands were shrinking, losing the graceful dexterity they once had. Typing took her much longer, though when she moved her hands they had an animal quickness. Her mind, she consoled herself, was still with her as she solved problems that stymied everyone else at the company. *The cat might steal my body*, thought Synthia, *but she'll never have my mind*.

Then a fly buzzed listlessly across the room, and she snapped her head around, focused on the insect. In a flash, she darted from her desk and leaped, catching the fly in her hand. Crouched on the ground, she opened her hand and looked at the trapped creature. It was unharmed and tried

to buzz away. Synthia let it get some distance, then snatched it back. She felt it buzz around in her hand, desperately trying to escape. It was pleasurable at first, until she realized that she was just as trapped as the fly.

That night, Synthia sat in the corner of her bedroom. Thin shafts of light came in through her window from nearby streetlamps, shops, and apartments. She hid from the light, from what it would reveal. The cat sat in the doorway, neither in the bedroom nor out of it.

Synthia and the cat stared at each other, mirror images. They were two of a kind, the weird chimera of cat and woman, neither human nor animal. They were long limbed and slender, with sparse white fur and pointed ears. Even in the darkness, Synthia could not hide from the truth. Her eyes now saw through the darkness, picking up the slightest hints of light. This was the

turning point, the moment the creature had stolen half of Synthia, but the other half still remained. She wondered which she was, the cat becoming the woman, or the woman becoming the cat. Had her mind, halfway in its journey, become confused as to who was human?

But she saw the answer in the shining sapphires. The blue eyes of the other told the truth. Synthia was human, or at least had been.

\*\*\*

“We need groceries,” the cat declared.

“I’ll get them delivered,” responded Synthia in a high-pitched voice.

“It’d just be easier for me to go out.” Her own voice echoed back to her.

“People can’t see us, see you, like this,” Synthia told the silhouette of the woman who stood in the shadows of her living room.

“I can wear a mask and hat like you did, long sleeves. No one will know. There’s no way you’re going to go out there, even if you do cover up,” said her double. But it wasn’t a double. The thing in the shadows looked almost exactly like Synthia, except for the streak of white in the curly black hair, the pointed ears, and the tufts of white fur.

The reason it wasn’t a double was because now Synthia looked nothing like it. She was hunched over, almost her entire body covered in fur, her fingers curled and pawlike with ever-sharpening claws. As she spoke, she felt her lips sliding over pointed teeth, the teeth of an animal.

“What if you see someone we know?” she asked, desperate for a reason to keep the creature from leaving.

“Then I’ll chat with them and come home. You’re always so timid. No one will think I’m acting strange,” the cat answered easily.

“But your eyes,” Synthia said, staring at the flashing sapphire jewels with vertical slits.

“They’ll see your eyes.”

“I’ll say they’re contacts, it matches the white hair. Now stop being so afraid of everything, and we really do need the groceries,” the cat countered and began getting ready, putting on Synthia’s clothes to match Synthia’s stolen body.

\*\*\*

“I’m going out again,” said the cat. Synthia sat up from the couch, stretching as she woke.



“Where?” she asked, her voice a curious trill.

“I’m meeting with our friends for some drinks.”

The cat put on shoes with an easy grace.

“You can’t. They’ll know, they’ll know,” Synthia said, her voice cracking.

“No, they won’t. My ears are normal, and I’ve shaved the last of the fur.” The creature smiled in the mirror by the front door. “My pupils are round now.”

*But still blue, still that evil glinting sapphire,* thought Synthia to herself.

“Don’t be mean. I can put in contact lenses to change the color,” the cat snapped, and Synthia wondered if she’d spoken or if her mind had been read.

“They’ll realize you’re not me. They’ll see you for the monster you are,” hissed Synthia.

“I’m not a monster, dear. I’m just a better you,”  
the cat countered and left Synthia behind.

She knew it was over, only a matter of time  
before she was completely a cat and the creature  
was completely human. Soon, she would be  
subsumed, and the cat would have stolen her  
identity. That was, except for the eyes. When  
Synthia found the courage to look at her  
reflection, she saw a catlike body that was too  
small for clothes. Almost completely feline,  
except for her bizarre hands and uncanny mouth.  
And the eyes, still warm hazel, still the same color  
as her mother’s.

She was fading away, like a wanderer in a  
snowstorm. At first, her features had been clear,  
but the snow clung to them, obscuring her face  
until the piling drifts completely covered her body  
and nothing was left in the fields of perfect white.  
She wondered if she could have stopped the

transformation. If she had fought harder, would her identity have stood against the curse? It was all so unfair. She had welcomed the cat into her home, the first step in defying her fear. But instead, she had brought in the blizzard that now buried her.

\*\*\*

“People are coming over,” Synthia said to her cat as she tidied the apartment. There wasn’t too much to be done. The cat languidly opened her eyes and purred. *Perhaps I’ll sit with the guests*, the cat thought to herself, *and let them pet me*. After that, she would diligently clean her perfect white fur.

She watched with mild curiosity as Synthia prepared her d’oeuvres, set out plates, utensils, and drinks. One by one, she welcomed guests. Salima was first of course, then the other friends

she'd made over the months. They laughed and talked the night away. The cat walked into the room, watching them. She was delighted with the attention they gave her, especially the small treats. The presence of these guests was a welcome break in the monotony, but she would not miss them.

The cat looked at Synthia, and slowly closed her brown eyes. The woman was so much more than she had been. Once a recluse, she now lived in the world fully, beloved by friends, esteemed in her workplace. Everyone would tell Synthia how happy they were with the change. She was, according to her friends, superior to her former self in every way. And the cat admitted it. When the cat was a human, when she was Synthia, she was afraid of life. She was a timid creature who wanted the small apartment to be her whole world.

The Synthia who had once been a cat smiled. She also couldn't wait for the guests to leave. Not so she could clean her fur, but so she could remove the lenses that hid her sapphire eyes.