

Dancing with the Cat Spirit

By Matt Boddy

Adam was glad Felix had died on a weeknight. His father was at work and his mother was off with friends. The early summer sun seared his bare back, the ancient shovel blistering his soft programmer's hands. California dirt was hard to dig through at the best of times, and the concrete mix from the foundation had seeped into the surrounding soil, turning every bite of Adam's shovel into a jarring impact that made his joints vibrate. Sometimes he only managed to yield a handful of dirt at a time.

He didn't let up, just hammered through the dusty, rocky soil, relishing the effort of gravedigging, the pain in his torn-up hands mirroring – and in a strange way, relieving – his deeper agony.

When the hole was four hands deep, Adam lay the shovel against the fence, moving slowly as he arrived at the part of this task he dreaded and didn't quite know how to do.

Kneeling into the dust, he picked up Felix and cradled him in his arms. "You were such a good kitty. I'll miss you. I love you." Adam was caught off guard by his own tears. He hung onto his cat as the yard swam and spun around him as if Felix himself could pull him out of this miasma.

Adam bit down on it. The neighbors next door, they might think something was wrong and he wanted to be alone.

He laid Felix in the grave under the threshold of his bedroom door, took him back out for a minute to better flatten the floor of the grave, laid him back in again. Adam rubbed his head for a final time, ran his hand through Felix's orange fur. He closed his eyes. It was strange, petting Felix and not feeling the tomcat rumble in response.

Adam heaped a shovelful of dusty soil onto his cat and learned not to watch himself do it. The second half of the task was far shorter but not nearly as easy. When he finished, he reconstructed the stoop and replaced the flagstones. He took his filthy clothes off, left them out back. He walked naked into his bedroom, lit a joint, and went to take a bath. It would be a good one, with lavender bath salts and that spearmint eucalyptus candle he'd gotten for Christmas last year.

The rest of the week Adam threw himself into work harder than usual, even went so far as to distract himself with a new pursuit: learning to make pancakes. The morning after he buried Felix, it dawned on him that he didn't know how to make his favorite breakfast food.

The first batch was edible only on technicality. Then he figured out how to regulate the temperature so that every pancake consistently came out golden brown, then he got it where he could make the outside of the pancakes crispy without burning them.

It was Saturday and Adam's mother gratified him by asking him to make them breakfast. His parents bickered over some triviality in the next room while Adam sipped his coffee and watched the sun burn the morning fog off the neighborhood.

The wild man who lived in the townhouse at the end of the drive meandered with his girlfriend's rat dogs, his shoulder-length black hair writhing in the breeze, his unhinged eyes sweeping back and forth over the suburban landscape. Adam shivered. The wild man was feared by all of the women in the neighborhood and a lot of the men as well, including Adam. He'd taken to staring at Adam, unbroken, cold, somehow intense and empty at the same time.

Twice over the past week the wild man had escalated to snarling vulgarities at Adam in passing. He was always around, loitering in the driveway, strolling from one place to another but never seeming to do anything. The wild man had developed an interest in Adam, and it worried him.

A cat trilled behind Adam, made him turn around. Chester, Felix's brother from the same litter, sat attentive, eyes wide, watching something on the ceiling. Adam followed his entranced gaze, expecting to see a moth or a crane fly. There was nothing. Chester trilled over and over, his head twitching back and forth to track what held him enraptured.

Adam observed to his parents that this was the second time this week Chester had done this. Chester's gaze whipped down the wall, then down to the floor. His parent's conversation staggered, then his mom gave a dismissive explanation, her tone flat. Adam watched as Chester went on his toes, the object of his interest now apparently darting back and forth around his feet. Chester tried to pounce on it, whirled around it, bounced around it, danced with it.

Eighteen hours later, Adam lay deep in dreams, soothed by a heavy stack of blankets and the pitch black of the new moon.

A heavy, warm weight laid against Adam's leg, waking him just enough to reach down to administer head scratches. Purring, the grinding of a small head into his thigh. So divine were the head scratches that Adam registered the wet warmth of cat drool. The warmth, the weight, and the rumble drew Adam gently back into the comforting abyss.

Adam was wide awake, gutted by a cold stab of terror. Chester didn't drool, only Felix did that. He lay in bed, paralyzed straight and stiff before whipping a hand at the lamp on his bedside table, scabbering back against the headboard.

There was no more weight or warmth against his leg. Adam's heart raced when he found that Chester was in his room; the other side of his room. Chester trilled, watched

something dart about on the ceiling. Then down to the carpet, around his feet, and Chester trilled and hopped and spun and pirouetted.

Adam's heart jackhammered his ribs. Clearly it had been a dream. Or maybe Chester had just moved from one side of the room to the other and busied himself with unnatural speed. No, it had to be a dream; dreams were always more vivid when one was half-awake, in Adam's opinion.

Rationale and lamplight soothed Adam, laying him back down on the bed, shaking but growing calm as he detoxed from adrenaline.

Adam reached for the lamp again, but stopped. There was a strange but familiar smell in the air, coppery, thick and cloying; it was familiar but Adam couldn't put his finger on it. It made him think of the smell of hot metal. His parents were older and often did things like leaving the stovetop on. Probably best to check the house over. Chester trilled and danced.

Even in the summer, the arid California air was cold at night, so Adam pulled on a pair of warm socks. Adam padded out of his room into the front hall. He was halfway between his bedroom door and the stairs to the kitchen when he gasped; his socks were now sopping wet. The copper smell was so strong. Chester pranced and danced in the bedroom behind him.

Adam reached down, but found the consistency to be thicker, more syrupy than the water (or maybe cat piss) he'd expected. Adam recognized the smell at last and he was shaking again, reaching for the light switch.

It was fortunate that Adam recognized the smell before his eyes caught up to the situation. The full experience hitting all at once might have broken him.

Even knowing what he was about to see, Adam still fell against the wall behind him.

Shabby and broken was the body, manic eyes staring, black hair wild. Adam might not have recognized the wild man otherwise. Every inch of him was raw meat. Even as mutilated as he was, deep wounds from long claws were clearly visible, angry and red, in ragged rows of four. A loop of bowels hung out of one of them unceremoniously.

The wild man lay knocked askance on his back, his head propped up by the far wall. Adam reeled. One of the wild man's legs was too long, and it took Adam's traumatized brain a moment to register that it wasn't too long, but rather had been detached and pulled halfway out of the pant leg.

Adam found that he'd sunk onto the tile floor of the front hall. He hadn't noticed himself go down. The hall light was jarring and the silence was so overwhelming Adam could hear the blood circulating in his ears.

