

The Cat in the Hospice

Belgium, the 1980s

Annette lay in a shared ward among others like her — old people waiting for death, each in need of constant care.

Here, the stench of excrement and decaying bodies had taken on a ghostly form that no lavender or air freshener could dispel.

Only wide-open windows and bouquets of flowers in vases brought a fleeting sense of relief.

For Annette, it wasn't death itself that humiliated her, but weakness — the need to soil herself, to press the call button, and to endure the grumbling of the perpetually tired, often rude nurse.

She often thought:

And if not for the savings I guarded all my life — would I have been able to afford a dignified death?

Of course not.

At best, they would have given her a filthy, shit-stained cot in the hospital basement — and covered her with a sheet before she was even dead.

The thought made Annette uneasy. She had never imagined that her life's journey would end like this.

During the First World War, all her relatives had died during evacuation.

She had last seen them when she left for a boarding school — far behind the front line.

Later she met her first and only love — her husband.

In memory, Annette spun around in a white dress, laughing to the sound of music and gazing into his shining eyes.

She would quiet down in his arms. They were like two swans — they used to say that to each other.

Then two beautiful boys were born to them.

And later, the Second World War ground them all — husband and sons alike — into bloody pulp, spewing out scraps of flesh on the frontlines.

Annette sighed deeply, pushing away the dreadful visions.

Twilight crept into the ward, covering with sleep those who hadn't yet died.

The night air from the open window and the scent of cut grass reminded Annette of tomorrow — a day she would not see.

She cried, from powerless despair.

Her strength was only enough to press the button and turn her head to read the nameplates on the other beds.

That was when she first saw the cat.

A fluffy black-and-white cat with orange eyes that glowed with an eerie light.

He sat at the feet of Berta — an unmoving old woman in a bed across the room, to the side.

He stared straight at Berta without moving.

She thought he must have been a dream.

But in the morning, Berta was found dead — she had passed quietly.

Lucky one, Annette thought and turned her gaze to the window, where white clouds floated across the endless blue sky.

A few days — or perhaps weeks — later, Annette woke up in the middle of the night.

In the half-darkness she saw the cat again: he sat at the feet of another elderly woman in the far corner of the ward, staring at her motionlessly, just as before.

The woman was murmuring something in her sleep, in German.

It was a dialogue, Annette realized, listening carefully and trying to make out the words.

She managed to catch only an old children's rhyme before everything went silent:

“Wer hat Angst vor dem schwarzen Mann?”

— “Niemand.”

“Und wenn er aber kommt?”

— “Dann laufen wir davon.” *

And how do you plan to run from Death? — Annette smirked to herself.

When she wraps you in her arms?

By morning, that bed was empty.

So it wasn't a dream, Annette thought — without a trace of fear. She wondered: what were the chances of a miracle in the twentieth century — the age of machines and progress?

After her husband and children were gone, she had stopped believing in God, and nothing mattered anymore.

When others scolded her for her disbelief, Annette would only shrug and say:

“I'll sort out my problems on the other side myself — without intermediaries.”

Now she worried only about one thing: that she might sleep through the cat's visit and never learn whom that strange, furry guest would choose next.

Some time passed, but the cat did not appear.

Annette began to sleep more during the day, so as not to miss him at night, and waited patiently — night after night — listening to the wheezing and moaning of her dying roommates.

And one night, she saw him again.

The cat sat on the windowsill by the open window, washing himself — like an ordinary cat.

Only his eyes betrayed something else, the way they glowed in the dark.

Annette knew cats didn't have eyes like that.

Suddenly the cat froze, as if listening, then softly jumped down and slowly approached the bed marked “Marguerite.”

Tilting her head, Annette watched as the cat leapt onto the bed, sat by the woman's feet, and went still, his gaze fixed on her.

A long time passed.

She was already drifting toward sleep when a hazy bluish glow began to separate from the woman's body.

It slowly floated upward.

The cat raised his paw and touched it — as if saying farewell to something invisible.

Annette realized she was seeing what people called a soul — that which leaves the body at the moment of death.

Silent tears streamed down her parchment-dry cheeks.

The cat, head tilted up, followed the rising light with his eyes until it vanished.

Then he turned toward Annette.

He blinked slowly with his orange eyes, jumped down from the dead woman's bed, and walked unhurriedly toward her.

Annette felt a chill of fear — and at the same time, relief.

Relief that it would all soon be over.

But the cat, climbing onto her bed, gave a quiet meow — like an ordinary cat.

He rubbed against her hand, curled up by her side, and fell asleep.

Feeling his warmth and hearing his soft breathing, Annette again saw the faint glow before her eyes.

And she asked herself questions that have no answers.

So, my time hasn't come yet, she thought wearily — and drifted into sleep.

The End

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