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The Night of the Comet

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The Night of the Comet

Abstract
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Simon is building a time machine for his cat.

Simon really loves the cat. He parades the cat through town in a red wagon while he runs errands, the cat resting on a pile of towels that I know Simon stole from the campus gym. The cat comes with Simon to class, too—or at least she used to, before other students started to complain. “It’s so cute,” everyone said, at first. They scratched her chin and admired her whiskers. But then they saw the way the cat watched them, and they decided the cat was up to something. “We can’t have a cat in Organic Chem,” said everyone.

The cat wears a bridesmaid’s dress on special occasions. She has pajamas, workout clothes, and a casual outfit for brunch. Simon used to be an accounting major, but I’m not sure that’s still true. Now he just makes things for the cat, so maybe he’s majoring in animal psychology, or possibly engineering. I mean, he’s learned a lot about science. For example, physics: How did he get the cat to hang up in the air for that long? How did he secure the parachute? And how did he build the cannon in the first place?

Sometimes I think that if I was a cat, it wouldn’t be so bad to be Simon’s cat.
I met Simon on move-in day. I walked into the dorm room with a plastic bin and saw him already arranging action figures on the cheap corner desk, hanging posters on the yellow walls. His mother clucked around smoothing linens and hanging Simon’s shirts in the tiny closet, speaking to him in rapid, nervous Korean. She quieted when she saw me. She squinted and looked me up and down like she was deciding how much to offer for me at the market.

*

When Simon originally snuck the cat into our dorm room, we didn’t think she would stay long. But when the cat curled up on a pile of Simon’s dirty clothes and was still there in the morning, I knew she wasn’t going anywhere. Simon smells like home.

The first thing Simon made for the cat was a pillow. Now he says she’ll take it with her in the time machine when she leaves. “So I’ll always be with her,” he says, “even when she visits the Bronze Age.”

“The Bronze Age,” I say.

“Or the Jurassic period,” he says quickly. “Elizabethan times? Anywhere she wants.”

He has notebooks full of formulas, little drawings of cats in the margins. Cats posing with dinosaurs, cats on space stations. People ask me if everything is okay with Simon. They’ve seen the books he’s reading, and they know our school doesn’t offer classes like that. And I say, “How should I know?”

But I remember how he looked the morning after it happened.

“I’m so sorry,” he had said with a hangover face, the cat watching me from his lap. I had just come back from the showers. My hair was still wet. I realized too late that I had used one of Simon’s stolen towels. And that was when I decided to leave. We hadn’t been roommates for long, anyway. I didn’t owe Simon anything. I don’t really remember much from the night in question, but that doesn’t mean it was my fault. We’d been drinking whiskey, and I passed out after crawling beneath the sheets, and I woke up to see Simon’s face hovering there in the darkness like a little moon, all alone in another galaxy.

“We take these things seriously,” said the Residence Life officer.

My new roommate is a jock with a girlfriend who lives off campus, so I never see him. Apparently Simon hasn’t been assigned a new roommate, probably because of
my complaint, and I imagine him and the cat enjoying all the extra space. But when I run into him on campus I see that he’s lost weight and his eyes are baggy like old jeans. All he can talk about is the time machine.

“She’ll be able to jump back and forth,” he says. “She can make mistakes, but then she can undo them.”

“What about the mistakes she hasn’t made yet?” I ask.

* 

A comet had passed overhead while we were drinking. We only found out about it because the TV was on and people on the TV were talking about how seeing the comet had changed their lives forever. One eyewitness said she saw her dead husband waving down at her from the comet. At the time, Simon said the idea of flying on a comet and waving down to someone you love was beautiful, and made him think of stories his mother used to tell.

“We just missed it,” says Simon now when people mention the comet. “We only caught the afterimage,” he continues, which is a lie.

* 

Simon found out that the comet will pass overhead again in ninety years. “Maybe we’ll still be around,” he says. “People are living longer and longer.”

But if you don’t remember that a comet raced across the sky directly overhead while you were drunk and maybe making out with your roommate, was the comet ever really there at all? And why would something that was never there come back?

* 

Sometimes I’m glad I don’t remember the comet, because that means I can imagine it for myself. I wonder whether Simon’s cat saw the comet, and whether she wanted to chase it, the way other cats chase mice. Or maybe she heard the comet and didn’t recognize the sound. Maybe it scared her. I remember the last time I held the cat. I rubbed her belly while she sat on my lap, and even though I could tell she liked it, she hopped down when Simon came into the room. I tried to hold onto her legs, but she wriggled away and left me sitting there alone.
Richard Scott Larson holds an MFA from New York University, which he earned at the Writers Workshop in Paris. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *failbetter, Joyland, Strange Horizons, Eclectica, Pindeldyboz*, and other venues. He also contributes criticism to a variety of publications. Born and raised in St. Louis, he now lives in Brooklyn and works for the Expository Writing Program at NYU.