

Forewarned

by Benjamin Matvey

"If I move in, I know I will kill your cat. I mean I'll murder it. Most likely. You need to know that," Faith said, her green eyes big, tearful, the sides of her mouth quivering.

Jerimund could tell she was serious. "Well, that is a risk I am willing to take." He looked over her shoulder, quietly distressed, at his six-year-old gray tabby, Sir Earl Grey.

"Well, maybe I'm not!" she said.

Jerimund wasn't sure what to do about this answer. He didn't want her to kill Earl Grey, but he so wanted her there at night. He got up and made her some soup. She liked Chicken and Stars.

#

The next day at work, he was sitting in his clear plastic envelope examining the genome of *Deinococcus radiodurans*—a germ that could survive exposure to gamma radiation, which is something most life cannot do. He was supposed to be developing an amoeba that would eat nuclear waste and turn it into something useful: plastic or lead or less toxic nuclear waste, perhaps. Instead he was working on a sequence in his head that would give polar bears giant bat wings. It had come to him in a dream when he was ten. A big white bear, elegantly flapping overhead with gigantic furry white bat wings. He had always wanted a skybear.

It was two p.m., so the sun briefly shone in his tiny window, and he was surprised to see some dust glisten in the beams. Dust was mostly dead human cells, cells filled with genetic material that should not be in the envelope. Much of that must be his dust.

He waved the dust towards the gene-analyzing machine. This was entirely against protocol. Contamination. He might accidentally produce a radiation-eating Jerimund. But he wanted to look at his code. He wanted to sift through and find the nucleotides responsible for Faith not wanting to move in with him. Perhaps he

gave off a scent that made a woman with genes like Faith's want to kill his cat.

He knew just waving the dust at the machine would do no good. The dust/cells could not get in. His dead skin flipped and floated about uselessly.

#

"Isn't he a nice cat?" he said to her as they sat on the couch the following week.

"Yes, he is," she said. "I don't want to get too close to him, though."

"Do you like your soup?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, and smiled up at him.

Then she looked down at the cat. The sides of her mouth started quivering again. Now was not the time to ask her to move in, but he wanted to try again soon. She lived far away and worked even farther away, so if she didn't move in, Jerimund would spend most nights alone.

They were both sad, so they went upstairs and had sex. Sex between them was great. He felt like a glorious skybear.

#

While he was getting ready for work, he found a red strand of hair on his cardigan. Faith's. He pulled it long. It looked like a filament of laser light. He could make millions of copies of her out of this strand of hair. It was a galaxy of DNA.

Maybe he could bring it to work, memorize it, and then, if she wouldn't move in, or would try to kill his cat, he could keep making new Faiths. Surely, he would eventually make one that he wouldn't make cause to want to kill his cat? But no, that would be playing God—and that was something his mother had told him not to do outside of work.

#

Weeks passed. On weekends they kissed. They had sex. They slept side by side and spooned. Sometimes they slept head to chest, other times chest to head.

He said, "I love you" a lot. She looked like she wanted to say it back but something wouldn't let her. He cursed his badly ordered nucleotides.

Then one weekend, as winter was coming near, she said, "I love you" a lot. Seven-and-a-half times. The half one was slightly mumbled.

Jerimund asked her again to move in. It was the fourth time he had asked her. But she said, "No." She reminded him of his cat's well-being. Every time he asked, he got sadder and sadder.

He started staying late at work examining his genome for the problem. It was not really such a bad genome. He hummed his code at night; the nucleotide pattern had a rhythm. It sounded like the Volga Boat song.

He couldn't find what the defect was.

#

The spaces between the weekends seemed longer, and by the time Faith came to see him that weekend, it had been too much. He had scrubbed himself, dusted his house, and cleaned Sir Earl Grey. There would be no scent, no secret genetic marker to set her off.

He looked at himself in the mirror before he made his move. "You can do this," he said to himself.

He pretended he had gone to get her a spritzer. Instead, he came back with the cat and—though her mouth started to quiver—he placed it on her lap.

She petted it until her mouth stopped quaking.

She looked up. "I'll move in with you."

#

Jerimund was very happy that week. He was making progress on the amoeba. He made one that liked to eat nuclear waste and would turn it into arsenic and a smaller amount of a different kind of nuclear waste. At least arsenic is natural.

He had also been examining his cat's genome. The rhythm of their genes was eerily similar. Two Volga Boat songs with improvisation in between.

When Jerimund first got Sir Earl Grey, he was a tiny kitten. So tiny, in fact, that he called him Teabag. The minute kitten would curl up on his shoulder and sleep there.

When he first met Faith, she reminded him of Teabag. Huge eyes and hair like a marmalade cat with its ears back.

#

Faith's smile was very big as they moved her stuff in on Saturday, and Jerimund was very happy, too. She had a spice rack with new spices he had never tried. She had better lamps. She had a beautiful oak coffee table. He liked the books in her boxes a lot.

He went out to get the last box. She put on the kettle. She killed Sir Earl Grey. She had pinned him to the oak coffee table, a paring knife through his top third, a screwdriver through his middle, and an ice pick through the bottom quarter. Her mouth was quivering, her eyes welling.

"Don't say anything. It is totally my fault," Jerimund said.

"No. . ." she said, teary.

"Yes, you warned me. . ." he said, hoping Earl Grey's soul was ascending somewhere.

She poked the ice pick and tittered for half a second but then looked back at him and started tearing up again.

#

He spent the next few days at work, poring over his genome, and over Teabag/Sir Earl Grey's. What was wrong with them?

He stayed a few nights in a row and slept in his plastic envelope. One night, he dreamed of mixing a narwhal with a kangaroo to make a leaping ice pick-like creature with a unicorn horn.

But did he really want a kangaroonicorn?

#

He came home sad. He realized he could make a new Teabag, but that Faith would probably have to kill him again.

Faith had been busy since he was gone. In the living room she constructed a see-through plastic cell, with a cot, a dresser, and

bed, and in the corner a toilet behind a little curtain with pictures of daisies on it.

“I will just stay in here,” she said. “It's safer.”

Jerimund did not like this idea. He wanted her in his bed. To be warm and soft with him.

But she looked happy in there. Free of worry of future cat murders, or misdeeds of any kind.

He saw that she hadn't vacuumed out her plastic envelope very well either. Dust swirled above her head, and in all likelihood it was his dust, and her dust, and even Sir Earl Grey's dust. He wondered if maybe his skin cells in that dust were still alive—if only a little.

He imagined them raining down on her and then, like little radio towers, transmitting the sensation of her skin and warmth to him. He could feel her from the other side of the plastic. She could stay there, and he would feed her Chicken and Stars. He could remake Teabag and keep him safely outside the plastic, and they would all be happy.

It occurred to Jerimund this might be good enough.

--end--

