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### THE CAT

That night, Maggie was alone in the flat watching videos on her laptop when she heard a noise. Someone nearby was humming a meandering jazz tune: ‘... *de da dah dah, doo be bop baaaa* ...’

Maggie flicked on the light and saw the substantial silhouette of the one-eyed cat pressed up against the rain-flecked window. As soon as he saw her, the humming stopped. He raised an indignant paw to the glass and scratched there pathetically.

Maggie opened the back door and he plopped down from the ledge and stalked in. He peered around the gloomy room whilst his tail swished with irritation. Maggie suddenly felt afraid that he’d leave. The evening seemed more bearable with his company, so she closed the door, sat down on the sofa and patted it.

‘Come on, puss. Come up.’ The more she patted, the more the old cat looked at her with a certain scorn. She

tried again, ‘Come on, puss-puss. Come up here where it’s warm.’

He relented and began to purr, softly at first but then growing into a deep satisfied rumble, though his tail still twitched and he still didn’t move. Maggie kept patting the sofa and saying ‘come up here, puss-puss’ like a mad woman until the cat opened his mouth and said in a clear low voice, ‘My name is not *puss-puss*. It’s Hoagy.’

Maggie froze. Several seconds ticked by then she let out a gasp and leapt up onto the sofa. Everything was silent except for the cat’s purr and the *thump-thump* of her own heart that seemed like it might explode out of her chest.

The cat, on the other hand, was completely calm. After assessing her for a little while, looming above him like a pale statue, he started to lick his front paw, occasionally mixing it up with an ear sweep. After some minutes of this obsessive routine he paused and looked at her once again. Maggie still hadn’t moved and continued to stare at him like she’d seen a ghost.

‘I didn’t think you’d be one of those,’ he purred, and he began the same cleaning routine but on the other front paw. When the cat spoke, there was the rumble of his purr behind it, softer than usual, but there, so that his low warm voice vibrated in the otherwise silent room.

Hearing the cat speak again snapped Maggie out of her daze and she took the opportunity to leap right over the back of the sofa. Then she peered over it at the cat. Her

voice was shaky when she finally managed to speak. ‘Can you really talk? Or is it in my head?’

Hoagy shook his rotund head with disappointment. ‘I’m not going to dignify *that* with an answer.’

Maggie tried to think. This was not . . . this could not be real. OK, sometimes she imagined things so vividly they felt real to her: like one time when she thought she could see little white demons riding the crests of waves in the sea back home or when she had sworn to her parents that she saw an old man flying home carrying his shopping bags every Tuesday evening. And yes, it was true that sometimes she could feel what other people were feeling. But this was something else.

Her mum always told her, went on and on at her, to be normal . . . *Don’t stand out . . . don’t be odd . . . don’t say strange things . . .* But she couldn’t un-hear this cat, could she? Maybe Dot had spiked that chocolate cake and she was hallucinating?

‘Oh for goodness sake,’ the cat muttered. He prowled to the back door, elegantly balanced on his hind paws to push down the door handle and then stalked out into the night.

As soon as he was gone, Maggie plopped heavily down onto the floor and looked up at the owl in its glass case for some sort of guidance. ‘Was that real?’

But the old stuffed bird had nothing to say on the matter.

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It was a few days before she saw him again. She'd bunked off double games and walked home through the woods, the trees thick against the colourless sky. When she got back to the flat, although there was already a tiny hint of the darkness to come, the night was some way off and a winter sun was still casting its dull white light.

Esme was out and Maggie opened the back door and went into the garden. She walked over to the great oak at the back that stood near a part of the old wall that hadn't yet fallen down. She ran her hand over its ancient rough bark and said, 'Hello.' And in her head, she imagined that the tree said 'Hello' back.

She glanced round to make sure no one else was in the garden or watching from a window then she slipped her arms around the old trunk and laid her head against the bark. Being close to a tree always made her feel better.

She used to do this at home and her dad, Lion (short for Lionel), would laugh at her and call her a tree-hugger. She didn't understand why hugging a tree was considered silly. Trees knew more than people did, you could feel it, all that time and energy collected up in them for hundreds of years. It made you feel good to touch them. Suddenly you faded away, or not so much faded, more all this other stuff started to run through you and made you forget about all the things you were worried about.

OK, so you were rubbish at school and you had no friends, but the earth was moving round at a thousand miles an hour

in a big black universe that no one could understand, no matter what they said, and there were stars glittering in the sky. Even when it was the daytime they were there, you just couldn't see them. And this oak had seen all this thousands of times, was maybe connected to the stars, Maggie thought, though she couldn't have explained how. She smiled as her skin rubbed against the gnarl of the tree's bark.

'Quite an embrace.'

She spun round. On the broken-down wall Hoagy was observing her, his one eye gleaming with amusement. Maggie frowned. Somehow she didn't feel so afraid hearing the old cat talk now. Maybe it was being outside in the garden and in daylight, or maybe her brain had had time to get used to it? She let go of the tree.

'Would you like one too?'

She moved with surprising speed over to the old cat, and before he could protect himself, she picked him up off the wall and gave him a big squeeze. Instantly his sturdy round body became a mass of furry ripples, squirms and claws, and he fell heavily out of her arms onto the mossy paving stones.

He ruffled himself, outraged. 'Don't grab me like that.'

'It was a joke. Hug a tree . . . hug a cat . . .'

'I don't see a connection.'

'No, I suppose not.'

He shook himself again and observed drily, 'So you've come round to the fact I can talk then?'

Maggie shrugged. ‘Do I have a choice?’

That cat’s tail flicked with irritation but he said nothing.

‘Can Esme hear you?’

‘She can hear me purr and meow, and other cat things. But not like you can.’

‘How come I can hear you then?’

‘Search me.’

‘Why doesn’t Esme like you?’

Hoagy’s tail flicked violently now. ‘Because she’s an idiot.’ He wrinkled his nose as if smelling something unpleasant. ‘Though, I must say, for a miserable old bag, she has a stupendous social life.’

Maggie giggled. ‘It’s true. She’s got more friends than me.’

‘That’s not hard,’ said the cat and began to clean himself yet again. Clearly he already knew a little about her.

Maggie sat on the crumbling wall and Hoagy, after another violent shake, re-ascended to his perch. They sat in silence for a little while looking back at the house through the unkempt garden.

‘Do you ever get lonely, Hoagy?’

‘Lonely? Pah! That’s human stuff.’

‘So you never want friends or anything?’

‘Cats want things all the time – I mean maybe not friends exactly – but the key is that we don’t have any self-pity. We want, we need, but we don’t regret or worry.’

The concrete garages behind the flats next door were

covered in a dense tangle of ivy and other weeds, and from out of the thick covering a little russet fox poked his head. But when he saw Hoagy he changed his mind and disappeared again, or maybe it was because of Maggie. The trees and buildings were starting to fade against the pale sky and a faint moon was just becoming visible above the garages.

‘Thanks for having me in the bath the other night. I may call on you again. It was surprisingly cosy.’

‘Oh, no problem.’

They sat together, letting the dark and cold grow around them. Then after a while Maggie began to feel a freezing wind at her back, as if someone had turned on a powerful fan just behind her. She turned around and looked into the neighbour’s garden. She felt very relaxed and calm just then, and her mind felt very clear.

That was when she saw them for the first time: six balls of light hanging in the air. They were like swirly yellow-white marbles, except they were the size of foot-balls. And they glowed like lanterns, hovering low over the perfectly ordered lawn that led to her neighbour’s perfectly ordered house beyond. Maggie frowned because it seemed much darker over there, like it was somehow night already. Without thinking, she slipped over the wall and moved slowly towards the lights.

As she approached, she had the strangest feeling that they could see her, or at least sense her. Now that she

was closer she saw that their surface was like skin, lots of tiny cells that moved and fluctuated as if these strange balls of light had a pulse – as if they were alive. There was no obvious place where their light was emanating from – no bulb or flame or anything. And they just hung there in the air with no strings or supports. What were they?

Maggie was so curious she forgot to be afraid. She wanted to reach out and touch one, but when she tried something stopped her. Her outstretched hand hit some sort of invisible barrier. It wasn't a block or a wall exactly. It was more like a pulsing feeling that pushed her away when she tried to get close. Suddenly the balls of light clustered together, as if in conference. Then they rose up rapidly and zoomed away into the darkness.

Maggie tried to follow them but she tripped on something. She fell down onto the damp grass beside a child's red plastic car. Suddenly the chill had gone and the sky had got lighter too. She heard the cat purring loudly with amusement from his perch on the wall.

After a moment she realised that a family, nicely ensconced in the warm glow of their open-plan kitchen-diner, was staring at her from around their kitchen table: a mum, a dad, a girl of about ten and a little boy of maybe seven or eight who was scowling furiously at her.

The dad was pushing back his chair to open the door and come out and see what was going on. So Maggie jumped to her feet, made a small embarrassed wave, and



scrambled back over the crumbling wall where the cat had been watching her, a rotund silhouette against the dark-blue sky.

As she hit the ground on the familiar overgrown side, a voice was calling out into the garden, 'Maggie?'

Hoagy's ears pricked up. He walked along the top of the wall, leapt onto the fence, looked back at her for a moment, winked and then disappeared over the other side with a heavy thump.

She could see Aunt Esme at the back door, illuminated with light from inside the flat, her beehive making her look like a chess-piece queen. She ran back to the house through the muddy dusk.

'Maggie?!' Then Esme saw her, waved cheerfully. 'Come in, dearie. I've made some tea.'

Maggie trudged inside. She thought, *I knew this place was weird.*

Later, she lay in a boiling deep bath thinking about the things that had happened. First of all, the one-eyed cat could talk. It wasn't just food poisoning. He really could. And now there were these strange glowing marbles in the back garden, made of skin and hanging in the sky. But some other sky, Maggie thought. Not the one that hung over West Minchen. Somehow they had been somewhere else. But how was that even possible?

She sighed and sank under the lovely warm water for

a moment, then burst out gasping and smoothed her hair back from her face. She was starting to understand why her mum was so obsessed with being normal. What if she turned out like Cynthia? What if she couldn't cope with the world at all? She shook her head to try and get rid of the bad thoughts, but they wouldn't go away.

She got out of the bath, her pale skin all red from the heat, and wrapped one of Esme's scratchy salmon-pink towels around her. Then she smeared away the thick condensation until her face appeared in the mirror. She hadn't bothered to tie her hair up and it hung in dark damp ropes around her face. She thought she looked stupid and boring; plain . . . uninteresting . . . not like Ida.

Ida always looked amazing and wore cool clothes and had her nails painted. She put loads of photos of herself online and she'd add a funny comment or hashtag too to make it seem like she didn't take herself too seriously. And she'd be in great places like in a nice restaurant with her family, or horse riding, or with her cousins, or on holiday beside a turquoise pool with big sunglasses on and a comment: 'My new sunglasses got me like . . .' and then the heart-eyes emoji.

It was pretty lame how much time Maggie had spent looking at these photos since she'd discovered Ida's online account. Now she knew what her parents looked like too. Her mother had the same curly hair. She always looked really fashionable and polished and smiled broadly in

any photo she was in. Her dad looked more like a boring business sort. There was tightness etched round his mouth even when he was smiling. And he wore a big gold watch on his pale hairy wrist.

Almost everyone in her class had a page too; she found them all. Carl, the lonely boy, didn't, and a few other outcasts, but everyone else. She couldn't help but smile at herself in the mirror. Maybe it was just as well she didn't have a phone. It gave her an excuse not to post photos. I mean, what would she put online?

Her wrapped up in a duvet in the pink bathtub freezing to death, #pleaseturntheheatingon #lolnotlol; her rummaging through the latest fashions at Help the Aged on the high street, 'Second-hand shopping got me like . . .' then the big stack of dollar bills emoji; or maybe her sitting in the dark with a talking cat, #imnotweird #dinnerinthe fridge.

Suddenly she burst out laughing.