

X

Lisa woke up after only a few hours of sleep. She glanced at their signal group chat that she had muted. The kids sent so many messages to each other. She couldn't keep up. They were set to disappear in a day unless it was something important. Lisa read these more persistent messages mostly. It had been a few days since they all met. If it wasn't for how the others talked she'd have convinced herself that it real by now. She decided that she was up for the night and got out of bed slowly. Her husband was a light sleeper and needed his rest.

Lisa lingered standing by the bed looking at his silhouette. He didn't know. She hadn't told him. Perhaps she never would. She exited the room. They had picked a place. Apparently Possum was long term house sitting for a couple. It was a small place but he was the only one of us that lived alone. Lisa was glad it was his place. He was the only person she actually knew before the meeting. Her other friends had all left before the real meeting started.

One of them checked in see if she was okay. She gave the appropriate reassurances and they knew better than to ask what happened after they left the meeting. Lisa started her electric kettle still with enough water from the night before. She wished they had stayed. But at least Possum had. He was the least fazed by all of this. The two had met working in a restaurant. There were both dishwashers.

He never treated her like she was older. Sometimes for worse but it was pleasant for a friend to invite you to a protest and not be worried about you breaking a hip. There was something that made her feel alive about that offer. That was her first protest in thirty years. It was a bit hard on her body but it was the start of her getting involved in the community. The next thing he invited her to do was bulk cooking. He was pretty good at making things work with limited ingredients.

It had been a bit over five years since they first met now. She steeped her tea. It was the cheapest black tea she could find and had been drinking it daily for twelve years now. In the past she thought about growing a tea scrub on her balcony. She felt that if she started that now maybe she'd have her first cup of it on her death bed. She felt little desire to out live her husband by more than a few days.

Whatever this thing would lead to, it would be her last hurrah before whatever is next. They were going to meet tonight. She decided she'd make a vegan casserole.

They brought Yano, the tom cat, with them on their drive. And he was having a time being inside. He was older and they worried he wouldn't make it without someone on the land. Cathy

fell in love with him immediately. And was splitting her time cleaning up his messes, preparing the house for her grand baby and courting Yano with slow blinks.

Tom and Valorie were both concerned about the health risk to the newborn once he was ready to come home. Gia agreed and suggested he be a mostly outside cat. That wasn't a popular point of view. Ava was unsure and suggested they have a meeting about it in a group chat. The meeting was quickly named the Elderly Kitty Committee. Ava defaulted to being a casual facilitator without much discussion. She didn't really have a strong opinion other than a solution was needed. Tonight was the last night before the baby would come home.

All were present including Yano who was resting between Cathy and Gia. "Okay is everyone ready to start the first meeting of the elderly kitty committee." Ava, after saying it out loud for the first time, realized that the name was a pun for a very similar discussion some of them had had years earlier.

"Yes I am" Olivia said and everyone else affirmed non verbally.

"So why don't we briefly go around and have everyone share the solution they think is best for Yano and everyone. Anyone want to start?"

It was late morning real time when Danny and Emily unlinked. Their bodies once again needed water and perhaps some food. They only separated when the need for such real time errands arose. It was always such a shame. But they knew that soon they would be doing much more real time errands. While connected they had no access to the outside world. No internet has Aims' kind could manage. Their regular linking increased their awareness of the others mind. Eventually their consciousness would desync and so they would rapidly re-link to sync up.

He filled glasses on water while she was on the toilet then they switched and she drank both glasses and refilled them. Their excrement was black, tarry and smelled awful. He emerged and drank both glasses she filled as she put on some clothes and handed him some of his. They found minor efficiencies in helping the other body get dressed. They brushed their teeth next to one another. It was like a dance. All their movements were.

They grabbed the relay device that was sealed in plastic. The other opened the door. Before stepping through they rapidly re-linked. Catching the others falling body has the re-linking process causes their bodies to go limp. They had practice this many times now.

They considered, to their shared surprise, letting the desync last for a time. To explore what ego separation would be like. It would have to be after they delivered the package to the six tonight. After that it would be time to setup shop in a new city. They could have so much time to further explore them-self. The thought of re-becoming plural did seem exciting in a way. They hadn't

needed to burn since they first linked. Reality flexed but through their shared perception didn't fracture.

They got into the car and began driving. Re-linking while driving was actually easier than while standing. They needed to go shopping before the meeting tonight. Their clothes were spoiled beyond washing, their skins pale almost lifeless, their eyes had deep dark bags and were bloodshot. Their gums were still bleeding from brushing minutes earlier. There were heading to a free store that mostly just gave out clothes. Then they planned to swim in a nearby creek and change into their new clothes.

They had a whole day of body care planned as to appear human to the six. It was less important for Emily's body as she wouldn't appear to them. Though the positive body stimulation was worth it in and of itself. Daniel's face would need some makeup and eye drops though. Without careful mind to details, they could no longer pass as human.

They held a deep love from them-self and their bodies. The real time external world was grotesque and full of danger. Together as one they had found true beauty.

Gia was smoking a hemp flower joint on their back porch. The discussion ended with they tabling the long term plans for their fine furred gentleman. Gia had managed to sway her mom and Valorie partly over to kitty liberation but there was nothing close to consensus.

Ava walked through the backdoor and sat next to Gia. "Can I have a hit?"

"It's just CBD." Gia explained.

"I know" and so Gia passed it to her. "That got a little intense I think" Ava observed.

"We're deciding the fate of a how person's life. It's good we're taking that seriously."

"You mean Yano."

"Yeah who else." Gia said slightly confused. "You did great keeping things running smoothly. Did you have any thoughts on the topic?"

"Well I'm compelled by your points but Olivia's side seems more sustainable. But I'm not sure."

"Why you're such a good facilitator." Gia offered.

"I guess so yeah."

"You legitimately are neutral on so many things."

"Y'all are all pretty smart. I often find myself agreeing with at least one of you."

"But you don't ever disagree with all of us and advocate for your own course of action." Gia said taking another hit.

"It seems like we're not talking about Yano anymore."

"I mean it's a good example but yeah. I'm just realizing it. You always pick a side or are unsure."

"I don't know if that's fair or accurate." Ava asserted.

"Me and Daniel made the plan for springing collectives with egos. Aims opposed much of our ideas and we three found a consensus. You didn't really weigh in all that much."

"I agree with what was being said. I don't know. What are you trying to say Gia?"

"I don't know. Just thinking out loud I guess."

"Are you still worried out the seven that linked with Aims?"

"Nah. Daniel would have messaged if he needed help or if there was a major threat to the plan. And I couldn't find any news story about a weird cult meetings on May 1st in a public library. So whatever happened I think we're in the clear."

"Any chance it like worked you think?"

"I mean with hearing nothing for this long. That means like the most likely possibility."

"That's good." Ava seemed relieved. "So you, your mom, Yano and Olivia are going out to the land to clean up the mess we left."

"Yeah it will certainly be an interesting time."

"Funny how tabling discussion for a week turned into you being out on the land for that week."

"I can be persuasive. Plus I think giving Yano a chance to run away in a place he's familiar is important if it's possible his temporary confinement here could become permanent." Gia rationalized.

"Are you going try to connect with her?"

"Yeah. It'll be hard. The relay is likely mush since we took the hot spot with us. It might still work though."

"And he really never told you where he put Aims?"

"You'd probably know better than me." Gia suggested. "Maybe she's still in that old green van we loaded her tank into."

"That day was so nerve racking. Never been that close to one of those big construction vehicles."

"Yeah that guy has no idea that he was doing brain surgery. He was careful enough for it though. Daniel made a good choice hiring him."

"Well I hope the relay still works." Ava concluded.

"Yeah me too." She said noticing the tension in her stomach relaxing somewhat.

Lisa came early to Possums her casserole and two bottles of pinot noir she felt it would pair well with. She heard talking in the backyard. After knocking and waiting several times she decided to make her way through the back gate. She saw Possum and Ron she believed trying to start a fire. Possum noticed her.

"Hey Lisa did you bring wine?" He asked.

"Yeah. I made food too. It's in the car. It's kind of heavy."

"That is fucking amazing." He sing-said. "Ron brought wood for a fire."

"Yeah I just drove around for a bit and collected branches and brush trimmings." Ron explained as he snapped a branch into a more manageable size and carefully placed it near the delicate, young fire.

"Here let's get that wine chilling." He said moving to the backdoor. "I can help carry in the food."

"That would be lovely." She said. Possum dressed and lived like the punks she admired in her youth. But also tried so hard to be a gentleman in his awkward way. She often found herself quite charmed by him. She never had kids but he would be the grandson she'd hope for.

"So what's new with you Auntie Lisa?"

"Well you'll never believe it but the other day I was on the moon." She jested as they walked through the front door.

"Oh that's cool. I hear it's a great place to practice back flips." He stopped in the lawn. "Watch this." She took a few steps back bemused. Then he did a back flip and raised his hands triumphantly.

"I'm impressed. I didn't know you could do that on earth too."

"I couldn't. Practicing on the moon gave me the muscle memory to do it quicker here."

"That's so wonderful. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks Auntie." He said.

It started as a joke when they were dishwashers. They looked somewhat similar so I guess that was how it started. She didn't really remember. He grabbed her insulated catering bag from her trunk.

"So what do you think she's tell us tonight?" Possum asked.

"You got your phone on you?"

"Nah left it in the house."

"Me too. I think it's going to be the beginning of some mass coordinated action."

"That would be bomb."

"I imagine they have some grand plan to redistribute power and we'll be a small part of it."

"Yeah like maybe their part of an alien federation or somewhat."

"Star Trek but the prime directive involves helping out struggling life." Lisa speculated.

"Yeah that shit would be tight."

Possum set the catering bag on the counter and they return to the fire pit. Possum found a nice camping chair for her to sit in.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" He asked.

"Oh I'll be fine."

"I can make us some tea." He suggested.

"Why that would be lovely."

The fire was burning well now. Ron continued to careful stack stick in a square prism with a few unlit logs resting on each other above the fire.

"You build a lot of fires?" Lisa asked.

"Oh just for fun mostly. Things like this." He was a young seeming 30 something. The type of guy with nothing to lose but hadn't yet regretted not building something with their life.

Everyone arrived one here, two there before the sun had set. Possum's tea was quite good. And it help her some dozing. She stayed in her sit mostly. Only getting up to pee. She enjoyed listening to the excited conversations. She got the texted finally.

"I'm rolling up" the number Daniel had given her read.

"Uh hey everyone." She said the conversations died down quicker than she expected. "Looks like he's here."

"I'll go greet him." Possum offered still in his host mode.

The conversations were softer now. She closed her eyes and felt the warmth on her second mug of tea. The fire was a nice idea. It helped keep the chill out of her bones. Everyone looked toward the backdoor as two figures approached the group. Possum didn't bother saying anything. He just sat down on his spot. Daniel remained standing. In the fire light his face seemed off in some way she couldn't place.

"Is everyone ready for next steps?" His voice raddled out. He must have gotten sick. It was good he was wearing a mask.

Lisa saw that everyone had nodded and all eyes were on her.

Lisa nodded.

"Good."

Emily's body sat in their empty green van. Their perception was linked via a mic Daniel's body was wearing. She kept her eyes closed. Trying hard not to perceive information he couldn't. Neither knew what would happen with a full desync. It hadn't occurred for them to practice. They were realizing that had been a mistake. One body focused solely on Daniel's voice. The other imagined them doing so.