

# Caterwauling

a short story by Karin Luisa Badt

The moon screamed out its light over the waves, which blackened to hide from the shock of the splitting radiance. I was swimming under the moon, watching my arms turn translucent over the black water, as if they were another creature swimming near me, dead to me, while my mind continued to soar into the darkness between the water and the cold air.

Back in my hut, my husband lay dead. I had left him there alone, because to see his stillness seemed wrong to me. I had loved his chest full of warmth, and had, every day of my life, looked forward to what words might come from his lips. He was often wrong, often said things that he had heard and had been too lazy to think about, but he enjoyed repeating things, and observing, and I took enormous pleasure in the innocence of his modest joy.

Sometimes we would have other neighbors in the city for dinner, and I would watch my husband offer his tidbits of observations, and the other men would hide their contempt for his laziness by stealthily looking down at their plates as if they were thinking of retorts to themselves they would never condescend to use.

He had more success with the women, who would enjoy his mistakes as they made them feel comfortable, all except for one woman, Angel who for some reason attacked him at every occasion.

We would be discussing meteorites, and my husband would mention an old Arctic myth about the meteorites producing children with extraordinary voices, to sing at fertility rituals, and Angel would jab her fork in her veal, and say, "That's not it at all. I saw that program on tv. It was a Hun myth, and the rituals were funeral rites, not fertility, and the singers were only the monstrous children born during the meteorite shower."

My husband would say "oh" and stare down in his plate, and wait for another conversation to ensue, when he would try again to tell a story.

For some reason, he insisted on inviting Angel each time to our dinners. He said that Angel amused him, since she was so angular, unlike both of us, who were generally soft people, with gentle ways. Many people came to our dinners.

Nobody besides Angel seemed to mind that my husband was not entirely accurate, nor the fact that he, unlike the others, held a mediocre job in a mediocre university, and had never published a paper.

Angel though was furious. She had married beneath her; her vast knowledge of the world was underutilized. So for my

husband not to have pushed ahead given his wealthy upbringing, his doctorate—infuriated her as a personal injustice.

My husband called Angel his little cat. Sometimes when it was just the three of us in our living room—we had no children--- my husband would reach out for Angel and she would curl up in his lap and begin to giggle. He would stroke her blonde hair and tell her she looked just like a kitten.

I was jealous of these moments; my husband rarely petted me in the same way, because I am not a giggler, nor do I curl up into people's laps, and if someone were to describe me as something it would be more like a tree trunk than a feline.

Angel was ridiculous to us, though, so I assumed when my husband passed his fingers in her hair he was getting the enormous pleasure of feeling stronger than a weak creature, which he rarely had any other opportunity to indulge. I, as director of overseas education at Hunter College, had daily opportunities to manage others, and have things done as I wanted them to be done. But my husband taught his classes and then spent most of his time wandering from social event to social event: readings in the village, teas with friends from college, environmentalist protest groups. He could not stand to be alone.

I had left him alone in our cabin because the night air was so black and fresh, and in the waves, I heard a sound of crinkling that had become louder and louder.

There is no mystery to my husband's death. He simply died an hour ago, after making an observation about the history of tea kettles, and the way the spouts had changed their shape during the Crusades in order to imitate the parabolic form of the holy spirit.

Angel planned to join us at this Mexican beach. She had mentioned she had no funds, her husband bored her, and only people like us—intellectuals, so-called (she actually said this and laughed)—could satisfy her enormous probity.

Angel was coming tomorrow. I predicted her pleasure in seeing my husband dead, although I wondered if her pleasure in winning the competition on who could stay on earth the longest to accumulate facts, would be dampened by her memory of the warm laps that she would no longer have privilege to snuggle against. It would be curious to gauge her reaction.

I dove my head into the water, the water freezing my head, making me remember that it too would one day end, just like my husband back in the cabin, but for now the neurons fired from the shock of cold sea, and in the night I could not see the current, so as I lifted my head free of the water, a current crashed into my mouth and nose and I swallowed sea.

I heard a screaming crinkling sound; it was the waves at night, carrying messages from the stars and the moon, to each other it seemed, as I felt an intruder.

And yet the screaming was entering my ears, and I curled up into a ball and flipped backwards to lose myself in a sensation of whipping motion, my feet as new as a baby's, and I spun as if I did not know that eventually, predictably, I would stop spinning and walk back on the dark beach towards the cabin, and there my husband would be still and quiet, his enormous body, which cheered me so much in life, now a burden.

I found myself on the beach, walking, freeing my footsteps in the sand, and thinking about how upset Angel would be. Perhaps this was my revenge after all, that she would see that she had missed the best of life, the pleasure I had in daily life with him, the softness of our rapport, the nights we spent holding hands and quietly commenting on countries we had read about, or friends we had known in our youth.

She had missed out on this, I thought, my feet cold and sure on the sand.

The ocean screamed behind me, and another scream responded; it seemed to come from high in the hills, from a clump of forest trees, that the local Mexicans called the Range of the Tree Woman. Women who had lost their children, wore a piece of bark on their necks, in hope and prayer that the Tree Women would return their offspring.

My husband and I had had no children because we wanted to leave the world an open space, and felt that by cramming children into it, we would make everything in our own image.

My husband would be happy that he had left the earth so without a trace.

Behind me, my own footsteps had left marks that were hardly human, but round with three lobular circles.

The scream came into the air again, a howl that was both the sound of waves, and the sound of winds thrashing through the trees.

I stopped in my tracks. The scream was big, bigger than everything I was seeing. How was it possible for a sound to become bigger than what one sees? Jacobsen's organ. My husband had once said that cats had this; it allowed them to mix the sense of sight with smelling so what they smelled they saw at the same time, and everything they saw had a smell.

This was the opposite. The ocean seemed to fade its outlines, the moon became a blur of something less distinct than the blackness, and my feet lost their feeling; an enormous scream had taken over the entire universe.

When I opened my eyes, I realized they had been open all along.

The scream had taken over me, and as I tried to walk, my feet did not move, but stayed there, and when I looked back I saw I had hundreds and hundreds of footsteps behind me, and hundreds and hundreds of footsteps in front of me, so I did not know if I had already come forward, or was going backward. The

ocean waves crashed on the beach and ran up to my toes, and when they became wet, I became confused whether my toes had wettened the ocean instead. The only thing distinct for me was the enormous cry, and just beyond the door, my husband's body lying, dead, absolutely dead, there was no awakening him again. As I would go outside in the world, or inside in the world, everywhere I went I would have only inside me and outside of me, myself.

I realized that the footsteps were my own.

And not my own.

A black panther crouched in front of me.

My scream was now mine.