

THE CAT VANDAL

by Fengar Gael

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*“In the cat I see woman
with her ever-changing, sensitive soul.”*
Giacomo Casanova

*“The story of another is a mystery,
and a cat’s soul even more so.”*
Anton Chekhov

*“Familiar spirit, genius, judge, the cat presides -- inspires
events that she appears to spurn, half goblin and half goddess!”*
Charles Baudelaire

*“Of all God’s creatures there is only one that
cannot be made the slave of the lash. That one is the cat.
If man could be crossed with the cat, it would improve man,
but it would deteriorate the cat.”*
Mark Twain

*“Oh, why am I slowly turning into a cat?
Is it Zeus is responsible, tired of my love,
Does he send me outside with the puss cats to rove?
Or indifferent rather, quite sick of it all,
Is he simply letting Hera have her way with a rival?”*
Stevie Smith

CHARACTERS

(an ensemble of two men and six women)

DOCTOR MIRANDA BIRMAN, a behavioral neurologist; age thirty

OMAR FAISAL AL-FAHD, a Syrian born archaeologist; age late twenties

JUDGE LENORE STERLING, a federal court justice; age forties

VICTOR MINSKIN, Omar's defense attorney; age mid-thirties

CONSTANCE CORNISH, the prosecuting attorney; age late thirties

YVONNE CHARTREUX, a French born middle-aged gallerist

YVETTE CHARTREUX, Yvonne's sister, a middle-aged artist

DOCTOR STEPHEN SELKIRK, a pediatrician; age mid-thirties

ALYSSA ANN GEOFFROY, a graduate art student; age mid-twenties

ALBINE, a feline phantom with a cat's head and woman's body

ALBERTINE, a feline phantom with a cat's head and woman's body

COURT CLERK, PARAMEDICS, NURSES

SUGGESTED DOUBLING

CONSTANCE CORNISH / YVETTE CHARTREUX

VICTOR MINSKIN / DOCTOR STEPHEN SELKIRK / NURSE

AYLSSA ANN GEOFFROY / PARAMEDIC / ALBERTINE

JUDGE LENORE STERLING / ALBINE

YVONNE CHARTREUX / NURSE

TIME

the present

PLACE

New York City: A single, stylized set represents a storeroom, courtroom, art gallery, and various offices, apartments, and conference rooms.

(Shadowy lights and skittery sounds reveal a rodent infested storage room in the basement of Bellevue Hospital. A creaking door opens as MIRANDA BIRMAN, a thirty year old patient, enters wearing a robe and carrying a flashlight.)

MIRANDA

(whispering) They'll never find me here!

(MIRANDA scans the room with the flashlight, focusing on dozens of rats.)

MIRANDA

I'd heard Bellevue was infested, but I'd no idea!

(MIRANDA draws a digital voice recorder from her pocket and begins recording.)

MIRANDA

This is the voice of Doctor Miranda Birman speaking before an audience of rodents, specifically of the genus *rattus*, species *norvegicus*. I realize that by most reasonable standards, I'm considered insane, but I once worked in this building, and would still be employed if I hadn't agreed to testify.

(As MIRANDA continues speaking, a gavel resounds, and lights reveal a courtroom where JUDGE LENORE STERLING presides. The accused, OMAR AL-FAHD, bearded and wearing dark glasses, is seated beside his defense attorney, VICTOR MINSKIN. On the opposite side sits the prosecuting attorney, CONSTANCE CORNISH.)

MIRANDA

The defendant was the infamous...

MIRANDA

...Omar Faisal al-Fahd.

JUDGE STERLING

Omar Faisal al-Fahd,...

JUDGE STERLING

...you've been charged with forty-six counts of vandalism to which you've pleaded not guilty by reason of mental disease.

MIRANDA

I was a consultant for the prosecution, and witnessed the trial from the beginning.

JUDGE STERLING

Do you understand that you've chosen to present your case before a judge instead of a jury of your peers?

(OMAR nods.)

JUDGE STERLING

The defense has requested that its opening statement be reserved until the beginning of its case; therefore, the attorney for the prosecution may present her case immediately following her opening remarks. *(to Constance)* You may proceed.

(CONSTANCE CORNISH stands before the JUDGE.)

CONSTANCE

In his statement, Mister al-Fahd claimed to be honoring a prohibition of Islamic Sharia, specifically the law against producing or displaying art which depicts living beings. He has written: "It is blasphemous to use dead materials such as paint and stone to represent creatures of the earth and sky." For that reason, Mister al-Fahd became a self-ordained executioner, a jihadist warrior armed with knives and hammers. Wielding these weapons, he destroyed works of art in museums and galleries from Los Angeles to New York. Since Mister al-Fahd resides here, he knows Americans are free to worship wherever we choose, but museums and galleries are not churches or temples or mosques. They contain paintings and sculptures that he calls irreverent, but are essential to the cultural heritage that belongs to all of us. Yet even if we win this case, even if Mister al-Fahd is imprisoned for life, his is a crime for which there is no reparation. You cannot raise Rubens, Renoir or Degas from their graves; you cannot resurrect the talents of Manet, Matisse, or Van Gogh. They are gone forever; their masterworks damaged beyond restoration. Mister al-Fahd has stolen from history; his is the true blasphemy! Since the defendant has been clearly identified on numerous surveillance videos, there is no doubt of his guilt. He claims to be mentally incompetent, but the expression on his face clearly reveals a man whose brutal slashings and hammerings were premeditated with malicious intent to destroy. We believe these videos constitute sufficient evidence to convict; therefore, the prosecution rests on behalf of the people of New York and everyone everywhere who cherishes the priceless treasures we call art, the paintings and sculptures that show us who we were, who we still are, and what wonders we're capable of creating.

(CONSTANCE returns to her seat.)

JUDGE STERLING

Mister al-Fahd, the state has assigned Mister Minskin to represent you. Now I understand that's proven difficult since you refuse to speak, though you're fluent in English, French, and Arabic. *(pause)* Mister Minskin claims you're mentally incompetent due to fanatical religious indoctrination. Before he presents his opening remarks, I'd like to know if you're still incapable of speaking on your own behalf.

(OMAR opens his quivering mouth.)

JUDGE STERLING

Ah, I see you're attempting to...

OMAR

Meeeeooooooooowwwwwweeeeeooooooooowwwwwwwwwww!!

(OMAR emits shrill, catlike shrieks, then leaps from his chair, bounding about the courtroom!)

JUDGE STERLING

Good god! *(banging her gavel)* Guard! Restrain the prisoner!

OMAR

Eeeeeeeeeooooooooooooooooooooooooowwwwwwwwwwwww!!

JUDGE STERLING

Get him out! Out! Out of my courtroom!

(A GUARD grasps OMAR'S arm, dragging him off.)

JUDGE STERLING

Counselors approach! *(to Victor, lowering her voice)* Either control your client or we'll have to continue without him.

VICTOR

But your honor...

JUDGE STERLING

Sorry, Victor, I hope you don't expect me to declare a mistrial after that performance. I'm going to install a conferencing system so the defendant can observe everything from the prison infirmary.

VICTOR

You think he's putting on an act?!

JUDGE STERLING
Possibly.

CONSTANCE
Yes!

VICTOR
But you saw him: he's in a state of acute anxiety!

CONSTANCE
And shrewd enough to elude the FBI in seven states!

VICTOR
Just because he's smart, doesn't mean he isn't gullible. Some people think being a Sunni Salafis is reason enough to declare him insane.

CONSTANCE
You could say that about all religions. Aren't you a Catholic? Don't you believe in miracles and the virgin birth?

JUDGE STERLING
That's enough; we're not here to argue religion.

VICTOR
Your honor, religion is the crux of my case.

JUDGE STERLING
Fine, we'll hear it when we return. (*standing*) Ladies and gentlemen, court is adjourned until tomorrow so our technicians can set up a video conferencing system.

(The JUDGE and ATTORNEYS stand frozen in time as MIRANDA continues recording from the storeroom.)

MIRANDA
When we returned, the courtroom was packed with police and reporters; cameras were flashing, and the judge was furious, screaming at the...

MIRANDA
...guards!

JUDGE STERLING
Guards!

JUDGE STERLING
(*banging her gavel*) Evict those reporters and everyone with a camera! (*pause*) I'm obliged to announce that during our recess we had several bomb threats, so you're here at your own risk. The police requested that we vacate the building, but this court will not be intimidated! The course of justice in New York City will not be debased because of some fractious zealots! Now the court clerk will activate the conferencing system.

(OMAR is revealed, seated in a Rikers Prison conference room, facing a computer screen.)

JUDGE STERLING

I've been assured that Mister al-Fahd has been medicated, that he's alert and listening. Isn't that right, Mister al-Fahd?

(OMAR nods.)

JUDGE STERLING

(to Victor) Proceed, counselor.

VICTOR

Omar Faisal al-Fahd was born in Damascus, and was exposed to the teachings of the Quran since the age of five. At the age of twelve his family moved to London where Mister al-Fahd was educated and graduated with honors and a degree in archaeology from Cambridge. He then moved to New York to pursue a doctorate from Columbia University. It was there that he was coerced into joining a Muslim enclave where his fanaticism was fueled by hadiths or interpretations of the prophet's words that condemn representations of living beings. Mister al-Fahd's imam explained that the souls of an artist's subjects -- be they humans or animals -- are trapped in the art, so by destroying paintings or sculptures, he releases their souls, which makes him a hero in the eyes of his fellow Salifis. Muslim fundamentalists are not alone in these convictions. Early Christians and Jews also held extreme interpretations of the second commandment against creating or worshipping graven images. The term for such beliefs is "aniconism" and is symptomatic of extreme mental conditioning, the kind that caused the defendant to divorce himself from reality and act in ways we find abhorrent. *(pause)* Has your honor read the psychiatrists' affidavits? All three are willing to testify.

JUDGE STERLING

I've read their statements. There's no need for them to appear -- unless the people wish to cross-examine.

CONSTANCE

No, your honor, but I have a rebuttal witness. The State calls Doctor Miranda Birman.

(MIRANDA has cast off her robe to reveal a business suit. SHE steps forward, holding a file folder, and seats herself.)

CONSTANCE

Doctor Birman is a highly regarded specialist in neurobehavioral medicine. Now Doctor, would you please recount your session with the defendant.

(As MIRANDA speaks, she evokes the past, joining OMAR in the prison conference room. HE speaks with a British-Arabic accent and wears dark glasses.)

MIRANDA

So far I've spent a total of sixteen hours with Mister al-Fahd. During our sessions, he was medicated, slightly agitated, and very talkative. He claimed to be...

MIRANDA
...oppressed.

OMAR
Oppressed,...

OMAR

...I am oppressed by sounds, smells, impulses. They are persistent and (*purring like a cat*) purrrrrnicious, ha, ha!

MIRANDA

We neurologists refer to this phenomenon as "the experience of a sensed presence."

OMAR

No shit.

MIRANDA

It's usually caused when the brain has suffered an intense cranial impact or concussion which occurred when you fell in the gallery. (*pulling photos from a file*) If you look at your CT scans, they reveal bursts of electrical activity in your left temporal lobe as well as the glabella region. It's also conceivable that you're sensitive to low level magnetic fields you might have been exposed to in your work.

OMAR

Bollocks! My condition has nothing to do with concussions or magnetic fields!

MIRANDA

Of course, since you were raised in a religious culture, you're inclined to interpret your experience as...spiritual.

OMAR

What about you, Doctor? Don't Jews have souls and a Day of Reckoning? Don't the wicked fall into fire and the good fly to paradise -- all the pickled herring you can eat!

MIRANDA

What I believe isn't relevant.

OMAR

Ha! What you believe is the *only* relevant thing about you!

MIRANDA

Look, Mister al-Fahd, I'm here to help determine the cause of your symptoms; however, I'm a neurologist, not a psychiatrist.

OMAR

Yes, you treat sick brains, not sick minds, so you won't be calling me a sociopath or paranoid conspiracy freak. My latest shrink said I'm a classic narcissist trapped in delusions of grandeur who has taken a fall. Before I was "The Sunni Slasher," a great internet hero. Now I am a rat-fucking, fleabag stinking pussy who also suffers from identity disorder and acute halitosis. (*blowing*) Is it true?

MIRANDA

(*backing away*) Yes.

OMAR

One of the guards brought me a bag of Kitty Chow -- very funny that! Ha, ha! Tell me, Doctor, have you ever known the intoxication of celebrity? The vain, vulgar addiction to applause?

MIRANDA

No.

OMAR

Have you googled my fan-blogs, Twitters, and Instagrams?

MIRANDA

I've read articles.

OMAR

The F. B. I. sent mug shots to museums and galleries, but lucky for Muslims with beards. We all look alike to you shit-for-brains Americans who detest, demean, and dishonor us!

MIRANDA

I'm sorry you feel that way. Most Americans pride themselves on being tolerant, especially here.

OMAR

Ah, yes, New York, the great melting pisspot, but let us be honest: though we are all descendants of Abraham, an abyss divides us, and Islam will triumph. There are more of us propagating, building our mega-mosques, and praying to Allah. Even here at

OMAR (cont'd)

Rikers, we wake to the voice of a muezzin calling us to prayer. But why am I talking to a woman? What shit-for-brains officials assign a woman doctor and judge to a Muslim man?! So are you married, partnered, shacked up?

MIRANDA

I'd rather not discuss my personal life, but if you'd prefer a male doctor...

OMAR

No, no, now that we have met, I think you will suffice. I know your name is Miranda Birman, daughter of a prosperous bourgeois investor, but you are *not* married. You are a careerist, a go-getter with obligations: bills to pay: the rent, utilities, manicures. I know because I have read profiles of the doctors testifying. So will you say Omar is a chatty cat with his brain on fire?

MIRANDA

You're obviously...articulate.

OMAR

When I am not caged, I frequently consult my computer thesaurus, so in English I am fluent. I am also affluent, but not assimilated like typical bourgeois Americans. So do you think I deserve prison or the lunatic asylum?

MIRANDA

I'm here as a consultant, and I try not to judge my patients.

OMAR

I am not your patient! I am a prisoner, and you are working for the enemy. Perhaps you are one of those liberal Jews who believe even convicts deserve pity, sympathy, the proverbial second chance?

MIRANDA

If you must know, I think what you've done is despicable, but I also believe you're a victim of extreme doctrines.

OMAR

Ha! What about your doctrines of extreme greed, consumption, and military aggression?!

MIRANDA

That may describe some Americans, but most of us respect laws against destroying property that others consider valuable.

OMAR

The human hand was not meant to recreate Allah's creatures! It always fails, and is fraudulent, offensive, perverse, and profane!

MIRANDA

To most people art is a creative response, a tribute, a gift. If you find art so offensive, why did you become an archeologist? Weren't you part of the team that discovered Queen Berenike's temple?

OMAR

Yes, yes, but Berenike lived in Hellenistic Egypt before Christ, before Muhammad, when people were pagans, infidels, worshippers of graven images.

MIRANDA

But didn't you find statues? Weren't they graven images?

OMAR

Over six hundred, all of them cats carved of limestone. Ironic, is it not? Cats seem to be my leitmotiv, my bete noire, my curse, ha ha!

MIRANDA

But you didn't destroy those statues.

OMAR

Because I was not yet a jihadist! Civilizations that existed before Islam were base and idolatrous, but now I know such relics should be destroyed -- the gods and goddesses obliterated, the pyramids razed!

MIRANDA

Please, try to relax, I notice you're trembling.

OMAR

Omar the scaredy cat, ha!

MIRANDA

Why don't you try taking deep breaths. (*pause*) Look, even though I'm here to evaluate you, I...I'd like to help if I can.

OMAR

Do you really mean that?

MIRANDA

Yes.

OMAR

Then shock me! Give me electroconvulsive therapy! Even if you think my feline fixation is self-generated, the medications only keep the cat napping. If you give me E.C.T., my body will convulse and jolt the damn thing out -- zap, crackle, pop the pussy! It may not work, but she will never leave on her own.

MIRANDA

Why not?

OMAR

Because she wants to *use* me -- the sodding bitch! I set her free, but now she wants me to kill the hag who put her there!

MIRANDA

You mean kill the artist?

OMAR

Yes, yes, Yvette Chartreux. She lives with her sister in the Bronx, in a tenement with her stinking cats, but she is moving. Yes, thanks to me she is no longer an obscure pauper eating spam from the can. Now they are calling the bitch a genius, her work a postmodern fusion of romanticism and expressionism -- all bollocks! What rubbish! After all the esteemed art I have damaged, after slashing the priceless paintings of Caravaggio, Goya, and Gauguin, for what do I get imprisoned?! For cracking a fucking bric-a-brac cat! Have you seen it for yourself?

MIRANDA

Only pictures.

OMAR

All her cats are kitsch, frivolous trash patronized by a decadent public. The whole fucking gallery is plagiarized shit -- cats as grids, cats as cubes, cats in neon and formaldehyde. There are even stuffed cats on pedestals -- revolting! Artists have degenerated into rock stars. Who gives a fuck about art? It is the artists they love, and I am the anti-artist they love to hate, ha! You see, Doctor, the mass marketing machines are winning; entire populations are hypnotized into shit-for-brains zombies.

MIRANDA

You hate art, but now you're a critic?

OMAR

Worse! I have made a dilettante into an American idol! Turned grotesque dreck into fucking fetish gold. I pray Allah forgives me. Am I shocking you?

MIRANDA

No, I...I was...prepared. Now I wonder if you'd mind removing your glasses?

OMAR

Yes, I mind! Devout Muslims cannot gaze directly into the eyes of strange women; however, since you asked: my irises are flecked with jade; before they were completely brown. Now they see well in the dark, but are sensitive to light, hence the shades.

MIRANDA

Have you seen an ophthalmologist?

OMAR

Yes, an American idiot.

MIRANDA

So you think the jade came from...?

OMAR

Yes, yes, the she-cat from hell! You still don't believe me, you think I am bonkers, but I know the truth of my condition and what it is teaching me.

MIRANDA

And what's that?

OMAR

From being a cat, I now know how it feels to be a woman.

MIRANDA

Really? So how does it feel?

OMAR

Depressing, pathetic, lamentable. It is amazing you do not commit mass suicide. After all these centuries, what have women done for civilization? Nothing except given birth to men who built the great cities, defined the cultures, religions, and philosophies. Women's misery at their inferiority is infecting every society, especially your own. You keep trying to elevate yourselves, but it is impossible given the nature of your minds and bodies.

MIRANDA

So the cat has made you feel weaker, diminished?

OMAR

Yes, and skittish around men. She prefers attractive women like you, for instance, though you should be married, pregnant -- fertile with life.

MIRANDA

And covered head to toe in a burka? Look, Mister al-Fahd, I think you'd be better off with a male neurologist. There are several I can recommend.

OMAR

No, no, I want you Miranda! You see, my cat and I think you have a sympathetic nature and are a cat lover yourself, yes?

MIRANDA

Well,...yes.

OMAR

So perhaps you will consider E.C.T., and don't tell me there are risks. You only use a small electrical current, so no one dies, and if I did, I would be a martyr, praise Allah. Imagine my obituary: Farewell Omar the Cat, alias "The Sunni Slasher," survived by the fleas on his collar, ha, ha!

MIRANDA

What else would they write?

OMAR

Bullshit, lies. You are not a shrink, so why the questions?

MIRANDA

I'm curious to...understand.

OMAR

Curiosity killed the cat, Miranda, ha, ha!

MIRANDA

I'm going to leave this notebook. It's filled with blank pages in case you want to write your thoughts, your family history, or whatever you wish.

OMAR

I already told the Inquisition. Read my file; you'll see Omar's mother was an English tyrant who preferred his shit-for-brains brother; Omar's father was indifferent -- a total left brain engineer; and the woman Omar courted was a student, an American beauty, a posh glamour puss. When I became serious about Islam, she retreated; when I went to Egypt, she vanished -- poof! -- then reappeared in the arms of my cousin, Jamal, the sodding prick bastard!

MIRANDA

Maybe your attitude towards art has its origins in rejection?

OMAR

Believe what you like. Alyssa abandoned me, and will no doubt grow fat, lazy, and burn in hell. But her rejection is the consequence -- not the cause! -- of my enlightenment. (*shivering*) Fuck! I can feel the medications starting to wear off.

MIRANDA

Shall I call the nurse?

OMAR

Yes, yes, unless you want to feel my tongue.

MIRANDA

What...?

OMAR

Muezza wants to lick you, to thrust her tongue between your legs and lap, lap, lap.

MIRANDA

That's enough, Mister al-Fahd!

OMAR

Call me Omar, sweetheart.

MIRANDA

Guard!!

OMAR

Mue cannot help herself; she is amorous as a Tom, and you are catnip, ha, ha!

MIRANDA

Guard! Let me out! Now!

OMAR

Ha, ha, meeeooooowwww...

(MIRANDA returns to the courtroom where CONSTANCE continues her questioning while OMAR remains in the prison infirmary.)

CONSTANCE

Please tell the court your conclusion regarding the defendant's state of mind.

MIRANDA

Mister al-Fahd's erratic behavioral symptoms are temporary. His physician took my advice and prescribed lorazepam and propranolol for tremors, hypertension, and anxiety. With time and continued medications, he should be functional and cognizant of the consequences of his actions.

CONSTANCE

The question remains: does he belong in a prison or a hospital?

MIRANDA

He belongs in a hospital until his sensations cease.

CONSTANCE

Is there any indication that this is happening?

MIRANDA

Yes, in the past week his computed tomographs or CT scans indicate a return to normalcy; he's regained his appetite; he reads, watches television, and converses with the staff.

CONSTANCE

Thank you, that's all, Doctor.

(CONSTANCE returns to her seat as VICTOR approaches MIRANDA.)

VICTOR

If my client is conversing with you and the staff, why won't he speak with me?

MIRANDA

I really can't say.

VICTOR

Do you think his recent outburst indicates a relapse or a strategy?

MIRANDA

I can only relate my own experience, but he's certainly capable of calculated deceptions.

VICTOR

But isn't it possible that Mister al-Fahd is still suffering from episodes of feeling possessed?

MIRANDA

Yes, and he may until he's completely recovered.

VICTOR

And yet you didn't recommend electroconvulsive therapy...?

MIRANDA

No, as I said, his brain is slowly healing itself.

VICTOR

(pause) Doctor, do you believe that a marble sculpture can contain a malevolent entity?

MIRANDA

No, of course not.

VICTOR

I have the damaged statue right here. What do you see?

MIRANDA

A black marble cat.

VICTOR

If I turn it towards the defendant, he may respond in an alarming manner. If he cries out or cringes in fear, wouldn't you say the statue had an abnormal impact on him?

MIRANDA

Some people have triggers that evoke a terrified, even psychotic response. As long as those triggers are avoided, they can function.

VICTOR

But when the defendant claims to feel possessed, is he being delusional?

MIRANDA

Yes.

VICTOR

So if he's delusional, isn't he suffering from mental disease? *(pause)* Now Mister al-Fahd, is this the statue that you smashed?

(As VICTOR turns the statue towards the video camera, OMAR responds with catlike screeches of terror!)

OMAR

Yyyyiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeooooo!! Yyyyiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeooooow!! Yyyyiiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeooooowww!!

JUDGE STERLING

(banging her gavel) That's enough!! Enough! For god's sake, turn off the screen! Now!!

(OMAR is blacked out.)

JUDGE STERLING

All right, counselor, you've made your point! There'll be no more demonstrations, understood?!

VICTOR

Yes, ma'am, but I'd like permission to recall Doctor Birman.

JUDGE STERLING

Granted. Now court will recess until the defendant has sufficiently recovered.

(Camera lights flashe; the JUDGE bangs her gavel, and MIRANDA'S VOICE is heard as if her recording is being played.)

MIRANDA'S VOICE

Three hours later Omer was tranquilized and we reconvened in the courtroom where the defense attorney called his witness,...

MIRANDA'S VOICE

....Miss Yvonne Chartreux.

VICTOR

Miss Yvonne Chartreux,...

VICTOR

...please tell the court your occupation.

(YVONNE CHARTREUX has seated herself on the witness chair. SHE speaks with a French accent.)

YVONNE

I am the owner and manager of a gallery and gift shop, but we gallerists are also mentors, impresarios, and guides to the aesthetic tastes of our clients. I named the gallery "Le Chat Noir," the black cat, since it is devoted entirely to paintings and sculptures of cats, most of them black, and most the work of my sister, Yvette.

VICTOR

Will you please describe what transpired the week before the night of October seventh?

(Music is heard as YVONNE evokes the past: YVETTE appears in the gallery, waving a note, also speaking with a French accent.)

YVONNE

It was Monday morning when Yvette came into the gallery, exclaiming that...

YVONNE

....someone taped a note to the door.

YVETTE

Someone taped a note to the door!

(YVONNE leaves the witness chair, snatching the note from YVETTE'S hand.)

YVONNE

(reading the note) "The prophet of Allah said it is forbidden to paint creatures of the earth and sky."

YVETTE

That is the third note this week.

YVONNE

Merde! *(Shit!)* Where are the others?

YVETTE

(retrieving the notes) Voici.

YVONNE

(reading) "Angels of Mercy do not enter a house in which there are pictures."

YVETTE

Quel dommage. *(What a shame.)*

YVONNE

(reading) "Beware the Day of Resurrection: souls that were breathed into every picture shall be freed, and the painters punished in the fires of hell." Yvette, this is a threat from a fanatic! Have you called the police?

YVETTE

Non, pourquoi? *(no, why?)*

YVONNE

Ne comprenez-vous pas?! *(Don't you understand?)* These notes say art is evil -- irreverent!

YVETTE

You are overreacting; they are quotations.

YVONNE

Or declarations -- of war! Have you not seen the news!? Fanatiques are looting and destroying art all over the world! I am serious; we cannot ignore this. We must call the police, install new locks and alarms.

(YVETTE stands immobile as YVONNE addresses the JUDGE.)

YVONNE

Then later that evening about five o'clock, Monsieur al-Fahd entered the gallery.

(As YVONNE evokes the past, OMAR enters the gallery, enacting her testimony.)

YVONNE

He was well dressed and strolled quietly past paintings of bombays and tabbies, while Yvette and I were preparing to close.

(OMAR slips a knife from his pocket, and swiftly slashes two canvases.)

YVONNE

We did not notice when he slashed the paintings, but Yvette saw him remove a hammer from his pocket.

YVETTE

Sacré bleu! (*rushing to rescue the statue*) Noooooooo!

YVONNE

Yvette tried to wrestle the hammer from his hand, but he grasped the statue which slipped and fell to the floor. A moment later, Monsieur al-Fahd fainted.

(OMAR faints as YVONNE approaches YVETTE.)

YVONNE

Mon, dieu, qu'est-ce qui est arrivé?! (*My god, what happened?*)

YVETTE

Il détruit Muezza! (*He smashed the cat!*)

YVONNE

Appelez une ambulance! (*Call an ambulance!*)

(YVONNE starts to resuscitate OMAR, pumping his chest while YVETTE speaks on the phone.)

YVETTE

Allo? We need an ambulance! A man has collapsed at Le Chat Noir Galerie!

YVONNE

Dieu merci! He is breathing! (*to Omar*) Allo?

YVETTE

(*into the phone*) Yes, yes, he is breathing, but hurry please!

(As YVETTE hangs up, she spies the slashed paintings.)

YVETTE

Mon dieu, he cut my Burmese!

YVONNE

Un connard! (*The bastard!*) Appelez la police! (*Call the police!*) Wait! First bring the packing tape to bind his hands and feet.

YVETTE

Yvonne, look! Look at his belly!

(YVONNE and YVETTE stare as OMAR'S stomach rises and falls, then HE emits an eerie feline howl.)

OMAR

Meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeooooowww!

YVETTE

(*gasping*) Ahhhhhh!

YVONNE

Merde! (*Shit!*)

(YVETTE departs as YVONNE returns to the witness stand while TWO PARAMEDICS arrive to remove OMAR.)

YVONNE

Later the medics arrived to carry the vandal away.

VICTOR

(holding photographs) Are these photographs of the paintings, and *(pointing)* is this the statue in question?

YVONNE

Oui, monsieur.

VICTOR

Could you please describe the damage.

YVONNE

You can see for yourself: There are chips in the tail and a crack from the tip of the right ear, across the face and chest. The two paintings have razor slits from their throats to their hearts. They are clean cuts, so we are hoping the canvases can be restored.

VICTOR

Have they been appraised?

YVONNE

The statue we call Muezza was worth fifty thousand dollars. The paintings were each worth twenty thousand dollars. With all the publicity there have been many inquiries, which is why we wish them returned as soon as possible.

VICTOR

Now, Miss Chartreux, would you please tell the court your theory concerning Mister al-Fahd's affliction.

CONSTANCE

Objection! The witness is not a doctor.

JUDGE STERLING

Noted, but it's a theory, not a diagnosis. Let's hear it.

YVONNE

As I explained to the reporters, Monsieur al-Fahd's mistake was choosing the wrong statue. When he struck Muezza, her spirit escaped.

VICTOR

So do you and Mister al-Fahd share similar religious beliefs?

CONSTANCE

Relevance, your honor? Do we really have to listen to this?

JUDGE STERLING

I'll let the witness answer.

YVONNE

Yvette and I do not care for the ruling religions of this world; however, Monsieur al-Fahd's "affliction" has confirmed our own...convictions.

VICTOR

So you and your sister believe a cat's spirit is "possessing" Mister al-Fahd?

YVONNE

We are not talking about just any cat, Monsieur. Muezza was a sly hunter and passionate lover. She was feral when we found her, stalking mice in the garden. Because of the new mosque, she was named Muezza after the cat that belonged to the prophet, Mohammed. You may think what you like, but if Muezza cannot be exorcised, she may drive Monsieur al-Fahd to suicide.

CONSTANCE

Objection! Outrageous conjecture on the part of the witness.

JUDGE STERLING

Let's move on, Counselor.

VICTOR

One last question: do you believe the sounds Mister al-Fahd made in your gallery and in this courtroom are the actual sounds of a cat?

YVONNE

Naturellement. Anyone who owns a cat knows what one sounds like.

VICTOR

Your Honor, I have here an audio file of some actual cats. If I may...

JUDGE STERLING

Not necessary; I have a cat of my own. *(to Constance)* Does the prosecution have any questions for this witness?

CONSTANCE

Not at this time.

JUDGE STERLING

(to Yvonne) You may step down, Miss.

YVONNE

Your honor, if I may speak?

JUDGE STERLING

No, you may not.

YVONNE

Please, madame!

JUDGE STERLING

Restrain your witness.

YVONNE

I am not a mere witness; I am a victim! (*approaching the statue*) My sister and I own that cat. It was confiscated without permission, and we want it returned!

VICTOR

Please, Miss Chartreux, this is not the appropriate...

YVONNE

You have stolen our Muezza!

(YVONNE snatches the statue, and marches off as VICTOR follows, attempting to grasp her arm.)

VICTOR

Stop! Put that cat back!!

JUDGE STERLING

Madam, please sit down!

YVONNE

Fous-moi la paix! (*Leave me the hell alone!*)

VICTOR

Give me that; it's evidence!

JUDGE STERLING

(*pounding her gavel*) Restrain that woman! And seize the damn cat!

(VICTOR blocks YVONNE'S exit, and seizes the statue as she kicks him in the leg.)

YVONNE

Merde! (*shit!*) Fils de pute! (*Son of a bitch!*)

VICTOR
Ouch!

JUDGE STERLING
(*pounding her gavel*) Miss Chartreux! Stop this nonsense!

YVONNE
But, madame...

JUDGE STERLING
Silence! One more word and you'll be charged with contempt! You'll get your cat back as soon as this trial is over! Court will reconvene tomorrow morning!

(While JUDGE STERLING and the ATTORNEYS depart, MIRANDA'S recorded voice is heard.)

MIRANDA'S RECORDED VOICE
As I was leaving the courtroom, I felt a compelling curiosity to visit the gallery, so I introduced myself to Yvonne who was eager to give me a tour.

(As MIRANDA'S VOICE continues, she is joined by YVONNE and YVETTE.)

MIRANDA'S RECORDED VOICE
From the sidewalk, it appeared to be an old brownstone with carved lions posed by the door. Inside was a small parlor where Yvonne introduced me to Yvette, who served chocolate...

MIRANDA'S RECORDED VOICE
...bonbons.

YVETTE
Bonbons?

(YVETTE offers a tray of chocolates. MIRANDA selects and devours one.)

MIRANDA'S RECORDED VOICE
They led me through spacious rooms filled with hundreds of paintings and sculptures, some of which resembled the art of the...

MIRANDA'S RECORDED VOICE
...ancient Egyptians.

YVETTE
Ancient Egyptians...

YVETTE
...worshipped cats because they killed the rodents that invaded their grain supplies. The historian, Herodotus, wrote that the penalty for killing cats was death. Like kings, they were buried in sacred plots with their own supply of mummified mice.

MIRANDA'S RECORDED VOICE

Stephen said I may have experienced a transitory...

MIRANDA'S RECORDED VOICE

...dissociative disorder.

STEPHEN

...dissociative disorder...

STEPHEN

...brought on by a repressed fear of being murdered by fanatics!

MIRANDA

But it wasn't...terrible. I mean, I'd no idea I was capable of such...elation! I've had patients who claimed to have such sensations, but how did the floor start spinning, and how did the walls and paintings vanish?

STEPHEN

Where were the sisters during all this?

MIRANDA

I don't know, but when I found myself on the sidewalk, I saw Yvonne waving from the window -- looking like the cat who swallowed the canary.

STEPHEN

Ha, ha! Take my advice: avoid the sisters and skip the trial.

MIRANDA

I can't; I'm supposed to stay available to testify.

STEPHEN

Look at me: you're still flushed; your pulse and blood pressure's elevated. Take a cab home and go straight to bed.

MIRANDA

(she sighs) I shouldn't have told you. I feel like I've diminished the experience by trying to describe it.

STEPHEN

Haven't I been sufficiently sympathetic?

MIRANDA

Maybe I'm losing it...

STEPHEN

It's the publicity, the bomb scares and protestors; you're not used to all the attention.

MIRANDA

So the pressure caused me to hallucinate?! No, I'm sure they drugged me; the chocolates tasted strange.

STEPHEN

But *why* for chrissake?! *(pause)* Do you want to get tested?

MIRANDA

No, it's wearing off. *(pause, she sighs)* At least they were beautiful, like dancing clones of the cat goddess.

STEPHEN

God, I hate cats. They're the psychopaths of the animal kingdom, the least loyal pets, and they kill birds -- millions every year.

MIRANDA

Really? You *hate* them?

STEPHEN

It's their claws and fangs, and when they arch their backs and start hissing -- Christ! They give me the creeps.

MIRANDA

(pause, her voice softening) Well, at least now I can tell my patients I've been there. I'm always suspicious when they ramble on about visions and psychic phenomena. Of course, I could see their prefrontal cortexes light up and their superior parietal lobes go dark, so I assumed their internal chemistries were affecting neurons...

STEPHEN

Beam down, Randy, you're babbling. Look, if you're going back to testify, you've got to stay focused and concentrate.

MIRANDA

It's strange, but I...I keep having this thought. *(pause)* It started on my way here. I was running, staring at my feet, when it occurred to me that I'd made a huge mistake, that I chose to become a doctor, but was really meant to spend my life dancing.

STEPHEN

It's a little late for that.

MIRANDA

Then why is it that all I want in the world is to hold hands and dance?

STEPHEN

Sorry, I have patients waiting.

MIRANDA

Please, Stephen! Just a quick pass around the room.

STEPHEN

You're kidding, right?

MIRANDA

It will only take a minute.

STEPHEN

I can't; I've got a kid with a raging case of hives.

(Suddenly ALBINE and ALBERTINE appear, and MIRANDA gasps, backing away.)

MIRANDA

Oh, god!

STEPHEN

What...? What's wrong?

MIRANDA

They're here. *(pause, blinking)* I mean, I...I'm seeing... *(pointing)* over there. It's nothing, right? Just one of my...my migraines.

STEPHEN

Right. *(embracing her)* Hey, kid, get a grip; go home, get some sleep. Now I've really got to run.

(STEPHEN kisses MIRANDA and departs, leaving her facing ALBINE and ALBERTINE.)

MIRANDA

(whispering) Go away! Leave me alone! Scat! Scat!!

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Meeeeeeooooowwww...

(Lights dim as ALBINE and ALBERTINE depart and MIRANDA speaks into her voice recorder.)

MIRANDA

They followed me home, and watched me undress, shower, and crawl into bed while they settled on the carpet. By the next morning they were gone, and I was so relieved, I arrived at the courtroom feeling almost normal -- except lighter on my feet.

(The court reconvenes with JUDGE STERLING, VICTOR, and CONSTANCE while OMAR remains seated in the prison conference room.)

JUDGE STERLING

I'm obliged to inform you of further bomb threats and my determination to carry on. Everyone seated in this courtroom is free to leave the building at any time.

MIRANDA

That was the moment I should have left and never looked back, but that's when the defense called...

MIRANDA

...Alyssa Geoffroy.

VICTOR

Alyssa Geoffroy.

(ALYSSA GEOFFROY, a striking woman of twenty-five enters and seats herself. Then VICTOR approaches the witness stand.)

VICTOR

You were dating the defendant, Mister al-Fahd, is that correct?

ALYSSA

Yes, we were students at Columbia; we met through a mutual friend.

VICTOR

Can you tell us what transpired to transform a promising archaeologist into a radical Islamist?

ALYSSA

It was the influence of the imam at his mosque. He was coercing his followers to become more devout, and I think he filled Omar's need for an authoritative male.

CONSTANCE

Objection! The witness is not a psychiatrist.

JUDGE STERLING

Sustained.

VICTOR

Then please tell us how the defendant's behavior towards you changed.

(As ALYSSA evokes the past, jazz music is heard,
and OMAR appears as a student holding the Quran.)

ALYSSA

We were in my apartment when Omar gave me a copy of the Quran and announced,....

ALYSSA

...It's time I cease drinking.

OMAR

It's time I cease drinking.

OMAR

(reading) "For you who believe: with intoxicants and gambling, Satan seeks to incite hatred and enmity, and distract you from Allah and prayers."

ALYSSA

He didn't seem to care that I still drank wine, but a few weeks later while we were studying, he asked me to...

ALYSSA

...turn off the music.

OMAR

Turn off the music.

ALYSSA

(approaching Omar) I'll lower the volume.

OMAR

I am sorry, Alyssa, but it irritates, grates and generates vexation.

ALYSSA

What if I play something else? A baroque string quartet? Or what about those atonal flutes? We could belly dance.

OMAR

Please, be serious!

ALYSSA

You know, every time you go to that mosque, it takes days to melt the ice in your veins. What do you do there?

OMAR

We read verses of the Quran, then discuss the hadiths of the prophet.

ALYSSA

What fun.

OMAR

Why the sarcasm? We are seeking to become enlightened, to aspire to shahada. There are separate meetings for women if you are interested. And Alyssa, there is another favor I have been hesitant to request: Would please remove those paintings from your walls -- the nudes.

ALYSSA

What...?

OMAR

I find them distracting and...disrespectful.

ALYSSA

“Disrespectful?!” You’re not serious...? I’m studying art, Omar; this is my vocation, my future. If you don’t approve, then tough shit! Go home!

OMAR

We can meet at my apartment.

ALYSSA

But what if we stay together? Am I not supposed to hang my paintings in my own home?

OMAR

Not if they depict Allah’s creatures, not in rooms I enter.

ALYSSA

I can’t believe what I’m hearing?! Are you crazy?! Soon you’ll be asking me to cover my head and walk three paces behind. I’m not your slave!

OMAR

No, of course not, though it is not unreasonable for devout Muslim women to wear hijab -- and please, stop swearing!

ALYSSA

Hey, Omar, this is me you’re talking to: a New Yorker who believes in liberty, equality, and the pursuit of high fashion.

OMAR

What about the pursuit of transcendence?

ALYSSA

You knew when we met, I wasn't religious, and I'll wear whatever I want whenever I want!

OMAR

A pity that. Sometimes men are possessive; we do not want lewd, lecherous infidels leering at our women.

ALYSSA

Okay, here's the deal: If you shave your beard, I'll take down my paintings.

OMAR

Never, that is not possible.

ALYSSA

Exactly, which is why this is never going to work. You have this awesome potential, but you want to live in the the seventh century, and I don't. What do you see in me anyway?

OMAR

Everything: your voice, your vitality, your intellect; American girls are very...alluring.

ALYSSA

But what you really want is a Muslim girl.

OMAR

Nonsense, I will continue to compromise, to compartmentalize: Omar the Muslim, and Omar the urbanite, the cool tool about town.

ALYSSA

What about Omar the archeologist? What happens when you dig up relics that resemble people? Won't Allah be offended?

OMAR

Perhaps, and my imam has suggested I may be mistaken in my vocation.

ALYSSA

Oh, really?! How dare he! It's time you found a new imam 'cause this guy's poison. Don't let him dictate your future! Your life!

OMAR

But what if he is right? What if archeologists are thieves, grave robbers, poking our picks where they do not belong. The hubris of assuming the treasures we find belong to us simply because we find them.

ALYSSA

That's ridiculous! Everything you dig up adds to our knowledge, our history -- you know that! Omar, you have a full scholarship; you're about to embark on a great adventure. How can you even think of throwing that away?!

OMAR

Yes, yes, but that does not prevent me from feeling that I may have stepped on the wrong trolley. For now I must pray to Allah for guidance, to keep my mind open.

ALYSSA

Great, and while you're at it, keep your mind open to other relationships. I'm serious, Omar, while you're in Egypt, let's consider dating other people.

OMAR

I will only be gone for two months, and who can I meet beneath the streets of Alexandria?

ALYSSA

Won't there be other women around?

OMAR

None as smart or seductive. (*grasping her hand*) We have something so precious, Alyssa. Your body is heaven to me, your skin and hair and lips are perfection, the pastures of paradise.

ALYSSA

Isn't paradise already crowded -- with seventy virgins?

OMAR

Seventy-two, to be precise, but on earth there is only you. Come here, please come here.

(OMAR kisses ALYSSA who responds, then turns to the courtroom to continue her testimony.)

ALYSSA

(*to the judge*) After Omar left for Egypt, his cousin, Jamal, and I started dating. I tried to explain on the phone and in E-mails, but when Omar returned, he insisted on meeting. He said,...

ALYSSA

...we are acting hastily.

OMAR

We are acting hastily.

OMAR

We need more time, more understanding. Perhaps I am socially inept, but I am certain we could form a harmonious union.

ALYSSA

I don't think so. I'm sorry.

OMAR

But why choose my cousin, Jamal? Why him?!

ALYSSA

You're the one who introduced us.

OMAR

A mistake that!

ALYSSA

He told me that when you were a boy, you were a talented artist. He said you could draw anything, especially portraits.

OMAR

Fuck Jamal! What does he know?

ALYSSA

He also said that your parents divorced when you were ten.

OMAR

Yes, my father did whatever he pleased. He fell in love, and had no feelings left to waste on conjugal or parental duties.

ALYSSA

Why didn't you tell me any of this?

OMAR

Why should I? My father's life is a great success. Women worship him, so he has never known the grief of rejection. My mother laid her heart at his feet and he trampled it -- fin, finito, end of story!

ALYSSA

Jamal said she was bitter.

OMAR

To hell with Jamal! I'll kill the prick bastard! He is a cowardly lecher with no moral scruples who steals another man's woman!

ALYSSA

I'm sorry, Omar, but...

OMAR

He will never love you the way I do! You think Jamal's a liberal, but trust me, what he really wants is for you to be cooking, cleaning, and trailing him like a mongrel dog. You will waste your education, your talent, your life!

ALYSSA

Maybe we should end this conversation.

OMAR

And maybe you should go to hell! You are killing me.

ALYSSA

I'm sorry.

OMAR

Stop saying you are sorry!

ALYSSA

(pause) Listen, Omar, I...I really tried, I even started reading the Quran you gave me. In fact, I've marked some passages. *(pause, reading)* This is from "The Chapter of the Unbelievers: Say o' unbelievers, I will not worship that which ye worship. Ye have your religion and I have my religion." Now that's very tolerant, and I don't have a religion, but if I did, I'd worship at the temple you uncovered. At least that cat goddess loved women and dancing....

OMAR

And orgies! The Bastetites were hedonistic drunkards! Today we have evolved: Muslims, Christians, Jews -- we all have the same God, and Mohammed is his messenger.

ALYSSA

Mohammed was a warlord and polygamist!

OMAR

A man of his time.

ALYSSA

And I'm a woman of mine! And I won't live without art or wine or music! Now here's another little gem: (*reading the Koran*) "Say 'o true believers, forbid not the goodly things which God has allowed you..."

OMAR

"...but transgress not! For God loveth not the transgressors!"

ALYSSA

Okay, fine, have it your way, but be careful or someday you'll be strapping a bomb on yourself!

OMAR

How dare you?! You know nothing! You lack the intellect, humility, or wisdom to comprehend Islam! You are a vain, pathetic woman, and I cannot believe I wasted months of my precious life in your company!

ALYSSA

Look, Omar...

OMAR

You've become a slut! A wanton whore! Your extinction and the extinction of women like you would definitely benefit the human race!

(OMAR marches off, returning to the prison infirmary to observe ALYSSA'S testimony.)

ALYSSA

A few weeks later, Jamal told me Omar left Columbia. He decided digging up relics was offensive to Islam and became a translator. Then I didn't hear from him until he was arrested.

VICTOR

So you believe the change in Mister al-Fahd was due to the influence of his imam.

ALYSSA

It was like he was under a spell. I think the culture of his childhood and the mosque kept him emotionally immature and susceptible...

CONSTANCE

Objection!

JUDGE STERLING

Sustained.

VICTOR

One more question: you've told us why the defendant was attracted to you, but can you tell us why you were attracted to him?

CONSTANCE

Objection! Relevance.

JUDGE STERLING

Overruled; the witness may answer.

ALYSSA

Well, at first I think I was charmed by his smile and his...hands.

(As ALYSSA speaks, OMAR curls his hands into paws and licks them.)

ALYSSA

His fingers are long and slender -- perfectly sculpted. It's easy to believe he was once an artist. He was well read and romantic in an old fashioned way, bringing me flowers, books, and he seemed more mature than the Americans I dated.

VICTOR

I'm through with this witness.

JUDGE STERLING

(to Constance) Your turn, Counselor.

CONSTANCE

Miss Geoffroy, during your relationship, did the defendant ever behave like a cat?

ALYSSA

No.

CONSTANCE

Was he ever violent? Did he ever strike you?

ALYSSA

No.

CONSTANCE

After you broke up, did he stalk you with phone calls, text messages, or follow and harass you in any way?

ALYSSA

No.

CONSTANCE

Then he wasn't obsessive or obnoxious?

ALYSSA

No.

CONSTANCE

So he behaved like a reasonable man, reconciled to the end of your relationship, and left you in peace.

ALYSSA

Well,...yes.

CONSTANCE

That's all, thank you.

(ALYSSA and CONSTANCE depart as MIRANDA continues recording.)

MIRANDA

The Judge called a recess, and as we started to leave I spied the beasts waiting outside the courtroom. That when I ran all the way to the gallery and confronted Yvonne!

(MIRANDA is at the gallery, approaching YVONNE.)

YVONNE

Bonjour, ma chérie. You are not looking well.

MIRANDA

(whispering) I'm not! I'm scared out of my wits! I'm being followed by two cat-faced ghouls! *(pointing)* They're right here, next to me. Can you see them?

YVONNE

No, but tell me, are they black?

MIRANDA
Yes!

YVONNE
Are they sleek and slender?

MIRANDA
Yes!

YVONNE
With the faces of cats but the bodies of nymphs?

MIRANDA
Yes, yes!

YVONNE
Ah, they must be Albine and Albertine, feline phantoms who escaped the paintings that were slashed.

MIRANDA
You're sure you can't see them?

YVONNE
No, but why don't we ask their names to to be certain who they are. Now where are they?

MIRANDA
(pointing) Right here!

YVONNE
C'est votre nom Albine?

ALBINE
(nodding) Meeeeooooooooowwww...

MIRANDA
Yes!

YVONNE
C'est votre nom Albertine?

ALBERTINE
(nodding) Meeeeeeeeooooooooowwww...

MIRANDA

Yes! Did you hear them?

YVONNE

No, but how fortunate you are -- to glimpse their secret souls.

MIRANDA

Just tell me how to get rid of them!

YVONNE

For that you will have to consult Yvette. She is not just an artist; she is also a priestess, clairvoyant, connoisseur of the arts, and epicure of the senses. You can find her in the studio, behind the gallery, but she is very upset. You may have heard: radicals have issued a fatwa on Yvette, so the police are standing guard.

MIRANDA

Are you serious? Since when?

(YVETTE enters having eavesdropped.)

YVETTE

This morning. The soldiers of Allah want my head.

MIRANDA

I...I'm sorry.

YVETTE

Please sit. May we offer you some café au lait or vin rouge?

MIRANDA

No thanks.

(YVETTE pours wine into glasses and a saucer she sets on the floor.)

YVETTE

This is for Albine and Albertine. I am so glad you found them.

MIRANDA

No, they found me! If you're following the trial, you know I'm a doctor with patients who depend on me, so if you can make them disappear, please do!

YVETTE

I would if I could see them.

MIRANDA

(glancing about) Damn, they must be hiding! Where are you?! I know you're here!

YVETTE

(pause, sipping wine) It is always a question of perception -- shapes shifting, planes intersecting. They choose when to make themselves visible.

MIRANDA

But why me?!

YVETTE

Albine and Albertine are not merely cats; they are the spiritual spawns of the goddess herself, half human, half Burmese, so they respond to feral odors, the spell of charms, the attraction of the mystical, the pull of the perverse.

MIRANDA

But I'm not mystical, or perverse, and they're affecting me! It's embarrassing to find myself dancing at inappropriate times, and...

YVETTE

Yes...?

MIRANDA

I'm drawn towards patches of light.

YVONNE

Ah, tell us, do pigeons flee when you approach?

YVETTE

Shush! Yvonne likes to play the comedienne, but do not distress yourself. Please sit, Miranda, you look faint.

MIRANDA

(seating herself) You know, I...I think I would like a glass of wine.

(YVETTE hands Miranda a glass already poured.)

MIRANDA

Look, Miss Chartreux...

YVETTE

Call me Yvette.

MIRANDA

I was raised in an ordinary Jewish home to be an ordinary woman with a career, a husband, and a family.

YVETTE

I would not call you ordinary; you have the grace of a ballerina.

MIRANDA

But I'm a neurologist!

YVETTE

Yes, I read your testimony -- totally false and misguided! You ignore the essentials -- ah, voila!

MIRANDA

You see them?!

(ALBINE and ALBERTINE have appeared, and start lapping the wine in the saucer.)

YVETTE

I am not getting a precise focus, but yes, yes! They are manifesting! Bonjour, Albine! Albertine!

YVONNE

Bonjour, mes belles!

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

(lapping wine from the saucer) Meeeeewwwwoooooo...

MIRANDA

(to Yvonne) Now you see them too?

YVONNE

Mais oui.

YVETTE

(tiptoeing around Albine and Albertine) They possess such mystery and cunning. Like mortal cats, they tend to move swiftly, then suddenly stop to stare -- at what? Floating objects from dimensions we cannot perceive?

YVONNE

Like all cats, they love to play, then find the softest chairs to nestle in.

YVETTE

It is curious their dread of water, and how their eyes absorb light by day and emit light by night.

MIRANDA

Some people detest cats.

YVONNE

Non!

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Meewwwwww...

MIRANDA

They think they're manipulative, bird-killing psychopaths.

YVONNE

Mon dieu, not you?

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Sssssssssssss...

MIRANDA

Just make them go away!

YVETTE

First, I must go through my collection of urns. You see, they are filled with fragrant ointments, and ethereal catnips that attract the spirits of strays.

(YVETTE appears to pull urns from her smock as if by magic.)

YVETTE

This urn holds a Siamese, and this holds a hairless sphinx, a stunning beast!

(YVONNE stands by YVETTE who brings forth another urn, uncaps it, then chants as an ethereal hum is heard:)

YVETTE

Oh, benevolent Bastet, divine daughter of Ra, wife of Ptah, and mother of Mehos, Mistress of the Sistrum, hear my prayer: Aaaayyyyyyeeooooow...

(YVONNE joins YVETTE, ululating an eerie harmonic chant that turns into a catlike yowl.)

YVETTE and YVONNE

Eeeeeooooooooooooowwwww...

(ALBINE and ALBERTINE begin vibrating, and are drawn towards YVETTE, then leap back, screeching!)

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Yyyeeeeooooooooooooowwwww!!!

MIRANDA

What's wrong?

YVETTE

They are not ready to leave.

MIRANDA

Then make them ready!

YVETTE

Cats are not dogs; they have minds of their own! Come back next week.

MIRANDA

Next week?!

YVETTE

Think of it this way: you will not be lonely.

MIRANDA

I'm not lonely now! I have a fiance; I'm getting married next month.

YVETTE

I would not bet the ranch.

MIRANDA

What...? Why not?

YVETTE

The details are not forthcoming.

YVONNE

Ahhhh.

MIRANDA

Oh, great, so now you're a fortune teller!

YVONNE

Yvette is descended from priestesses dating back three thousand years.

MIRANDA

How can she know that?

YVONNE

Under hypnosis, she discovered her spiritual ancestry. Bastet is not only the cat goddess of song and dance, but also of essential oils.

YVETTE

Many of us mourn the passing of the female deities. Do you ever wonder if our phenomenal world is only an illusion conjured by a fallen goddess?

MIRANDA

No, never.

YVONNE

Yvette and I believe the wrong cultures have survived.

MIRANDA

I see, and you're planning a resurrection?

YVONNE

A revolution! We plan to return to Egypt to build new temples.

YVETTE

Temples of learning near fresh water wells, fruitful farms, and homes for the abused and abandoned.

MIRANDA

That's very...ambitious.

YVETTE

I can afford to be -- thanks to The Sunni Slasher, which is why I wish to remedy his... condition.

MIRANDA

Are you serious? He wants to kill you!

YVETTE

He will recant. In the meantime, he has made us rich enough to expand the gallery, have groceries delivered, new baubles, new buyers, commissions, excessive praise...

MIRANDA

And a fatwa on your head! He hates your art; you should hear him -- he's brutal!

YVETTE

Everyone's a critique, n'est-ce pas?

MIRANDA

He said Muezza wants revenge!

YVONNE

What nonsense! Muezza was a shrewd, affectionate creature, an exquisite Egyptian mau. To be candid, we think it will improve Monsieur al-Fahd to be possessed by Muezza. He should take advantage of his new perspective.

YVETTE

But poor Mue: to think she has thrown her spirit inside such a hostile host.

MIRANDA

Omar isn't just hostile; he's terrified.

YVETTE

You call him Omar? You find him attractive?

MIRANDA

No! God no.

YVONNE

Then why are you blushing?

MIRANDA

I'm not; he's...contemptible!

YVETTE

That is no reason to refrain from easing his suffering. Now listen, Miranda: in cases of possession, I anoint the victim's head, but since I cannot meet him, you will have to do it.

MIRANDA

Me?! Why can't you?! You're not a prisoner here, are you?

YVETTE

For now, yes -- for the crime of my graven images. The jihadists claim it is my vengeance on Islam for my circumcision.

MIRANDA

(pause) I...I'm sorry; I didn't know.

YVETTE

Why would you? You see, Yvonne and I were born in Al-Jizah, near Cairo, where clitoridectomies were de rigueur. When father passed away, our mother remarried and moved to Paris where they do not perform barbaric rituals.

YVONNE

Or want us shrouded like the walking dead. That is the ultimate desecration: the utter defacement of women. Now look out our windows at the women of New York: How I love to see their hair flowing free, their arms uncovered, chattering on phones, texting and traversing the Internet that will never cease unveiling the world.

YVETTE

(pause) Now Miranda, back to business: despite your testimony, Mister al-Fahd will be found incompetent. He will be taken to a psychiatric facility, and if you remain his doctor, *(handing her a small urn)* you can take this ointment to exorcise Mue.

MIRANDA

But I'm *not* his doctor; I'm just a consultant.

YVETTE

After the trial, you could continue to see him, yes?

MIRANDA

Well, yes, I...I suppose...

YVETTE

Bien! *(handing her a card)* Here are the instructions.

MIRANDA

But what am I supposed to do about *(pointing to Albine and Albertine)* them?

YVETTE

Be patient. External entities require special prayers, coercion, and more research. Come back next Tuesday.

MIRANDA

What do mean "more research?" You've done this before, right?

YVETTE

Each case is different.

MIRANDA

Oh, great. *(pause)* I have to leave, but are you aware that you have rats? *(pointing)* There's a nest in that wall over there.

YVONNE

Merde!

MIRANDA

And there's more under the hedge by the entrance.

YVETTE

You see, my dear, your phantoms have expanded your senses.

MIRANDA

(gesturing to Albine and Albertine) They track them everywhere: in shops, cellars, subway stations, skittering under bushes -- it's disgusting!

YVONNE

Yes, but in New York you could be useful, ha, ha!

MIRANDA

Right...

YVETTE

Come back in a week!

YVONNE

Au revoir, Albine! Albertine!

YVETTE

Bonne chance, Miranda! *(Good luck, Miranda!)*

(ALBINE and ALBERTINE follow MIRANDA who continues recording while approaching STEPHEN.)

MIRANDA

Later that day I made the mistake of confiding in Stephen who suggested...

MIRANDA

...a vacation.

STEPHEN

A vacation!

STEPHEN

We'll reschedule our patients. We'll leave tomorrow, drive to Nantucket, then drown your damn cats in the ocean.

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Sssssssssssssssssssssssss...

MIRANDA

I told you I can't, and stop threatening them. It upsets them.

STEPHEN

Good. I'm thinking of getting a dog, a pit bull who eats cats for lunch. Grrrrr...

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Yeeooooooooooooooooowwwww...

MIRANDA

That's not funny!

STEPHEN

You're right. In fact, it's scary as hell, and it's time you scanned your own brain -- then make an appointment with Adam Toyger.

MIRANDA

You think I need a psychiatrist?

STEPHEN

Don't you? By now any normal person would be checked into a clinic.

MIRANDA

Nobody's normal anymore. We're all addicted to gadgets that distract and alienate us. At least I'm still functioning, and if you must know, my brain's already been scanned. There's only slight heightened activity in the striatum and hippocampus.

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Meeeeooooooooooooooooowwwww...

MIRANDA

Shush! You've no idea what it's like to be stalked. They even follow me to bed.

STEPHEN

Where are they now?

MIRANDA

(pointing) There. At least Yvette and Yvonne see them.

STEPHEN

Or so they say.

MIRANDA

You think they're lying?! Humoring me?! *(pause)* So tell me, Stephen, if they're not real, what are they? You always have a theory -- let's hear it.

STEPHEN

(pause) You once told me you had cats during your idyllic childhood, when you reigned as the adored princess who danced in school plays. Now you're thirty and realize your artistic longings aren't being fulfilled by your work, so you've...

MIRANDA

What...?!

STEPHEN

Somehow your creative mind's conjured symbolic feline guardians.

MIRANDA

(staring at Albine and Albertine) So they're symbolic? Like the animals in allegories...?

STEPHEN

Or nostalgic projections, but maybe what you're really having is a unique mid-life crisis -- only it's coming early.

MIRANDA

(pause) It's true, I don't always feel fulfilled, but who does? The trouble is, I don't just see them, I...I feel compelled to mimic their movements.

STEPHEN

So you're a copycat?

MIRANDA

That's not funny!

STEPHEN

Look, you're not a cat! If anything you're more of a draft horse like me. We're doctors, technologists. Look at me, Randy, do you really think you'd be better off if you'd pursued dancing? Don't you like what you do?

MIRANDA

Not always. With the latest CT scans, I can see the exact location of my patients' thoughts and compulsions, but nobody knows how or why they occur, and it's frustrating when I can't help them. Still, I'm not sorry the mind remains a mystery. We can't just be defined by neurons and synapses. It may be possible for consciousness to be spiritual and lasting, that there are dimensions we'll can't yet fathom. I have a colleague who scans the brains of monks who meditate so deeply their superior parietal lobes appear completely dark. That's the region that tells us where the body stops and the rest of the world begins, but what if it's where reality stops and illusions begin?

STEPHEN

Or where Miranda stops and her cats begin?

MIRANDA

(pause) I saw a cartoon ridiculing Omar as a victim of cat scratch fever, and I thought how we're both victims, only he's possessed from within and I'm possessed from without.

STEPHEN

And you're a decent, law abiding citizen, and he's a despicable troglodyte! Besides, he's not a victim. He was privileged and educated, and crossed over to the dark side of his own free will! Don't let the bastard take you with him!

MIRANDA

No, of course not, but Yvette has asked me to...to help him -- after the trial.

STEPHEN

You refused, right?

MIRANDA

Well, not exactly...

STEPHEN

Jesus, Randy!

MIRANDA

Don't you have any sympathy...?

STEPHEN

No, none! I might if he was a looter or a thief. At least a thief sells the art, but a vandal completely destroys it and deprives future generations. Someone should tell the bastard that his afterlife scenario's all wrong. Instead of nubile virgins, all the souls of all the artists whose work he destroyed will be having a party -- to celebrate his descent to hell!

MIRANDA

He's already there. The last time I examined him, I noticed extreme activity in the anterior cingulate cortex which...

STEPHEN

To hell with his cortex! He's fucking toxic; he belongs in a cage! Don't you get it, Miranda?! This guy and people like him want to exterminate people like you.

MIRANDA

You mean...Jews?

STEPHEN

Yes, and anybody who doesn't think the way they do! They've ruined our lives, turned our country into a security-obsessed police state, and I fucking hate it!

MIRANDA

(pause) Maybe we both need a vacation. *(she sighs)* Some days I feel like giving up, hanging up my shingle. I'd stop being of any use to anyone, except I can detect the presence of... *(sniffing)* there's a mouse in this room!

STEPHEN

Don't be silly.

MIRANDA

I'm serious. *(pointing)* Behind that table; look for yourself.

(ALBINE and ALBERTINE precede STEPHEN who peers behind the table, then leaps back in horror.)

STEPHEN

Jesus!

MIRANDA

Ha, ha, ha, ha!

STEPHEN

Stop that! Get hold of yourself!

MIRANDA

You're afraid of mice! Ha, ha, ha!

STEPHEN

I'm calling the exterminator!

MIRANDA

Don't bother, I'll get him. *(scooping up the mouse, stroking its head)* There, there, now, no need to be frightened. It's only a baby.

STEPHEN

Don't touch it; they're full of bacteria!

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

(approaching) Meeeeeooowww...

STEPHEN

Throw it out the window!

(MIRANDA lifts the mouse by its tail, holding it above her head, and slowly opening her mouth.)

STEPHEN

Jesus, Randy! What are you doing?!

(MIRANDA starts to lower the mouse towards her mouth.)

STEPHEN

Nooooo, don't! Stop!!!

(STEPHEN flees the room while MIRANDA pockets the mouse and speaks into her recorder as lights illuminate the courtroom where JUDGE STERLING, VICTOR, CONSTANCE, and OMAR are seated.)

MIRANDA

I pocketed the mouse and went home, and the next day I tried to ignore my feline followers because I was summoned to the courthouse where the defense attorney called...

MIRANDA

Omar Faisal al-Fahd.

VICTOR

Omar Faisal al-Fahd,...

VICTOR

...please take the stand.

(OMAR walks to the witness stand.)

VICTOR

Mister al-Fahd has been medicated and wishes to speak on his own behalf. Now please explain your decision to vandalize art depicting humans and animals.

OMAR

First I wish to apologize to the court for my outbursts during this trial. It was not my intention to disrupt the proceedings and make a spectacle of myself. Now to answer your question: I believe my calling as a jihadist began in Alexandria. Our archaeological team was headed by Doctor Zahi Hawass, and perhaps your honor has seen photos of the hundreds of limestone cats, though they do not convey their singular, awesome effect. However, as we were unearthing these statues, my mood shifted from elation to vague unease, then dread, followed by heart pounding, flop-sweating fear, but why? What was happening? Were we disentombing, dusting, sorting and photographing primal objects? Were these statues capable of unleashing dark forces into the world? Most educated Muslims do not believe such things possible, but whatever occurred in that temple, I did not emerge unscathed. Still, we Muslims believe that suffering can lead to enlightenment, and beholding those statues made me realize the truth of the hadiths that claim it is sacrilege to make Allah's creatures into objects.

VICTOR

But you didn't harm the statues from the temple.

OMAR

The exact nature of my mission had not yet manifested itself.

VICTOR

And when did that occur?

OMAR

Back in New York when I was scanning the photographs, I realized I could become an instrument of Allah, that my life could have a sublime purpose. It was the eyes, you see, the eyes of the cats.

VICTOR

What do you mean?

OMAR

Your clueless F.B.I agents did not perceive that all the art I destroyed had something in common: feline and female, all the eyes were demonic, like the flaws, fears, and failings of women.

VICTOR

Yes, we've heard your views on women, but I'm still curious about your views regarding those limestone cats. They're made of inorganic materials, so they're not actually...alive?

OMAR

If you look and listen long and hard enough to certain relics -- even bones and stones -- they speak to men of faith, and I do not mean that metaphorically. So let me answer "yes," the relics I excavated are alive. Many archaeologists would agree.

VICTOR

Does that mean the pagan gods and goddesses are also alive?

OMAR

A good question that -- you surprise me, Mister Minskin. I cannot answer with certainty, though my cat has given me reason to consider this appalling possibility.

VICTOR

How can you reconcile that with Islam?

OMAR

I cannot, which causes acute anxiety, but why do you care? You say you were raised a Christian but are now an atheist infidel, so no god for you, Mister Minskin. You are nothing but the sum total of all you achieve in your brief life -- a pity that.

VICTOR

Now more to the point: can you tell the court why you chose to visit the Chat Noir Gallery in particular?

OMAR

I made the mistake of reading that schizoid rag called The New York Times. There was an advertisement for the gallery with a picture of the statue titled "Mohammed's Cat, Muezza." Mohammed loved that cat, and if Muezza was sleeping on his cloak, he would rather shiver with cold than disturb her.

VICTOR

But the statue wasn't of the real Muezza, just a cat named in her honor.

OMAR

What honor?! My imam called it an abomination, so I destroyed it for Mohammed's sake and the sake of my soul.

VICTOR

So by destroying art, you ensure your soul's ascent to heaven?

OMAR

If there is an entrance exam, I hope to pass, praise Allah. You will not, and neither will your colleagues.

VICTOR

So everything you do is motivated by a desire to please Allah?

OMAR

To quote the rag: "Omar Faisal al-Fahd is a true iconoclast, a smasher of idols, a soldier of Sharia." Of course, I realize my mission and condition seem far afield from the way you Americans think. You have no logical way to perceive them, so you declare me and my brotherhood daft and deranged -- "inbred freaks from the land of the sheiks."

VICTOR

Since you brought it up, let's talk about your "condition": You've explained that you're possessed by the spirit of this Muezza. Do you have any way of proving that?

OMAR

I can only relate my observations: I notice I am heliotropic which means I'm attracted to light; I cower from the prison dogs; and crave fish, birds, and small predators. My night vision is keener; my hearing detects a broader range of frequencies; my whiskers are sensitive to touch; and I no longer suffer from insomnia. I also have acute olfactories and emit feline odors that attract other cats. I should add that I am proficient at detecting the presence of rodents like the ones (*pointing*) scurrying on that windowsill.

VICTOR

Yes, well, thank you, that's all for now. Your witness.

(CONSTANCE approaches OMAR, her notes in hand.)

CONSTANCE

You're often quoted criticizing American culture; however, according to United Nations' reports on human development, the Arab world is near the bottom regarding standards of healthcare, literacy, science, productivity, and the number of patents for inventions. In fact, in a single year the country of Spain translates more books than the entire Arab world has in nearly a thousand years. What's your response to that?

OMAR

It is pathetic, pitiful, but Arab intellectuals know that Islam will rise again. While Allah would have us live simpler lives in accordance with the five pillars of wisdom, He would also have us study the scientific nature of our universe, its history and potential.

CONSTANCE

Mister al-Fahd, while your religious beliefs may seem oppressive and far fetched, you express them quite coherently, so tell me, even though you claim to be possessed, do you really believe you're insane? Please remember you're under oath.

OMAR

No, I am not insane.

CONSTANCE

Then why would you agree to be sent to a psychiatric facility?

OMAR

Even you must realize there would be more freedom and a better chance to escape.

CONSTANCE

But you don't really think you're suffering from mental disease?

OMAR

The truth, madam, is that is I am no more insane than you and your countrymen.

CONSTANCE

Can you elaborate on that?

OMAR

With pleasure: your arrogant, insufferable leaders are the delusional ones, assuming superiority, indulging in tantrums that inflict terror upon the innocents of other countries. Collateral damage they call it; collateral damage in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen. Since you profligate Americans apparently value money and possessions more than life, I inflicted my own collateral damage on the objects you call art. In fact, I have done you Americans a great favor: I have shown you what you risk losing if you keep this up. Behave yourselves! Cease dropping heavy metal on the countries of my mother continent or we jihadists will destroy everything you value! Yes, you can say goodbye to your excessive habits: your gluttonous overeating, overspending, overarming and over-insuring your miserable lives! It does not matter where you confine me, though my clever attorney is trying to set me off by bringing those creatures (*pointing*) into the courtroom. They are creeping this way, trying to start my own cat yowling, but I will not be cowed! I will not be (*wincing*) yeeooooowwwwwww...

(ALBINE and ALBERTINE have approached OMAR who arches his back, hissing.)

OMAR

Sssssssssssssssssssssss...

VICTOR

Your honor...?

ALBERTINE

Meeooooooowwwww...

OMAR

Can you see them, Judge?! Can you hear them? Creeping closer, attempting to disrupt my testimony! (*to Victor*) Get rid of them you sodding prick! Tell them to scat, go away, away! Damn you, bloody beasts!!! (*snarling, flailing his arms*) Yeeeoowwwww....

(Now ALBINE and ALBERTINE ae pawing OMAR who stands, snarling, his arms flailing wildly.)

JUDGE STERLING

(*pounding her gavel*) Guards! Restrain the defendant!

OMAR

No, no, I insist on being heard! *(to the guard)* Go away, don't touch meeeeeooooowwww!!

(OMAR dashes around and out of the courtroom, yowling, pursued by ALBINE and ALBERTINE!)

JUDGE STERLING

(pounding her gavel) Catch him! Don't let him leave the premises!

VICTOR

Your honor, the defense rests!

JUDGE STERLING

(to Constance) Have you heard enough, Counselor?!

CONSTANCE

Yes.

JUDGE STERLING

Shall we dispense with closing remarks? I'm not obliged to hear them, and frankly, I don't see the point of prolonging the agony, do you?

CONSTANCE

No, your honor.

VICTOR

No, ma'am.

JUDGE STERLING

Court is adjourned until ten o'clock tomorrow at which time I will announce my decision and pronounce sentence. *(to Victor)* This time make sure he's sufficiently sedated!

(The lighting alters as MIRANDA speaks and OMAR is escorted back to the courtroom.)

MIRANDA

The next morning Judge Sterling spoke directly to Omar.

(OMAR and VICTOR now stand facing the JUDGE.)

JUDGE STERLING

Mister al-Fahd, do you have anything to say before I pass sentence?

OMAR

Marg bar Amrika!

VICTOR

That means "Death to America."

JUDGE STERLING

Of course it does. Mister al-Fahd, the crimes you've committed are abominable, but I also believe you're so indoctrinated by your culture of hatred and revenge that it has made you incapable of rational judgments. Insanity may be a legal defense but it's not a moral one, and frankly, I find people who distort their religions to justify violence utterly repugnant. Before yesterday I was inclined to send you to prison, but your last outburst convinced me that you belong in a psychiatric institution. However, you must never be permitted to inflict harm on our national treasures ever again, so I will recommend that you be confined for the rest of your natural life. *(banging her gavel)* Court is adjourned! *(to Victor)* Please see to it that the statue and paintings are returned to the Chartreux sisters immediately!

(The courtroom dims to black as MIRANDA speaks into her recorder.)

MIRANDA

After I left the courtroom, Stephen called and asked to meet at my apartment. He had made a decision about...

MIRANDA

...our wedding.

STEPHEN

Our wedding...

STEPHEN

...has to be postponed.

(Now MIRANDA joins STEPHEN in her apartment. SHE is followed by ALBINE and ALBERTINE.)

STEPHEN

We shouldn't be getting married until you're well. Here's the number and address of Toyger's private clinic. You can check in tomorrow.

MIRANDA

It was the mouse, wasn't it?

STEPHEN

Hell, yes! I can't banish the image of you dropping it down your throat -- like some carnival freak!

MIRANDA

If you must know, I didn't actually eat him.

STEPHEN

There's good news.

MIRANDA

(slipping off her ring) There. Consider yourself *unengaged* -- a free, spouseless, mouseless man.

STEPHEN

I don't want the damn ring. *(pause)* Christ, look at this place! I assume you pushed back the furniture so you could dance, and when did you last empty the garbage?

MIRANDA

I like the smell of fish and fowl.

STEPHEN

Randy, honey, you can't live like this!

MIRANDA

It won't be for long. I told you, Yvette is going to *(whispering)* remove them. Whoops, I forgot; you don't believe they're here. *(stroking his cheek)* Oh, my dear, at least admit my companions have been good for my feline finesse and flexibility. They've shown me how to bend, stretch, and twist my torso in ways I never dreamed possible. *(bending)* Look at me!

STEPHEN

Not now. I have to call our families and explain.

MIRANDA

What are you going to say?

STEPHEN

That our reasons are personal, and hope they understand.

MIRANDA

They won't. *(pause)* Did you ever really want to marry me?

STEPHEN

Of course; I still do.

MIRANDA

Then why don't my cat-nymphs like you?

STEPHEN

Because I want them dead! Because life's already too complicated -- on top of which I have a raging flu epidemic to deal with.

MIRANDA

And I have a meeting with three video game addicts who forget to eat, sleep, or take a piss.

STEPHEN

So they're stuck in their biochemical ruts, but not you. No, your delusions are real.

MIRANDA

That's right.

STEPHEN

Where are they now?

MIRANDA

(stroking Albine) Albine's on my right side and Albertine's at my feet. *(pause)* Even though I wished they'd followed someone else, I'm learning to hear things differently: the rain and songs of birds and insects are amplified, and everyone's footsteps are unique -- so are their smells. It's as if my olfactory neurons are super charged: my assistant smells like sausage; the prosecuting attorney smells like coffee; and you smell like the apple you ate for lunch.

STEPHEN

(pause, he sighs) Look, Randy, we're not over; we're just...waiting. Don't you think that's reasonable?

MIRANDA

She said we wouldn't marry.

STEPHEN

Who said?

MIRANDA

Yvette. She a clairvoyant priestess.

STEPHEN

Oh, great! Terrific! Listen to yourself! Those women have some kind of creepy, inscrutable hold on you; they're seducing you into their odious cult!

MIRANDA

Do you really think I...I'm so weak I can be so easily exploited, so vulnerable?

STEPHEN

Yes! But I liked that about you, that you really listened and were empathetic, but now I wish you were tougher, less trusting. I think you lack sufficient...skepticism.

MIRANDA

And you lack sufficient imagination! You're not creative enough to comprehend much less see them.

STEPHEN

Look, let's not argue; just try not to lose your...self respect. You really need to call your cleaning service, and you're looking...unkempt.

MIRANDA

God, how I wish they'd make themselves visible! *(to Albine and Albertine)* Can't you do something to make him believe me?! Knock down a lamp or lift a chair?

STEPHEN

What if I swat them? Maybe they'll take off on their own. *(rolling up and wielding a newspaper)* Here, take that! And that! Scat! Scram!!!

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Yeeeeeeooooooooooooowwwwwwwwwww!!!!

(ALBINE and ALBERTINE pounce and paw STEPHEN who screams and falls, clutching his arm.)

STEPHEN

Ooowwwww! Shit!!

MIRANDA

Oh, my god! Stop! Stop that!

MIRANDA

Are you all right?!

(STEPHEN folds back his sleeve to reveal long, bloody claw tracks.)

MIRANDA

Oh, dear, they've scratched you! Now do you believe me?! *(pause)* Cat got your tongue? Ha, ha!

(STEPHEN stands and backs away in horror as MIRANDA turns and speaks into her recorder.)

MIRANDA

After that Stephen retreated -- no calls, no texts, but a week later Yvonne phoned to tell me he'd visited the gallery on the same day at the same time that I arranged to meet Omar at the Metropolitan Psychiatric Correctional Facility.

(In the gallery, STEPHEN stares at the paintings, while YVONNE and YVETTE stroll beside him. In another area, MIRANDA sits across from OMAR who no longer wears dark glasses. ALBINE and ALBERTINE are crouched under the table by Miranda's feet.)

MIRANDA'S RECORDED VOICE

I gestured for Albine and Albertine to remain hidden, then asked Omar,...

MIRANDA
...how are things?

YVETTE
How are things...

YVETTE
...with you and Miranda?

STEPHEN
Not good.

OMAR
Not good,...

OMAR
...most days I wish I were dead.

MIRANDA
I'm sorry.

YVETTE
I'm sorry.

OMAR
I begged a nurse to give me a nembutal cocktail -- a mistake that. Now they hover about, clucking like chickens.

STEPHEN
We've postponed our wedding.

OMAR
I amuse myself, tracking rodents.

STEPHEN
Now Miranda's tracking rats.

OMAR

Why am I so restless in your presence?

MIRANDA

Your cat wants to meet my...companions.

YVETTE

Would you like to see paintings of her companions?

MIRANDA

Prepare yourself.

YVETTE

Prepare yourself.

(ALBINE and ALBERTINE leap up before OMAR
as YVETTE gestures to a painting.)

OMAR

(standing) Holy shit!

STEPHEN

Holy shit...

MIRANDA

Sit down.

(OMAR sits.)

YVONNE

Their spirits followed Miranda from this very room.

MIRANDA

I knew you could see them. Their names are...

MIRANDA

....Albine and Albertine.

YVONNE

(pointing to the painting) Albine and Albertine.

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Meeeeeeeeooooooooooooooooowww.

OMAR

So has the doctor crossed to the patient's side?

YVONNE

Have they turned your world upside down?

MIRANDA

Yes.

STEPHEN

Yes.

(OMAR puts his hand over MIRANDA'S and they sit staring in silence as STEPHEN confronts YVONNE and YVETTE.)

STEPHEN

So is this gallery a front for your religious cult?

YVONNE

Les Chat Noir exhibits and sells art, nothing more, but we are religious in our way. After all, painting and sculpting are spiritual endeavors. Yvette can tell you: great art is conceived in the sanctuary of the artist's soul.

STEPHEN

(to Yvette) But you don't just paint cats, you worship them, right?

YVETTE

Let us say our revulsion for the modern world has turned us toward the ancient one.

STEPHEN

But the ancient world was just as brutal: People starved; there were wars, diseases, slavery; evil people doing evil things.

YVONNE

Yes, and the god of the Christians, Jews, and Muslims has grown even more impotent! He will never vanquish evil.

STEPHEN

But your cat goddess can...?

YVONNE

She will begin by saving the world from an excess of vermin.

STEPHEN

Ha! You mean rats, but what about excess cats? Cats kill birds, and what about excess humans killing off the planet -- the forests, the oceans, whole species are extinct.

YVETTE

Yes, it is tragic, which is why the world would be better served by the female deities. *(gesturing)* Over here is a painting of the human face of Bastet.

STEPHEN

My god, she looks like...

YVETTE

Miranda...? Yes, the resemblance is uncanny. Bastet is still revered in parts of Egypt, and in New York her cult is being revived.

YVONNE

We can see you are not a man of faith.

STEPHEN

My faith is in science. The evolutionary triumph of our species is the intellect, so I believe the reality of what I've actually seen and studied (*displaying his scratch wounds*) -- until last week.

YVONNE

Ah!

YVETTE

Ahhh...

STEPHEN

I couldn't see them, but I...I felt them.

YVETTE

Bastet's creatures rarely reveal themselves, but trust them to guide Miranda's heart.

STEPHEN

(*pause*) Before this trial, her heart was mine, our lives were full and promising. Then she came here and walked out a wreck.

YVONNE

Miranda is *not* a wreck; she is blessed with an ancient soul and a destiny to fulfill. Such a pity, monsieur, that you cannot see Miranda through our eyes.

STEPHEN

I see just fine.

YVONNE

No sir, you are blind. Shall we show him our eyes, Yvette?

YVETTE

Pourquoi pas?

(YVONNE and YVETTE appear to remove their optical lenses to reveal cat's eyes.)

YVONNE and YVETTE

Meeeeeeooooooooowwww...

(STEPHEN recoils and flees as lights black out on the gallery. Meanwhile, MIRANDA remains seated with OMAR who yowls mournfully.)

OMAR

Meeeeeeooooooooowwww. (*pause*) Her voice insinuates itself at random which drives the other patients bonkers. The shit-for-brains shrinks here say Muezza is a fiction, my mind escaping the prison of Islam, but every cell in my body is infected, defiled, fouled. Even now I feel her rearing up, a force that wants to fondle your feline friends, and paw your own purrrfect...

MIRANDA

Shush! Stop it! You have to discipline your thoughts!

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Sssssssssssssssssssssssss...

OMAR

Believe me, I try: I pray, I meditate, I profess faith in Allah every five minutes to keep myself believing, but where is He? Where?! What good is faith in a God who cannot evict this wretched beast?

MIRANDA

I can't answer that, but Yvette gave me this ointment to exorcise Muezza, to draw her spirit out of you and into this urn.

OMAR

That's not bloody likely, is it?

MIRANDA

Shush! Now stay still. (*dabbing Omar's face*) I'm supposed to put a drop on your forehead and either side of your eyes, and your throat. Then I keep the lid off the urn.

OMAR

So she leaps inside?! What rubbish! (*pause*) I feel nothing.

MIRANDA

She said it might take time.

OMAR

If this works, how has it not exorcised (*pointing to Albine and Albertine*) them?

MIRANDA

They're not ready to leave.

OMAR

A pity that. They do not seem like cordial companions, but perhaps they sense my antipathy. (*hissing*) Sssssssssssssss...

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Sssssssssssssssssssss.

OMAR

Ha, ha! So how are you coping?

MIRANDA

Not well, but sometimes, when I stop resisting them, when I relax and start to simply observe myself observing them, then I see that they're quite...beautiful. Maybe you should take advantage of your new perspective.

OMAR

Hah! The perspective of an alley cat who wants to jump your bones.

MIRANDA

Shhh! Stop that! So what do you do with yourself all day?

OMAR

They give me access to the library, and remember that notebook you gave me? Instead of writing, I sketch the nurses, the patients, the shit-for-brains doctors. They bring fresh sketchbooks whenever I want.

MIRANDA

May I see them?

(Pause as OMAR hands over his sketchbook.)

MIRANDA

Omar, these are...incredible! So proficient like the portraits of the masters, like Rubens and Ingres.

OMAR

Mere cat scratchings. (*pointing to a sketch*) That is Doctor Jungala, though I failed to capture his supercilious sneer much less his soul. Art is nothing but lies and deceptions.

MIRANDA

Then why do you...?

OMAR

Because I can! Because it diverts, distracts, and makes the staff and my fellow freaks respectful. In fact, I have sold three charcoal drawings and have several requests -- commissions, if you will.

MIRANDA

This portrait -- isn't she your former girlfriend?

OMAR

Alyssa, yes, I have dozens. *(pause)* Poor Alyssa, to think I did not encourage her talent, but Jamal warned me; he told me: you are blind, Omar, you have a great gem in that woman. She truly loves you, so never mind that she is not Muslim; accept her American ways! Marry her, he said; if you don't, I will! Hah! I am a fool, an idiot, an ass of the highest order! *(pause)* Believe it or not, she has written letters -- not amorous, but congenial. I think my fame intrigues her, though best to let sleeping dogs lie, and what good am I stuck in this nuthouse?

MIRANDA

Have you sent her your sketches?

OMAR

Only two. Did you know she has been visiting the cat shit gallery? Oh, yes, she has joined the French Legion of Lunatics. *(twitching)* What is it, Miranda? You are grinning like the Cheshire cat.

MIRANDA

Nothing, I...I'm just happy that you haven't given up on your...talent. I had no idea....

OMAR

Look, I am not a fucking convert if that's what you think, *(twitching)* though I confess I have doubts.

MIRANDA

About Islam?

OMAR

About everything! What use are doctrines -- any doctrines -- if they do not fill the abyss? *(twitching)* Why is there this great gaping hole for a cat to crawl inside? *(twitching)* Damn, she is desperate to paw you!

MIRANDA

Please don't.

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Sssssssssss...

OMAR

Just a touch..? (*stroking her arm*) You are the cat's meow, Miranda. Forgive me, my Muezza is a devotee, a connoisseur of women in all their glory and guises, even dark haired Hebraic semites.

MIRANDA

But you don't really approve of us, do you? You think Jews are -- what? Dangerous? Scoundrels? Swindlers?

OMAR

All of the above, along with the rest of the mongrels who comprise the human race. At least you have your Day of Atonement, but what if the prosecution is right? What if there are crimes for which there is no atonement? And worse, what if Allah has ceased listening? Who do I ask to be redeemed for my sins?

MIRANDA

I don't know, but your life isn't over; we're all vulnerable to feeling hate.

OMAR

But why? Why are some of us more vulnerable? I have so many "if onlys" If only I had not chosen Columbia, if only I had not gone to Egypt, joined the mosque, entered that gallery. To think that I, Omar Faisal al-Fahd, the rising star of the archeological pyramid, to think that I am now chasing rats, the source of ridicule and seduction. Ha! You would not believe how some of the nurses want to stroke and poke "Omar the Cat." (*twitching*) The guards here would like to surgically remove my genitals. Some days they isolate me, but solitude makes Mue (*twitching*)...restless.

MIRANDA

(*pause*) Are you feeling anything yet...?

OMAR

The usual craven desire to fuck you, (*twitching*) ha, ha!

MIRANDA

Shush! Lower your voice!

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

PuurrTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT...

OMAR

Maybe the ointment is working. I feel...something internal, electric, ... (*twitching*) a pulsing! (*pause, twitching*) We archaeologists use remote sensors to analyze the bedrock beneath (*twitching*) temples. A pity we cannot analyze the bedrock beneath (*twitching*) bodies. Oooowwww!

MIRANDA

What are you feeling?

OMAR

As if the cells of my organs are being....

MIRANDA

What...?!

(ALBINE and ALBERTINE attach themselves to OMAR who grasps MIRANDA'S hands, then jerks uncontrollably, enduring several seizures.)

OMAR

Yooooowwwweeeewww...

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Meeeeeeooooowwwwwwwww....

(As OMAR'S mouth opens, HE howls and the SPIRIT OF MUEZZA departs and enters MIRANDA's gaping mouth. Then SHE swallows, grasping her throat.)

OMAR

(breathlessly) Ahhhhhh, praise Allah!! I feel...cleansed! Reborn! Redeemed!! *(pause, staring at Miranda)* Miranda...?

(MIRANDA slowly opens her mouth, emitting a yowl, and is joined by ALBINE and ALBERTINE as OMAR stares, aghast.)

MIRANDA

Yeeeeeeooooooooooooowwwww...

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Yeeeeeeooooooooooooowwwww...

(Lights black out on the hospital as MIRANDA turns to speak.)

MIRANDA

Omar was free, but now I had three feline phantoms, two astride, and one inside! I left Omar and ran directly to Yvette's studio, hissing with fury!

(ALBINE, ALBERTINE, and MIRANDA run with synchronized steps to the YVETTE'S studio.)

YVONNE

Ah! Look who the cats dragged in, ha, ha!

MIRANDA

Help! Help me!! *(to Yvette)* Get it out of meeeeeooooooooowww!

YVONNE

I am afraid we cannot; fate has ordained your destiny.

MIRANDA

To hell with fate! I want it oooooowwwwwwt!

YVETTE

Please, my dear Miranda, try to calm yourself. Let me pour some wine.

YVONNE

Trust me, soon you will not be able to envision life without them, though it will not be easy. Bigots will call you the anti-Christ, the anti-Semite, anti-Shiite, anti-everything! You will be feared, mocked and despised, but beloved by women, and living proof that not all the goddesses are dead.

YVETTE

(handing her a glass of wine) Please, Miranda, do not despair; soon we will all be boarding a plane to Alexandria. You will see the pyramids! Queen Berenike's temple!

(MIRANDA guzzles the wine.)

MIRANDA

What about Stephen? My prrrrractice?

YVONNE

Someday Stephen may join us -- where are you going?

MIRANDA

To Bellevue! Sorry, ladies, but there's more than one way to skin a cat!

(MIRANDA marches off followed by her CATS.)

YVONNE

Should we stop her?!

YVETTE

Du calme. *(Relax)* We will find her.

(Lights dim as MIRANDA returns to the storeroom with ALBINE and ALBERTINE. SHE dons the robe she wore at the beginning, and speaks into her voice recorder.)

MIRANDA

The doctors prescribed drugs, hypnosis, analysis, meditation, and nothing has banished them. So this morning I'm having my first electroconvulsive therapy treatment. To quote Omar, they're going to snap, crackle, pop the pussies!

(The door opens and a MALE and FEMALE NURSE enter.)

MALE NURSE

Hey, here she is!

MIRANDA

I'm not finished!

FEMALE NURSE

You've got to come out, Doc; everyone's looking for you.

MALE NURSE

We'll escort you back to your room.

MIRANDA

I need another minute to finish recording.

MALE NURSE

Give her a minute.

(The NURSES remain, observing MIRANDA, speaking into her recorder.)

MIRANDA

If the treatments don't work, I have two options: suicide or a flight to Egypt.

FEMALE NURSE

(mumbling) On a flyin' carpet.

MIRANDA

I heard that! You're think you're humoring a lunatic?!

FEMALE NURSE

No, ma'am, sorry ma'am.

MALE NURSE

We know who you are, Doctor Birman. Take your time.

MIRANDA

(into her recorder) I've given up a lot lately: my fiancé, my work, my apartment, not to mention my dignity and reputation. Behind my back they call me "The Mouser," "Miss Kitty" and names I won't repeat. Stephen visits nearly every day; Yvonne brings chocolates, and Yvette assures me that we're going to change the world. The reason I'm recording this is to relate the facts in case my treatment causes any permanent loss of memory.

MALE NURSE

Ready to wrap it up, Doc?

MIRANDA

Yes. *(to the male nurse)* I'm going to give you a hundred dollars. I want you to promise to keep this recorder for meeeeeeeow. *(pause, taking a breath)* If anything happens to me, I want you to play it for everyone willing to listen, then mail it to Judge Lenore Sterling. Here's an envelope with her addresssssss.

MALE NURSE

Okay, sure.

MIRANDA

You promisssse?

MALE NURSE

Yeah, sure.

MIRANDA

And by the way, there's a rats nest in that wall and another in the ceiling. Someone ought to report it.

FEMALE NURSE

Yes, ma'am!

ALBINE and ALBERTINE

Sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss...

(MIRANDA, ALBINE, and ALBERTINE leave, followed by the NURSES who close the door, leaving the cellar in darkness.)

