

# WHAT THE CAT SAW AT LEOPOLD

*Aryan Ayyar*

## AN IMPORTANT NAP IS INTERRUPTED

Whisker was asleep beneath table seven when the man moved the chair.

This, Whisker felt, was the central problem with human beings. They entered historic cafes, ordered beer in the afternoon, discussed love, money, politics, betrayal, cholesterol, real estate, and occasionally cricket with the seriousness of constitutional law, but not one of them possessed the basic civic sense to check whether an elderly black cat was conducting important afternoon business under the furniture.

The chair scraped.

Whisker opened one yellow eye.

The man stopped.

Then, to Whisker's considerable surprise, he bent slightly, looked beneath the table, and said, "Sorry, boss."

Boss, Whisker decided, was acceptable.

He did not move, of course. A cat who moves after one apology teaches the wrong lessons. Instead, he remained stretched out on the cool floor, his tail arranged in a position of wounded dignity, and inspected the offender.

The man was tall, perhaps late thirties, with a face that looked as though it had once apologised too much and had now learned to do so only when required. He wore a crisp white shirt, a navy jacket despite the weather, and shoes that had clearly never chased a pigeon behind the Taj. There was a watch on his wrist, understated but expensive. Humans liked such objects. They strapped time to themselves and still arrived late.

He placed his phone on the table, screen down.

Whisker noticed this.

Most humans placed their phones face up, as though awaiting instructions from a tiny god. This one put his away and looked around the room. Not impatiently. Not as if he wished to be seen. He simply looked, with the calm alertness of someone who had learned that life was mostly missed in fragments.

A waiter came over. The man ordered lime soda, no sugar, and something small to eat. He spoke politely, without the clipped irritation that Whisker associated with men who had recently acquired success and wished to invoice the world for it.

Interesting, thought Whisker.

Not interesting enough to move, but interesting.

Leopold Cafe hummed above him. Afternoon light fell in uneven squares across the floor. Forks clicked. A German backpacker tried to understand the menu with the tragic optimism of foreigners. Two young men in expensive T-shirts argued about a startup neither appeared to have started. Near the wall, an elderly Parsi couple shared a caramel custard in silence, which Whisker considered one of the few dignified forms of love.

Then the door opened, and the man in the navy jacket forgot the room.

Whisker saw it happen.

Humans were poor at hiding recognition. Their mouths lied first. Their eyes confessed immediately.

The woman stood near the entrance for a moment, adjusting to the dimmer light inside. She wore a blue saree, the colour of early evening before the city turns on its lamps. Not the loud blue of tourist scarves or plastic buckets. A quieter blue. Silk, perhaps. Whisker had no formal training in textiles, but he had slept on enough laundry to possess opinions.

She was beautiful. This was obvious, and therefore not very interesting. Beauty, in Whisker's experience, was common enough in Colaba. Every day, beautiful people came to Leopold believing the cafe had been waiting for them. What was rarer was the way this woman paused to let an old waiter pass before she stepped forward. What was rarer was the small smile she gave him, not as performance, but as acknowledgement.

The man stood.

"Neha," he said.

The name came out carefully, as though it had been wrapped and stored somewhere for seventeen years.

She looked at him, and for a second her face did something complicated. Surprise arrived first. Then calculation. Then memory. Then, almost against her will, warmth.

“Vicky,” she said.

Ah, thought Whisker.

Old ghosts.

He tucked his paws beneath his chest. This was now officially worth remaining awake for.

## THE PAWSHAKE PROTOCOL

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Whisker had seen this before. Two humans, once important to each other, meeting after years. It always began with the same absurd ceremony: the smile that was not quite a smile, the half-step forward, the half-step back, the sudden discovery that hands were complicated objects.

The woman solved it first.

“Hello, Vicky.”

“Hello, Neha.”

“Vaidyanathan Shivaramakrishnan, actually,” she added, the corner of her mouth lifting. “If we are being formal.”

He laughed before he could stop himself. It was not the correction that moved him. It was the full name, intact after seventeen years, carried lightly as if she had put it down only yesterday.

They shook hands.

This disappointed Whisker. A handshake, in his opinion, was what humans did when they wished to hide either affection or unpaid debt. Sometimes both.

The meeting, Whisker gathered from the stiffness of their shoulders, had not been an accident. It had begun somewhere invisible, in one of the small glowing rectangles humans used to summon old trouble. A college group. A photograph. A name typed after too many years. Then, apparently, Leopold: neutral territory, public enough for dignity, familiar enough for danger.

“You look...” She paused.

The man raised an eyebrow. "Alive?"

She laughed, but carefully. "Different."

"I hope that is not a polite way of saying I finally discovered ironing."

"Among other civilisational advances."

There it was. The first little spark. Not fire, not yet. Just the sound of an old matchbox being touched in a drawer.

The man smiled. "I will accept that. Please, sit."

He pulled the chair out for her, not with the flourish of a man performing manners, but with the quiet ease of someone who no longer needed credit for decent behaviour. Neha noticed. Whisker noticed her noticing. Humans, he had learned, were always noticing more than they admitted.

She sat down opposite him. The blue of her saree gathered around her like a composed thought.

"You are wearing a saree," Vicky said.

"That is generally how one identifies it, yes."

"No, I mean..." He stopped, then laughed at himself. "Sorry. I just remembered you once saying sarees were instruments of national inconvenience."

"I said many foolish things at twenty."

"We both did."

A small silence followed. Not empty. Full.

The waiter arrived with Vicky's lime soda and looked at Neha with the old professional patience of a man who had seen ten thousand reunions and been tipped poorly for eight thousand of them.

"Fresh lime soda, sweet and salt," she said. "And could you get a small bowl of water?"

The waiter nodded.

Vicky glanced at her glass, then at her. "Still sweet and salt?"

"Still."

"Some loyalties survive."

"Some," she said.

Whisker, who had understood the word water, lifted his head. The bowl arrived and was placed near the side of the table. Neha gently pushed it closer to him with her foot, not enough to disturb him, only enough to

make the invitation clear.

This was unexpected.

In Whisker's long experience, beautiful women had varying attitudes toward cats. Some loved them loudly, which was unbearable. Some feared them, which was insulting. Some photographed them for social media, which was a violation of diplomatic protocol. This one simply offered water and returned to her conversation.

Acceptable, Whisker decided.

He stood, stretched with deliberate majesty, and approached the bowl as though he had commissioned it.

"So," Neha said, folding her hands lightly in her lap. "How have you been?"

It was a terrible question. Humans asked it when they wanted an answer of no more than four words.

Vicky seemed to know this. "Good. Mostly. You?"

"Good. Mostly."

They looked at each other and smiled, because the lie was mutual and therefore polite.

"Still in Mumbai?" she asked.

"Between Mumbai, Bangalore, Singapore, and airports. But yes. Mumbai is home, in the way a difficult relative is still family."

"That sounds like something you would not have said earlier."

"Earlier I was busy having no opinions and too many anxieties."

"That is not true."

"It is substantially true."

She looked at him more closely. "You were anxious, yes. But you had opinions."

"Bad ones."

"Very bad ones."

The speed with which she said it made him laugh.

Whisker approved. Humans were at their best when they stopped pretending the past had been tasteful.

"I probably deserved that," Vicky said.

"You once told me," Neha said, lowering her voice slightly, "that your

wife would never need to work.”

Vicky closed his eyes for half a second. “Please tell me I said that during a fever.”

“Third year. Outside the mechanical workshop. You were eating a samosa.”

“Then I blame the samosa.”

“Convenient.”

“And cowardly. Also accurate. College canteens have caused more ideological damage than people admit.”

She smiled, but this time it lasted. “You really have changed.”

“I had to. The earlier version was not scalable.”

“Scalable?”

“Sorry. Occupational disease.”

“What do you do now?”

He stirred his lime soda with the straw, though it needed no stirring. “I work in artificial intelligence.”

“Doing what?”

“Mostly teaching stubborn machines to make better guesses than people.”

Neha stared at him.

Then she laughed.

Not carefully this time. Properly.

The laugh opened her face, and for one second Whisker saw the girl she had been: sharp, amused, dangerous, alive in the knowledge of her own effect. But the woman sitting there now was softer around the edges, not less powerful, only less cruel with it.

“You?” she said. “You work with math?”

“I try not to call it that. It frightens the younger me.”

“You hated math.”

“With passion. Sadly, math did not respect the breakup.”

“You once failed a signals test because you wrote half an answer and then started drawing cubes in the margin.”

“Those were not cubes. That was early spatial reasoning.”

“It was a box.”

“A visionary box.”

She shook her head. “Unbelievable.”

“I know. Sometimes students ask me how to build a career in this field. I want to tell them the truth.”

“Which is?”

“Panic consistently for ten years and call it discipline.”

Neha laughed again. Vicky watched her, not greedily, not like a man trying to recover a lost possession, but with a kind of startled gratitude. As though some sound he had forgotten had been restored to the world.

Whisker drank from the bowl and pretended not to see.

“And you?” Vicky asked. “What are you doing now?”

“Fashion.”

“Of course.”

One of her eyebrows rose. “Of course?”

“No, no, I mean... you always had an eye. Even when you were being terrifying, you were well dressed.”

“That may be the most Vicky compliment I have ever received.”

“I have improved but not entirely escaped myself.”

“Good,” she said. “Escaping oneself is overrated.”

He looked at the saree again, but this time more carefully. “Did you design this?”

She seemed pleased that he had asked. “Yes.”

“It is beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“Not just beautiful. It looks... modern, but not embarrassed to be Indian.”

Something shifted in her expression.

“That,” she said slowly, “is probably the nicest thing anyone has said about my work.”

“Then you need better critics.”

“I have plenty. They mostly use words like global, premium, hand-crafted, celebrity-friendly, and disruptive.”

“My condolences.”

“Accepted.”

She looked down at the border of her saree and smoothed it with her fingers. "I spent a long time trying to run away from India. Then I spent a longer time realising I was carrying it with me anyway. So I thought I might as well make something beautiful out of the argument."

Vicky did not answer immediately.

This was another thing Whisker noticed.

The old kind of human silence was empty because the person had not listened. This silence was different. The man had heard her and was making room for what she had said. Whisker had no use for poetry, unless it contained fish, but even he understood the dignity of being properly heard.

"That sounds like you," Vicky said finally. "But older."

"Older is unavoidable."

"Kinder, then."

She looked up.

The word had landed somewhere neither of them expected.

"Am I?" she asked.

He considered this. "I think so."

"You knew me when I was not."

"I knew you when you were twenty-one."

"That is generous."

"Not entirely. You were also impossible."

She laughed softly. "There he is."

"Who?"

"The boy who occasionally said the correct thing after saying twelve nervous things first."

"Ah. Him. I try to keep him in advisory capacity only."

The waiter passed again. Outside, the traffic thickened and dissolved. Someone at the next table mispronounced quinoa with enormous confidence. Whisker considered correcting him, then remembered he did not care.

Neha took a sip of her lime soda. "I saw your name somewhere a few years ago."

"On a police notice?"

“An article, I think. Something about artificial intelligence.”

“That sounds more respectable.”

“I remember thinking, Vicky? Our Vicky?”

Our.

The word came out before she could polish it.

Vicky heard it. So did Whisker. The old cat’s ears moved forward.

“I have had similar reactions to my life,” Vicky said lightly.

“Do you enjoy it?”

“The work? Sometimes. The attention, less so. I like building things that work. I like teaching. I like the idea that intelligence, artificial or otherwise, should be useful and not merely impressive.”

“That also sounds unlike the old you.”

“The old me wanted to be impressive because he was frightened nobody would find him useful.”

There it was.

A true thing, placed quietly on the table between the lime sodas.

Neha’s face changed again. She did not rush to comfort him. Whisker respected that. Humans often ruined honesty by trying to bandage it too quickly.

“I did not know that,” she said.

“I did not know how to say it.”

“You did try sometimes.”

“Badly.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you for not disputing that.”

“I am kinder now, apparently. Not dishonest.”

He laughed.

The guardedness had begun to thin. It was still there, but less like a wall now and more like a curtain moving in a fan’s breeze.

“And you?” he asked. “Married to some frighteningly successful person who owns six homes and says things like portfolio diversification at breakfast?”

Neha looked into her glass.

There it was, Whisker thought. The question pretending to be a joke.

Humans had invented civilisation largely to avoid asking directly whom another human slept beside.

“No,” she said. “No frighteningly successful breakfast philosopher.”

Vicky’s fingers paused around his glass.

“Ah,” he said.

“And you?” she asked. “Married to someone very sensible who has cured you of sarcasm?”

“Clearly not cured.”

“Clearly.”

“And no,” he said. “No one sensible has taken permanent responsibility.”

“That sounds like a legal disclaimer.”

“I have spent time with lawyers.”

They smiled, but this time the silence after it was not polite. It was alive. Whisker looked from one to the other and sighed through his nose.

So. Not married. Both pretending this was neutral information. Both lying with the incompetence of amateurs.

He stepped away from the water bowl, circled twice under the table, and settled near Neha’s feet. Her sandal had a small silver buckle. Vicky’s shoes were polished enough to reflect catastrophe. Between them, under the table, the past lay down like another animal.

Above him, Neha said, “Seventeen years is a long time.”

“Yes.”

“I was not sure you would come.”

“Neither was I.”

“But you did.”

“So did you.”

This, Whisker decided, was the trouble with old ghosts. If both people arrived, the ghost had to sit somewhere.

## OLD GHOSTS, NEW SCRATCHES

The trouble with meeting someone after seventeen years is that memory comes overdressed.

It arrives wearing perfume, old grievances, unfinished sentences, and the exact shirt someone wore on a day when they broke your heart. It takes the seat beside you. It orders without asking. It insists it knows the menu.

Whisker had no patience for memory. He trusted smells. Smells were honest. The woman smelled faintly of sandalwood, rain on silk, and expensive restraint. The man smelled of citrus, airport lounges, and the nervousness of someone pretending not to be nervous.

Humans called this maturity.

“I have to admit,” Neha said, “this version of you is taking some adjustment.”

“The jacket?”

“The jacket, the work, the manners, the fact that you have not checked your phone once.”

Vicky glanced at the device lying face down beside his glass. “I check it too much usually.”

The screen lit up once, silently. He turned it farther away without reading it.

“So why not now?”

He looked at her. “Because I came to meet you.”

There was no cleverness in it. That made it worse.

Neha’s fingers tightened briefly around her glass. She looked away first, toward the wall where old photographs and framed memories watched

customers make new mistakes.

Whisker approved of the sentence. It was direct, and therefore rare.

“You did not talk like this earlier,” she said.

“Earlier I thought sincerity was a disease other people caught.”

“No. Earlier you were sincere. Painfully. You just hid it under confusion.”

“That is a generous archaeological reading.”

“I remember you better than you think.”

He smiled, but the smile was careful. “Do you?”

“Some things.”

“Only some?”

“Some things one remembers. Some things one improves in memory. Some things one buries and then acts surprised when they grow roots.”

Vicky leaned back slightly. “That sounds like a designer speaking.”

“That sounds like a man dodging.”

“Fair.”

“You always did that,” she said, and the old sharpness slipped out before she could soften it. “Turned feeling into an argument you could win.”

He looked down at the table.

For half a second, the girl she had been was back in the room: quick, exact, gifted at finding the unarmoured place.

Neha saw it too.

“Sorry,” she said. “That was sharper than it needed to be.”

“No,” Vicky said. “It was accurate. But yes, sharper than required.”

She accepted this with a small nod. “Old muscle.”

“Still strong.”

“Unfortunately.”

The waiter arrived with a plate of chilli cheese toast. It smelled, in Whisker’s view, promising but ultimately unserious. No chicken. No fish. No moral centre. Still, he kept one eye on it. Human food often lost discipline near the edge of plates.

Neha broke off a small corner and placed it on her side plate. “Do you still forget to eat when you work?”

“Sometimes.”

“You used to survive on tea and whatever could be bought for twelve rupees.”

“Inflation has ruined that lifestyle.”

“And health?”

“Also that.”

“Good.”

He looked amused. “Good?”

“Yes. You deserved adult supervision.”

“And you provide this professionally now?”

“Only to fabrics. Humans are more difficult. They keep insisting on free will.”

Vicky laughed. The laugh was easier now, less audition, more response.

“Tell me about your work,” he said.

“You really want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Most people ask that and then immediately regret it when I begin explaining fabric fall, craft clusters, dyeing, body politics, celebrity fittings, and why everyone claims to want originality until originality makes them nervous.”

“I spend my days with machines that never know when they are being boring. I have no right to fear long conversations.”

“That is true.”

“Also, I am interested.”

She studied him for a moment, perhaps testing the sentence for politeness. Then she began.

She spoke of textiles first. Not glamour, not celebrities, not red carpets. Textiles. Of weavers in Kanchipuram and dyers in Bhuj; of women in small workshops who knew more about structure and balance than most people with design degrees; of the violence of bad tailoring; of the strange arrogance of urban customers who wanted Indian craft only after it had been made sufficiently foreign for them to trust it.

As she spoke, her hands moved. Not theatrically. Precisely. She drew invisible seams in the air, pleats, borders, tensions between fabric and body. Vicky watched her hands, then her face, then something beyond both, as

though he was following the architecture of a mind he had once mistaken for merely beautiful.

Whisker had always believed hands revealed the truth. Human mouths were full of public relations. Hands betrayed appetite, fear, boredom, tenderness. Neha's hands were calm now. Long ago, Whisker suspected, they had been used to being watched. Now they were used to making things.

"You built a language," Vicky said when she paused.

She blinked. "What?"

"Your work. It is not just clothing. It is a way of saying you do not have to choose between belonging and becoming."

Neha was silent.

Outside, a taxi honked with operatic despair.

"That is unfair," she said at last.

"What is?"

"You cannot turn into a person who says things like that. It disrupts the established historical record."

"I apologise to the archive."

"You should."

But she was smiling.

He picked up his glass. "I mean it."

"I know."

That was another new thing between them. In college, Whisker imagined, they had probably spent half their time demanding proof of what was obvious. Now they were old enough to recognise sincerity when it arrived, even if it wore an unfamiliar face.

"And you?" she asked. "Do you enjoy the machines?"

"Some days. Mostly I enjoy the humility of them."

Neha looked surprised. "Humility?"

"Yes. You can have a beautiful theory and then reality looks at it and says, nice personality, but no."

She laughed. "That must have been difficult for you."

"Because I was arrogant?"

"Because you were insecure. Insecure people are often more attached to being right."

The sentence landed gently, but it landed.

Vicky did not deflect immediately. Whisker noticed this too. The man let the truth sit there, like a guest who had not been invited but was not entirely unwelcome.

“Yes,” he said. “I was.”

Neha’s expression softened. “I was arrogant.”

“You were.”

“Fast response.”

“Sorry. Muscle memory.”

She laughed, then looked down. “No, it is true. I thought attention was the same as love. I thought being desired meant being understood. I thought if I could enter a room and make people look, then I had won something.”

“Had you?”

“Sometimes. But it was a small victory. And a tiring one.”

Whisker looked at her with renewed interest.

He understood this. Cats were admired constantly. It was burdensome but necessary. The difference was that cats deserved it.

“What changed?” Vicky asked.

Neha ran a finger along the rim of her glass. “Life. Work. Failure. My mother getting ill. Being responsible for people who did not care whether I looked perfect. Being in rooms where beauty helped me enter but could not help me stay.”

Vicky listened.

“And you?” she asked.

“Similar things. Loneliness, mostly. Then work. Then a few good mentors. A few humiliations. Therapy.”

She looked up quickly.

He smiled. “Yes, I know. South Indian men of my generation were supposed to treat therapy like espionage.”

“I was not going to say that.”

“You were thinking something close.”

“Maybe.”

“It helped. Not immediately. At first I treated it like an exam I could

pass by giving intelligent answers.”

“Of course you did.”

“Then one day my therapist asked me whether I wanted to be understood or admired.”

Neha went still.

“And?”

“I said understood.”

“Was that true?”

“Not then.”

“And now?”

He looked at her. “More true than it used to be.”

Whisker lowered himself onto the floor. This conversation had taken a serious turn. He disliked serious turns unless they ended in dropped food. Still, he remained. There was something in the air now, something old untying itself.

“I am glad,” Neha said.

“That I went to therapy?”

“That you wanted more for yourself than being admired.”

“You too, then.”

She smiled faintly. “Me too.”

For a while they ate in small, distracted bites. The noise of Leopold moved around them, but their table had become strangely private. Not silent, exactly. Sealed. Like the city had granted them a temporary room inside the room.

Then Neha said, “Do you remember the last time we met?”

Vicky’s face changed.

“Yes.”

“I was awful.”

“We were both young.”

“No. Do not dilute it. I was awful.”

He looked at his glass. “You were cruel.”

She accepted it with a small nod.

Whisker, who believed in accountability when applied to others, opened both eyes.

“I have thought about it,” she said. “Not every day. Not dramatically. But enough. The things I said. The way I made you feel small because I did not know what to do with your need.”

Vicky was quiet.

“I am sorry,” she said.

There are apologies that seek applause. There are apologies that arrive carrying explanations, footnotes, weather reports, and the complete genealogy of blame. This was not one of those. It was small. Plain. It sat down without demanding a chair.

Vicky breathed out slowly.

“Thank you,” he said.

She looked relieved and wounded at once. “That is all?”

“For now.”

“Fair.”

“I was not easy to love either.”

“No.”

“Another fast response.”

“Muscle memory,” she said.

He smiled.

“I was needy,” he said. “And resentful. I wanted you to fix loneliness you had not created. I wanted you to admire me before I had become anyone I could admire myself. And when you could not, I decided you were shallow, because that was easier than admitting I was lost.”

Neha’s eyes shone, though she did not cry.

Whisker was grateful. Tears complicated floors.

“We were children,” she said.

“We were twenty-one.”

“Exactly. Children with better vocabulary.”

“And worse hair.”

“Your hair was not the main issue.”

“There were many contenders.”

The humour returned, not to escape the sadness, but to make it bearable. This, Whisker thought, was one of the few intelligent things humans did. They wrapped pain in laughter so it could be carried without spilling

everywhere.

Neha reached for the water glass, then stopped. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"Did I hurt you badly?"

Vicky looked at her for a long moment.

"Yes," he said.

She looked down.

"But not only you," he added. "I was already hurt. You just had very good aim."

A laugh escaped her, soft and unwilling. "That is terrible."

"But accurate."

"I am sorry," she said again.

"I know."

He said it with such steadiness that the words seemed to close something, not completely, but enough.

Whisker had seen humans make peace before. Usually they did it badly, with speeches, accusations, and dessert. This was better. Not perfect. Perfect things were suspicious. But better.

Neha leaned back. "And now you support women's organisations? I saw something about that too. A foundation?"

Vicky looked embarrassed. "Small grants. Mentoring. Some funding for education and legal aid. Mostly I try to help people already doing the work."

"That is quite a journey from mechanical workshop samosa philosophy."

"A necessary one."

"What changed that?"

He thought for a moment. "Listening to women when they talked. Not waiting for my turn to defend myself. Also realising that the world I had been taught to expect was unfair even to the men it supposedly favoured. It made us lonely and then told us loneliness was strength."

Neha did not speak.

"Too much?" he asked.

“No,” she said. “Just... unexpected.”

“In a good way?”

“Yes.”

“That is a relief.”

“You wanted to impress me?”

The question was light, but not only light.

Vicky smiled. “A little. I am evolved, not dead.”

This time she laughed with her whole face.

Whisker flicked his tail. Flirting. At last. Humans took so long to reach the obvious. Cats, by contrast, knew immediately whom they liked, disliked, tolerated, or intended to bite.

The plate of chilli cheese toast sat between them, largely forgotten. Whisker considered this an irresponsible use of dairy.

“And you?” Vicky asked. “Do you still hate Mumbai?”

“I never hated Mumbai.”

He gave her a look.

“Fine. I was rude about Mumbai.”

“You once called it a city with humidity instead of a personality.”

“That is a good line.”

“It is a cruel line.”

“Those often travel together.”

“Do you still think that?”

She looked around the cafe, then toward the windows, where the afternoon had begun to lean golden against the glass.

“No,” she said. “I think Mumbai is difficult to love cleanly. It does not let you love it in a pretty way. It exhausts you, stains your clothes, takes too much rent, breaks your plans, and then, one evening, gives you a colour in the sky or a stranger’s kindness or the smell of frying garlic near the sea, and you forgive it like an idiot.”

Vicky’s smile was slow. “That is the most Bombay thing anyone has said in a blue saree.”

“Mumbai,” she corrected.

“Ah. Fully converted.”

“Not converted. Reconciled.”

He nodded. "That is better."

For a moment they simply looked at each other.

This time, neither seemed embarrassed by being seen.

Whisker rose, stretched again, and padded closer to the table leg. The afternoon had warmed the floor. Above him, history was being revised by two unreliable witnesses with excellent lime soda. It was, he had to admit, not the worst use of a day.

Then Neha bent slightly and looked under the table.

"Hello," she said to him.

Whisker froze.

This was inappropriate. He was not part of the conversation. He was the observer, the intelligence service, the moral authority.

"He has been listening," Vicky said.

"He looks judgmental."

"He is from Colaba. Of course he is judgmental."

Neha extended two fingers, not too close, not presumptuous. Whisker regarded them with the full seriousness of state protocol.

Then he allowed her to touch his head once.

Only once.

She smiled.

"What is his name?" she asked.

"I do not know."

The waiter, passing behind them with a tray, said, "Whisker."

"Whisker?" Vicky repeated.

"He comes every day," the waiter said. "Black fellow. Very proud. Eats only if he approves."

"A critic," Neha said.

"A senior critic," Vicky added.

Whisker accepted this as accurate.

Neha looked at the cat, then at Vicky. "Do you think he approves of us?"

Vicky looked under the table. Whisker gave him the expression he reserved for tourists, pigeons, and men who wore sunglasses indoors.

"Too early to say," Vicky said.

“Wise cat.”

“Or lazy.”

Whisker withdrew his head from Neha’s fingers and returned to his water bowl.

Lazy, he thought, was what the unobservant called efficient.

## THE ART OF LISTENING WITHOUT POUNCING

The afternoon changed without announcing itself.

This was one of the few things Whisker liked about afternoons. Mornings arrived with ambition. Nights arrived with drama. Afternoons simply loosened their collars and became something else.

The lunch crowd thinned. The waiters moved more slowly. The bottles behind the bar caught the light and held it in small, amber rectangles. Outside, Colaba continued with its usual argument: taxis, tourists, bargaining voices, the impatient cough of scooters, the sea somewhere beyond everything, smelling faintly of salt and old iron.

At table seven, the man and the woman had stopped trying to summarise seventeen years.

This, Whisker felt, was wise. Humans were always attempting impossible arithmetic. Seventeen years into one conversation. One heartbreak into two apologies. One life into a sentence beginning with “So, anyway.” It could not be done. Even cats, who were superior in almost every measurable category, did not attempt to compress a nap.

Neha had turned her glass slowly between both hands. The ice inside had nearly melted.

“You know what is strange?” she said.

“Many things. You may need to narrow it down.”

“You are listening.”

Vicky did not smile immediately. “I am.”

“No, I mean... really listening.”

“I know what you mean.”

“You did not earlier.”

“No.”

She looked at him with the cautious wonder of someone discovering a familiar room with a new window in it.

“Earlier,” she said, “when I spoke, I always felt you were partly somewhere else. Not because you were bored. It was more like... you were trying to survive the conversation while also having it.”

Vicky looked down at the table.

Whisker, beneath it, noticed the man’s right hand close once, then open.

“That is accurate,” Vicky said.

“Was I that frightening?”

“Yes.”

She winced, though he had said it gently.

“But not only you,” he added. “Everything was frightening. You were just beautiful, articulate, popular, and therefore a concentrated version of everything I did not know how to handle.”

“That sounds exhausting.”

“It was. Mostly for people around me.”

“And for you.”

He nodded.

There are moments, Whisker knew, when humans place a kindness on the table and pretend it is nothing. This was one. The woman had given the man back some mercy he had misplaced years ago.

“I used to think,” Vicky said, “that if I could just say the right thing, everything would become safe.”

“Did it?”

“Almost never. So I spoke too much, or not at all. Then I would go home and think of the perfect sentence six hours later.”

“You once sent me a three-page email after a five-minute argument.”

“Please do not bring documentary evidence into this.”

“It had bullet points.”

He closed his eyes. “I was a menace.”

“You were in pain.”

He opened his eyes again.

The sentence had been simple. That was why it reached him.

For several seconds, neither of them spoke. Around them, the cafe carried on, indifferent and merciful.

Whisker yawned. Not because he was bored. Because feelings, when released into a room, changed the oxygen.

The conversation had reached the dangerous part. Whisker recognised it instantly. Humans could discuss careers, politics, cities, food, even death with relative safety. But the moment they began discussing how they had wanted to be loved, the table became unstable.

“I was not good at seeing people,” Neha said.

Vicky waited.

This was important.

Earlier, Whisker suspected, the man would have rushed in. He would have forgiven too quickly, contradicted too eagerly, rescued her from the discomfort because her discomfort would have frightened him. Now he simply waited.

Neha noticed.

“See?” she said softly.

“What?”

“That. You waited.”

“Should I not have?”

“No. You should have. That is the point.”

He smiled, but did not make a joke.

“I am trying,” he said.

“It shows.”

The words pleased him. He tried to hide it. Failed. Whisker considered the failure dignified.

Neha leaned back, the blue saree shifting at her shoulder. “I spent so much of my twenties being looked at that I mistook it for being known. It took me years to realise that admiration can be a very lonely room.”

“Yes,” Vicky said.

“You knew that?”

“From the other side. You keep waiting for applause to become com-

panionship. It does not.”

She looked at him then, fully.

Not with nostalgia. Not with the old sharpness. With attention.

Whisker saw the man receive it like warmth after fever.

“The whole difficult arrangement is usually the best part,” he said.

“And earlier?”

“Earlier I wanted the edited version. Of myself. Of everyone.”

“I gave people the edited version.”

“It was a very convincing edit.”

They smiled. It was easier now to smile after difficult things. Like opening windows after rain.

Whisker stood and made a slow inspection of the space beneath their table. There was, disappointingly, no fallen chilli cheese toast. He considered leaving for Bademiya, where the moral standards of gravity were more favourable, but something held him. Not sentiment. Certainly not sentiment. Curiosity, perhaps. Professional responsibility.

Above him, Neha said, “Do you ever think about who we might have been if we had met now first?”

Vicky was silent.

The question was foolish, Whisker thought. Humans loved alternate timelines because they had not properly managed the existing one.

“Sometimes,” Vicky said.

“Really?”

“Not in a dramatic way. Not like regret. More like... intellectual vandalism. The mind breaks into old rooms and rearranges the furniture.”

“And what does it find?”

He looked at her. “That we might have been kinder to each other.”

“Only kinder?”

“No.”

The word rested between them.

Neha’s eyes did not leave his.

“But kinder would have been a good beginning,” he said.

She nodded slowly. “Yes.”

Whisker sat down again. This was flirting, but not the easy kind. This

was not the bright, careless batting of paws between young cats in an alley. This was older. It had scars. It knew what claws could do.

She smiled faintly. "I did think of you."

He looked at her.

"Sometimes," she said. "Not always kindly. Sometimes defensively. Sometimes when a song came on. Sometimes when someone said something in exactly the way you would have hated. Sometimes when I saw a boy at a cafe looking lost and trying not to look lost."

"That is dangerously specific."

"You were dangerously specific."

He laughed under his breath.

"And you?" she asked. "Did you think of me?"

Vicky looked down at his glass, then back at her. "Yes."

"How?"

"Unfairly, at first. Then less unfairly. Then, eventually, with something like gratitude."

"Gratitude?"

"You forced me to confront the fact that being loved by someone impressive would not make me less afraid of myself."

She absorbed this with visible difficulty.

"That is a lot to put on a college romance," she said.

"I was an ambitious idiot."

"You were not an idiot."

"Ambitious, then."

"Definitely."

Their laughter was quiet now. Private.

The waiter came by and asked if they wanted anything else. They both looked at the table, startled, as if surprised to discover they were still in a cafe where bills existed.

"Another lime soda?" Vicky asked.

Neha checked her watch. "I should not."

Neither moved.

Whisker knew this human ritual too. The performance of leaving before leaving became necessary. Bags were touched. Watches consulted. Bills re-

quested and then ignored. Departures, among humans, required rehearsal.

“I have a fitting in Kala Ghoda at five,” she said.

“That is nearby.”

“It is.”

“I have no meeting till six-thirty.”

“Also nearby?”

“Everything in South Bombay is nearby if one is sufficiently nostalgic.”

She smiled. “That is not geographically sound.”

“But emotionally accurate.”

A pause.

“We could walk a little,” he said.

The suggestion was casual in the way carefully balanced things are casual.

Neha looked at him. “Through Causeway?”

“Unless you now hate Causeway.”

“I never hated Causeway.”

He gave her the same look as before.

“Fine,” she said. “I may have called it a colonial flea market with humidity.”

“Also a good line.”

“Also cruel?”

“Moderately.”

“I am reformed.”

“Then walk with me and prove it.”

There was the old ease again, but altered. It no longer needed to win. It only invited.

Neha looked down at Whisker, who had chosen that moment to sit very upright between their feet.

“What about him?” she asked.

“Whisker?”

“He has supervised so far.”

“I suspect he has other appointments.”

Whisker did, in fact, have other appointments. A promising patch of sun near the entrance. A long-standing dispute with a pigeon outside

Mondegar. A theoretical possibility of chicken toward evening. Still, he disliked being excluded from narratives he had improved by his presence.

Vicky signalled for the bill.

The spell shifted but did not break. That, Whisker admitted, was impressive. Many spells could not survive itemised taxation.

While they waited, Neha said, “You know, I was nervous before coming.”

“So was I.”

“You did not look it.”

“That is because the jacket is doing most of the emotional labour.”

She laughed. “It is a very capable jacket.”

“Thank you. I chose it after rejecting three versions of panic.”

“I chose this saree after rejecting five versions of indifference.”

They looked at each other, and the laughter faded into something gentler.

“I am glad you came,” Vicky said.

“I am glad you asked.”

“I almost did not.”

“I almost said no.”

“Efficient, then, that we both failed at avoidance.”

“For once.”

The bill arrived. Vicky reached for it. Neha reached too.

“Do not,” she said.

“I invited you.”

“And I accepted as an independent financial entity.”

“Noted.”

“Good.”

They split it.

Whisker found this development politically advanced but emotionally less entertaining.

Vicky did not argue. Neha noticed that too.

“Another change,” she said.

“What?”

“You would have fought me on that once.”

“Yes.”

“Some speech about being the man.”

“Please lower your voice. The ghost of my younger self is already embarrassed.”

“He should be.”

“He is. I have had words with him.”

“Good.”

They stood.

For a second, the table looked bereft without them. Two empty glasses, a half-eaten plate, a folded bill, the small bowl of water, and beneath everything, the faint warmth of what had just happened.

Neha adjusted her saree. Vicky picked up his phone, finally, but did not look at it. He slipped it into his pocket as though returning a tool he had not needed.

Whisker saw Neha see that.

It mattered.

Humans were foolish, yes. But sometimes they understood the significance of small things. A phone not checked. A silence not filled. A bill not conquered. A question not rushed. These were tiny offerings, and perhaps tiny offerings were all adulthood really was.

They turned toward the door.

Whisker followed.

Not because he cared.

Because someone had to see what happened next.

## THE LIMITS OF FELINE SUPERVISION

Outside, Colaba received them without ceremony.

This was another thing Whisker respected about the city. It did not pause for anyone's emotional development. A man and a woman could emerge from a cafe having rearranged seventeen years of memory between two lime sodas, and Mumbai would still require them to avoid a delivery boy, a family of tourists, three taxis, one ambitious scooter, and a man selling sunglasses with the confidence of a minor prophet.

The afternoon had deepened. Light lay along the shopfronts in slanting sheets. The pavement was warm under Whisker's paws. Somewhere nearby, onions hit hot oil. Somewhere farther away, the sea breathed its old metallic breath behind the buildings. Colaba Causeway moved around them in its usual crowded argument: vendors calling, bangles clicking, leather bags hanging from hooks, scarves lifting in the sea air, foreigners bargaining badly, locals bargaining well, everyone convinced they were late to something important.

Vicky and Neha stood for a moment just beyond the doorway, both adjusting to the brightness.

Whisker slipped out behind them.

Not following. Following suggested attachment, and attachment was a vulgar word. He was merely travelling in the same direction for reasons connected, perhaps, to chicken.

"You were right," Neha said.

"A rare and dangerous opening. About what?"

"Causeway is nearby if one is sufficiently nostalgic."

“I intend to have that engraved somewhere.”

“Please don’t.”

They began to walk.

At first they kept the careful distance of people who had not yet agreed what kind of walk this was. Not strangers. Not quite companions. Certainly not lovers, though Whisker knew humans often required absurd amounts of paperwork before admitting what their feet had already decided. They moved with an inch of air between them, enough for history to pass through if it insisted.

A boy appeared beside them with a fan of cheap sunglasses.

“Madam, original Ray-Ban. Sir, very good price.”

“Original?” Vicky asked.

“Full original.”

“That sounds more original than usual.”

Neha glanced at him. “Do not start a philosophical discussion with the sunglasses boy.”

“I am merely interested in degrees of authenticity.”

“He is interested in selling you plastic.”

“Also a valid model.”

The boy, sensing danger in excessive conversation, transferred his hopes to a tourist couple behind them. Neha laughed under her breath.

Whisker kept pace along the edge of the pavement, where the shadows were better and human shoes less predictable.

In college, he imagined, the man might have walked too close or too far, might have performed concern loudly, might have offered protection as if the street were a theatre built for his masculinity. Now he simply adjusted his pace to hers. When the crowd narrowed, he fell half a step back. When a scooter cut too near the curb, he moved slightly to the outside, not as a declaration, only as fact.

Neha noticed.

Of course she noticed. Humans rarely missed the things they were no longer being asked to applaud.

They passed a stall where glass bangles were arranged in towers of impossible colour. Neha slowed. Vicky slowed with her, but did not ask whether

she wanted to stop, which was wise. A person looking at bangles did not always need a committee.

She lifted one set, blue shot through with green, and held it against her wrist. The vendor began praising it immediately, with the ancient desperation of commerce.

“Madam, perfect matching. Designer piece.”

Neha smiled. “Designer, is it?”

“Very designer.”

Vicky coughed once into his hand.

“Say nothing,” she told him.

“I am a model of restraint.”

“A recent model.”

“With software updates.”

She put the bangles back gently. The vendor looked wounded, then recovered at once and turned toward a woman in a yellow kurta.

They walked on.

The loose end of Neha’s pallu lifted suddenly in the wind from a passing taxi and drifted toward the dusty handlebar of a parked scooter. Vicky’s hand moved, then stopped. It was a small hesitation, but Whisker saw it. So did Neha.

“May I?” he asked.

She looked at the pallu, then at him. Something like amusement crossed her face, followed by something softer.

“Yes.”

He lifted the silk carefully, with the backs of his fingers, as if touching a page that might tear if handled with old habits. He did not make a joke. He did not hold it longer than needed. He only guided it clear of the handlebar and let it fall back where it belonged.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Dangerous city,” he said. “Even the scooters have opinions.”

“This one liked the saree.”

“Good taste. Poor boundaries.”

She smiled and resumed walking.

But the inch of air between them had changed. It was still there, yet

it no longer seemed posted as a warning. It had become ordinary space. Negotiable space. The kind into which a hand might one day move, or not, without frightening anyone.

Whisker, who had never asked permission before touching anything in his life, considered the matter with professional interest.

Near a bookstall, Neha stopped again. Old paperbacks leaned against one another in sun-faded rows. Business books promised domination. Diet books promised discipline. Romance novels promised neither but looked more honest about it.

“Do you read fiction now?” she asked.

“A little.”

“You used to say fiction was inefficient.”

“I was punished for that opinion by having a life.”

“Good.”

“I deserved it.”

She picked up a battered copy of a novel and turned it over. “I think stories frightened me then.”

“You? Why?”

“Because they made wanting look serious. I preferred surfaces. Clothes, parties, airports, exits. They were easier to manage.”

“And now?”

She slid the book back into place. “Now I design surfaces for a living, and I know exactly how much truth they can carry.”

Vicky looked at her with that new quiet of his.

“That is a good answer,” he said.

“Do not analyse it.”

“I am admiring it.”

“That is allowed.”

They walked again.

The crowd pressed, loosened, pressed again. At one point their shoulders touched. Neither apologised. This, Whisker thought, showed progress. Humans apologised for the wrong things constantly and the right things years late.

They passed the old, painted front of Mondegar, where music leaked

out faintly and someone laughed too loudly near the entrance. Neha looked toward it.

“We went there once,” she said.

“With the whole class.”

“You sat in the corner.”

“I was cultivating mystery.”

“You were hiding behind a menu.”

“A mysterious menu.”

She laughed, but there was no cruelty in it now, and no defensiveness in his answering smile.

At the crossing, traffic gathered itself into a knot and refused all solutions. Vicky and Neha reached the curb still talking, both too absorbed to give the road the attention it believed was its birthright.

“Ready?”

“For crossing the road?”

“For Mumbai, one should confirm consent.”

“Very progressive.”

“I have grants now.”

She laughed and stepped beside him, and they entered the traffic as if the city had politely agreed to wait.

The city had not.

A black-and-yellow taxi shot forward from behind a bus and honked with the particular Mumbai urgency that was not quite warning and not quite accusation, but somehow both. The sound split the air beside them.

Neha startled.

Before she seemed to know she had moved, her hand caught Vicky’s arm at the sleeve of his jacket. Not a clutch. Not possession. Just her fingers closing in the cloth, enough to steady herself, enough to say, without saying it, that for one unguarded second she trusted the man inside it.

Vicky saw.

He did not apologise. He did not become embarrassed on her behalf. He did not perform rescue, which Whisker considered an important distinction. He only waited until the taxi had bullied past them, then looked at her and smiled.

Not triumphantly. Not knowingly. Genuinely.

Neha's cheeks coloured. She released the sleeve at once, smoothing the fabric as if the jacket, and not she, had been the one to lose composure.

Vicky said nothing.

That was also correct.

They crossed the rest of the road more carefully, but closer than before.

Whisker watched from the original side of the road.

The man and woman had already reached the far pavement, and the afternoon sun had laid a comfortable rectangle against the wall behind him.

Whisker considered following, then sat down.

Across the road, Vicky and Neha had slowed again. They stood near a stall of scarves, talking in voices Whisker could no longer hear. The city moved between them and him: taxis, bodies, colour, heat, the bright interruption of everything.

Then Neha said something and Vicky laughed. She laughed too, more relaxed now, as if the sound had stopped surprising her.

Whisker's eyes had begun to close. He opened them with effort.

The two humans were walking again. More slowly now. More easily. The blue of Neha's saree moved beside the navy of Vicky's jacket, closer than it had been at the café door, closer than it had been before the taxi, closer each time the crowd made room and then took it away.

Whisker lowered himself into the rectangle of sun.

He could still see them between the passing taxis.

Their hands moved as they walked. Not touching. Not yet. Only travelling near each other, closer, then apart, then closer again.

Whisker tried to keep watching, although he was now clearly sleepy. His eyes started closing involuntarily, a little at first - then with quite some force.

The afternoon was warm. His body was old. His eyes closed once, then opened.

Across the road, Vicky's hand drifted toward Neha's, close enough that even from his sunlit post Whisker understood the question being asked, an opportunity - too risky to take but too rare to leave.

Whisker would have loved to know the answer, but then he remembered he was a cat and slowly drifted off to sleep.