

A Retirement from Hell

By Benjamin Gayle

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T. Foor loved his job, his career. He wasn't the best. He wasn't the most accomplished. He didn't win special awards (*that* one didn't count, he knew it was just something the Company had cooked up to avoid having to pay him a retention bonus). He was just a regular guy, steady and stable, successful through perseverance. It really wasn't hard to persevere because he enjoyed his work so much. But it was time to retire – he was at the age limit and the rules were strictly enforced. He had made it this far by following those rules and not ranging too widely. He was not an experimenter, adventurer, rebel, or thrill-seeker – they tended to die young or be fired (that was worse).

One more assignment. He was distracted by thoughts of what to do afterward. The Company would take care of him, that was in the contract and the Company always honored its contracts. It always had, as far back as Time went, as far as anyone knew (and that was pretty far), the Company had always *been*, there had never been Time without the Company. There were speculations about a beginning (everything that *is* had a beginning, didn't it?), and origin, and what came before. But that was an event long-gone, outside the system, and

nobody could even *know*.

What would he do with his time in retirement? The Company had a training program for that, to ease the transition (it was a good Company). He felt a sudden apprehension: *this will be the last time I can do what I have enjoyed for so long*. The last time. It was the thought of there being an end that upset him. Ends were final, well most of them anyway, even if it was a transition to something else.

The assignment seemed mundane: an ordinary middle-aged house cat living in a third-level flat with two elderly human-companions. It brought visions of warm laps and rubs and flower boxes in grate-covered windows. Not very exciting, though cats had their own special character. Not dangerous, cats were some of the safest assignments in the current market. It would be an easy but still respectable end. A *boring* end.

Foor started recounting the techniques he had used with cats. He was, after all, allowed some professional discretion on-the-job. Some subjects needed a light touch, others had no discernible limits. He might have a little fun, add a bit of zing to make it memorable. There was that orange tabby that had got as close to breakdancing as any cat has ever been known to, a tail-chase and a single-paw vault into a back-spin. The human-companion's reaction to its paws-in-the-air wide-mouthed toothy *ta-daa* was particularly satisfying. There was a Siamese who sang along with the radio and wailed plaintively when it was shut off, then went on destructive rampages if it was not turned back on. That had been a normally talkative cat, so the singing might not have seemed unusual.

He needed to think up something a cat could do, without injury to itself (that was in the Rules), but that a

cat just *wouldn't* do. Chasing invisible things up walls was out. He suspected that cats did that on their own. Anything that inflicted physical injury or death to others was generally frowned upon, if not strictly prohibited. Terrorism, to use a modern word, worked much better if the terrorised lived to continue to be tormented and even to propagate their fears long after their root had disappeared. That was the ultimate goal of the Company: disruption without damage.

Foor knew that the worldly economy was based on trade of goods and services, value for value. He had never worked out how the Company managed – it didn't seem to participate in trade or even need to. The Company just *was*, as it had always been. He hadn't thought much about it because it did not affect him directly and it was an implicitly taboo subject. He was simply an instrument that applied the will of the Company, and he had always been content with that.

He started the preliminary preparations for the assignment. Protocol required that he formally accept the assignment, request further details, or reject it. After accepting, he would have access to the full case file so that he could prepare and plan. (Rejecting an assignment carried potential consequences. There would be hearing to determine if the rejection was justified. It usually wasn't, and this was one of the reasons that employees were fired.) Then he would have to submit his plan and await approval.

The case files provided good and useful information, but were never complete. This cat carried the title 'Captain Midnight'. That sounded more promising than the usual 'Fluffy' or 'Mr. Piddles'. He was described as very dark solid grey, not quite black, with a bluish tinge if the light reflected at a particular angle. Five

years old, adopted as a kitten, and had spent most of his life in the same third-level flat. Favorite activities included napping, eating, and sitting in a flower box surveying his domain. Batting a lumpy ball around the uneven floors of the flat was endlessly entertaining. No possessions on record. The elderly human-companions might need special handling.

Foor had a high approval rating and his near-textbook plan was approved almost immediately. He would enter through the television receiver, luring the cat close while the human-companions were away. Just a touch, one paw on the cabinet or screen, would be enough to make the transfer. Exits were usually left open and worked out in-the-moment. Sometimes it was necessary to leave in a hurry.

When he reported to the transfer station to start the assignment, his last assignment, his co-workers had gathered to see him off. He was embarrassed at the attention. He acknowledged them as they cheered politely, then moved into the transfer slot.

Captain Midnight was lying on a throw-rug in the living room when Foor arrived in the television receiver. Midnight was pointed in the direction of one of the windows, looking at a flower box and thinking about it. *So many things to do*, he thought, pleased that so many of those things were naps. He wasn't napping when the television turned itself on.

He heard the relay click, the high-pitched whine of the capacitor charging up to drive the picture tube, the static hiss rising out of the speaker as the tubes warmed up. He rolled his head around in time to see the picture screen brighten enough to look like frothing foaming dirty water. A bright ball of indeterminate color

(it was a black-and-white set) floated into view, dancing around the screen as tossed by the churning water. He watched it for a while, then looked back at the flower box. And back at the television picture, moving no more than necessary to redirect his gaze. He prided himself in that type of efficiency. There was something unusual about the picture. It wasn't the kind of show the ladies would watch, and they didn't watch while they weren't here. He had nearly fallen asleep while thinking about this but snapped back to attention when the strange noises started.

Fluttering and chirping, rustling of dry leaves, the rending of steel as a blade sliced open a can. He was suspicious. There was no smell, or rather there was no *different* smell, only the usual tang of warm electronics. And the ball was still where he had left it, underneath the sofa. He decided it was worth a closer look so he rolled over onto his other side. There was no noticeable difference. He couldn't just go back to sleep because the noises had a subtle variation that didn't repeat, that kept his senses on edge.

Suspicion was one of the forms of curiosity, he couldn't resist. He pulled his feet underneath him and rose, stretching casually, then sat for a moment. In five steps he was at the machine, nose nearly touching the glass of the screen. He heard the soft crackle as the electrical discharge reached his nose, or maybe it was afterward. Putting aside the discomfort of the shock, he knew immediately that something had changed, something was wrong.

Foor also knew immediately because the cat didn't respond like it should have. It was like floating in a transition area with no control over his direction. It wasn't like vertigo but he was slightly disoriented and

beginning to panic. He pulled himself together and put on his best commanding-but-not-threatening daemonic voice.

“I am here to possess you. Submit now,” he projected. He should not have had to do that. His mere presence should have been enough. Had the schedulers at the Company played a trick on him for his last assignment? He felt the cat's response, weak in signal but strong in self-confidence.

“Nobody can possess me, I'm my own cat.”

Back-talk, and from a cat! Foor was experienced enough to handle it calmly. “No, I do not mean to own you. I am taking over for a while.”

“Like sub-leasing?” Midnight responded.

“More like occupying by force. You will follow my command or you will suffer,” Foor said with forceful intent.

“Sounds like Hell.”

Foor's rhythm was upset. “You have heard of the Company?”

“So you're one of those daemon-things that I've heard about?” Midnight asked.

“Yes,” Foor confirmed, annoyed at the casual and familiar address of the cat. Conversing with the subject was not exactly prohibited, but it was highly unusual and had never happened to him before. The novelty of it was at least interesting, if not infuriating. He could safely assume that the cat couldn't communicate the conversation to the outside world so it probably wasn't dangerous to continue.

“Do you have all of those special powers, like levitation and glowing in the dark and talking in thumbs? Like a superhero genie in a little red skinsuit popping from place to place?”

“No, it isn't like that.”

“You mean you can't do any tricks?”

Foor had not anticipated this. “I could make you breakdance like it's 1985.”

“Ooh!” Midnight exclaimed, delighted at his fortune. “Can you add a moonwalk in there somewhere? I've always wanted to be able to do that. Yes – do it, DO IT!”

“I also know things about you that might disturb you,” Foor continued, ignoring the cat's exuberance. “For example, I know that your title is 'Captain Midnight'.”

“That's my callsign,” Midnight confirmed. “What's yours?”

“I am known as T. Foor.”

“What's the 'T' for, Foor?” he asked, pronouncing it like 'fur'.

“Just call me Foor.”

“Four?”

“*Foor.*”

“Fyer? Fewer? Fuhrer?”

“No! That is *not* how it sounds. You are mispronouncing it on purpose.”

“I'm not pronouncing anything. I don't have to, I'm a cat,” Midnight said, matter-of-factly. “T – hmmm. Thomas, Theodore, Timothy, Tanaka –”

“No –”

“Tamara, Tina, Teresa –”

“No. Where did you get all of those names, anyway?”

“Phone book. The ladies started putting pages from the phone book under my food and water dishes when they stopped subscribing to the newspaper. I read while I eat. How 'bout I call you Ted? You seem like a

Ted.”

“No! My name is Foor.” He sighed before reluctantly adding, “T stands for my *title*.”

Midnight considered this for a moment. “Teaweasel? Toeclipper? Taxiwhacker? Tr—”

“No – stop!” Foor nearly yells, exasperated. “The 'T' stands for Technician.”

Midnight paused again. “Well, that's kinda boring. I like Taxiwhacker better. You wanna be one? I can teach you.”

“You can't teach that, you just made it up.”

“I am an expert.”

“You are *not* an expert and you are not certified.”

“I have a license. You wanna see it?”

“You don't have any license.”

“Sure I do.” Midnight flicks his collar tags with a claw. “This one says I'm a licensed cat – read it. It's official. Where's yours?”

“Where is my what?”

“Your license. You can't just go around technicating without a license. It's in the rules.”

“You don't know the rules and there is no license. I am trained and authorised by the Company, that is the only license necessary.”

“Maybe I should start my own Company. I *am* licensed, after all, that's a good marketing point. I'll call it 'Captain Midnight's Technicating and Taxiwhacking'.”

“There is no such thing as taxiwhacking.”

“Sure there is, the ladies told me about it. That's what you have to do if the taxi won't stop for you. It helps to have a cane or umbrella, something with some reach. A handbag can work too. Say, you seem pretty useful, you wanna join me? We could do things, go

places. Or you could while I just *be*.”

“Maybe they should have called you 'Captain Vicarious'.” He knew that was a step over the line, but it was too late. There was a rule against personal insults.

“Your experience is almost entirely through others.”

“And yours isn't?”

Foor made an uncouth noise.

“What else would you be doing, going around possessing other cats?”

“No, this is my last assignment. I am retiring.”

“Why? Don't you like what you do? Isn't that who you are?”

“Well, yes, but I have reached the mandatory retirement age so I have to retire. It's in the Rules.”

“What happens then? What will you do?”

“I don't know yet.” Foor paused. “The Company has a training program for making that transition to something else. I have not been through it yet. I have been busy working and I suppose I didn't want to think about this ending. I don't want it to end.”

“It doesn't have to end. I have goals you could accomplish for me.”

“Personal goals are things you should accomplish yourself.”

“Sure, I could do it for myself, but that goes against my principles. You see, I'm on the path to true catness, to accomplish more with less effort.”

“You don't do things for yourself because you are lazy – too lazy to do and too lazy to learn.”

“It's not laziness, it's cat-nature. I'm ambitious. I'm out to out-cat all the other cats. That's where you come in.”

“I won't help you.”

“So watch this.” Midnight padded purposefully

into the kitchen. Putting weight on both of his front paws, he depressed the pedal that pushed open the lid of the trash can. Once fully opened, it stayed open until he depressed the pedal again. “See? I *do* know these things and I *can* do them. But why should I? You can do them for me.”

“That is not the way it works. I can only motivate you to do things, not do them for you. Ordinarily, that is. I don't seem to be able to motivate *you* to do anything.”

“Motivation without self-motivation is closer to true cat-nature. That's good, how far can we go with it?”

“We? *I* am doing the possessing here. This is my show, *this is my job*. This is all about *me*.”

“*You* are retired. There is no job, there is no you. *We* are on a mission now. I'm on my first life, by the way. I wonder if we can carry this on through the next eight.”

“That is a myth. You only get one life.”

“At a time?”

“No, only one life *ever*. No more. No second chance. No eight more chances.”

“You sound jealous.”

Foor paused to consider the absurdity of the situation. “You seem to think that you will profit from me staying. What would I get out of it?”

“You would rather go home to a boring retirement than spend a few exciting years with me? Really? What would you be doing?”

“I already told you that I don't know. I don't know what employees do in retirement. I have never known anyone who was retired. I have always been too busy working, I will stop.”

“You've already done that.”

“Not yet, this is my last assignment.”

“How's it going? According to plan, achieving your goals?”

“No, this is all wrong. You are not cooperating. You should not be talking.”

“I'm not talking, that's just your imagination. I've heard that happens when you get old. The ladies—”

“I am not imagining things. This is different.”

“If it's that different, maybe you really are done and this is your transition to something else, isn't it?”

“No. There will be a ceremony, co-workers gathered to see me off into retirement. I have seen others off in that way.”

“Did you see them again, after that?”

“No.”

“What happened to them? Where did they go?”

“I don't know. They went into a transfer slot and . . . ”

Midnight waited for him to continue, then said, “And what? You sound like you just inhaled a stink-bug.”

“They gathered at the transfer station to see me off for my last assignment, *this* assignment.”

“So retirement is a kind of last assignment, right?”

“This cannot be retirement,” Foor cried. “To be stuck with a cat. *Possessed* by a cat? No!”

“That settles it, then. *We* are on a mission. Lets make some plans. Or better yet, you start planning while I take a nap. Oh, and just wait 'til you meet the ladies, they know all about retirement.”

No one at the Company ever heard from T. Foor again.