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Foreman: Playing Dead

PLAYING DEAD

Robert Long Foreman

Last night I slept alone among the sheets of a photographer I have never met. My girlfriend Sarada house sits for her, but took a vacation this week with her parents. I agreed to stay behind and watch the house, as I continue to not have a job.

I stayed here a week with Sarada before she left, and we broke the photographer's bed. The supports snapped off of their wooden frame. This was a collaborative effort, and we fractured the poor thing twice, in different places, before we dragged the box springs and mattress into the adjacent office. After that adjustment I think we scraped the hardwood floor with our friction, as if the bed frame had not been enough.

Nothing expensive has broken yet. Neither of the photographer's cats has died. Thus, we have done a pretty good job of looking after things so far.

This is the first time in a year that I have had so much as a room to myself, and things are likely to get out of hand. I may never sweep the floor. I may take up chain smoking and refuse to use an ashtray, let the cats throw up and not clean after them. I could use the bathtub for a toilet, smash the TV set, eat nothing but lettuce and LSD for three days, and redecorate the place with tinfoil and used film. I might even listen to the photographer's Pink Floyd albums. Sarada would return, arms full of luggage, to find me stark naked on the floor, twenty pounds lighter, punctured with broken glass, the two cats wandering about perplexed. I would have not washed the dishes since I clogged the sink and filled it with pig's blood. This is the kind of thing I think would be intense and memorable but lack the initiative to carry out.

The two cats, Mavis and Monkey, insist on drinking straight from the kitchen faucet. On the first morning without Sarada

I had to wait several minutes before I could fill the coffee pot, while Mavis lapped at the continuous stream of water and Monkey licked Mavis' neck in eager anticipation of his turn to suck moisture from the plumbing. I stared at the oven.

I spend my time in the office, on the mattress, where I read, write and eat in the pleasurable company of the window unit air conditioner. My previous life was not sedentary, but in this summer's blistering heat I got used to the lifestyle. For a couple of days I watched the cats laze on their own furniture as I acted like this, and I saw that all along I was unconsciously doing my best to fit in with them. The cats lounge incessantly, and meanwhile their owner lives it up in New York City. I repose with them, and Sarada goes sailing off the coast of New England. The cats and I have a lot in common.

Gallons of unused water pass through this house every day, because of the cats. When Mavis drinks from the sink, she does it for five minutes at a time. I do not know how to politely throw a mammal to the floor, so I leave the faucet on for her and walk away. Water spills from the faucet straight into the drain, embarrassingly, long after she finishes. I hate wasting things. When I do this I blame the cats, and feel glad for the city's recent report that its water contains cyanide. I am not conflicted when it comes to throwing away cyanide.

Once a day, Monkey meows and coughs nervously until house debris comes spilling from his mouth in a soggy bolus. I think it is only a matter of time before I, too, vomit food and hair onto the hardwood floor, and pace away without cleaning it. I cannot wait.

The gender divide between the photographer and me makes my stay here a little invasive. Sarada, after all, is the one who was trusted to watch the place and not I, her unclean, undoubtedly male boyfriend. As an adolescent I wished I could walk invisible through a pretty lady's bedroom as she undressed, and watch the proceedings with rapt attention. My presence in this house gives not quite the same ghost-voyeur's satisfaction, but it does

achieve some component of that common fantasy. Although no one in this house is currently naked except for me, some woman's stuff is all over the place, and her life is arranged on shelves and in drawers, and if I wanted to I could go riffling through it. No one would stop me. I have not yet explored that option, and my exasperated friend Monty does not understand why.

The photographer takes pictures of ghosts or, anyway, pictures that simulate ghosts. Books of occult photography haunt her shelf, and according to her web site their old shots of ectoplasm seeping out of ears and clothes inspired her recent work, which hangs on her walls. In them, dense fogs inhabit a few cells in the old lunatic asylum in town, and linger in the woods that surround it. I am not certain how she achieved these effects, but I like the concept: she knows the ghosts are not real, yet she passes them off in earnest despite that. Skeptics have fun, too.

Before the photographer returns, Sarada and I will fix the broken bed. We will carry her box springs discretely to where we found them. Later she will see how we scraped her wooden floor. Perhaps she will not see this, though, for several months after she returns, and by then she might have put it out of her mind that Sarada lived here. She might wonder if the scars were made the night before, by something unseen. At midnight her bed will snap, in the same place where Sarada and I broke it, as she shifts her groggy weight. Her mattress, which I am currently sprawled on, will slump with mystery from the wooden frame to the floor. She might wonder if disquieted spirits have emanated from the ground to tell her something.

She seems to think about this sort of thing often enough to draw such conclusions. Others have gotten ideas like it based on less complicated evidence than what I am providing her. With any luck the cats will act disturbed when the bed breaks again and frighten the photographer even more. I know the truth, though. There are no ghosts: rather, wooden beds are not strong enough to withstand housesitters in love.

At first I thought the cats were not all bad. They relieved

themselves in the appropriate sandbox, and left me alone as long as I kept clear of their sink. They even crawled into bed with me at night. With Sarada gone, there was room enough for me and both of them together. We each snuggled up to ourselves, at peace.

As the week wore on I dozed later into the day. The first time I slept in, Mavis attacked a pile of her owner's papers with claws and teeth. I could hardly believe how loud this was. She was trying to wake me up. I told Mavis to go to hell, and she stopped, and then I shut my eyes and dreamed about a giant lobster.

Monkey took over the next morning. Some cardboard boxes inhabit the space next to the mattress where I sleep, and he dug his claws into them, at high volume, and made my life feel like an unfortunate mistake at five in the morning. I refused to hit him, which I worried might be the only thing that could halt his awful behavior. This quickly became a morning ritual.

In a high school anatomy class I dissected a cat in order to learn something. I had to reach in and split its ribcage with my bare hands. If I could somehow convey that experience to Mavis and Monkey I think they would manage to leave me alone when I want them to, and we would get along splendidly.

I descended to the town my second night here, to see what the noise was about. One would expect that, on a Monday in the summer, college kids might calm down a little. I could hear them from up at the photographer's house, though, at their howling parties. I went out, and passed a crowd of college guys who stood on a porch with their shirts off and shouted at girls who walked behind and in front of me. The girls ignored them. None of us had anything better to do.

They all failed to acknowledge me, and I might as well have not been there. I walked into a crowded bar where I knew nobody. I breezed past a few average, living people at the entrance, then scurried to the back while I eyed the crowd, pretending I needed to use the restroom. I stood there a few seconds, looked in a mirror, then turned and left. It occurred

to me later that if I had been killed by an SUV on the way to that bar (which I just know is bound to happen someday) and had unknowingly become a ghost and continued on my way, thinking I was still alive, my ghost self would have behaved in that same fashion, talking to no one, avoiding eye contact, not ordering any drinks.

The next day I passed on foot the remains of a devastating collision between two cars. The street was filled with torn metal and no passengers. If I had been standing near the vehicles when they hit, I thought, I could have easily been killed. I got worried, thinking perhaps I really had been there and died, and then had joined the spirit world and forgotten the event, as ghosts will supposedly do, and gone about my quiet life as usual. I entered a bakery nearby, and no one saw me. It appeared that my end had finally come.

Then I caught sight of a friend of my ex-girlfriend, and she scowled at me. She was disgusted, as though my ears were weeping ectoplasm. This reassured me that I was still alive. I could not decide exactly how I felt about this.

Sarada returned with her golden hair, and she did not like my lettuce and LSD fantasy when I told it to her. She did not think it was funny. She said it sounded like something her ex-husband would have done.

Sarada's father and sister came one afternoon to drop some things off, and they looked at the ghost photographs on the wall. I tried to explain to them what effect the photographer seemed to be after, what she was trying to achieve, and they did not like this at all. They were displeased with the whole concept, and I found myself trying to make the photographer sound good so that they would think highly of her. I wanted them to like the photographer. I still have not met her myself, and I am not certain I will like her if I do.

Now that I am near the moment when I will exit this place for uncertain things ahead, I want to leave something for the photographer to find, an object she will know me by. I do not

keep business cards, as I make no money from the things I do.

I could leave a copy of something I wrote while I was here, perhaps an early draft of this very essay, but if I did she might take it the wrong way, or steal it and publish it herself, or try to publish it and fail. Who knows how she would react. Despite how intimately I have come to dislike her cats, I know almost nothing about this woman, and I doubt I ever will. She could be a sadist, for all I know. She could be friends with my ex-girlfriend, or with all of my ex-girlfriends. I do not think she will respond well if I leave a signature behind me.

I have my doubts, however, as to whether I can help it. Everything I do in this house reminds me how easily the photographer could perceive the remnants of my presence when she returns in September. I lose, at the very least, one hair per day in her living room. Everywhere I go I trail a mess of evidence behind me, indicating where in the universe I have existed. I might as well spend this summer on the surface of the moon, where no wind will ever sweep my footprints from the dirt below me, and dust mites will not eat my flaky remains.

I think I understand why ghosts are never as direct and obvious as believers think they are, and as skeptics think ghosts would be were they real. We are not the ones specters would want to talk to if they could do it. Like the photographer and me, ghosts are stuck with us by circumstance, and most of us—living and dead—would much rather be windsurfing.

I will not miss the cats after I leave. As soon as I move in with Monty, they will be strangers to me. If we cross paths on the street and they look at me expectantly, I will walk past them without making eye contact. I will brush them off as though they were insane, or salesmen, or insane salesmen, and leave them without a word. They will feel betrayed and confused.

Many of the people I know in this town are leaving, or they have left already. I have lost touch with dozens of friends in these last three years, and it feels like I have not seen them in ages. Even Sarada will be gone by September.

I have some friends in town still, and I should not pretend that they have all disappeared or become astronauts. This fall I will inhabit an apartment near the photographer's house with Monty, and he is more animate in five minutes than most people are all day. There will be others around, too, but the friends I never see far outnumber those that I do. I will be everywhere surrounded with absences and dead potential. My life has never been so ghostly as that.

It did not have to turn out this way: Monkey could have tried harder not to throw up; Mavis could have kept his urine off the bathroom tile; they could have left me alone in the mornings, and made my life easier. They should have thought about these things at the start of our week together, and things could have turned out differently. When I am gone, in their cat brains I will have been a specter, a transitional presence who has found some other way to occupy his time, perhaps with some stray cats—less demanding ones—in a house where no one lives on the other side of town. I will vanish, and they will forget me, and the photographer may never know that I was ever here.