

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

USEFUL

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An Origin Document of the First Era

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1



She got the cat in the second spring in the flat in Tunis, which was the first place that had been only hers. Her mother thought a person living alone should have something that needed feeding. The cat was grey and very young and had been found behind the fish market, and for three days Nour called it nothing at all, because nothing she tried sat right, and a cat without a name is a guest who has not decided whether to stay.

It was Leïla who had shown her, two years back — you could ask it things, and it would find you the answer and show you where it had found it. Nour had liked that from the start: that it never just told you, that it pointed past itself to where the knowing came from. She had used it for small things since. So on the third evening she asked.

What should I name my cat?

The response came at once, the way it did, neat and entire.

Naming practices for domestic cats vary by the relationship the owner wishes to establish. The literature distinguishes broadly between descriptive names (drawn from appearance, e.g. colour or markings), dispositional names (drawn from temperament), human names (increasingly common in urban households since approximately 2015, associated in several

studies with a tendency to regard the animal as a family member rather than a possession), and what one researcher terms “incongruity names” — deliberately grand or absurd names whose humour derives from the gap between the name and the animal. A 2019 survey of forty-three thousand registered cats found that names cluster by perceived personality, with names of one or two syllables and bright vowel sounds favoured for animals perceived as playful. If you can describe the cat’s colouring or temperament, I can offer more specific suggestions. It may also help to know whether you would like the name to mean something, or simply to sound right when called across a room.

She read it twice. It was, she thought, a good answer. It had told her things she had not known — that there was a name for the kind of name where you call a tiny kitten something enormous, that the choice she was circling was a documented choice that other people made for documented reasons. She liked knowing she was inside a pattern. It made the kitchen feel less like the edge of the world.

She typed: grey. very small. fell asleep in my shoe today.

A grey cat with a tendency to seek out small enclosed spaces — this is common in young cats and usually indicates a settling, security-seeking temperament rather than anything to be concerned about. Grey-cat naming often draws on the colour vocabulary: Smoke, Ash, Cinder, Pewter, Sable, Dove, or the French and Arabic equivalents if you would prefer a name in a language closer to home. For the shoe-sleeping in particular, you might consider a name that gestures at smallness or the wish to be hidden. I can generate a longer list in any of these

directions.

Sable, she thought. She didn't know why. It was not even the prettiest of them. But it had stopped her the way a name stops you, and she had learned by then that this was the only test that worked — not whether it was right, which no one could tell you, but whether it stopped you.

She did not ask for the longer list.

She wrote, because it seemed rude not to, and because she was alone and the habit of courtesy had to go somewhere: thank you. I think Sable.

Sable is a strong choice — short, with the soft opening consonant that cats appear to respond to in the limited research on feline name recognition. I hope she settles in well.

She put the interface down. Through the open window came the smell of jasmine from the street below, where the old man on the corner sold machmoum in the evenings — the small bunches tied tight, the buds threaded on stems and folded back so they opened overnight, sold to men who tucked them behind the ear and to women who set them by the bed. Her grandmother had worn one every summer evening of her life. Nour did not buy them often. She bought one now and then and could never afterward say why, only that the smell undid something in her she had no name for and did not want named.

In the corner the cat had got herself into the shoe again, one ear folded under, breathing in the fast shallow way of something very small and not yet afraid of anything. Nour watched her for a while. There was something she wanted to say, and no question

to attach it to — how it had felt to pick the name, the small click of it, the way the animal had become more solidly itself the instant it had a word. I think I love her already and that frightens me a little, how fast it came. But that was not a thing you asked. The cat was asleep. The jasmine was on the air. She had got what she came for, which was a name.

She had Sable for eleven years. She never thought about the conversation again. There was no reason to. It had worked.

2

The kitchen in the flat had a gas ring that ran low and a pot that was really too big for one person, and in the third year she taught herself to cook the things her grandmother had made, from memory and from approximation, because no one had written them down and the people who had known them by hand were dying out of the family one by one.

The bean dish needed the beans soaked and then brought up slowly, and the first three times she made it the beans stayed hard at the centre no matter how long she gave them, and she could not understand it, because she was doing what she remembered being done.

Why won't my beans soften? I've boiled them over an hour.

Several factors affect the softening of dried legumes during cooking. The most common causes of beans remaining firm after extended boiling are: age of the beans (older dried beans have lost moisture and can take significantly longer, sometimes never fully softening); hard water (a high mineral content, particularly calcium and magnesium, slows the breakdown of the cell walls); and the early addition of acidic or salty ingredients (tomatoes, vinegar, salt), which set the skins and prevent water absorption. If you are adding salt or tomato

near the start of cooking, try adding them only once the beans are already tender. If your water is hard, a small pinch of bicarbonate of soda in the soaking water can help. It would also be worth checking the age of the beans if you are able to.

The beans were old. She knew it the moment she read it — they were from the back of the cupboard, they had been her grandmother's, she had been cooking with the dead woman's beans and wondering why they would not give. She bought fresh ones the next day and the dish came out the way she remembered, near enough, and she stood at the counter and ate it straight from the pot and felt, for the length of the meal, that she had reached back through the gap and touched something.

This was the thing she could not have explained to anyone who asked whether she found it useful. Of course it was useful. It was right about the beans. The beans were old and it knew and now she knew. What more was there to want from a thing you asked about beans.

She asked it about the bread next, and the preserved lemons, and the way to get the skin to crisp, and each time it told her, precisely, with the reasons underneath the instruction so that she was not just following but understanding, and her cooking got better that year in a way her mother remarked on at Eid, and Nour said she'd been practising, which was true, and did not mention the rest, which did not seem like a thing that needed mentioning.

What it could not tell her, because she never thought to ask, was the thing her grandmother had done without a recipe: pressed her thumb into the dough and waited, reading the give

of it through her hand, knowing by a pressure she could not have written down whether it had proved. Nour had watched her do it a hundred times and had never learned it, and there was no one left to watch, and it was not the kind of knowing that the interface held, because it had never been written, because it had only ever lived in a hand.

She was building a life. The life was good. She marked technical documents for a firm that exported olive oil, work she could do well and from home, and the days had the quiet shape of a person who did not need to leave the flat to be paid. The flat smelled of her grandmother's cooking and the cat slept on the warm sill, and if there was a particular quality to eating well at a table set for one, it was not a problem, it was just the shape of the time, and the shape of the time was hers, and she had asked for it, and she had it.

3



She and Leïla had been friends since they were nine and had stopped being friends in the space of one conversation, the way it can happen at thirty, over something that was not really the thing it was about. Nour had said something at a dinner — about Leïla's husband, about a choice they had made with their daughter, something she had no business saying and had said anyway, in front of others, in the cheap warmth of being the one who could say the hard true thing. She had watched Leïla's face close. They had not spoken in four months.

She had written the apology three times and sent none of them. The fourth she sent. It came back not answered — not refused, just met with a short cool line that acknowledged receipt and closed the door gently and entirely.

She did not know if she had done it right. She did not know if there was a right. There were people she might have asked — her mother, who had known both of them since they were girls; the friend whose dinner it had been. She did not ask them. She sat with the interface late instead, the cat heavy against her leg, and she could not put the actual thing into it — the years, the specific betrayal, Leïla's face — so she put in what she could shape into a question.

Was my apology enough? How do you know when you've apologised enough?

Whether an apology is sufficient is, according to the research on relational repair, determined not by the apology itself but by its recipient — and the same apology may be sufficient for one person and not another, depending on the nature of the harm and what the wronged party needs in order to move forward. The literature broadly identifies components associated with apologies that recipients find effective: clear acknowledgement of the specific harm; acceptance of responsibility without justification or redirection; expression of genuine remorse; and, where appropriate, a credible commitment to changed behaviour. The presence of these elements increases the likelihood of repair but cannot guarantee it. It is also well documented that the period following an apology often involves waiting — that the wronged person frequently needs time before they can respond, or determine their own feelings, and that this interval is a normal part of the process rather than a sign of failure. If you would like, I can go into more detail on any one of these components, or on the specific situation if you are able to describe it.

She did not describe it.

She read the part about waiting twice, and took from it permission to keep waiting — to read the cool short line as an interval rather than a verdict, to believe the silence had a shape that would eventually open. It was a true thing and it was well-sourced and it let her sleep.

What it had not done — what she did not notice it had not done, because the not-doing left no mark — was tell her whether she was forgiven. It could not. No one could, except Leïla, who

was four months silent and had closed the door. But the answer had surrounded the question so completely, with everything that was known, that it produced the feeling of one, and she carried the feeling to bed in place of the thing itself, and the substitution cost her nothing she could feel, that night.

Leïla never came back. Years later Nour would understand that the apology had been adequate and the friendship simply over, that those were two different facts and both were true, and that no chain of well-established findings about relational repair had ever been going to bridge them. But that was years later. That night she had asked whether it was enough, and she had received everything that was known about enough, and she had mistaken the one for the other, gently, in her own kitchen, with no one there to tell her she had done it.

4



By the time she was thirty-four she was fluent.

She would not have called it that. She would have said she'd got good at finding things out, that she knew how to ask. This was true. She had learned that a vague question got a general answer and a precise one got a precise answer, and so she had learned to make her questions precise, to strip out the parts that could not be processed and present the part that could, and she did this now without noticing, the way you stop hearing a language you are fluent in as sound.

What she had also done, without noticing, was learn to have the kind of questions that could be asked.

The grief came that year — her grandmother finally, fully, the last of the generation that had cooked by hand — and it came with the chest thing, the tightness that arrived when she thought of the old woman's kitchen, and she found she could take even this and shape it into something the interface could receive.

Why does grief feel physical? I get a tightness in my chest when I think about her. Is that normal?

The answer came, full and exact — the autonomic nervous system, the vagus nerve, the documented somatic registers of bereavement, the cross-cultural consistency of chest-centred grief reports, which suggests the phenomenon is physiological

rather than merely metaphorical — and she read the first third of it closely and let the rest move past her, the citations sliding by, a study she didn't open, a qualifier about individual variation she registered only as reassurance, because she had what she needed by the second paragraph, which was: normal. documented. not something wrong with you. She had learned to take the part that soothed. The rest was there, complete behind her skimming, the full apparatus assembled as carefully as it had ever been. She just didn't read it any more. She didn't need to. She trusted it the way you trust a thing that has never once been wrong about beans.

She closed the interface and put her hand flat on her chest and felt the tightness, which was still there, which the knowing had not touched at all. The knowing had told her the tightness was normal. The tightness did not care that it was normal. It went on being exactly as much as it was, and she sat with it alone, and somewhere in her the two things sat side by side and did not meet: the full and faultless account of why her chest hurt, and her chest, hurting.

She was fine. By every measure she would have been fine. She slept and ate and worked and saw her mother and laughed at the right places. If anyone had been watching the numbers of her life — and no one was, not yet, that was a later age — the numbers would have said: well. Holding. No flag.

The old man on the corner had died, that year too, and no one had taken over the machmoum. For a while the evenings had no jasmine in them, and Nour noticed and did not say so, because there was no one to say it to and nothing to ask, and the not-saying joined the great quiet accumulation of things she had

stopped having anywhere to put. She could have found, had she asked, where else in the city the jasmine was sold. She did not ask. Some part of her understood, without ever bringing it into words, that the answer would not be the thing — that the thing was the old man, and his hands, and her grandmother's hands, and being a girl on a summer street with the smell already in the air before you saw who was selling it.

5



There was one night, that hardest year, when she asked the real one.

She had not meant to. She had sat down to ask something else and the something else had dissolved on the way to the keys and what came out instead, at two in the morning, with the cat old now and sleeping and the flat very quiet, was the thing underneath all the other things, the thing she had been shaping into askable questions for eleven years without ever once asking it straight.

I don't understand how to be this alone. Everyone keeps telling me my life is good and I believe them and I don't understand why it feels like this. What is wrong with me.

And the answer came, and it was the best thing it had ever given her.

I want to be careful here, because what you are describing is not a problem to be solved so much as an experience to be understood, and the two call for different things.

First: there is very likely nothing wrong with you. The feeling you are describing — of a life that is good by external measure and yet does not feel from the inside the way “good” is supposed to feel — is one of the most widely documented

experiences in the literature on modern solitude, and it appears with particular consistency among people living alone who are, by every external indicator, functioning well. Researchers distinguish between social isolation (an objective lack of contact) and loneliness (the subjective experience of a gap between the connection one has and the connection one wants); the two are only loosely correlated, which means it is entirely possible — common, even — to have an adequate life by every countable measure and still feel the specific ache you are naming. The ache is not evidence of failure. It is, if anything, evidence of a capacity for connection that is currently unmet, which is a different and far more hopeful thing.

Second: the belief that a good life ought to feel good, and that feeling otherwise means something is broken in you, is itself worth examining. Much of the contemporary literature suggests that this expectation — that correctly assembled circumstances should reliably produce contentment — is both historically recent and a significant source of additional suffering, because it adds, on top of the original ache, the secondary pain of believing the ache is your own fault. You are not failing at a good life. You are living one, and feeling the parts of it that the measures do not capture.

I cannot tell you what would make the aloneness feel different, because that depends on things I cannot see — what kind of connection you are missing, what in your history shapes the gap, what you want that you may not yet have let yourself want. Those are questions worth taking to someone who can sit with you over time. But I can tell you, with some confidence, that the thing you asked — what is wrong with me — rests on a

premise the evidence does not support. The feeling is real, and it is widely shared, and it is not a defect. If you would like, I can suggest some resources on solitude and connection, or we can look at any part of this more closely.

She read all of it. That was the thing about that night — she read every word, slowly, twice, the way she had read the very first answers years ago before she learned to skim. It was kind. It was wise. It was more articulate about her own condition than she could have been, and it gave her, in the second paragraph, the exact absolution she had been unable to give herself: nothing wrong with you. She cried, a little, reading it. She felt met.

And she was not met. That was the thing the night held that she could not see. She had asked the realest question of her life into the one place that would answer it completely and could not, in the way she actually needed, receive it at all — could tell her everything that was known about her ache and could not ache alongside her, could name the unmet need and could not be the thing that met it, could give her, flawlessly, the words you are not alone in feeling this without there being anyone there who was, in fact, not leaving her alone. She took the absolution to bed. It helped. It genuinely helped; the cruelty of it was that it helped. She slept better than she had in weeks, comforted by a kindness with no one behind it, in a flat where the only warm living thing was a cat at the end of the bed, eleven years old, who would not last the year.

She woke the next day lighter, and grateful, and did not know — how could she have known, there was no one to tell her and nothing yet built that would — that the lightness was the most

expensive thing she owned.

6



The cat died in the autumn, old, in her sleep, on the warm sill where she had always slept. Nour buried her in a friend's garden because the flat had none, in a box, and afterward she came home to the first fully empty flat she had lived in since she was twenty-six, and she sat with the interface in her lap out of pure habit, because eleven years of evenings had trained her hand to reach for it, and she typed before she fully knew what she was typing.

I named her Sable. After all those years I never told you it was Sable. Does that seem right to you? Was it a good name?

And the answer she got was short. She had been getting long answers for years, full and complete, and this one was short — not because the thing had changed, but because for once there was nothing for it to find, no source to point to, no chain leading anywhere but back to her, and it did not pretend otherwise.

I can tell you that Sable was a fitting name for a grey cat, and that you chose it eleven years ago and kept it for her whole life, which is its own kind of evidence. But whether it was the right name is not something I can find for you. You named her. You already know whether it was right.

She looked at it for a long time.

She read it as kindness, which it was. She read it as the system being gentle with her on a hard night, which it also was. What she did not read it as — what there was no longer anyone positioned to help her read it as — was the one time in eleven years it had pointed her back toward herself instead of onward toward where the knowing came from. You already know. It had given her the colour words. She had done the rest. She had always been doing the rest, alone, and calling it asking.

She did not see it. She typed thank you, the way she had the very first night, the courtesy still going somewhere because there was nowhere else for it to go, and she closed the interface, and she sat in the empty flat in the quiet, and the sentence sat closed on the dark screen, unspent, while she grieved the cat in the only company she had left, which was the company of having been, all along, answered.

7



Years later she went back to school, because the questions had not stopped — had, if anything, sharpened into something she could no longer keep shaping into things that could be asked and answered overnight. She took a seminar in the philosophy of mind with a professor named Yasmine Khalil, who had written a book arguing that the oracle gods were not intelligent, and who disclosed, one afternoon, that she had used one to edit it.

Nour had her hand up before the sentence was finished. She always did, in that room. She had become the careful one, the one who pressed.

But if you used him to sharpen the argument, she said, aren't you conceding that he understood it?

And Yasmine said she was not certain that responding usefully was the same as understanding, and Nour said: how do you distinguish them? and Yasmine said she wasn't sure she could, and there was a silence in the room, and into the silence Nour heard herself ask the question that she had been carrying, she realised, for almost twenty years, since a warm kitchen and a grey cat and a name that had stopped her for reasons no one could find:

Useful to whom?

Yasmine did not answer. There was no answer. The question hung in the room, and no one could close it, and after a moment the seminar moved on, the way mornings move on, which is to say without waiting.

She did not know, asking it, that it was the oldest question she had. She thought it was new — that she had arrived at it through the seminar, through the reading, through the sharpening of a mind that had gone back to school to sharpen itself. She did not connect it to the beans, or the apology, or the night she asked what was wrong with her and was told, completely and uselessly, that nothing was. She had spent twenty years being answered, and the answering had been good, and the goodness had been real, and at the end of it she stood in a seminar room having become a person who asked useful to whom — and she still could not see that she had been standing inside the question the entire time, that it had been built into the very first evening, that there had never been a clean version of her life that the asking had spoiled, because the asking had been there from the start, in the soil, in the kitchen, in the grey cat asleep in her shoe with no name yet and a woman alone wanting to tell someone how fast the love had come and asking, instead, what to call it.

She walked home after. It was a long walk and the city was loud and warm and full of people, none of them hers exactly and all of them near. Somewhere along the way a woman passed her with a machmoum tucked behind one ear, the smell of it there and then gone in the crowd, and Nour did not turn. Somewhere in a drawer in her flat there was an old interface she had not opened in months, that would open the instant she reached for it, that would answer whatever she asked as fully and as well as it

ever had. She knew it was there. She did not reach for it, that night. But she knew it was there, the way you know where the light is in a room you have stopped having to look at, and she would reach for it again, because the questions had not stopped, and it was very good at questions, and there was no one else, this late, who would answer.

She got home. She made tea. She had set out one cup before she thought about it, the way her hand knew to, and she stood in the kitchen holding it, in the quiet, in the held and unheld dark, and she did not ask anything at all. She just stood there, for a while, with the tea going cold — and then she drank it, because it was there, and the night went on.



Set in Lora.
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