

THE CAT

By B.Z Florida

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## CHARACTER LIST

JACK is a gay man in his 30s.

WARREN is a gay man in his 30s.

ARIEL is a cat played by a man in his 20s.

SCENE ONE

*SETTING: A dining room, with two chairs and a table.*

*AT RISE: Jack and Warren have finished eating dinner, so Warren is now having an Old fashioned.*

JACK

How was work at The Company That Murders Children?

WARREN

Good. How was home?

JACK

Good, equally as good. Though Ariel's been meowing like crazy today. I'm wondering if we need to take him to the vet or something.

WARREN

He's alive, isn't he? The noise is good, it's a sign of life.

JACK

Something's been off about him today, I wish I could put my finger on what. Do you think he's lonely? I was thinking maybe we could get a second cat. You know they say that it's better to have two cats so they can play with each other.

WARREN

No, absolutely not.

JACK

Why not?

WARREN

We have Ariel so you don't get lonely all day. Why would Ariel need a second cat to make sure he wasn't lonely? Can't the two of you just make sure you're not lonely together?

JACK

You don't understand cats.

WARREN

What if the cats don't get along, and then everyone's lonely? When does it end?

JACK

We could get two more cats, so each of them got their own cat friend.

WARREN

You're being ridiculous.

*(Ariel enters the room, not looking at Jack or Warren. Instead, he slinks to the center of the stage, staring at the audience.)*

ARIEL

I am the spirit of a thousand dead children. A thousand dead children, killed by The Company That Murders Children. I am not the totality of all the children killed, merely a sampling, a sampling of the dead children whom Warren's work has enabled the killings of. I'm not here to extract vengeance. I do not believe that bloodshed here would change anything for all the children who have yet to die. Instead, my mission is simple. I will matter. That is what it will take for these children to finally be able to know peace.

*(Warren giggles, scrunching his nose.)*

WARREN

Meow meow meow to you too, you silly lil guy.

JACK

See what I mean? He's way chattier than normal. Something's up.

ARIEL

Though each dead child whom I represent was alive for only a brief span of time — the oldest alive for 13 years, the youngest for three days — collectively they represent a human wisdom of well over a thousand years. So it is with this millennial knowledge that I speak to thee, Jack. Truth always upsets sinners who have something to hide. That is why my words upset your soul.

WARREN

Awwwwwwwww.

*(Warren walks up to Ariel, scratching behind his ears. Then, he puts his face right in the cat's face.)*

Aren't you the cutest, funniest thing in the world? You make the hard days at work worth it. I do it all so you and Jack can have a happy life.

ARIEL

You cannot justify the sins you enable. Nothing justifies those sins.

*(Warren's expression slowly changes, from amused to distraught.)*

JACK

What's wrong?

*(No answer.)*

Is it something with Ariel?

WARREN

I still want to quit my job.

JACK

Not this again.

WARREN

I keep having nightmares.

JACK

I know.

WARREN

The kids keep dying.

JACK

Don't let nightmares ruin your whole day.

WARREN

It's not the nightmares that bother me. It's that they're real. Kids are really dying, every day. I may not know them. I may not know their exact names or faces. But I know they're out there, dying. They're getting bombed and shot and they're bleeding out.

JACK

We donate every year.

WARREN

It's not enough.

JACK

It's all we can do. I'm sorry, love, but I really don't understand what you want us to do here.

WARREN

It's my fault the kids are dying.

JACK

You're an accountant.

WARREN

I work for The Company That Murders Children!

JACK

It's a gigantic company, you're not involved in any of the kid-killing stuff.

WARREN

You don't get it.

JACK

You've got to stop beating yourself up over stuff that isn't your fault.

ARIEL

But it is your fault, isn't it, Warren? Your work helps run the business that's killing children.

JACK

This has nothing to do with you and what you're doing. We just have to stop calling it The Company That Murders Children. Really, it's such a terrible name.

WARREN

That's its new legal name.

JACK

The CEO has a terrible sense of humor.

WARREN

He thinks it's funny. People accused the company of killing children, so he changed the company's name. Because he thought the accusations were funny.

JACK

It's a bad joke, but it's nothing worth blowing our lives up over. You're making good money.

WARREN

I work for The Company That Murders Children. The Company That Murders Children!

JACK

We can't keep talking about this every day. You get so upset.

WARREN

It's all I can think about. We have to keep talking about it.

JACK

When there's so much good in our lives to talk about? We've got a beautiful home, a loving cat, plenty of hobbies. And we're part of a beautiful community. It's a great life, but we need your paycheck for that.

WARREN

I can get a new job.

JACK

Sure.

WARREN

You don't think I can.

JACK

I think you can. Of course you can. It's just that you've been looking for months already. It's a tough market out there. I'm sure you'll get one at some point, but I know you want to quit now. And you can't do that, without putting everything in danger.

WARREN

I have to leave.

JACK

You will, some day.

WARREN

The job market's so terrible.

JACK

It'll take a while. Which is why you can't leave yet.

WARREN

What if I can't find something else?

JACK

Then you'll have to stay. We need that paycheck, Warren.

WARREN

For what? So we can impress our dumb neighbors?

JACK

This is the life we always wanted.

WARREN

All they do is drink and eat and gossip about each other.

JACK

When we were in college, you said you wanted a stay-at-home husband.

WARREN

We're so far away from the suffering, but that makes our lives feel so empty.

JACK

You wanted someone who would do all the cooking and all the cleaning at home without argument. You wanted someone who would put together dinner parties and position us as upstanding little citizens of the community, all while you went out and earned your big-boy paycheck. Being gay was supposed to be enough. It was supposed to be enough that we loved each other, and wanted everything the straights had. But we'd get it all while being gay.

WARREN

We don't have everything straight couples can have.

JACK

Because we don't have a kid? Is that what this is about? You said you didn't feel ready for a kid, the responsibility of being a father.

WARREN

This isn't about some hypothetical kid in some hypothetical future.

JACK

Then what is it about, Warren? That your CEO's kind of a dick?

WARREN

Kids out there are dying. And each one of them had a life — they had lives just as important as ours. More important than ours, since they had more of it left to live. I can't square it, all the death. I just don't understand it.

ARIEL

I understand all too well. Civilizations have always relied on hierarchy. Humans don't know how to build societies without it. But it used to feel better. The elites used to subjugate the people in front of them. This hardened them and helped them understand what they were doing. Now the people you subjugate most fully are far away from you. It's like eating the hamburger without having to slaughter the cow: convenient, but in a way that weakens you.

WARREN

I don't know what to do.

ARIEL

You have to quit.

JACK

Quit looking at Ariel. Look at me. Your responsibility is to me, Warren. To me, and the life we built together.

*(Ariel moves so as to make direct eye contact with Jack. Jack pushes Ariel's head away, gently.)*

ARIEL

You're pathetic, aren't you, Jack? You like subjugating others, don't you? You're unwilling to see the world clearly. To do so would terrify you.

JACK

I promise I see things the way you do. Your CEO is terrible, and your company is doing terrible things. It's hard to live in this world, I know that. But we have to. And things are so, so much better than they could be. As hard as it is now, it would be so much worse if we didn't have your paycheck. Let's stop calling it The Company That Kills People. That'll fix things.

WARREN AND ARIEL (in unison)

It won't.

WARREN

I can't keep going like this.

JACK

That's what hope's for. You have to be thankful for the life you've got, but you've also got to hope that the things you don't like will get better. You have to hope you find a better job. Or, if you never find a morally pure company, you have to hope for retirement. Hope that one of our investments goes well.

ARIEL

Does that sound like hope to you?

WARREN

No. I don't think that's what hope is. Hope is living life the right way and hoping the world catches up. Hope is believing that the world is always moving to a better place, and you have to live in a way that makes you worthy of that future. I'm done being ashamed of myself. I have to make a change.

JACK

Don't do this.

ARIEL

You have to.

WARREN

I have to. I'm quitting tomorrow, and you can't stop me. If you don't like it, you can find your own job. I'll figure out how to clean the house and host the fucking tea parties.

*(Warren exits.)*

ARIEL

You're the weakest of them all, letting Warren go out and work while you stay at home.

JACK

What's gotten into you? I've been having the strangest thoughts. But they don't feel like my thoughts. I know they're not my thoughts. And they started coming when you started meowing more.

ARIEL

You aren't ashamed of the oppression you enable?

JACK

I'm not ashamed of anything. I've been looked down on by so many people, who didn't believe in me because I was gay. My family back home won't even talk to me. But I made it. Who are you to judge how I've made it? We don't get to choose the world we're born into. We don't even have all that much control over how it treats us. We just have to do our best, and I'm sure that's easier to do if you're just a cat who has to lay around all day. So Warren's company isn't perfect, who cares? If he doesn't work for them, someone else will.

ARIEL

"Someone else would've done it." Isn't that the case some Nazis made, after the War?

JACK

We're all part of systems. We don't get to choose the systems we're born into.

ARIEL

Feels like a Nazi argument.

JACK

Let's say I did have to live in Nazi Germany, knowing I was gay. I could've been true to myself. I could've been true to myself and told them to go fuck themselves. I could've hit on every hot guy I saw and died within a week... or I could've lived in the closet, waiting for a time when I was able to love who I wanted to love. Would it really be better to be true to myself if it meant getting killed? If it meant not surviving until the better time, when I could be openly gay? I don't think so. You can only fight so hard against the world you live in. After that, you have to accept it and wait for tomorrow.

ARIEL

Do you always see yourself as the victim, as opposed to all those dead children?  
Because you're a cis gay man?

JACK

Why am I arguing with my cat? I hear you meowing, but... there's this other layer to your voice. There's a voice behind the voice, and I *know* it's not Ariel's. What am I talking to? What has possessed my cat?

ARIEL

I am the spirit of a thousand dead children, children killed by your husband's company.

JACK

Huh.

ARIEL

Does that surprise you?

JACK

I don't care if I'm going crazy. If Warren and I are both going crazy. All I care about is getting you to stop tormenting my husband.

ARIEL

Warren can make his own decisions.

JACK

You're agitating him.

ARIEL

Do you think he's easily manipulated?

JACK

I think you're an irritant. And I want you to leave my cat's body. Why are you here, and how do I get you to leave? Are you planning to stay here?

ARIEL

I'll leave when Warren quits his job.

JACK

Who knows when that'll happen.

ARIEL

He's going to quit tomorrow.

JACK

He'll quit on our timeline, not yours. I'll take care of that once you're out of the home. But first, why are you here?

ARIEL

Because your husband works for The Company That—

JACK

That company has over 100,000 employees. I'm sorry, but I don't think they're killing enough kids for every single employee to get haunted like this.

ARIEL

Maybe one day.

JACK

Why are you *here*?

ARIEL

I am the spirit of a thousand dead children. Cumulatively, our intelligence spans over 1,000 years. And yet none of us got close to our 18th birthday. I just want that to matter.

I was drawn to your home because of how tortured your husband is. Most people don't really care like that. It's nice to pretend our deaths mean something, even if the two of you can't even agree on that.

JACK

What happened to you was terrible.

ARIEL

You don't care.

JACK

I do.

ARIEL

You don't want your husband quitting his job.

JACK

He'll quit when he has another one.

ARIEL

You don't really care. You care enough to say you do, in this room, when I'm confronting you. But if I wasn't here, you wouldn't think about it much.

JACK

You're right.

*(Beat.)*

I'm sorry, but you're right. It's not... I'm not heartless. I don't enjoy the thought of people suffering. But I'm just one man. People weren't built to understand the sufferings of everyone all the time. I just can't do it. I don't want to try. Warren needs me, and I need him. We can't fight against every injustice in the world all at once when we're trying to build our lives.

ARIEL

You two have each other, and no one else matters.

JACK

We give to charity. We really do try. But at a certain point, I can't even imagine what a thousand children dying is like. One child dying feels like heartbreak, but a thousand? I can't process that, I'll never understand it.

ARIEL

So kids faraway keep dying.

JACK

They always have.

ARIEL

And now I'm here.

JACK

I'm so sorry for the pain you've experienced. I'm sorry you never got to grow up. All of you.

*(Throughout the rest of the scene, Ariel's voice softens. He seems farther and farther away. He's journeying to The Beyond.)*

ARIEL

It shouldn't be like this.

JACK

It shouldn't.

ARIEL

You promise you care?

JACK

I do.

ARIEL

It's a rotten world.

A terrible world.

When I close my eyes, I see all these deaths.

Bullets and starvation and blood and screaming and...

JACK

I'm sorry.

*(Ariel closes his eyes.)*

ARIEL

And pain and misery and confusion and heartbreak.

JACK

Every one of you mattered. No one can take that away from you.

ARIEL *(weakening)*

And the light hurts and love hurts and everything hurts.

JACK

I hope you find the peace you deserve.

ARIEL

I don't understand the world enough to comprehend its pain.

What's the point of being born just to die like this?

SCENE TWO

*SETTING: A dining room table.*

*AT RISE: Jack and Warren have finished eating dinner. They're both drinking champagne.*

JACK

I'm proud of you.

WARREN

Thanks.

JACK

You're good at what you do. A bad job market wasn't going to keep you stuck at that company forever.

WARREN

Yeah.

JACK

We're supposed to be celebrating the new job, but you've been quiet all evening.

WARREN

I still don't feel good.

JACK

You're working for an NGO. I don't know that it's going to get much better than that, love.

WARREN

It's not that. Or maybe it is. I don't know.

*(Warren takes a drink, and Jack lets him sit in the silence, collecting his thoughts.)*

It's not about the job. I'm glad I found something better, and I feel better about it, but it doesn't feel like enough. Don't... Don't make fun of me, or think less of me, because I'm still upset.

JACK

I won't. I don't. I just want you to be happy. What do you think that's going to take?

WARREN

I don't know. It doesn't feel like anything I can do is enough, when there's so much terrible shit happening in the world.

JACK

You have to find a way to be happy in spite of all that. Being miserable about everything won't make it better. We donate, and we're going to keep donating. If there's any volunteer work we can do, any activism, I'll do it with you. Whatever it takes to make you happy.

WARREN

That doesn't feel like enough.

*(Beat.)*

I've been reading about effective altruism. Sam Bankman-Fried, and all the rest.

JACK

The guy who went to prison.

WARREN

For fraud. Yeah. I'm not saying I want to end up like him. I'm just saying, at least he cared. At least he tried.

JACK

Why'd you bring him up?

WARREN

I was thinking that these guys come from a similar place as me. They're the ultimate utilitarians, believing you should do the most good for the greatest number of people possible. They work so hard to maximize their impact because they want to make the world a better place. And they do, in some ways. They spend a lot of time finding the best charities to give to, figuring out what's going to have the biggest impact.

But then you read some of the things these people believe, and they go off the rails. They think all suffering is equal, so the suffering of billions of hypothetical people centuries from now is more important than real suffering people experience today. They

think we should be worried about a future AI Overlord who could enslave humanity, but their solution to that is to just build it themselves... carefully? So that maybe the AI Overlord is nice.

They're trying to amass as much wealth and power as they can to make the world their way, and reading about it, I just think... isn't that capitalism? I don't understand how altruistic it is, if they're just trying to shape the world the way they want it to be shaped. How'd they forget about all the people dying *now*? How'd they get away from real human suffering that we know is happening, that we can prevent in this moment?

JACK

I don't know. I wish you wouldn't think about this stuff so much. It's upsetting.

WARREN

I wish I was more like you. I wish I didn't think about it. That my feet were planted on the ground like yours are. You're practical. You only really care about something if it's directly in front of you.

JACK

Pros and cons to that.

WARREN

And I've seen them. But you're still a mystery to me for that, after all these years.

JACK

You're not like the effective altruism guys.

WARREN

I know. But I just don't understand how they could get things so wrong. They're supposed to be some of the smartest people in the world, tackling the questions I care about, but they get everything so *wrong*.

JACK

They want to reshape the world in their image.

WARREN

It's disgusting.

JACK

I think it's what happens when you move too fast, and you think all the world's problems are yours to handle. There are billions of people in the world. You can't fix everything, and you shouldn't try to.

WARREN

I love the life we've built together, but I need to do more. I need to make the world a better place... somehow.

JACK

I admire that about you. You will make it a better place. Because you want to. You just have to focus on where you want to help. I like helping the people around me, but that's not how you look at the world. Maybe you'll find a specific problem. A big one, but a problem that isn't so overwhelming. Or maybe you'll decide you're ready to have a kid.

WARREN

I just don't know. Do I want a kid? Or do I want to make the world a better place for all the kids who are already here?

*(Ariel enters. As Jack speaks, the cat begins to approach Warren. Slowly, so as to build tension in the audience. This will be Warren's ultimate test.)*

JACK

You don't have to know today. I think we've spent enough of today ruminating on problems, and what we should do about them. I'd rather spend the rest of the evening celebrating you and your new job.

WARREN

I am really excited about the job.

JACK

You should be. You work hard to be the best man you could possibly be. That's something to be proud of.

*(Ariel stares in Warren's eyes, calling back to the previous scene.)*

ARIEL

Meowwwwww.

WARREN *(To Jack)*

Thanks. I love you.

JACK

I love you too.

*(Warren goes and kisses Jack. It's a significant, tender moment.)*

END OF PLAY