

Dysfunctional Family Cat

by Paul Melko

"I'm leaving," said Tricia, punctuating the words with three short sneezes. She dug into the pocket of her flannel shirt, found a used tissue, and wiped her nose.

"All right, dear. Have a nice time." Her mother's glazed eyes never left the television as it blared the bantering dialogue of a late-afternoon talk-show.

"No, Mother. I'm leaving home."

"All right, dear. Have a nice time anyway."

"Have you been drinking again, Mother?" Tricia held her nose close to her mother's lips. Sour, yes, but no whiff of alcohol. Tricia realized that her mother wasn't watching the television, but that her eyes were fixed on the central speaker above it.

"Jesus, Mom. You're fried."

"Honey, you sound all congested. Do you have a cold?" Her mother's gaze wandered from the TV to Tricia's face.

"No, Mother, I'm just fucking allergic to cat hair."

"That's too bad dear, now that we have Plonk."

"Well, here's a thought. Maybe we should get rid of the cat."

"Oh, no, we couldn't do that. Send it out into the world? Alone? Oh, never."

"That's what I thought. Good-bye forever."

"Bye, dear."

Tricia shrugged on her backpack and walked down the hall to her younger brother's room. Timo was sprawled across his bed, naked except for some tattered shorts, staring at the ceiling.

"I'm leaving home."

"Bye."

"Hey! I said I'm outta' here for good. Don't you want this for your report?" For his seventh-grade social studies class, Timo was doing a case study on dysfunctional family units, using his family as the basis. His thesis was that since 57% of all family units were dysfunctional, the definitions of normal and abnormal could be reversed.

"Naw. I'm bored with that."

"What the fuck is wrong with this family?"

"Read chapter one through four in my report."

"What is wrong with you?"

"I'm going through one of my depression swings. They come and go."

"Timo, you are not suffering from bipolar disorder. You're just a moody preteen."

"You're just jealous of my creativity and its mystical link to my manic-depressive problem."

"I'm not jealous. Anorexia is a valid psychological disorder, too." Tricia paused, smiling sadly. "I'm gonna' miss you."

"Then don't go."

Tricia sneezed. "It's either me or the cat."

"Oh. Okay. Bye."

Tricia rolled her eyes. As she turned to leave, Timo shouted, "Hey, if you see Plonk, could you bring him up here?"

Over her shoulder, Tricia snarled, "If I see it, I'm gonna' kick it."

"Hey! You're kidding, right? You wouldn't...." Timo's voice faded as she ran down the stairs. In the den, her stepfather and stepbrother Chad sat in their two recliners watching the sports channel. In Chad's lap sat Plonk, a ball of white fluff, like an overweight, albino gerbil. Tricia sneezed, and Plonk looked up at her, pink eyes in a snow white face.

A phlegmy snore slithered from Chad's half-open mouth. Both of them were asleep, Tricia realized. She walked behind Chad's recliner and lifted an eyelid. The pupil beneath was huge and glazed, like a greased marble. Around Chad's nostrils and mouth were tiny white hairs. Tricia sneezed three times in succession.

"You need some monoxidil, cat," she said. Her eyes were tearing and her lungs felt like they were the size of beanbags. "Fuck it. I'm outta' here."

She stood in the hall at the base of the stairs. She yelled, "I'm running away from home! I told you it was me or the cat. And now I'm leaving." Silence, punctuated by the sporadic drone of the TV's sports announcer. "Next time you'll see me, I'll be on Oprah!" Tricia paused a moment, her hand on the knob. No one rushed down the stairs to stop her. She half expected someone to tell her to bring back a gallon of milk.

Plonk wandered out of the den, pausing to rub its face against the doorway. Tricia looked down at the animal then kicked it in the stomach. "I hate cats," she said as she slammed the door shut.

#

She dumped the contents of her backpack out on the bus stop bench. Her inventory was sparse:

Dysfunctional Family Cat by Paul Melko

thirty-seven dollars, a pack of gum, a can of mace, her address book, an emergency Kotex, a copy of The Catcher in the Rye and her mother's Visa card. She noted each item, then sighed. Now that the drama of the act was over, despondency washed over her. She stuffed everything into her backpack, deciding to go wherever the next bus went.

Tricia waited on the sun-warmed bench, sitting in the red-violet of the sunset. The warmth seeped into her, calming her. Her sinuses cleared, and she took pleasure in the simple act of breathing.

Across the street, a young, poorly-dressed man, stumbled down the sidewalk. In one hand he clutched a staple gun and in the other a ream of red paper. He paused at the light pole on the corner, then dropped the paper on the ground. He pulled at his earlobe, shook his head and snorted like a horse. Taking the sheet from the top of the ream, he stapled it to the pole with four randomly-placed kerchunks.

The man stood back from his work, pulled at his earlobe again, and then crossed the street. He spotted Tricia, aimed himself at her.

"Have you seen my cat?"

The man waved a flyer in Tricia's face. She took it from him, glanced at it, and threw it on the ground. The man surged to pick it up again, but Tricia placed her foot squarely on the flier. The man pulled at it, ripped it in half. He stood straight up, then let the piece flutter away.

"A-a-a simple yes-or-no would have sufficed," he muttered, again pulling at his earlobe.

Tricia noted the man's red eyes and jittery manner. She'd seen the symptoms in her mother. He looked like he was coming down off something hard. His clothes were in disarray, his shirt untucked, socks unmatching, pants too short. His hair was uncombed, and his breath was foul. A badge clipped to his shirt pocket labeled the man as Dr. Jerry Wilder of Genomads Inc.

"How much of a reward?"

"A hundred dollars. You should have read the flier."

"A thousand, and I'll take you right to him."

"A thousand? That's.... Wait! You know where he is? Tell me." Jerry grabbed Tricia's shirt and pulled her to her feet. "Where is my cat?"

Tricia calmly reached into her backpack and maced him.

#

"Are twenties all right?"

"Yeah. Fine. And don't forget the extra five hundred for not pressing charges."

Jerry handed the cash to Tricia as fast as the machine would spit it out. She was impressed with the limit on his bank card.

"All right. Let's go." The two walked back to Jerry's car. As Jerry pulled out his keys, Tricia stood in front of the driver's side door and held out her hand. "I'm driving."

Jerry paused, eyed her wearily, then shrugged and handed the keys to her. "You have a license?"

"Well, a permit. But that's pretty much the same thing, right?" she said as she heavily dropped the car into gear.

Tricia sped the car out of the strip-mall parking lot, narrowly avoiding a collision with a shopping cart. Unfortunately, she saw no one she knew on the way home. With a scraping of metal against concrete, she bounced the car into her driveway.

"Come on, Jer." Tricia popped the door open with a flick of the knob. "I'm home!" she called up the stairs.

Jerry pushed past her, stumbling on the step. "Mendel! Here kitty-kitty! Come here, Gregor!"

"Hey, Sis. Who's the geek?" Chad stood in the doorway to the den, scratching his crotch.

"This is Plonk's owner."

"Really? Cool. Thanks for letting us keep him, man."

Jerry noticed Chad for the first time. "He's my cat. I've come to take him back."

"The fuck you are, man. He's ours now." Chad turned around. "Hey, Dad, this fuck wants to steal our cat."

Tricia refrained from laughing and wandered into the kitchen where she filled a bowl with milk. Behind her, she heard her father join the argument.

"Anyone who's so irresponsible as to lose a cat doesn't deserve to own one," he said. "I think you better just leave before we call the police."

"He's m-m-my cat, sir. I en-en-en... raised him from a kitten. I couldn't live without him."

"Well, you ain't getting him out of this house," said Chad. "'Cause there's two of us and only one of you."

"What's going on down here?" Tricia's mother had joined the fray. "And who is this young man? Are you a friend of Tricia's? Is she finally showing an interest in men?"

"Dream on, Mom," Tricia said, walking into the front hallway. She had left the bowl of milk on the kitchen counter. "This is Plonk's owner, Jerry Wilder."

"Gregor Mendel," Jerry corrected.

Dysfunctional Family Cat by Paul Melko

"How do you do, Mr. Mendel?"

"Uh.... No. The cat's name is Mendel. My name is Jerry Wilder, and I've come to get my cat." He pulled at his earlobe.

"No, no, no. Plonk's name...."

Tricia leaned close to Jerry. "Why do you keep pulling at your earlobe?"

Jerry whirled on her, turning his head so that his left earlobe was out of view. "Nervous habit."

"You've got some sort of bump, man," Chad said. "Bad piercing, dude?"

Jerry whirled again, then backed up to the front door. "It's just-just-just... a pimple."

Tricia edged closer to the man, intent upon his lobe. Jerry stood, back against the door, eyes dancing like butter in a hot skillet. Tricia jumped forward and squeezed the earlobe between her finger and her thumb.

Jerry screamed like a madman, and leaped away. Tricia jumped on his back, wrapping her legs around the man's chest. She squeezed his lobe, feeling something wet and soft squirm under the pressure.

"You're gonna' OD me!" Jerry yelled. "Let go! Let go! Let gooooo." Jerry fell face first onto the carpet of the front hall. "I am soooo high, man," he muttered, then started to giggle.

"That was pretty cool, Sis," said Timo from where he stood on the stairs. "I'm glad you're back."

Tricia smiled at Timo. "Just for a few laughs."

"So what's with the geek?" asked Timo as he bounded down the steps. He and Chad rolled Jerry over.

"Oh, what's that smell?" said Tricia's mother in a nasal voice.

"He pissed himself," said Chad.

Jerry found that exceptionally humorous and began to giggle again.

"I think he's got a drug gland in his earlobe."

"Drug gland?" Timo, Chad, and her stepfather leaned close to Jerry's head.

"Can you do that with a beer, dude?"

Jerry paused in his fit of giggling. "Naww-www!" He gulped in breath for a moment, then added, "Just en-en-endorphins! Endorphins! Enporpoises!" Drool rolled out of his mouth as he giggled.

"He works for a genetic engineering company. I think he made that drug gland to keep his fix nearby and ever-ready," said Tricia.

"Hey, that's pretty cool," said Timo.

"I think he engineered the cat too."

"Yeah, I did." Jerry sat up, coughing. He seemed to have partially recovered from the spurt of drugs into his system. His eyes were still glassy, and his voice was slightly slurred. "I made him to make me happy. Like God." He vomited on Chad's shoes.

"Shit. What a waste," said Chad. He wiped his shoe on Jerry's shirt. "Being such a loser you have to build your own friend." He paused. "Can you do me a chick?"

"Fuck you. I want my cat."

"Hey, wait a minute," Timo said. "Why are we so obsessed about a stupid cat?"

"Yeah," added Tricia.

"He's modified," said Jerry. "His odor is a mild euphoric. Well, actually, it's a highly addictive depressant."

"We're addicted to a cat?" asked Timo.

"Cool, beer-in-a-cat," said Chad.

"So why don't you just make yourself another cat?" asked Tricia. "Why don't you just make a gland to give you the drug? And why not a cute puppy next time?"

Jerry shook his head. "It was a mutation. I can't reproduce the recombination sequence. I thought it was the retrocomb of the iris allele, but when I try to duplicate it, all I get is abortions. I was trying to breed him when he got away from me." He held his head in his hands and began to cry. "My one big success is a fluke."

"Here's a tissue, young man," said Tricia's mother.

"Well, I think that earlobe thing is pretty cool," said Chad.

Jerry sniffed. "I stole that from a colleague."

"You really are a fuck," said Timo.

"Well, I just stopped to bring Jerry by," said Tricia. "I'm outta' here now." She waved at her family. "Bye."

"Bye, now Tricia, dear," called her mother.

Her stepfather said to Jerry, "Here's a solution, Jerry; you can move in with us. We got a room empty now."

"Really? That would be so... so... nice of you."

"See ya', Sis," said Timo.

Tricia stopped. "Come with me, Timo," she said softly. "We don't belong in this family."

Timo smiled. "I wish I could." He shrugged. "I'm stuck now."

Tricia nodded, then walked back to the kitchen. Holding her breath, even though she knew it wouldn't work, she plucked Gregor-Plonk-Mendel off the counter top and exited out the kitchen door into the backyard.

Dysfunctional Family Cat by Paul Melko

She managed to stifle the sneeze until she reached Jerry's car. Seven straight sneezes left the windshield speckled with mucus.

"I hate cats," she said to her companion, who blinked pink eyes at her.

Tricia gunned the car, flying out of the driveway. She threw the car into drive, and floored it with a screech of tires. In minutes she was in downtown Ormdon, headed for the interstate.

Tricia made one stop on the way.

"Oh, he's so cute," Wendy Morse said, taking Plonk into her arms, and squeezing him. Tricia knew Wendy from her gym class.

"Could you take care of him for just a few days? We're going on vacation."

"He's neutered, right? He's safe to put with Princess Gwen?"

"Oh, yeah. I think they'll be great pals."

"All right. I hope you and your family have a nice vacation."

Tricia turned around as she pulled open the car door. She smiled and said, "Thanks. I'll try."

Tricia adjusted her Raybans. She wondered how long it would be before the world was full of Plonks, then shrugged. As she sped up the highway, she rolled down the windows and inhaled the fresh air.

END

*Paul Melko is a writer of speculative fiction, with stories published in **Realms of Fantasy**, **Terra Incognita**, **Talebones**, and other magazines. His next story is "Singletons in Love" in the anthology **Live Without a Net** from Roc Books. He reviews short fiction for **Tangent Online**.*

*Paul is eligible for the **John W. Campbell Best New Writer Award** in 2003 and 2004. His web site is located at <http://www.sff.net/people/melko>.*

*"Dysfunctional Family Cat" was first published in **Aberrations** #39.*