

THE TAIL OF DANNY WHISKERS

It's not easy being smart.

BY FAWAZ AL-MATROUK

Ten miles from the Canadian border, they were stopped by police. “Don’t say anything,” said Dr Tarboush, his hands turning red against the steering wheel.

“You were driving like a maniac,” said the cat in the carrier box on the passenger seat. His name was Danny Whiskers.

Dr Tarboush could feel his heartbeat in his hands as he watched the police officer approach in the rear-view mirror.

“You think I’m stupid?” said Danny. “I’m not stupid.”

“Shush!”

“I know when to be quiet.”

“Hello officer,” said Dr Tarboush.

The police officer kept his distance. “Licence and registration please.”

Dr Tarboush fumbled through the glove compartment. It overflowed. Receipts, envelopes, pages from a scientific paper on the epigenetics of intelligence.

“Hang on,” said the doctor, searching through papers. “I have it somewhere.”

“Goodness,” whispered Danny.

“Shush!”

“You’ll get us shot.”

“You’re the talking cat!”

The officer heard him. “Excuse me?”

“Sorry, officer, just talking to myself. Found it!” Dr Tarboush produced the registration.

The officer twisted his brow. “Hang tight.”

Dr Tarboush watched the officer get smaller in the rear-view mirror. Beads of sweat collected on his bushy eyebrows. “He’s onto us.”

“Great. Ten miles from Canada and you’ll have me killed.”

“You’re the one who can’t keep quiet.”

“You’re the one swerving across lanes.”

“That’s because my cat decided to break out of his carrier box and shout obscenities,” — he was loud now — “at my fellow drivers!”

“Do they not understand what a fast lane is?”

“Do you not understand what a fugitive is?”

“I understand. I’m not stupid.”

“I get ten years for unauthorized experiments in genetic engineering.”

“I know.”

“You get to learn how many ways there are to skin one of you.”

“Stop.”

“I should have left you in the lab and read about you in the *Vancouver Times*, or whatever they have up there, sipping chamomile tea. ‘Talking cat!’ ‘Freak experiment!’ ‘Puss gives heartfelt monologue as federal science police put him to ...’ Are you crying?”



Danny was distinctly crying. “No.”

“Stop crying.”

“It’s not fair,” he mumbled. “I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t ask to be smart. I was legal just a week ago. Why did they have to change the laws? Why can’t they just let me be?”

Dr Tarboush squirmed in the driver’s seat. He was never good at comforting.

“I don’t know, Danny.”

“It’s not fair.”

“No, it’s not ... People get scared and make laws and they ruin other people’s lives and they don’t understand how.”

Danny sniffled. “Other people’s lives?”

“Yeah.”

“You mean I’m other people?”

“Of course you are.”

Danny let himself smile. “Smarter than human people, though.”

“Shove it.”

Danny laughed. Dr Tarboush stuck his fingers through the metal grating of the carrier box. “Come here.”

Danny leant into the fingers, accepting the neck rubs. He began to purr.

“That’s a good boy,” said Dr Tarboush.

“Don’t patronize me,” said Danny, purring.

Heel clicks announced the officer’s return. Dr Tarboush sat up straight. The officer leant into the car, a yellow ticket between his fingers. He flung it onto the pile of papers.

“Figured that’s where you want it,” he said.

“Sure.”

“It’s for changing lanes without a signal.”

Dr Tarboush nodded. “Right.”

“That your cat?”

“Yeah.”

“Cute.”

Danny groaned in his carrier box. Dr Tarboush felt his heart sink into his belly.

The officer smiled. “You know, there’s people doing weird experiments on animals. Changing

their genes and such. Something called crispy.”

Danny scoffed.

Dr Tarboush scoffed to cover it up.

“You scoffing at me?”

“No, no, officer. At crispy,” his voice broke.

“It’s a stupid idea.”

The officer narrowed his eyes. “Why stupid?”

Dr Tarboush cleared his throat. “It’s against God’s plan, you know. There ought to be a law.”

“There is a law.”

“Is there?”

“Serious law. Serious time. There’s two fugitives from it now. An old man and his cat, last seen heading north from California. Talkative cat. Described as ‘uppity.’”

“Uppity!” It was Danny Whiskers.

Dr Tarboush slammed his forehead against the steering wheel.

The officer said: “That was the cat.”

“Sir ...”

“Sounded like the cat.”

“I’m a ventriloquist, sir. I can throw voices.”

“You’re a ventriloquist,” the officer laughed.

“Dr Taha Tarboush. PhD in ventriloquy. Or is it ventriloquation? I don’t know. I don’t care. Back to the subject. You say it’s against God’s plan to mess with genetics. I say,” he leant in to whisper, “that my dad has Alzheimer’s, and I’m hoping for a breakthrough. Godspeed.”

With that, the officer walked away. Dr Tarboush could feel his heartbeats, six to every footstep. “But don’t speed!” The officer called from his cruiser.

“What just happened?” asked Danny Whiskers.

“I think we got lucky.”

“I think truth won out.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m truth,” said Danny. “I won out.”

Dr Tarboush turned to his passenger seat. “We have ten miles to the border, Danny. One more sound, and you’re a stray.”

“What about a purr?”

“Danny.”

“Meow?”

“Shut up.”

“What if my tail falls asleep? Can I let you know? Can I leave my box? What if it itches? What if I need a scratch? Scratching’s a sound. Can I make a scratch?”

They drove ten miles to the border without a moment of silence between them. Shortly after they entered British Columbia, Danny Whiskers fell asleep. ■

Fawaz Al-Matrouk loves the latest tech, but writes with pen and paper. He is a film director by trade, currently developing a feature debut with the support of SFFILM.

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