

The Metamorphosis of Mao Mao

The room was dark. The curtains were drawn to cover the view of a strip mall parking lot. Incense smoke twirled in the air like ghostly ribbons, imbuing the space with the scent of sage. Underneath that green herb-y smell was something else—something sour. Wet trash. I remember catching that scent as I was walking up the outside stairs. The apartment was next to a market that sold live seafood.

On the table were laid objects of curiosity. A flickering black candle. A shiny silver bowl. Glass bottles filled with liquids and pickled something or others. I wondered why these rooms had to be so dark and intimidating. And why they were always in the worst parts of the city.

Sitting across from me was a woman in her late forties or early fifties. Her burnt sienna skin was shiny with oil, which accentuated the sharp angles of her face and her jutting collarbones. She wore her hair wrapped in a turban. Around her long neck were at least twenty beaded necklaces of various colors. The weight pulled her neck forward, giving her the appearance of an eager aunt excited to hear your story at Christmas dinner.

Her eyes were closed. Their eyes were always closed. Perhaps she was communing with the spirit world. Perhaps she was just trying to concentrate really hard. She was the sixth witch/shaman/medicine woman I'd come to.

The first five could not help. No matter what they did, the curse was unbreakable. I was determined this one would be my last—hope, chance, redemption—whatever it was that we needed.

Her name was Aba. She was born on a Thursday. She told me to call her Miss Aba. “Dancing Queen” played in a loop in my head as I stared at her closed eyes. Her large eyelids were lined with black coal. Her lips moved so minutely it was almost undetectable. Was she chanting an incantation? Talking to a spirit? Or just singing softly to herself?

Let me preface that, being a science guy I have always been a solid agnostic. I do not have a problem with other people’s faith. But I am adamant about not mixing that with facts. And I definitely did not believe in witchcraft. It seemed a hoax, a sham invented to service those who believe there is more than the physical realm and do not mind paying a pretty sum to find reasons to continue to think so. But that was before the curse became a fact for me.

I leaned back on my chair and looked up. A ceiling of someone’s home can say a lot about them: economics, creativity, grit, level of tolerance. Miss Aba’s was a popcorn ceiling with a brown stain the shape of a Godzilla. There were no cobwebs.

The sound of throat clearing stirred me out of my reverie. I snapped my head back and saw Miss Aba staring at me with her deep chocolate eyes. They were so dark, her eyes looked all pupils.

“Tell me your story,” she said.

“One day last fall my cat turned into a snake.” I braced myself for a scoff but it did not come.

“What kind of snake?”

“A black mamba.”

She spat out words in a foreign tongue. As she busied herself mixing oils into a bowl, I looked around. The walls were beautiful. They were draped in rich fabrics in shades of saffron, cinnamon, and paprika—reminding me of the spice market in Istanbul.

I realized with a sinking heart I had not been on a vacation since Mao Mao became a snake, and had no plans for one. That was probably why I was constantly irritable. Perhaps a run-down apartment of a witch/shaman/medicine woman in the back of a fish market could count as exotic. Maybe I could imagine it as somewhere in Africa.

“Tell me about your cat-snake,” she said as she ground something hard with a mortar and pestle.

“His name is Mao Mao. He’s male. Very fluffy. *Was.*”

“What happened?”

“I was bringing in laundry. He was standing on the carpet, stretching. The next moment he turned into a very large gray snake.”

It was the most curious thing because: 1) Up until then, I had never seen a black mamba in real life, 2) Mao Mao was part-Maine Coon who owed most of his handsomeness to his fluffy fur, and 3) We lived in San Diego, not Sub-Saharan Africa.

“Was he gray before he turned?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“What did you do after?” she asked.

“I screamed. I did some research. I redecorated.”

A search for “how to turn a snake into a cat” yielded disturbing images. They were either of a snake eating a cat or a cat eating a snake. One website had a series of photos showing a python in Thailand regurgitating a whole orange tabby. The cat was dead and covered in slime. The owner buried it in her backyard. Animal control caught and released the snake back into the wild.

“You must care greatly for this cat-snake.”

“It’s not his fault we’re in this situation,” I say. No cat would have wanted to be a snake. And I imagined, vice versa.

Not keeping Mao Mao was not an option. He’s family. Of course life would have been easier had he stayed a cat. He knew how to be one. I knew how to have one. *C'est la vie*.

“Did you know that cats and snakes have a lot in common?” I added. “Black mambas eat small mammals like birds and rodents. So do cats. Both species have fangs. They hiss in threat display. They like to bask in the sun.”

“What do you feed him now?”

“Arctic mice.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s just a fancy word for frozen mice. I thaw and dip them in chicken broth for flavor.”

I decided not to tell her about the live white mice I snuck into his cage on those days he needed a little pick me up. Since becoming a snake, Mao Mao was more prone to depression. There were things he could no longer do. He used to like prancing around the courtyard, and being petted by strangers. Nobody wanted to caress a black mamba. Unless they didn’t mind dying.

“Are you not afraid?” she asked.

Her question was expected. Black mambas have a terrible reputation. They are the most feared snakes in the world. But their speed and aggressiveness are often exaggerated. While they can outpace most humans and can inject four times the lethal dose of venom in one bite, they are generally shy. They only strike if threatened.

“Mao Mao is a sweet old cat. All he wants to do is curl up on your lap and sleep.”

I did not tell her that I also did not mind dying. For as long as I remember, this sense of foreboding has followed me. Life is not something I trust. Not fully. There are days I feel slightly better about the prospect of living. But no matter what, I cannot shake the feeling that something horrible is going to happen to me. It's a matter of mathematics. Try googling "odds of bad things happening."

There's even an "odds of death" chart for the United States. Heart disease topped the list at one in six people. Cancer was one in seven. Gun assault was one in two hundred and eighty-five. The odds of dying from a gun are lower in other countries, of course. The one I was most concerned about—suicide—was one in eighty-eight. I did not know what the rate would be for a cat who had transformed into a snake.

"But just as a precaution I bought a pan-African anti-venom from the Internet," I said.

"You can get that?"

"You can find anything on the Internet." That was how I found her and five others.

"You said you redecorated. Why?" she asked.

"I just wanted to make the place look more natural. I added plants and fake rocks. I read black mambas like hanging out on trees. Just like cats."

I was overcompensating, I knew. But we couldn't leave and no one could visit. This conundrum turned us into hermits. I ate a lot of boxed Chinese food. He, mice. He became more attached to me—needy almost. I talked less with neighbors. I went out less with friends. Every relationship outside the home seemed a lie. There was a huge chasm filled with unspoken things that separated me and the world.

"I need to see the snake," she said.

I was surprised. No one had ever asked to see Mao Mao before.

“Uh, sure,” I said.

“It’ll cost more.”

“Okay. How much?”

“A hundred.”

That would bring my total dollar spent on finding a cure for Mao Mao to a thousand. I nodded.

“And I will need you to drive me to and from there.”

“Okay. When?” I asked.

“In an hour. I have to make some preparations.”

I nodded and wondered what I could do for an hour to wait. I thought of the fish market next door. Maybe Mao Mao would enjoy eating a live eel. I imagined it would go down smooth.

The piercing whiteness of the florescent lighting above was a big contrast to Miss Aba’s dark lair. The stench of this place was overwhelming. The air stank of ammonia, like old urine. I looped a red basket around my forearm and walked to where tanks of live fish lined the back wall. Each was so crowded, there was barely room for water. Large ice-filled containers featured various fish, round eyes clear as new death. Green-blue shrimp, both headless and head-on, lay frozen in rigor mortis. Oysters, clams, and mussels clustered like barnacles on pirate ships.

I began to wonder what I would do if Aba could not help. I was not ready to let Mao Mao go. And where would he go? Not the African savanna. I saw a video of a mongoose killing a black mamba on the Internet. Mao Mao would not have lasted a day there. A zoo would be too cruel. His space would be reduced from a one-thousand square foot condo to a one-hundred-and-twenty gallon aquarium. Although there are several beautiful trails in San Diego, they were not

an option either. I trusted Mao Mao with me, in our house. I did not know whether I could outside the carefully constructed serenity of our home.

I forced the worry out of my mind. I was determined to stay optimistic until I couldn't anymore. The first aisle was the canned food. Bamboo shoots, coconut milk, curry pastes, fermented lettuce, chestnut slices, sardines, lychee, jackfruit, banana in syrup. I grabbed a can of lychee. The next were dry goods. Desiccated fish, squid, seaweed, yellow peas, mung beans, noodles of different widths. Another was just for fish sauce and soy sauce of various origins. I went around all the aisles twice before arriving at the place I had wanted to come to since the beginning.

The eel tank was filled with so many it looked almost black. With their slender and elongated bodies, they looked like snakes. The irony was not lost on me.

"Excuse me," I bellowed.

A young man behind the counter who was chopping off the head of a red fish looked up. He had a tattoo of a tiger down one arm.

He walked to me, his eyebrows scrunching together. He was sizing me up, wondering whether we belonged in the same tribe. With my khakis and crisp button down shirt, I reeked of generic Asian. Worse, educated.

"Can you feed a live eel to a snake?" I asked.

My question took him aback. He probably thought I was another boring engineer. *Buddy, if you only knew what I have at home.*

"What kind of snake?"

"A boa," I lied.

"What do you usually feed it?"

“Mice.”

“I heard of a sea snake in Thailand eating an eel whole. Not sure about boa. You can try it.”

“Okay, I’ll get a live one.”

The man grabbed a plastic bag, dunked a hand into the eel tank, and in one swift movement pulled one out. “This one alright?”

They all looked the same to me. I nodded. He twirled the eel into the small bag and tied it loosely.

“Where did you get your tattoo?” I asked.

He looked up from the scale where he was weighing the wriggly eel.

“Cambodia.”

“Cool.” I paused. “Been thinking about getting one. Maybe a snake. Never been to Cambodia.”

He grunted and handed the bag affixed with the price and weight to me.

“Will it stay alive like this?” I asked.

“It’ll be fine for a couple hours.”

“Thanks.”

After paying I came back up into Miss Aba’s apartment and found her waiting.

“What’s that?” she asked of the things in my hand.

“An eel and a can of lychee.”

“That’s an odd combination.”

“The eel is not for me.”

We drove north on the 805 and exited Nobel Drive. Although just a few miles away, it was a world away from her neighborhood. I turned down a tidy tree-lined street and into my condo complex. There were a couple of neighbors with children on their way to the pool. They waved at me. When they saw Miss Aba, their smiles froze, choking on her exoticism.

“Maybe you should wait at the front door while I check on—”

I unlocked the door and pushed in. The condo looked as if an angry tornado had touched down. Overturned potted plants. Emptied-out drawers. Books and papers were strewn all over the floor. The flat screen T.V. was off the wall and on the couch. So was my laptop.

“Oh my god.” The bag of eel and the can of lychee slid down to the floor.

“What’s going on?” asked Aba from the other side of the door.

“I’ve been robbed.” The odds of being burglarized are one in thirty-six.

She pushed in and surveyed the room. “Where’s your cat-snake?”

“Close the door!”

I ran to the bedroom. I had left Mao Mao on the bed before leaving to see Miss Aba. But he was no longer there. My bed was stripped down to the mattress. The bedding was in a huge heap next to it. Whoever had been here was looking for hidden cash. I leaned down to pick up the heavy duvet from the ground. *Correction: is here.*

The man was lying face down underneath the blanket. His skin was tinged blue. Anaphylaxis. I touched his neck, feeling for a pulse. There was none. The robber was dead.

“Mao Mao!” I cried out. “Mao Mao, where are you?”

“Help!” Miss Aba’s strangled cry came from the living room.

I ran out. She was standing with her back against one wall, her eyes gaping wildly at the image in front of her. Mao Mao was in a strike pose, hissing. The front of his body lifted off the ground. His mouth opened to show the inky black interior.

I sat on my haunches.

“Mao Mao,” I called to him with a soft voice. “She’s alright. Come to me.”

He looked between me and her, trying to decide. I made the same cat noise I normally used when calling him.

“Come over here, Mao Mao.”

He laid back down and slithered to me, his tail covering half the length of the living room. When he arrived at my feet he curled up.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Miss Aba. “He’s probably still freaked out by the robbery.”

I stroked Mao Mao’s head and thought of the robber’s dead body in my bedroom. From the corner of my eye I saw Miss Aba walking toward us. Mao Mao flicked his head over in her direction. She paused.

“It’s okay. She’s not going to hurt you,” I repeated in a gentle tone.

Miss Aba continued walking until she was a few feet from us.

“Magnificent,” she whispered. “In my home village, we fear this animal.”

“Can you break the curse?”

She looked at me with a confused expression. “He’s not cursed.”

“Yeah—I mean I know he’s not evil. But someone had turned him into a snake.”

“No, nobody did. I can see it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can see curses. And he’s not cursed. This is his true form.”

“What?!” I wiped my face, feeling as if I had just been startled awake.

“When did you get him?”

“Five years ago.”

“From whom?”

“I found him on a hiking trail. He was starving.”

“Someone must have turned him into a cat to either get rid of him or protect him. That someone must have died recently. That’s usually when the spell breaks.”

I could not believe what I heard. “He’s always been a snake?”

“That’s right. If you want, I can change him into a cat. It would make things easier for you.” She gazed at me with her dark, dark eyes, awaiting my answer. Gauging.

Mao Mao nestled at my feet. Silent and serene. I could now see that beyond the generic cat-snake commonalities, there were similarities between Mao Mao the cat and Mao Mao the snake. The silvery gray color and pale tummy, the sweet personality, the same round black pupils with coronas of gold. He was not cursed but was living out his natural form. Suddenly the idea of him being a cat seemed an odd notion. How could I force him back into a body that was not his own?

But there was still the dead burglar in the bedroom. Soon, I would have to call the police. The state of the condo would explain the man being here. But the reason for his death?

A thumping sound near the front door, like tiny feet dancing on wood, pulled my attention. *The eel*. It was wriggling, suffocating in the plastic, waiting to be freed.