



CAT IN A BOX

By Keith Donohue

Awicked grin flitted across his face as he prepared his latest conundrum. Dr. Mueller seemed to be toying with the class, introducing topics not yet comprehensible, all the while taking some perverse satisfaction from our confusion. Occam's razor and the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle tortured our young minds, and now with something approaching glee, the physics professor shuffled his notes and lifted his face to the stunned students. "Now I should like to tell you," he said, "about the paradox of uncertainty."

Arranged neatly on his desk were a stuffed cat, a cardboard box, some vials and what appeared to be a small Geiger counter. He moved like an actor upon a stage.

"Let us say you wish to record atomic decay within a given space. You place into a box a diabolical instrument that as soon as it detects an atom breaking down, it will smash a small glass vial containing a poison gas. Into the box, which is shielded against any external forces, you place a live cat...."

The students tittered as he lifted the stuffed cat and then the instruments into the cardboard box and folded close the lid.

"Now if the odds of atomic decay are fifty-fifty, the odds of the gas being released and killing the cat are the same. But how can we know the result without opening the box?" Mueller ran his fingers through his wild hair, pausing for effect, knowing we had no answer.

"Obviously, one cannot know. So at this stage of the experiment, the cat could be alive or dead, even-stein, and for our purposes, we must consider it both alive and dead at the same time. It is both at once."

"That's crazy," a voice piped up from the back. I looked over my shoulder to see Jake Silver rising from his desk. "A cat cannot be alive and dead at the same time—"

"Ah, Mr. Silver, that's where you are wrong. This is a famous thought experiment by the physicist Erwin Schrödinger to illustrate—"

"I don't believe you. It can't possibly be both at once." He began walking to the front of the room. "Life is the opposite of death, and to be dead is to be devoid of life. This can't be that. Is can't be isn't." In three quick strides, he was at the professor's table and with a flourish of his hands, he opened the lid to the box, and extracted the plush cat from inside. "Just as I suspected. This cat was never alive to begin with, and therefore, it can never be dead."

"Sit down, Mr. Silver."

"But Dr. Mueller, I am sitting down. Sitting and standing at the same time."

"If you don't sit, I'll ask you to leave."

"But I've already gone," Jake said as he backed out of the room, flashing his middle fingers in the air. "Here and there. In and out. Hello, goodbye."

We waited, but he never came back. How could you not love the bravado of the guy?

Made of pins and baling wire, he would uncoil and spring apart at the slightest pressure. At least that's how I remember Jake Silver, 20 years on, as an over-wound spring of pure energy and intellect. He was the one who smuggled a dozen white doves into the university library during finals week and set them free among the stacks. Jake was the one who put the goat on the roof of Old Main during Homecoming. His unpredictability made him a kind of folk hero on campus, but it also engendered some degree of antipathy from the other students, who feared his outrageous nonconformity and his temper.

I don't know how I ended up rooming with the guy. Perhaps because I amused him, he took me in like a stray. We lived together in the dormitory for two years, and just before senior year, we rented a house so that there would be room for one more person.

Nadia.

She was made of words. Or should I say that words became her? Nadia spoke in lines of unbroken waves. The more she said, the more she came into being, materializing before our eyes, through our hearing, into our bedazzlement. You had to listen to her. She spoke in crisp, clear sentences strung into well-ordered paragraphs, the theses of which seemed irrefutable. A virtuoso, she pierced our lack of understanding. Without pretense, she would freely use her constantly expanding vocabulary, sending her auditors scurrying to the dictionary in the privacy of their rooms to look up "sigil" or "aurochs" or "catafalque," acknowledging with a grudge that she was correct again.

In a philosophy class we signed up for together, she once asked a question about Emerson's transcendent giant eyeball, and by the end of a persistent dialogue had driven the professor to tearfully question her vocation. The other students, myself included, simply stopped listening altogether. Two or three fell asleep with their heads upon their desks, folded arms as pillows. Most stared vacantly into space. The girl next to me drew a maze, creating new corridors every time Nadia went off on a tangent. By the end, the maze covered a page, front and back, from which no escape existed. Nadia acquired, like Jake, an undeserved reputation on campus. Some thought her an elitist, an *arriviste* at our carnival, but if you simply con-



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Keith Donohue

is the author of the national best-seller The Stolen Child and Angels of Destruction. Donohue has a Ph.D. in English with a specialization in modern Irish literature and wrote the introduction to The Complete Novels of Flann O'Brien. He lives in Wheaton.

centrated on what she was saying, you would discover Nadia was simply and manifestly curious about life and ideas. Her abstraction distracted most people, but I delighted in her every thousand-word grunt. The combination of her intelligence and beauty made every hopeless soul fall hopelessly in love with her.

But she loved Jake, and the two odd bodies found in one another perfect consolation to what might otherwise have been an almost unbearable loneliness.

My studies occupied most of my time, though some evenings I could hear the wild rumpus from their bedroom, and once I saw him throw a plate of scrambled eggs against the wall over something she had said. Every so often, they made some big show of their affection for each other in front of me, as though to demonstrate the depth of their devotion, but it was a kind of torture and I did my best to stay in the shadows and out of the way. Though, I think, they were glad to have me around as a kind of buffer to their great exuberance.

I was at their wedding the June after senior year—not only the best man, but, I think, she would have asked me to be maid of honor as well were it not for the fact of a younger sister. We drifted, as friends often do, and the letters and phone calls and e-mail became more widely spaced, often only in connection with the holidays or the special occasion of the birth of their two sons, whom I had never actually met. Two decades had passed, and I had not thought of them in any concrete way for quite some time, not till the invitation tracked me down. They were offering a month with them at their grand old house at the shore. A chance to reconnect, some nostalgic reunion to mark the passing of time.

“The boys,” Nadia wrote, “will be on Outward Bound, so we’ll have the place to ourselves.” At first reading, I thought perhaps that Jake and the twins would be gone, but upon reflection realized that she was merely notifying me that no children would be around. I have an undeserved reputation for hating children. Perhaps it is a sign of an incipient and premature midlife crisis, but I was feeling all of 40 and sorry about it. So, I said yes, it would be good to see them, to reminisce, to catch up on each other’s lives, to spend a few weeks with no obligations, out in the sun, next to the sea.

To make sure we would recognize each other at the airport, we agreed to wear red polo shirts. To the other passengers and welcoming parties at the gate, we must have looked like

long-lost members of the same bowling team or perhaps a group of tourists determined not to lose one another in the crowd. We looked like triplets. Older, certainly, with the minor surface aging, but essentially the same, and the old ease erased any strangeness or discomfit that long absences often create. Jake was still Jake, pensive, ticking, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel as we headed off the island ferry and drove east to their summer home. Nadia, who had never learned to drive, was still Nadia, kibitzing from the backseat, issuing a monologue that took us across the water without so much as a pause. Although I could not always hear her from the front seat, I was happy to see her as she talked, and happy to see Jake, who seemed fundamentally settled. When we pulled up the oyster-shell drive, a small mocha-colored cat sunned himself on the top porch step. It rose to rub against my ankles when I took the steps.

“I’d like you to meet Schrödinger,” Nadia said.

“Like the physicist?”

“Jake’s idea.”

On the island, their old Victorian had a panoramic view of the ocean, and from my window, I could see a few people baking in the sun or strolling along the edge. The house was dead quiet, shushed by the maternal rhythms of the sea. Jake and Nadia’s muffled voices occasionally rolled under the silence as I unpacked, and the cat crept into my room to spy on me. When my knapsack was empty and the last of my things tucked away, I spoke to the cat. “And what can I do for you, Herr Doktor?” Schrödinger sprang to the bed and curled up like a king where the edge of the pillows met the mattress. I sat beside him, petting between his soft ears, and looked about the room, my home for the next four weeks. His fur felt oddly like the hair of a baby human.

One of the twin boys evidently slept in the bedroom when he was not climbing mountains or sailing dinghies with his brother. Photographs in their frames lined the walls, tiled more or less at eye level, and I was some time studying the family’s changing portrait, seeing how babies bear the later smiles and eyes of teenagers, how their parents morph more slowly, changing haircuts and fashions, but irreducibly the same people. One could almost see the artificial superstructure beneath Jake’s skin; you could almost hear Nadia create herself word by word. On the night table, a photograph had been placed, recently I guess, of Nadia, Jake and me, taken some college summer day long ago. I stood in between them, and each had draped an arm

“Do you remember?” she began. “There was a time when all we had, when all Jake and you and I had, were one another? We were three misfits, but we had each other.”

“I don’t recall ever feeling like a misfit.”

“Yes, you do. We were.” She squeezed my arm with affection, like an old familiar. “You just don’t remember. ...”

across my shoulders. The cat rolled on his back, nearly purring, demanding a belly rub. As I scratched, I studied the threesome in the picture, who seemed more real somehow than the people in the house.

“I see you are trying to steal my heart’s desire.” Nadia stood behind me in the doorway. Schrödinger rolled over and scrambled down to his mistress’s feet. “Come, I’ll show you the house.”

A century old, the house had absorbed the sea. Its wooden paneling, layered with varnish, smelled of saltwater, sand and sunlight. As she swung open the heavy doors, Nadia told a story about each room, a catalogue of peculiarities from the smoothed finials on the stair railing to the copperplate door-knobs and keyholes, turning verdigris, no matter how often she scrubbed and polished. Jake and Nadia slept in the grand bedroom at the top of the stairs, at the extreme end of the hall from my temporary digs, and I found through sundry experimentation that one could effectively box out the noises in the house by shutting every door and opening both my windows to the calming roar of the night tide. Although in the morning, the laughing gulls and rising sun made a mockery of repose.

But I get ahead of myself. The first few days with Jake and Nadia were like the parable of the prodigal son. They killed the fatted calf—or in this case, the biggest lobsters I have ever seen, followed by an evening clambake and bonfire on the beach the next night. For some reason, it was only the three of us at all times. Their neighbors, surely summer people, too, were polite, waving to me from their porches, but my queries about them were met with Jake’s shrugged shoulders or Nadia’s silence. My hosts were with me day and night, sometimes until the wee hours of the morning. Jake fell asleep one star-filled evening on the sand, and Nadia, perhaps a little drunk, sat down next to me and wrapped a blanket around our shoulders.

“Tell me about your life,” I said. “Are you happy still?”

“My life is divine, a dream come true, everything that I hoped and wished and prayed for. The boys are growing up into fine young men, nothing at all like Jake or me or you, or should I say the less veridical aspects of our characters. They are good boys, will make good men, and fathers, and have many friends and do great, good deeds. They live so much more broadly and completely than we ever did, worried as we were, so much about ourselves and what others thought. I watch them in their sleep and still think them angels.”

Echoing her tone, I told her that I would like to meet these gentlemen some day.

She laughed at the moon. From some distant spot, a dog barked at a shadow in the water.

“And Jake? He is happy, too?”

“He’s such a good man. Most people only see him in the hard light of the market and investments, as someone who understands and intuits the herd, who makes the right call days, weeks, months before others. They see him as shrewd, tough, competitive, but he is wise. He just understands people better than most.”

I took a swig of beer, which tasted sandy suddenly. “I guess I never thought of him as a people person.”

She shuddered, as if about to cry or as if some sea breeze suddenly chilled her bare skin. Clenching the blanket tight around us, she laid her head upon my shoulder.

“Do you remember?” she began. “There was a time when all we had, when all Jake and you and I had, were one another? We were three misfits, but we had each other.”

“I don’t recall ever feeling like a misfit.”

“Yes, you do. We were.” She squeezed my arm with affection, like an old familiar. “You just don’t remember. Or perhaps you choose to remember something quite different from the facts. But I tell you, we were inseparable. The three amigos, the musketeers, the Marx Brothers, the Stooges, a trinity.

“I remember you coming into my room, half-drunk probably, or drunker certainly than you are now, and we were studying together, Jake and I, parsing syllogisms, if memory doesn’t fail. And I still can see the look on your face, as if you had discovered us naked, although at the time you must have known, and you had a singular moment of grace. You could have been, should have been shocked, outraged. I know how Jake would have reacted, but, no, you had the presence of mind to be generous. You said, ‘How are my two favorite people?’ I could have leapt up and kissed you—that approval meant so much to Jake.”

I am quite sure of never having said anything like that, but I smiled as if we shared the sentiment. In the quiet hours, Nadia fell asleep at my side, but I could do nothing but stare at the moonlit sea and feel her exhalations and inspirations. My own breath adjusted to hers, and finally on the edge of a dream, I felt a hand grip my shoulder a bit too forcefully.

“Thought you could sleep with my wife, eh?”

His voice sounded full of menace and threat, but then he laughed as, of course, did I, and Nadia awoke quickly as if she had not been asleep at all. Back at the house, I could hear late at night their creaking bed and count their sighs, until I discovered the trick of open windows in my little cell.

For the next few days, Nadia avoided me. She ran chores in town that lasted for hours, awoke early to gather wildflowers or dig for quahogs in some remote cove. Conversations at

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evening meals changed to reports of the day's activities and observations. At night in my room, I overheard the ebb and flow of their talks, voices raised at times, at others an intimate silence. Jake played the role of my caretaker, and we traipsed the dunes and looked for wild deer along the marsh edge. He even took me fishing one day on the wild blue sea, although mercifully, we both were too sick to catch a thing. By the end of the first week, he had run out of things to do. I suggested that we re-finish the wooden deck facing the shoreline, and that task occupied the better part of two days.

When the sun had baked the new finish hard, Jake and I sat out on Adirondack chairs, admiring our handiwork, enjoying well-earned cigars and Coronas. Nadia had gone for a promenade along the shore, and we watched her, lithe and sure, walking on the hard sand. The ocean breeze caught the folds of the oversize shirt that she wore, sending the fabric billowing out like a sail. From time to time, she combed back her hair with clawed fingers, and scanned the waves expectantly. I had always associated her with her words, but seeing her from afar, silent, was like seeing her for the first time, and she exuded an allure far greater than her wit.

"You are a lucky man, Jake."

He surveyed his house and environs, looked up at the cloudless sky and endless sea. Pulling furiously at his cigar, he sent up puffs of smoke like an old-fashioned steam engine.

"I mean, the house, the boys—who, from your reports, seem like fine young men—and you and Nadia, the business, the money. Did you ever think you'd come this far? That you'd have it made?"

"You can have it." He studied the glowing ash.

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, Einstein," he started, but the muscles along his jaw line twitched. He never looked at me, and as far as I could tell, never took his eyes off the horizon. He was making a supreme effort at self-control, but I could tell that something was pulling at the pins and wires. I tried to locate Nadia on the beach, but she had vanished.

"Nothing," he said with a sigh. "Do you remember that whole business with Dr. Mueller and the physics class? Where they propose to put a cat in a box with a fifty-fifty chance that it might die?"

"Right," I said. "To illustrate the point that until you open the box, you don't know if the cat is alive or dead. The paradox of indeterminacy?"

Jake flushed through his tan. "You get upset once—I mean, he was talking about killing a cat to see if you could know whether that cat had been killed. What bothers me, though, is that people thought I was losing it..."

"You had a temper—"

"...but it was an experiment..."

"—back then."

"Perfection is desire never attained. I didn't mean a thing. I am the luckiest man alive."

The screen door opened with a screech, and the cat padded out to the deck. Nadia slid out from behind his curling tail and walked over to the railing where we stood. She first put one

hand on Jake's shoulder and one on mine, and like a natural conductor, she bridged the current and closed the circuit. I felt a surge of electric anger pass from him through her, and it was all I could do to stand there and let it fry my soul.

...

After that moment on the deck, I had the sense that we had become totally alienated from one another, although they gave the appearance that all was well and that I was fitting into their routine. Most mornings, I slept in and often they were both gone, leaving me to fend for my own breakfast or lunch. Even when they were home, they tended to observe me sideways, as if in so doing, they could alter the outcome. Nadia took to tapping away at her laptop or reading a novel most afternoons in the sunshine on the deck, and Jake busied himself with marathon jogs along the beach or the countless odd jobs of the vacation homeowner. I would walk the mile or so to the newsstand at the ferry dock, buy the *Times* and do the puzzles, have an ice cream cone and watch the girls on the boardwalk.

One drowsy afternoon, I returned to what felt like an empty house. The car was missing from the driveway, and as I approached the Victorian, it seemed eerily still. Even the cat had disappeared. In the distance, a child's gleeful laugh carried across the breeze and dissipated into nothing. Even the omnipresent surf sounded muted, and the gulls and plovers rested, subdued, on pilings and the roof. The chairs on the deck were deserted, and the towels hanging out to dry shuffled stiffly every so often. Inside, the kitchen had been tidied, the living room swept and ordered. I poured some water in the cat's bowl and a glass for myself. No one answered when I shouted out a greeting. The sound of my own voice filled me with a pang of loneliness.

At the top of the stairs, their bedroom door was closed, unusual in itself in the middle of the day, but I had the sensation that someone was inside. I don't know what possessed me, but I stopped on the landing to listen, going so far as to press my ear against the oak. The distinct sound of breathing—inhalation, expiration—startled me, for I was boxed up all alone in the house, but a measured respiration reverberated against my ear.

"Nadia?" I called softly, but heard no reply. Nor did anyone stir when I knocked softly on the door. Bending down carefully, slowly, I peered through the keyhole, but I could see nothing, though I was sure someone was there. The breathing grew louder, intensifying to the point where I could no longer bear it. My heart beat wildly against my ribs and a kind of white searing pain seized my head just behind the eyes. Through the keyhole, a voice whispered, "I love you," each word as soft and sure as a kiss.

...

Twilight approached by the time I awoke on my bed. Uncertain as to how I had ended up there, I struggled just to sit up. The sheets were soaked with perspiration, and the pain in my head now radiated down my arms and legs to my fingers and toes. For a long time I wondered about the whispered voice at the door and tried to reason my way through the possibilities, but every syllogism failed. I know that I had not dreamt or imagined it, for although only a whisper, the voice was as distinct and clear as

POEM

TRAVELS WITH MY MOTHER: CHINCOTEAGUE

By Lori Powell

After hours spent charming the twin snakes
of obligation and love,
we come to this place
where the natural world hums sublimely,
all its joints gliding,
while we creak after it, gawking;

this place where the water at dusk
is mauve then shining white,
where salt stains the skin
and where, turning a corner,
we come upon five egrets
high in a tree,
stark as clean bones,
neat as five lies told
in quick succession,
beautifully, and without guilt.

In this place
I begin to steal shamelessly.
The stillness of trees
I wrap like a bandage over my eyes.
I stop giving answers,
singing instead in repeating verses,
two notes then three,
like the cardinal.
I grow smaller and thinner.
You begin to lose me
among the pine needles.

But no theft is perfect.
We leave this place together,
each wearing the skin
of her usual camouflage
and the hats you brought
in case the weather turned cold.

Lori Powell lives in Cabin John and teaches English as a Second Language for Montgomery County Public Schools and Montgomery College. A collection of her poems, Truth and Lies, was published by Black Buzzard Press in 2001.

my own. On the other hand, Nadia and Jake were irrefutably not in that room. I struggled to my feet and cautiously approached their bedroom. Opening the door, I hoped they would jump out and yell surprise, even if it gave me a heart attack, but there was nothing to see inside but a smooth and unwrinkled quilt, motes of dust undulating in the sunlight, a mystery novel facedown on the table next to a conch shell. I held it to my ear and heard the imitation roar of the sea upon the sand. I lifted the bedcovers and felt the cool pillows, lingering a moment on hers.

Downstairs the phone jangled in its cradle. The little monster was crazed, mewling and yowling by the receiver, pacing back and forth for someone to pick it up. That telephone felt like the first real part of the world I touched since I had knelt at the keyhole. The person at the other end of the line was crying. "Nadia?"

"Oh...you are there." She seemed surprised that I had answered the phone.

"I'm sorry. You have to come help us. It's Jake. He wanted to do something special for us, you understand, for the three of us. For you. Are you all right? We drove over here because it's the only place of its kind on the island, and he had called ahead while you were out, and they assured him it would be here when we got here, but when we got here, it wasn't ready. It wasn't even here." She seemed suddenly to have lost the ability to make herself understood. "What took you so long to answer? The man said he was sorry. He thought it would have come in by the time we got here, but it hadn't. So Jake asked him when will it come in, do you think? And the man—he was a big man, bigger than Jake—he said I don't know. And Jake asked him what do you mean you don't know, either it's here or it's not here? We come all the way over here and now it isn't here. It can't be both here and not here at the same time. And the man said that's funny. And that's when Jake lost it."

"Nadia, Nadia, Nadia, slow down. I don't understand. What were you looking for?"

"He didn't mean it. The fight. But there you have it. I haven't seen him so upset in 20 years. You won't be angry with him when you see him? That's all he kept asking."

There was much more to the story, but I could no longer bear to hear. As she related the details, the violence, the police and the trip to the clinic, the quaver in her voice betrayed her loyalty to my old best friend. Some sound, some tone had decayed and disappeared. She gave me directions to where the car had been abandoned and instructed me to walk along the road east and meet them at the clinic.

"You've got that now, you've written that down? He just wants to say he's sorry. It should only take an hour or so to make it here. You are my hero."

I had no pen in my hand. Instead I went back to my room, past the whispering lock, and packed the photograph of the former three of us in my knapsack. The ferry off the island was due west and the last one scheduled to depart in half an hour. If I hurried and walked along the tideline, we could make it, even at the risk of getting soaked. I put the cat in my bag and stole away. When we made our exit, I left the door open, filling the silent house with starlight and salt air. **B**