

The Halloween Cat

a Mike DeSalvo story by Doug Muder*

I took a sip of excellent, fair-trade, don't-exploit-the-peasants coffee and surveyed the noisy, crowded, sunlit room from the privacy of my portable leper colony.

Elsewhere, well-dressed people chatted in clumps and jostled against each other on their way to the long table that held the coffee urns and a few plates of cookies. But I could enjoy my dark French roast without fear of anyone knocking my elbow. And even if someone did, the spill would merely fall on the hardwood floor rather than onto the well-tailored suit or fashionable ensemble of one of my fellow members.

Communities of people resemble ant colonies more than they usually care to admit. The group mind operates in its own mysterious ways, producing complex, observable effects that no individual is conscious of intending. And so it was here. Each person pursued his or her own Sunday-morning-coffee-hour agenda – greeting friends, gathering signatures on a good-cause petition, checking whether their committee was meeting this Tuesday night or next – without glancing over a shoulder to note my movements or appearing to pay attention to me in any way. And yet, all those distinct agendas conspired to produce a movable bubble about three or four feet in diameter, centered on my precise location.

My mirror image on the opposite side of the room was Elsie McTaggart. To her the room must have seemed quite crowded indeed, as a dozen or more people tried (in their own restrained, subtle ways) to join a conversational cluster that had room for only four or five. Elsie was the thirtyish granddaughter of one of the families that had founded the Society for Rational Ethics after World War II. She was intelligent, witty, and beautiful in a highborn, classical way, like the old Roman statues of Juno. Like Juno, she was old-money wealthy, as opposed to the merely well-to-do engineers and psychotherapists who made up the bulk of the Society's membership.

And she was the prodigal returned. Elsie had, in her rebellious teens, been sucked into a fundamentalist cult which had undoubtedly gotten its paws on a considerable chunk of that old money. For almost fifteen years she had not been mentioned in this room, except perhaps in hushed, sorrowful tones. But now she was free from the awful clutches of that horrible church.

My father's church.

Prior to Elsie's return, if anyone had suspected I was one of *those* DeSalvos, they tastefully had failed to mention it. In fact, they were still not mentioning it. The knowledge seemed to have passed silently through the colony as, pair by pair, one ant rubbed antennae with another. I had no idea how much information Elsie had brought

* This is Mike's second appearance as my narrator. He was introduced in a much darker story, *Legion*. Readers of *Legion* know some backstory that Mike glosses over in *Halloween Cat*, but *HC* is intended to stand on its own.

back from Oklahoma. There was, unfortunately, a lot to know about me if you went back far enough. And I never talk about it, because it's hard to explain.

You see, some religions believe in angels and demons; the Society believes in explanations. I don't believe in challenging a believer unless I have to, but I hate to lie. Lying had always been Dad's department. I find it easier just to shut up.

As an experiment, I walked over to the petition table and signed. This week we were trying to get a political prisoner released from somewhere in Africa. Jim Knowles was sitting behind the table. He had come to my apartment shortly after I joined the Society, during the pledge drive two springs ago. We had had a nice talk. I had learned much more about him than he about me, which had seemed to suit us both. My pledge had been slightly larger than I think he had expected from a newly joined apartment-dweller, so he left happy.

Jim did not turn and run when I approached the table. "Thank you, Mike," he said politely as I signed, but then he noticed someone across the room and waved to him. I moved on.

If this continued much longer, I realized, I would have to leave the Society for Rational Ethics. And that would be unfortunate, because I had been starting to feel at home here. The Society was a funny, quirky place – an unchurch for unbelievers who still felt a need to go somewhere on Sunday mornings and share their good intentions with other good people. I am the first to admit that I have not always been a good person. But I aspire to become one someday, and the Society seemed as good a place as any to work on that project. I hadn't made a lot of friends yet, but then, I hardly ever do. It had been enough just to have some people start recognizing me and talking to me.

I am told that when the white-steepled colonial church on the town green failed in the 1960s, the Society bought the building "to preserve a historic town landmark." And magically, instantaneously, without replacing a single shingle or applying a single drop of paint, everything in that old building had been transformed. No longer was it a church; now it was a meeting house. The sanctuary turned into an assembly hall, and the pews became benches. Hymns changed into anthems, and prayers into meditations. Sunday School vanished and Ethical Education classes were created *ex nihilo*. Ministers no longer preached sermons from a pulpit, but meeting leaders stood behind a podium for twenty minutes each Sunday morning discussing topics of ethical significance. Eventually the Society completed the building's transubstantiation by taking the cross off the steeple (though I ran across it in the basement one Saturday when I worked on the annual rummage sale) and replacing it with a weather vane. But otherwise we preserved the trappings of the old Congregationalists perfectly. A foreign visitor who watched our actions without understanding anything we said or wrote would have noticed no difference.

Two kinds of people arrived on the Society's doorstep. One type was brought up without any religion to speak of, and felt a chill wind blow the first time a child asked "What happens when people die?" The other type had been brought up with too much religion,

or had been temporarily infected with a nasty case of it later in life. Like Elsie, they were refugees from places like the DeSalvo Institute, and it would please them greatly if no one ever again talked to them about God or the Bible or salvation.

When I had signed the membership book, no one asked me which type I was. I liked that. I liked to think of myself as an explorer, not a refugee. I didn't like to talk about where I came from, or even why I had left my more recent home in the Pacific Northwest. So a community of flinty, mind-your-own-business New Englanders suited me perfectly.

Until Elsie came home.

The coffee hour was still going strong, and a roundtable discussion of the day's topic-of-ethical-significance had started in one of the classrooms, but I was ready to give in to the terms of my ostracism, at least for today. I returned my mug to the kitchen (where two gray-haired matrons found things to do in places far away from me), fetched my light overcoat from the rack, and left out the side door, the one that the old Congregationalist ministers had used for quick get-aways.

It was a gorgeous day outside – chilly enough to make me appreciate my coat, but clear and bright. Unlike so many things in life, autumn in New England is all it is cracked up to be. The peak of the fall colors was slightly past – the oaks and maples on the Green were starting to look a little bare – but the orange, red, and yellow leaves that carpeted the grass had not yet dried and faded as they would by Thanksgiving. Kicking my way through them like a boy, I understood why the Old Religion had postulated Halloween (or Samhain, as they called it) as the time when the barrier between the living and the dead is thinnest. Death is all around you in late October, and it looks beautiful.

I heard the side door open and close again after I was halfway to the street, but I didn't turn around. Even in better days, I had occasionally sneaked out of coffee hour to avoid admitting I hadn't finished some task I had volunteered to do, and from time to time people who had told me they would do something-or-other were hard to find. There was no sidewalk from the side door to the street, but I followed a path that many feet other than mine had worn into the lawn.

Unfortunately, the old town church had not come with a parking lot. A late-comer this morning, I was parked two block away, on a small side street that couldn't be seen from the church – or, rather, from the meeting house. The further I walked, the lighter I felt. I had no obligations for the rest of the day. Maybe after I changed clothes I'd make a sandwich and take a hike in the bird sanctuary. I had a new camera to try out, and maybe the herons hadn't left for the winter yet.

But as I touched my car's door handle, I heard someone call out. I looked up and saw a tall, distinguished looking man in his fifties walking as fast as he could without breaking into a trot. The name slowly worked its way up through the murky waters of my memory: Dan Calhoun. He was a professor of some sort. I had heard him give a talk about globalization one Wednesday evening just before Christmas, and we had carried tables together as part of the set-up crew for the annual spring dinner (which had happened, this

year, to fall on Easter).

“Mike,” he said, puffing just a little, when he came into conversational range. “I’m glad I caught you before you got away.”

I looked over my shoulder to make sure there was no one else he could be talking to. “I ducked out a little early today,” I acknowledged. “I’ve got a hike planned for the afternoon.”

“Oh,” he said disappointedly. “Jill and I had been hoping you could stop by for lunch. It’s nothing fancy, but we ... we haven’t had the chance to ... to *talk* much lately.” He wasn’t wearing an overcoat, and kept shifting his hands from his pants pockets to the pockets of his suit jacket. I had never seen Dan nervous before. On the night of his globalization talk, he had stood in front of fifty people as calmly as if we had all grown up together.

“Well, I’m sure the rest of your guests will be able to keep a good conversation going.”

“But you see, we ... It was just going to be you ... and us. Jill ... it was Jill’s idea, really ... she has some things she wanted to talk to you about.”

I was having trouble picturing Jill, but I wasn’t about to let on. There was no need. “Well, maybe some other ...”

Socrates used to claim that he had a *daimon* who stopped him from saying stupid things. I have often wondered what became of the little guy after Socrates drank the hemlock, or if any of his descendants survived into our era. Perhaps a member of that tribe had finally decided to pay me a visit, because I stopped in midsentence and took a harder look at my would-be host.

Dan looked awful. At first I had thought he was suffering from some late fall allergy, of which there are many. But the eyes of someone who has been crying regularly over several days turn red in a subtly different way that I find hard to describe, but recognize because I have (in less fortunate times) seen it close up in my mirror. Dan didn’t have an allergy.

“What the heck,” I said. “I was looking for an excuse to cancel out of that hike anyway.”

“You were?”

“Sure. I turned an ankle in the summer and it hasn’t been quite right ever since. I really ought to stay off of it more.” The lie sprang out of my mouth with frightening ease and sincerity. The older I get, the more often I find my father’s talents hidden away inside me like an old cross in the basement. “Should I go home first and change? You and Jill probably don’t want to race home from church.”

He seemed not to have thought that far ahead. “Ummm ... Jill didn’t come to church. We usually ... I mean, she’s home getting things ready.” Suddenly I realized I knew who Jill was: a tall, trim blond who looked as if she could be almost any age, including Dan’s. She chaired the committee that gave old people rides to the doctor’s office and brought

casseroles to new mothers. I hadn't remembered her at first because I couldn't recall ever seeing her and Dan together. Usually, either he came to church alone or she did. "But, umm ... you have a good point. We're going to eat out on the deck. We'd probably all be more comfortable without our church clothes. So why don't you meet us there."

I had never been to Dan and Jill's house before and didn't know the way. He gave me much more detailed directions I needed. "So I'll be there in, oh, about an hour?"

"Good!" Dan now looked very happy, far happier than the promise of my presence ought to make anyone. He nodded enthusiastically and turned to leave.

I opened my car door. *Maybe*, I thought, *maybe this is some sort of signal that the Society is going to accept me after all.*

"Oh, Mike?" Dan had remembered one more thing. I stopped with one foot in the car and one on the curb. "When you come ... we, uh, we're having our driveway resurfaced, and the contractor said he might stop by to take a look at it later this afternoon."

"On Sunday? That's a dedicated contractor."

"And so ... when you come, don't park in the driveway. It would be best if ... if you left your car around the corner."

"Sure," I said. And I thought: *Or maybe not.*

*

When I got to the Calhouns' house an hour later, I decided I had read too much into Dan's parking recommendation. Their driveway did have several significant cracks, and their street had been recently re-graveled. If you owned a beautiful new car (as they did, but I did not), you might want to stay off it, lest some tar-covered pebble spring up and leave its black footprints on your door. Their cars were parked around the corner as well, and they had left the closest space for me.

On the other hand, they did not let me into their house. Dan met me on the driveway and ushered me around, past a hedge that once must have been a row of individual bushes, but now was a single impenetrable wall defending the house's east side. We climbed some wooden stairs to the back deck, where Jill had set three places at an umbrellaed metal table surrounded by matching black metal chairs. At the edge of the deck, pointing back at the table, a long narrow space heater assured our comfort in case it clouded up.

The deck was made of some dark wood whose name I would probably know if I owned a home, and it stretched more than half the length of the house. On a sheer square-foot basis, it was probably larger than my apartment. A long flower box almost cut it in two, with the smaller section being some sort of workspace. The workspace had a large gas grill, which it seemed we would not be using, and a long plastic-topped table, on which Jill had laid out the fixings for our lunch.

Seeing Jill, who was wearing black stretch pants, a black top, and an orange, almost rust-

colored, cardigan, I recognized her at once. I think her name would have come to me sooner than Dan's, had she been the one to go to the meeting that morning. "Halloween colors," I commented brightly. She tried to respond with a smile, but smiling somehow seemed difficult for her. She pointed to my place at the table, and went back to the workspace to toss our salads.

Despite having the same red-eyed look as her husband, Jill was a stunning woman. In the October sunlight she looked like a Scandinavian tennis player who has retired into an elegant middle age. She had the long arms and legs, and the graceful motions. Probably she was, like Dan, in her fifties. But in a dark bar, surrounded by people my age, she could pass.

Not that she would. Jill was one of those people that no one in the Society would say a word against. She was hard-working and positive and unfailingly pleasant. And she remembered names, which was a talent I found very admirable.

As the guest of honor, I had the seat facing away from the house. The Calhouns had a long, neatly mowed back yard, with a playground set made of the same dark wood as the deck. I tried to remember whether they had children, or even grandchildren, and came up blank. At the end of the yard was not someone else's yard, but conservation land. Tall pine trees marked the boundary. A path started at the back of the lot and quickly disappeared. If I knew my local geography, it probably arrived fairly quickly at the river. Probably I had canoed past their lot half a dozen times over the past two summers.

I have noticed that New Englanders are often embarrassed by personal compliments, but that no homeowner can resist a compliment aimed at his property. "What a beautiful view," I said.

Dan, who had taken the seat to my right, nodded and smiled, though (as with his wife) the smile seemed to have to fight its way across his face. "Yes," he said. "I feel sorry for people your age. Places like this have gone up to totally unreasonable prices. We couldn't afford to live here if we hadn't bought it thirty years ago. I don't know what we'd do if we were just starting out."

"We'd manage," Jill said without looking up.

She brought the salads over and Dan thanked her. She sat on my left, as far from Dan as possible. He opened a thermos of hot apple cider and poured us each a steaming cup. She thanked him. To me, they seemed implausibly polite to each other. I have never been married, and have never even had a girl friend for very long at a stretch, but I can't imagine that we would treat each other like that, especially in our own home. I tried to decide whether this was just another symptom of New England reserve, or something else.

Lunch was filled with small talk. Jill asked us what the topic had been that morning, and Dan gave a reasonably good synopsis of the Coordinator's (not the Minister's) talk about the insidious thought-patterns of neo-colonialism, and how they sneak into our everyday

conversations. I was not much help, though I did recognize the main points as Dan repeated them.

The conversation moved to our professions. Dan was a professor of government. Jill was a high school counselor, and I was a software engineer. There didn't seem to be much to say about any of them. Since my arrival I had been wondering why they had invited me. Now I was beginning to wonder if I would ever find out.

Salads were followed by sandwiches. Dan remembered that they had some all-natural potato chips from the whole foods store, and went into the house to find them. But he came out empty-handed.

"The mice got into them," he announced. "A tiny little hole at one end of the bag, and fragments all over the cabinet. I don't know how they get in there. We keep it shut and it's well constructed."

"Mice are amazing," I said. "They can squeeze their bodies almost flat." I could imagine that with this much land, there was no keeping them out of the house. "You should get a cat," I suggested.

Dan was dumbstruck, and looked at Jill. Her face was frozen, but after a few seconds a tiny tear rolled down her cheek. She looked like a person crying from inside a mask. The tears came out the mask's eyeholes, but didn't change its expression.

"Obsidian was never much of a mouser," Dan said. "I think we spoiled him. I mean, why chase a mouse when the tuna comes right to your dish?"

When he was done speaking, I looked back at Jill. She had dried the tear and seemed perfectly composed again. The moment, whatever it had been, had passed.

Thin slices of pumpkin pie appeared, with whipped cream for me but not them, because they were counting calories. Dan produced another thermos, this time with coffee. Jill offered me a second piece of pie, but I didn't want to seem like a glutton.

With the food gone, we reached an awkward silence. I didn't know whether or not my business here was done now, because I had never figured out what that business might be. I thought about bringing the conversation to a head myself, but I saw them looking silently into each other's eyes, and I deduced that they were negotiating about who would do it.

Apparently Dan lost. "I, uh, ... don't know whether you knew this. But for a lot of years the McTaggarts were our best friends in the Society. They were a little older than us, but they took us under their wing when we moved here in the Seventies. Elsie ... we watched her grow up. She, um, ... she stayed with us when she first came back ... before she, um, felt up to moving back into the old house."

Dan looked very uncomfortable, and I could guess why. At this rate it might take him hours to get to the point, so I decided to head him off.

“Listen,” I said. “Nobody feels worse than I do about the kinds of things my Dad does. I’m sure that they twisted her up like a pretzel and played every kind of mind game on her before she got away. *But I didn’t do it.* I don’t have any contact with him any more. However much money they got out of her – I’ll never see a dime of it. I don’t want to see a dime of it. I walked out of there when I was a teen-ager, and I just took the clothes on my back. I program computers now, and I’ll be paying off student loans for the rest of my life.

“I know I look like him. And like my brother. And every time she sees me it must all come back to her, like the DeSalvos have followed her home or something. *But I’m not him.* And I feel sorry for her – nobody feels more sorry for her than I do – but I’m not going to leave the Society just to make her feel better. I like it here, and I’m staying.”

I had thought the silence was awkward before, but I was wrong. Dan looked like a deer in the headlights. He and Jill shot a series of looks back and forth that I could not begin to decipher.

“Oh dear,” Jill said after some indeterminate length of time had gone by. “That didn’t go well at all.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It just seems like I run into this wherever I go.”

“No,” she said. The mask seemed to be off now. “We’re the ones who should be sorry. I should have guessed you would think we had some other reason for inviting you. It ... well, it seems so obvious now in retrospect. That you would think that, I mean.”

Now it was my turn to be dumbstruck. “So ... you’re not ... you’re not asking me to leave the Society?”

“Of course not,” Dan said. “Everyone who wants to be in the Society should be. It violates everything we stand for if we start asking people to leave.”

“Elsie doesn’t want you to leave,” Jill said.

“Then why are we talking about her?”

They exchanged some more looks. Jill lost this time.

“Because we’re working our way around to talking about you,” she said.

“Maybe I should shut up and listen, then,” I said. “Tell me about Elsie.”

Jill took a deep breath, like a story-teller setting off on a long narrative journey. “In the spring, when she was staying with us, she sat right here on this deck. It was the afternoon of the first Sunday she came to a meeting, right after she had first seen you and realized who you were. And she told us that everything the church people had taught was a lot of nonsense, and it was all a con, and she was embarrassed that it had taken her so long to see through it.”

“She shouldn’t be embarrassed,” I said. “Dad is the best in the business. Some people never see through it.”

“And then she said, ‘Except for one thing. There’s one thing I still believe.’ And we had to drag it out of her. She was sure everyone in the Society would think she was crazy. We’re all such rationalists, you know. She was too embarrassed to tell us what it was.”

Now I understood where they were going. “I should talk to her,” I said. “I don’t know which of his tricks was so good that she still buys it, but I know all of them. Whatever it is, I can set her straight. So what is this thing she still believes in?”

“You.”

I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes tight. I hadn’t done the math. Elsie had arrived at the Institute before I left. She’d caught my act.

“Miracle Mike DeSalvo,” I said. “What does she think he can do?”

“See spirits. She says you talk to the dead.”

“Not when I can avoid it! I have enough trouble with the living.” The words just sort of leaped out of my mouth. I wanted to call them back as soon as I heard them. “I’m sorry. That was flip.”

Both of them looked painfully disappointed. I couldn’t figure out why. “So,” Dan said. “So you’re saying it was all fake?”

Just say yes, I thought. Say yes and you never have to talk about it again. Religion is all fake – the whole Society believes that. Just agree with them and they’ll be happy with you.

“Not exactly,” I admitted. “It wasn’t fake, exactly. It’s just that most of it wasn’t anything occult. Ninety-nine percent of it had a perfectly rational explanation.” They kept looking at me. “OK, think about it like this: When you really know somebody, you almost always know what they’re going to say. So why should that change when they die? It’s like there’s always been a piece of them inside you, and when they die that piece is still there. So a wife comes in and wants to talk to her husband, and she doesn’t need me to tell her what he would say. She knows. All she needs from me is permission to know what she already knows. So I’d give it. That was most of the cases right there.”

Jill said: “But not all of them?”

“Then there were hauntings. Most of the places people think are haunted really aren’t. They’re just set up to imply a presence.” I tried to think of an example. “Think about the church – the meeting hall. Go in there some weekday when it’s empty. There’s a podium in front, and a lot of benches arranged to focus on that podium. The room, just by the way it’s set up, implies that there’s somebody up front with something important to say. Even when there’s nobody at all in the room, the furniture is still sending that message. If we turned down the lights and filled the place up with fog, and told people that some wise spirit was coming to say something important, they’d all know to look for it in the podium. And half of them would see it. And the message – it’s like the wife talking to her dead husband – you already know what wise advice you need to hear. You’d project it up

there; you'd hear it from the spirit. Or if it's supposed to be an accusing spirit – you know what you're guilty of. That's how most hauntings work. The place, for some reason, from some angle, implies a presence somewhere. And if you let yourself get carried away by it, you'll see the presence, even though there's nothing there. And if there's an implied message, you'll hear it. That's most of the rest of the cases."

"But not all of them."

"Then there are roles. Some people, what they are to you is just their role. They're the relative who complains all the time, or the friend who isn't afraid to tell you when you're full of it, or the authority figure who will never be satisfied no matter what you do. Whatever. If I can figure out their role for you, and I start acting that role, then to you I'm channeling the dead. Because that's all they ever were to you anyway – a role."

Jill's voice got very weak, like a girl's. "That's all of them, then, isn't it?"

Say yes, I thought. Just say yes.

"No," I said. "That's not all of them."

"What else is there?" Dan asked.

I shrugged. "The real thing. When something from the outside just shoves itself into my body and demands to be heard. I hate it. You work so hard to be yourself, and then bang! you have to be somebody else for awhile. It sucks. It hasn't happened since I moved out here, and that's fine with me."

Now I've done it. I've told them I believe in the supernatural. It will be all over the Society by next Sunday. Nobody will ever talk to me again.

I saw the two of them looking at each other. Then I looked out at the playground set. And I thought: *Maybe this isn't about me.*

"Is somebody dead?" I asked.

Jill just dissolved this time. There was no mask. She just put her head down on the table and sobbed. "We don't know," she said. "It's been more than a week. He's never done anything like this. He could be dead. He could be lost. He might need us and we wouldn't know."

"We thought," Dan said, barely holding his voice together. "Well, it wasn't a thought really, it was more like a hope. We remembered what Elsie had said about you, and we hoped you really could sense spirits. It ... well, I know it was silly. But we hoped that if he was dead, you'd sense that somehow, and then you could tell us. Or if you couldn't sense him, then maybe we could think he was still alive."

Congenitally superstitious people would never have come up such a harebrained plan, but nobody is as gullible as a rationalist turned desperate. It's like they've had the irrational parts of the world walled up in the basement all these years. And then when some chink in the wall comes loose, it all rushes out and sweeps away every bit good sense they ever

had. Fake spiritualists have been taking people like the Calhouns to the cleaners for generations.

“What do the police say?”

“Oh, they don’t care,” Jill wailed. “They think we’re crazy. They say, ‘It’s just a cat.’ And they won’t do anything.”

It took me a few beats to get the question out: “We’re talking about a cat?”

“Obsidian,” Dan said.

“Poor Obie,” Jill said. “I just wish I could hold him one more time.”

I was never big on cats. I once moved in with a woman who had one, and after a week, when it became clear that the cat and I weren’t going to get along, I was the one who had to go.

“Oh my, look at the time!” I said. All in all, I think I acted with considerable restraint. I didn’t run to my car as fast as my legs could carry me. And I didn’t say what was in my head: *You people are mad as hatters.*

Instead, I did my best to get out of there with full decorum. I explained all the things I needed to get done before the weekend was over. I allowed as how I can’t really control when spirits of people will decide to channel through me, and that although there are a couple of world-spanning demons I could probably find if I went looking, the spirit of a cat would most likely escape me. I wished the best for them, and for Obsidian, wherever he was. I thanked them for lunch, said it was marvelous, and that I would look forward to seeing them at the meeting house next Sunday. They asked me to get back to them if I had any ideas, and I lied and said I would.

They walked me down to the end of their driveway, but stopped short of the new gravel and the tar underneath. Before turning to march to my car, I took one last look at my hosts. And I noticed yet another strange thing about them. Like me at coffee hour, each of them seemed to be inside a bubble. Couples have a way of joining up to say good-bye, as if to acknowledge that the good-bye is an act of the single corporate being that encompasses them both. Some put an arm around each other. Some touch hands, or even just stand close. Dan and Jill were a full three feet apart.

“You know,” Dan said just as I was turning, “if you’re worried about how you’re getting along in the Society, you should go talk to Jack. He’s really good at helping people figure out how to fit in.”

*

Even crazy people give you good advice sometimes. If I stopped listening to everybody I thought was screwed up, well, who exactly would that leave? And it was obvious that if I was having some sort of problem that might make me resign from the Society, then I should talk it through with the Coordinator, Jack Easley. I should have done it months before.

But I didn't expect to do it anytime soon. Jack's schedule, I had decided shortly after I joined the Society, surpasses human understanding. He seemed to be in the middle of everything that happened – Sunday services, committee meetings, social events. And yet he somehow found time to write his Sunday talks, do some counseling, and represent the Society in any number of local civic events and interfaith gatherings. And he managed to pay attention to all the births, deaths, and other unpredictable family crises of nearly three hundred people.

So when I called the Society's office Monday morning, I thought it would be like making a doctor's appointment: If I had been in a car wreck, Jack would be there right away. Otherwise, he might have an opening next month. But after thirty seconds on hold, the secretary returned to tell me that I could have lunch with Jack in his office at 11:30 – if that was all right with me.

All morning I was too distracted to do much programming. I kept drifting back to the Calhouns and their bizarrely exaggerated grief over a missing animal. Or I thought about what I must have looked like to the people who saw me with my father, and about Elsie. She really did look like Juno, I decided. On the Internet I found an image of a statue of Juno that had struck me when I had visited the Capitoline Museum several years before. At the time, I had been picturing the Queen of the Gods as old and matronly, a female equivalent of Blake's Ancient of Days. But this was a statue of a woman in her prime. This image, the guide told us, had been the model of respectable Roman pulchritude, the wife every patrician was looking for. Modernize the clothes and put Juno's hair down around her shoulders rather than up in curls, and the resemblance was uncanny.

I got to the church a little early and Jack was running late, so I wandered around. The youngest of the EE classes had been making Halloween decorations, which were still all over the walls of their room. I smiled when I noticed the images the kids hadn't drawn.

Officially, the Society has no dogma, but in practice certain things are taboo. Ugly witches on broomsticks, for example, are misogynistic and denigrate the Wiccan religion, while ghosts imply the existence of a supernatural afterlife. But jack-o-lanterns and black cats are still OK. So if your Halloween scene needs a ghost, maybe you draw an extra black cat instead. Some of the kids, looking for cracks in the rules as they always do, had drawn airborne brooms *without* witches. Maybe the witch had turned herself invisible, or maybe she was a presence that the broom falsely implied.

In the hallway between the assembly hall and the common room, I examined the Society's bulletin board. I hadn't looked at it Sunday when the hall was filled with people in a hurry to get back to the common room for coffee. A color printout asked members if

they had seen the Calhouns' lost cat. The picture could easily have come from the wall of the EE class. Obsidian was one of the blackest cats I had ever seen, and the camera's flash made his eyes look like green lights. All the picture needed was an arched back and a pumpkin.

Jack found me when he was ready. The first words out of his mouth were: "You've got to see this. It's great." He led me into the kitchen, where a large, fierce-looking jack-o-lantern sat at the center of a work table. "Some of the kids made it for me. It's got a big hole in the base." He lifted the pumpkin, pushed his head up through the hole, and tried to imitate the big toothy snarl. "Jack of the Lantern. Get it?"

I think I had been looking for a minister who was nothing like my Dad, and in Jack I had found him. Of course, we didn't call Jack a minister, but he had a degree in divinity, and the other ministers in town accepted him as one of their own. In my childhood, Dad had been the earthly representative of a very dour and demanding God. Jack, on the other hand, sometimes seemed like a big kid who thought that churches – meeting houses, congregations, whatever you called them – were just the keenest things in the whole world.

Jack made me try on the pumpkinhead, and pretended to be afraid when he saw me in it. Eventually we went to his office and opened our respective bag lunches.

"I was going to call you this morning," Jack said, wrinkling his nose at his wife's choice of sandwich. "You must be telepathic."

That bolt from the blue was too much. "Did Elsie tell you that?" I demanded.

Jack put the sandwich down on his desk and leaned back in his chair. "Nooo ,,," he said. "Why would Elsie tell me that you're telepathic?"

Silently I cursed Socrates' *daimon*, who hadn't been doing his job. "It's just ..." I sputtered. "It's just that ever since she got back, people seem to know things about me that I haven't told them."

"So is it true? Were you really Miracle Mike DeSalvo?"

I acknowledged that I was.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's simple really," I explained. "I was hoping you would never find out."

"Why? I love having famous people come here. You should have seen the Pentecostal minister when he found out. He was totally green."

I looked at him suspiciously. "You're not horrified?"

"Why would I be horrified?"

"Well," I admitted. "It horrifies me sometimes."

Jack picked up his sandwich again and looked at it the way I must have been looking at

him. “Yeah,” he sympathized. “I don’t brag much about my teen-age years either.” He took a big bite, chewed it quizzically for a few seconds, and then decided that it wasn’t so bad. “So what about the other thing? Are you telepathic?”

“Hardly ever,” I said defensively. “Mostly, it’s no big deal. It’s a trick.”

“You mean, like planting people in the audience and such?”

I shook my head. “Not *that* trick. Dad used to do that one on stage. But I wouldn’t do telepathy in front of people. It made him furious, but I wouldn’t.”

“So who said you were telepathic?”

“The Forty. They’re ... it’s a really long story. There was one big mass hallucination at the beginning of Dad’s ministry and they were all there for it. Afterward, they barnstormed the country with him until he settled down. They’re still the center of his organization. They’re the ones who kept saying I had all these strange abilities.”

“But it was a trick.”

“If you’re a kid, and you’ve been traveling all over the country with the same people for a few years, it’s not hard to guess what they’re thinking. I mean, people aren’t that different, really. In most situations, there are only a handful of things a person *could* be thinking. If you can just imagine somebody’s situation well enough, that handful of thoughts springs right to mind. Then you just have to figure out *which* thought they’re actually having. And that’s just ordinary detective work: You look at mundane clues like their posture or tone of voice or something.”

“Somehow I doubt it’s as simple as you’re making it sound,” Jack commented. “But, if I get what you’re saying, it starts with accepting that other people are pretty much like you, so the thoughts in their heads are probably already in yours somewhere, if you just knew where to look.”

That was a little different way of putting it, but seemed close enough.

“So,” Jack continued, “it would stop working if you started to think of yourself as being completely different from everyone else.”

I acknowledged that he was probably right.

“So maybe,” he suggested, “that’s why you’ve been having so much trouble figuring the rest of us out.”

I had no immediate answer to that idea, and he let me sit with it. We ate our respective lunches.

“Dan Calhoun was smart to tell me to come talk to you,” I said.

Jack brightened. “You’ve been talking to Dan?”

“He and Jill had me over for lunch yesterday.”

“I’m glad,” he said. “They should reach out to more people. They’ve been through a lot.” I couldn’t believe Jack was taking their crisis seriously. “They told me about the cat,” I said.

“What?”

“The lost cat. Obsidian. Picture on the bulletin board. They’re all broken up about it.”

He shrugged and fished a bag of chips out his lunch. “Yeah, I think I heard about it. But that wasn’t what I meant.”

“What then?”

He started to open the chip bag, but then put it down and studied my face. “You really don’t gossip much, do you?”

“I guess not.”

“I’m talking about their son, Peter. It was before you came. Three, no, four years ago. He’d be fourteen by now. You’ve seen their place, down by the river. Well, Dan bought a kayak, kept it in the back, down close to the trail. So Peter – God knows what gets into kids – he snuck out one afternoon, dragged the kayak into the river, floated about half a mile downstream, then flipped it over and drowned. Had a life vest on and everything, but he must have gotten trapped underneath somehow and panicked.”

I was stunned. “They never mentioned it.”

“They never do. That’s why I still worry about them. I practically lassoed Dan one day, dragged him in here and made him talk about it. I can get away with doing that to Dan, but I don’t have that kind of pull with Jill. He says it’s just about ruined their marriage.”

“They do seem kind of distant from each other,” I said.

“He thinks she blames him for it. I’d be amazed if she did, but there’s no convincing him. ‘She never wanted me to buy that kayak,’ he told me. ‘She told me to wait until Peter was old enough to have one of his own. But I didn’t listen to her. Now she won’t look at me, won’t touch me. She can barely stand to be in the same room.’ That’s what he said, sitting right there where you are now.”

I didn’t know what to say. My appetite was gone. I wrapped up the rest of my sandwich and put it back in my bag.

“I thought you should know, if you’re going to be spending any time with them,” Jack said. “Everybody else does. Maybe it will keep you from saying the wrong thing.”

“Maybe I already have,” I said.

“Well,” Jack said, “I wouldn’t worry too much about it. People who won’t tell other people what they need can’t really blame anybody for not treating them right.”

I thought about that. “So now we’re talking about me again.”

Jack cocked his head. “Are we? We could have been talking about almost anybody in the Society. I’ve never seen such a place. Everybody seems to think that being a good person means that you keep your own problems totally under wraps so you can help other people. Look at Jill. You think it doesn’t rip her up to take meals out to new mothers when her own baby boy is dead? I’ve tried to get her to leave that committee, but she won’t budge.”

“I had no idea.”

“Getting people to look at their own problems and open up to each other is the hardest part of my job. We’ve all got ourselves wrapped up too tight.”

I thought about the members I knew. “That makes sense to me if you’re talking about the engineers,” I said. “I mean, I work with engineers, and we’re not a very touchy-feely bunch. But so many of the members are counselors and therapists and so forth.”

Jack laughed. “Oh, they’re the worst. Listen to *your* feelings – fine. Talk about their own – not so much.” He rocked back and looked up at the ceiling. “No, I take it back. Ministers are the worst. I’ve got three hundred people’s problems to think about. When would I have the time to think about mine?”

I considered how to pursue that opening, but Jack changed the subject before I had the chance. “Right now one of my problems lines up pretty well with yours. That’s why I was going to call you.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, your problem in the Society, as I see it, is that people thought they knew you, and then they found there’s a whole bunch more to know. But they learned it by gossiping, which they’re ashamed of themselves for doing. So they don’t know how to act around you.”

I hadn’t thought it through in quite those terms, but I was willing to let him run with the ball. “So what do I do?”

“Tell them who you are. Give them permission to know what they know. And you can start that process by helping me solve one of my problems: the second Sunday in November. There’s nothing scheduled and I’m fresh out of ideas. So I was thinking we’d do a pop-up.”

A pop-up, I knew, is a Sunday service where the sermon is replaced by a series of members speaking for about five minutes each. Instead of one head behind the podium for twenty minutes, a series of heads ‘pop up’ one after another. “On what?” I asked.

“Memories of fundamentalism. An amazing number of people in the Society grew up fundamentalist, but there’s some kind of conspiracy of silence about it, other than to trash the old church once in a while. That’s not what I’m after. I’m picturing four, maybe five, people, two memories each. One good memory – nobody’s childhood was so unremittingly awful that there isn’t one good memory. And one memory that makes you glad you’re here now. Think you could do that?”

The whole idea made me nauseous. “Me? In the pulpit?”

“Well, we call it a podium now. But yeah.”

“You know, Dad used to force me to preach.”

“And you were good at it, by everything I hear.”

“I hated it.”

“And that’s why you haven’t done it now for more than a decade. I think you’ve made your point. Nobody can force you to do it if you don’t want to.”

It was five after one. I knew that Jack had a one o’clock appointment. “Listen. I’m really grateful for ... for everything. And I’ll think about what you said, about reintroducing myself to everybody. But me ... preaching ... it’s too much to ask. I’m sorry.”

We got up and moved toward the door. Jack seemed to take my refusal well. “I didn’t think it would be this hard to find four or five people. There are still a few I haven’t talked to yet, but it’s turning into a hard sell. Well, maybe I’ll think of something else. We could always do a Quaker meeting – twenty minutes of silence.” He laughed at the idea and opened the door for me. I walked out.

And ran straight into Elsie MacTaggart.

At the sight of me, she turned as white as Juno’s marble statue. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out of it.

“OK,” I said abruptly. “OK. Don’t freak. I’m leaving. I’m practically gone.”

I turned away from her and ran: down the hall, past the office, down the steps and out to the street. I didn’t stop until I got to my car.

*

I was halfway back to work and my heart hadn’t stopped pounding yet. Everything was swimming together in my head: preaching again, even if it was just for five minutes; the Calhouns’ dead son; the stunned, horrified look on Elsie’s face; my sprint to the car. I tried to imagine sitting calmly at my desk, debugging the code that hadn’t worked this morning.

There was no way that was going to happen.

I thought about Dan and Jill, and how they had bottled up four years worth of grief until they could let a little of it out because their stupid cat ran away. I had asked them directly if someone was dead, and they had never mentioned Peter. Jack had gotten a little bit out of Dan, but Jill – did Jill talk to anybody? I went through my memory and reassessed: Everyone in the Society seemed to admire Jill and think well of her, but had I ever heard someone say, “Jill Calhoun is my best friend”? Maybe Elsie’s parents would have said it, but how long had they been dead? More than four years? Somehow I suspected that the answer was yes.

And then I realized what I wanted to do. I knew it was the kind of scheme that I had to get started quickly, before I had a chance to figure out how stupid it was. I pulled the car over, and dialed information on my cell phone. As soon as I had the Calhoun's number, I called, figuring I'd leave a message and be committed.

To my surprise, Jill answered. She had taken a personal day to wait for the contractor, who still hadn't shown up. Having expected to talk to a machine, I stammered a little. I told her that with a chance to sleep on it, I had had some ideas about how to contact Obsidian's spirit. I asked if I could come over and "feel the impressions". I wasn't sure what that meant, but I was confident that she wouldn't know either. She seemed very grateful. I said I would be right over.

I parked in front this time, ignoring the clatter of gravel on the underside of my car. Jill met me at the door and let me into her house for the first time. She started to greet me, but I held up my hand for silence. I walked past her and scanned the front room slowly. I was playing the expert spiritualist now, so I figured I might as well lay it on thick. And besides, I needed to think. My plan still had a lot of holes, or "opportunities for improvisation" as Dad used to say.

If ever a house implied a presence, this one did. A family photograph – Dan, Jill, and a beautiful blond ten-year-old boy -- hung on the wall, visible from the door. Dan in particular had aged considerably since then, but there were no newer pictures. I already had a good idea where the focus of the presence would be, but I didn't go straight to it. Pacing is everything in this business.

The front room was neat as a pin – clearly nothing ever happened there. It was for show, not for living. The wear patterns on the carpet, the angles of the chairs, a million other things too trivial for most people to pay attention to – they all pointed to the stairs. I gestured for Jill to follow me, and she did.

At the top of the stairs, I could see that the doors at either end of the hall were open. One was clearly a master bedroom, which seemed to belong to Jill now. I easily raised some black cat hair out of the throw rug, and decided that Obsidian must have spent a lot of time here. The other end room had originally been a study and guest room. But the convertible bed was permanently open now, as the stack of books underneath it testified. The books had political titles – they were Dan's. So in spite of what he had told Jack about Jill not wanting to be in the same room with him, he was the one who had moved out of their bedroom. Maybe it had begun with him staying up late reading, not wanting to disturb her. Then he started falling asleep here with a book on his chest, and then the pattern became a habit. The bedspread was dark and warm in the afternoon sunlight coming through the west-facing window. It also had more than the usual concentration of cat hair on it.

I walked past the closed door, which had to be Peter's room. Jill unconsciously looked at it and paused whenever she went past, but I was saving it in case I needed heavy artillery. I knew what had to be in there: a little museum with nothing out of place – pennants on

the wall, Little League trophies, stacks of trading cards on the desk -- and not a speck of dust anywhere.

I went back downstairs to see if I was missing anything important. I found the television room, which was probably where Elsie had stayed. We went past the dining room to the kitchen, which had a small table, I think they used to call it a breakfast nook, built into one corner. This was the only cozy public space in the house, and I guessed it must have been where Jill and Mrs. MacTaggart had talked when the older woman used to visit. Which side was which? I looked at Jill's expression and got a hint, then settled myself in the old woman's seat. I gestured for her to sit down across from me.

"We can talk now," I said.

"Can I get you some coffee or something?"

Jill was supplying the missing piece of the picture. "That would be wonderful," I said.

She went to the cabinet and pulled two very old cups out of the back. She filled them with coffee, set them down on the table and then came back with some milk and a sugar bowl. From the motions of her eyes, I gathered that Mrs. MacTaggart had used milk, but not sugar. I followed the form.

"Have I seen the whole house?"

"Yes," she said uncertainly. She wasn't going to suggest we look in Peter's room.

"What about that door over there?"

"It goes to the basement, but there's nothing down there. It's where the old laundry room was, but it wasn't convenient." Now a washer and drier were in the space just off the kitchen, on the way to the garage.

"Did Obsidian ever go there?"

She shook her head. "That's the only door and we keep it closed. Obsidian didn't have any way to get there."

I doubted that. Cats, I have noticed, find ways into every corner of their domains, if only to prove to themselves that they don't want to go there. But if Obsidian were merely trapped in the basement, I had no doubt he could make enough of a racket to get himself rescued.

She started to add something, but stopped herself.

"Peter used to go down there," I guessed.

Her eyes got very wide. She looked a little bit like Elsie had looked when I surprised her coming out of Jack's office. "Is Peter here?"

"In a way," I bluffed. "I'm not sensing a concentrated entity. But in other ways Peter is all over this house. It's like ..." I had used this analogy many times before, but I pretended to be thinking of it on the spot. "Like a bed that he has just gotten up from. He's not there,

but his impression is in the mattress, his smell is in the sheets. It's like that."

Jill's eyes began to glisten, but she tensed her cheeks and wouldn't let a tear fall.

"What did Peter do downstairs?" I asked.

"I didn't like him to be down there. It was cold and dirty. But it was big and open and rough. I guess he liked that. He had ridiculous numbers of those little plastic soldiers and tanks and things. He set them up in the basement and had huge battles. His knees would be grimy when he came back up. But ..." Her lip started to quiver. I touched her hand to steady her, and she continued. "It's awful to admit this, but I let him play with them down there because you weren't supposed to let kids play with war toys. Peter loved them, but if somebody from the Society came over, I didn't want them to see tanks and soldiers all over. The basement ... nobody ever went down there but him."

"What happened to all those toys?"

"For a long time after he ... stopped going down there, we just left everything alone. Then I had to go down for something else, and I saw that mice had chewed through everything that was cloth or cardboard. The plastic men were OK, but all his old games and stuffed animals were ruined. I boxed up everything and moved them to storage. I don't think Dan even knows that. I never realized how bad the mice were down there. I would never have let Peter play there if I had."

She teared up again, but she restrained herself and took a gulp of coffee. She shook her head and said, "The mice ... the mice ..."

"What about the mice?"

"Even they've left," she said. "They're gone. Nothing living wants to be here."

That was off my script. "What are you talking about? The mice were here yesterday, in the potato chips."

"No," she said. "That cupboard had all the things in it we aren't eating because of our diets. The mice could have gotten in there weeks ago. I haven't seen any trace of them for days now. Just as a test, I put out a little bit of peanut butter on a plate last night. They love peanut butter. But nothing touched it. Not even the mice want to stay here."

"Let's get back to Peter," I said.

"What's Peter got to do with finding Obie?"

I hadn't planned to play that card yet, but since she had asked me directly I had to answer. "I think Peter may be the key. I don't have any experience finding cat spirits. Cat spirits are ... smaller than human spirits." Jill looked up. She didn't like that idea; a cat owner wouldn't, I realized in retrospect. I was starting to lose control. "Maybe to a cat it wouldn't look that way. Cats probably see cat spirits as large and human spirits as small. Who can say? But to me ..."

"You think that if you can find Peter, Peter can find Obie. But it won't work."

“Why not?”

“Peter never knew Obie. Obie didn’t show up until the day after Peter’s funeral.”

I had to wing this one. “Don’t you think that links them somehow?”

Jill sat with that thought for a while. “Maybe.” She sat longer. “You don’t think Peter could have ... have *sent* Obie to me?”

It’s true that you can’t fool all of the people all of the time, but usually you don’t have to, because they’ll fool themselves if you just let them. “It’s possible,” I said.

Her eyes glistened a little more and she wiped them on a napkin. She pressed her lips together hard enough to make them turn white. “No it isn’t,” she said. “Peter was mad at me. I wanted him to do something and he wanted to do something else, and he got mad and ran out of the house. I should have gone after him, but I thought he would just swing on the swings for a while and we’d both calm down.

“But a few minutes – it really couldn’t have been much longer – a few minutes later I looked out the window and I couldn’t see him in the yard. I went out and looked and yelled and I couldn’t find him. I thought maybe he’d gone off to one of his friends’ houses, so I went back inside and started calling. I never thought to look for the kayak. It was Dan’s. I never thought of it as something Peter might use.

“If I had, if I had seen it missing and run down the path instead of going back into the house, I’m sure I’d have caught up with him. He wasn’t that strong. It couldn’t have been easy for him to drag the kayak over to the river. It must have taken him a long time.”

The tears were pouring freely down her cheeks now. The table had become an obstacle for me. The right thing to do was to gather her up and let her cry on my shoulder, but I didn’t see how to do that. “It’s not your fault,” I said. “Peter didn’t blame you. When the kayak tipped over, he blamed himself, not you. No one blames you.”

She closed her eyes and tilted her head downward. “Dan does,” she said quietly.

“He doesn’t,” I said.

“Yes he does,” she argued without looking at me. “Ever since that day. He doesn’t talk to me. He doesn’t touch me. He can’t even stand to be in the same room with me.”

My only way of knowing for sure that Dan didn’t blame her was that Jack had broken a confidence, and I wasn’t about to let him get in trouble for it. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, I thought. I reached out to touch her hand again, and made my voice as witchy as I could.

“Peter says no. He says that Dan doesn’t blame you for what happened. He blames himself.”

Jill looked up suddenly. I couldn’t tell whether she was buying it. Maybe she didn’t know whether she was buying it.

“Peter watches you both. He hears what you both say when you are alone in your rooms. He wishes you weren’t so sad. He wishes you weren’t so alone.”

“And he hasn’t heard Dan say that it’s my fault?” Jill asked weakly. She was hooked.

“Dan thinks you blame him. He thinks you blame him for buying the kayak and leaving it out there in back. You told him not to buy it.”

“I did, but –” The back of her hand went up to her mouth and she bit it. I saw the tooth marks when she pulled it away. “Dan ... thinks ... I ... blame ... him?”

“That’s why it’s so hard for him to be close to you. He’s ashamed.”

“Dan thinks I blame him.” She repeated the words without inflection, like a line from a foreign phrasebook. Then, almost angry, she fixed her eyes on mine and demanded: “How could he think that of me?”

“The same way you could think it of him. You two never talked about this, did you?”

She looked away and pushed her coffee cup to the wall. “I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. After, after Peter, I would spend hours at a time sitting on the deck, wishing there was someone I could talk to. But not Dan. He ... And that was when Obsidian came. He was just a black dot in the yard. It took three days of putting out saucers of cream and fish before he would come up to me and let me pet him. And then, in the evenings, we would sit out there and be quiet together, me and my poor mute cat. The vet says there might something wrong with his vocal cords, but I think he’d been traumatized too. We’d sit there in silence, me because I couldn’t tell anyone, and Obie because he couldn’t make any noise louder than a purr.”

I had been leaning close, putting my eyes on the same level as hers, but now I sat up to my full height. “Wait a minute,” I said. “Obsidian is mute?” I started to get up. She nodded with a confused expression. “And the mice are missing?”

I jumped out of the nook and ran towards the basement door.

“Where are you going?” she called after me.

I flung the door open and fumbled for the light switch. “Peter just told me where Obsidian is.”

I raced down the steps. The basement was unfinished and damp, with odd upstairs castaways scattered here and there like driftwood. Each light gave me just enough vision to see the next bulb, and the time I spent waving to find their pullcords let Jill almost catch up to me.

When I turned the knob and opened the thick wooden door to the old laundry room, Obsidian launched himself out like a jack-in-the-box, clawed his way past my face, and bounded off my shoulder into Jill’s arms.

Leaving the sounds of the happy reunion behind me, I turned on the light in the laundry room and saw what I expected to see: A high broken window sheltered by what appeared

(to humans) to be an impenetrable hedge, a toppled set of metal shelves under that window, a deep washerwoman's sink with a slowly dripping faucet, and mouse tails scattered all over the room.

I figured my work here was done.

As I pulled away from the curb and tar-covered pebbles pelted the underside of my car, I caught a glimpse of the playground set in the Calhouns' back yard. "I hope you didn't mind me speaking for you, Peter," I said. I listened for a moment and heard, or imagined, the implied thank-you.

Which, I admit, was pretty unlikely. Ten-year-old boys almost never say thank-you.

*

On the second Sunday of November, Jack got more or less what he wanted, as he does on most Sunday mornings. *Memories of Fundamentalism* was perhaps not the most scintillating or profound topic the Society had ever discussed, but it was well attended and did not stand out as one of our worst efforts either.

I gave the last of the five-minute talks. It had taken me three full days to come up with the required good memory. But as soon as I did, half a dozen other good memories emerged after it like Obsidian flying out of the old laundry room. All the same, it was not difficult to explain why I am glad to be in the Society now.

As I delivered my talk, I even remembered one thing I always liked about preaching: The speaker has the best view in the house.

From the podium I saw, for example, the Calhouns. I don't know and will probably never know what they talked about when Dan got home and found Obsidian mute as ever, but safe, sound, and licking the last of the tuna from his whiskers. But I have seen Dan and Jill together several times since, and they no longer seem encased in their separate bubbles. Sometimes in the assembly hall they sit close together, but when I saw them from the podium, they had left just enough space between them to imply the presence of a ten-year-old boy.

Jack didn't convince Elsie MacTaggart to participate in the pop-up, but she did attend. She looked stunning sitting in the third row, gazing up at me with her Juno eyes. And as I came round to my conclusion – a humorous line that got an even larger laugh than I had been hoping for – I had one of those flashes of not-quite-telepathy that Jack and I had been talking about in his office. I looked into the eyes of my untouchable Roman goddess and saw, just for a moment, what they were seeing:

Mike DeSalvo, untouchable god.

I nearly tripped over myself as I returned to my place in the row of chairs behind the podium. Like Jill Calhoun, I only had space in my mind for one reaction: *How could she think that of me?*

The Halloween Cat

Doug Muder

I guess we need to talk.

THE END

July 2004