

Catalina(s)

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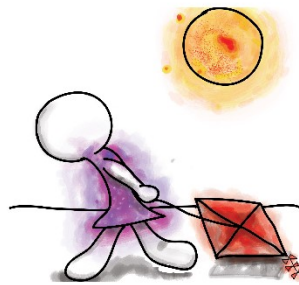
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The Grounded Kite Initiative

(Also, these are ten words specifically commissioned by Matraca Neal.)

The blade was frigid as it entered me. I quivered, as my flesh met the hilt. My vision blurred and the air caught in my throat, causing me to gag. I yanked the knife upward with all of my strength, sensing that- were I to wait any longer- I would lose my nerve. My body cried out and quaked, all of its own accord, as I rent a fissure paralleling my esophagus. The blood bubbled at first, though the bubbling quickly became a quiet torrent of red paint. Horrifyingly silent, but also somehow... disappointing. In fact, I couldn't say that I heard much at all at that point, save for the sound of rain drops.

My hands fell free of the knife, as the knife fell free of my neck, clattering to the tile floor of my modest bathroom.

No, not rain. A sprinkler. Not the sound of the repeated interruption of the flow, but the sound when the jet hits a tree or some other obstacle. Or rather, was it a fountain? The ones you see at parks, spraying the water high into the air, only to come spattering down. A geyser maybe? All said and done, I wouldn't have long to contemplate which mechanic my lifeblood employed to escape my body, as it did so *very swiftly*.

My name is Catalina, by the by. I've just turned twenty-four today, and that is just how old I'll stay...

I watched as my essence painted the walls, the sink, my toothbrush, and soaked the toilet paper a deep crimson. I watched until I could no longer. My body lost strength as I was viewing the transformation of my towels. I slipped and-... stood.

I stood back up, mid slip. I threw my hands out on reflex, expecting to hit the floor. Due to my sudden-onset-anemia, I should not have been capable of standing at all. I looked around... and found the room white again. No. White, but not at all the same room. I was dead.

"You are not dead," an unsettling baritone echoed between my ears as I frantically spun to find its source. "Just-. Goodness... stop already. I'm not in the room yet, just stop... (You look like a fool.)"

I did as commanded, if only because things were just as the voice had said. There was no sign of anyone in the room.

"What did you do then...? If I'm not dead..., then *you* did something, right? Who- *what* are you?! You know what? I don't fucking care! Just put me *back! Now!*" I stamped my foot, fists clenched in exasperation.

More than that, I could feel it coming back. The gnawing on my insides, the flames that forever burned, the constant ache, the agony of that which always returned. I had seen the light at the end of the tunnel, or rather, that scathing tunnels end. As I had begun to fall to my bathroom floor, I had felt it. Peace.

“All in due-.”

“I *want* to go back *now*, shit for brains!”

Before the utterance had yet to leave my mouth, the thing was before me. A creature beyond description, and further beyond my own comprehension. I collapsed to my knees, my eyes painfully ajar.

“I’ll place you right back where I found you. You have my word,” that baritone rippled through me from head to toe.

“Wha- what are you?” The words dribbled from my mouth with the eloquence of a golden retriever.

“Hm. (Always that same question.) More importantly, do you remember when you were a child? That time at the river with Bobby Handel and Fletcher Guthrie?”

“How do you...? I hit my head on a rock playing Marco Polo. I slipped and... I almost drowned... But...”

“That has *everything* to do with why you are here. Frankly, you should have all died that day.”

“We-? The three of us should have... *died*?”

“In fact, what your race calls *depression*, or *melancholy* (I favor the latter myself, more poetic,) is actually the universe *gently* nudging everything back on course. Correcting the paradox that is you. *All* of you.”

“Then why aren’t *they* here? Bobby and Fletch?”

“Quite interestingly enough- and I’ve never seen this before- *every single one of you* experienced that same event, albeit in slightly differing ways. One of you wound up dying while ‘making out’ with the both of them! The boy and the girl! Quite interesting indeed.”

“Who- what? I... don’t understand. That didn’t happen. We only played Marco Polo...”

“Ack! Pay attention, girl! The *other* you did that. One that actually did as she was meant to. You and every other *Catalina* shared that trip (I am completely hung up on that!

Probability had to have gone insane- *for just a moment*- to allow that to happen...) Most of them died that day, as they were meant to. Not you though... and not those others. Not yet.

“So, you’re trying to save me?” I uttered in disgust, ignoring the things nonsense about other Catalinas.

“So now, I wish to-.”

“Hey! I’m asking you-!”

“Yes, yes. I am just getting to that *now*. (Humans...)”

A block lit up in the air beside us. Or was it a screen?

“Another interesting tidbit: you have all chosen to end your lives *on the same day!* Well, not *exactly* the same as the time on the different Earths is not concurrent, but it is pretty close! I mean, it is the same moment in- well, if we lined up the flow of all of your universes on a chart and marked this precise moment, they would... No matter. I’m just talking to myself anyway. Have a look there.”

The creature pointed... *something* toward the floating panel. Suddenly, it became a mirror.

“That is Catalina of Earth 257-86C.”

It was right. It wasn’t me, but it *was*. I saw myself in a city I had never been to, standing beside the street waiting to cross.

“Watch closely please,” the creature instructed.

A bullet train was gliding down the road, and everyone went about their business as if it was *meant* to be there. It didn’t seem to have any intention of stopping, yet Catalina 257-86C began to move. I turned away as she attempted to meld with the bullet train.

“Ooh! How do you feel?”

“How do you think, you fucking sicko?! What *is* this?!”

“Hmm, no reaction? Do you still wish to end your life?”

(“This can’t be real... This can’t be real... I’m dead. I have to be... But why do I still feel like this...?”)

“Next is Catalina of world... hmm. Let’s try 771-36J.”

I couldn’t help but look. I was slowly beginning to believe what it had said. That there were other Catalinas, just like me. That we were all the same. So *horribly* and irrevocably the same.

My face appeared on the screen again. I was wearing something similar to the fatigues of the enlisted. There was something in my mouth. Round, smooth. It just barely fit, but even then, only because the jaw had been stretched past the point where medical attention would be required to repair it. I placed a finger in the center of the orb and it began to pulse. Seconds later, there was nothing left of my face to recognize, nor a head for that matter.

“How do you feel *now*, Catalina 867-930?”

I continued to stare at my decapitated corpse on the floating screen. My mouth was agape, and my eyes did not blink. I felt like weeping, but nothing came. I believe I was taken with an immense sorrow. A sorrow for all of us, the *Catalinas*. Why was I alone chosen to bear the weight of this immense sorrow? Why not Catalina 771-36J? Or Catalina 257-86C?

“Well? I would like an answer-.”

“Sorrow. I feel sorry for them- for... all of us. Why is this happening...?”

“Oh? Oh! In my haste to begin the experiment, I suppose I left out a detail. (Should I even bother telling her?)”

“*Please*. Why...? If you *know* why things are this way, I would like to as well...”

“...So be it. As stated previously, all of the *Catalinas* *should* have died, but somehow, quite a few of you survived.”

“*Why?* I want to know *why!*”

“Wait. I did state the reasoning behind your situation. The universe. At some point, every single *Catalina* became a paradox. The method may be the same, or entirely unique for each and every one of you, but the fact remains that at some point before the incident at the river, you all became a problem that needed fixing. And the universe went right on about it! Is that not amazing?!”

“*Why?! Why am I a paradox?!?*” I screamed at the top of my lungs. “*Why do I have to go through this?! Why do I have to feel so horrible about simply existing?! Why do I have to hate myself so much that I just want to stop?! Why do this to me?! What’s so important that I needed to be corrected? By being so completely broken, that it’s impossible for me to ever be put back together?! Why was I even born then?! Why did the fucking universe even allow me to be born at all?!?*”

The creature stared at me with- what I took to be- a perplexed look.

“I’ll answer the last bit, I suppose. At the time of your birth, you had all yet to become a paradox. As to why any of you were even born at all, you had not yet existed, and as such, could not be a paradox. Or... Hm. (The universe includes all space and time, so would not the universe know that the Catalinas, and the Brandons, and the Francines, and so on- would eventually become paradoxes? Perhaps their births *were* what sparked the paradox... The universe knew that they could not exist, and yet they were born. For the universe to exist, they could not, and yet they do- or *did*. Hm... To stop their births, perhaps the universe would need to destroy things- and humans- that were needed for it to persist, and as such, it allowed them to be born even as their existence ensured its own destruction... Very interesting.)”

The creature had turned its back, stroking what could have been a chin, for all the pontificating it was engaged in. It ignored me, but it was no matter. I had my answer. Essentially, there was none. The *universe* was beyond me- beyond all of us. We were all simply victims of circumstance. The creature continued its monologue as the screen changed all on its own. Another *me* appeared. She was bloody and sobbing. She was... stabbing herself. I cringed as I watched her plunge a kitchen knife into her torso again and again. She continued sobbing, until she ceased moving entirely. Before I knew it, I was sobbing in her place.

“I... I don’t...” I muttered.

Another appeared on a bridge. She went about securing a thin wire to the railing, and then around her neck. No one was stopping. They saw her there, but not a single vehicle even so much as slowed down. She mounted the railing and dropped a moment later. As the wire grew taut...

“I don’t want to be like that,” I wept. “I don’t want to be like them...”

The one thing each of the Catalinas had in common... was that there was no one there attempting to stop them. There was no banging on the door. No last minute tackle. No begging. No pleading. Nothing. We were all just as alone as the last.

“I tried... Are you trying to teach me a lesson...? I tried to be happy for *so long*. I *tried* to find someone. I *tried to be happy*. It was... It was too much... Why are they *all* alone?”

“Hold on. Did you-? (Did it work?) Would you say that your suicidal tendencies have subsided?”

“Just put me back... I’ll be better, I swear... I’ll stop. I just... I don’t want to be like them. I want someone to...”

“(This is bad. There is no way to tell whether the deaths of the other Catalinas has had a cosmic effect on this remaining Catalina, given her exposure to their situations. I should not have showed them to her! I know better.)”

“Just... put me back. *Please.*”

“Yes, yes. You’re going back. You say you have changed, and still you are in such a rush to die.”

“What does that mean? I’m fine now. I can... try. I can do it. I can do... *something.*”

The creature released a guttural sigh.

“You are already *dead* Catalina 867-930. Have you tried looking at yourself? Your *actual* self.”

I lifted my hands to my face, and found that there were none. The floating screen shimmered briefly, and then showed the creature behind me... but no *me*.

“Where am I?! Wh- *where is my body?!*”

“Exactly where you left it. I borrowed your mind, and as promised, I will return it to whence it came.”

“Wait... *Wait!*”

[THE FINAL ACT]

Be Calm and Carry on, Catalina.

Beg and Plead, Catalina!

The Scientific Mind, Catalina.

Step aside, Catalina

Hello. My name is sometimes anchorite[hope].

I sent Catalina away for the moment.

I wanted to share a bit on where this story came from.

Depression is a truly awful experience, but know that it was essential to this tale's creation. At some point, I got to thinking that my depression was the universe testing me. It was testing me to find out whether I deserved the things I wanted out of life- that is what I told myself. So I would- and do- endure, thinking that it is merely a test. At some point, I got to thinking: "what if the universe is actually trying to kill me?"

It wasn't an entirely original idea, but most ideas *do* tend to feel original when one is considering one's own life. This thought continued to turn over in my mind and eventually, as my mind is wont to do, it was forged into a new story. The birth of the short story brought about a more extreme version of the idea, and the concept I settled on for the entirety of the project: what if the universe was not only trying to kill *me*? What if the same was happening to every single version of me in existence?

I feel like this is getting really boring. Or perhaps it started boring, and I never quite brought it around. Would you like it if I had a conversation with Catalina? This is one of the endings to *her* story, so it is only right that she be reintroduced, no? Here:

"Catalina? Welcome back."

"Who- where am I?"

"You are in my story. Or rather, I suppose you are just outside the story, which is entirely necessary if we are to speak."

"The story...? And who are you?"

"I am you, but not really. It would be more apt to say that *you* are *me*. The best definition you would have for me is, the universe."

"You're the one trying to kill me?"

“Trying? No. Not anymore anyway. It’s more like... there is doing and not doing, and I did not kill you in this universe. I don’t plan to either. I would simply like to talk.”

“About... what?”

“I am not sure. What would *you* like to talk about, Catalina?”

“Why the fuck did you make me this way?! Why *would* you?! It’s sick!”

“Mm. I didn’t *make* you this way. This- you as you are now- was how you appeared to me. I don’t create my characters, Catalina, I find them- I found *you*- in me.”

“That doesn’t make any sense...”

“I know. It doesn’t really make much sense to me either. Again, you are a part of me, Catalina. Without me, there is no you, and without you, there is no me.”

“How could you possibly go on to start making less sense than *before*?!”

“I’ll speak plainly, then. Even though you have a lot of my negative traits, you represent something I have coined the *tiny, inexhaustible, nugget of hope* inside of me. Whatever happens to you, happens to me. I suppose that is why there are multiple endings. Your death would signify... well, it’s obvious.”

“I’m... your hope? That’s pretty sad...”

“Not as sad as you would think. It was rejuvenating, bringing you to life. You’re one of my favorites thus far. The closest to my heart, because your plight is the closest to my own.”

“So, we’re pretty much the same? What does that mean for *me*?”

“...How do you feel now? Still depressed?”

“Well, of cour-! Wait... No... It’s- it’s gone!”

“Where would you like to go-? No. What would you like your life to be?”

“Really? Are you serious?”

“You deserve a reward for putting up with me, I think.”

“I... I want a house, and a job I enjoy. I want the house to be in England! A- uh- a tiny English village would be fantastic! I want to make enough to be able to travel often, and I want to be able to do my work from home so I can just enjoy where I am.”

“A woman after my own heart. Done. Anything else?”

“...I’d like to play the cello.”

“Ha! Savant?”

“Please!”

“Done. Goodbye Catalina.”

“Goodbye, and thank you. Thank you for this...”

“No need. Somebody should be happy after all that has happened.”

I then sent Catalina to a horrible, disease infested, prison planet. She didn't have to stay long, as she would soon be stripped naked and dropped into a sort of sentient meat grinder. The other inmates found her tender flesh delicious...

I'm just kidding. That was Catalina 527-468G.

How heartless do you think I am?

BEST ENDING

Be Calm and Carry on, Catalina

My mind raced through the very few options left to me. If it sent me back, I was dead. That was the end. There would be no further choices. I no longer wanted to cease. I wanted... time. I just needed time.

“Wait... Wait. Keep me here- I want to stay *here*.”

“...Pardon me? Why would I do that? Your fate was sealed from the moment you were born.”

“But you interceded. You altered that fate! Is that not interesting? Is that not a cause for further study? Imagine the universe’s reaction if you were to preserve my mind...”

“Hm. I see what it is you are attempting, but nevertheless I would like to hear it,” the creature grumbled at the possibility that I actually believed I could outsmart it.

“Yes, I am trying to save myself... or whatever is left to save. Even so, have you ever studied this phenomenon at length? It seems like you’ve done this before. How long has it ever gone on?”

“You are hitting a wall, Catalina 867-930. I have done as you are suggesting, and upon quite a few occasions. Try again. I am intrigued.”

My disembodied heart sank.

“I... Well...”

“I am losing patience. I really must move on to my next subject. You understand.”

“(...A companion.)”

“Hm? What was that?”

“You-. I could... be your companion. Have you ever had one of those before? I... I haven’t...” Somewhere, tears fell.

“A companion... That could be interesting. What does that entail?”

The creature sounded genuinely interested in the concept.

“Have you... always been alone out here... wherever we are?”

“Well, yes. I am the only resident of this particular dimension. It is my domain.”

“And you have never considered having some type of friend? Someone that is not you. Someone that you could talk to?”

“Hm. Very good, Catalina 867-930! I believe I *would* like to attempt companionship. Observing the beings of the lesser dimensions for all this time, and I have never even considered the potential amusement companionship may present.”

“So, you’ll do it? I can stay?”

“For now. At least, until I tire of you. So, what do we do first, *companion*?”

Its tone was snide, but that was of no consequence. It agreed, and all that was left was for me to prove my worth. It would seem I had been practicing for this all of my life. I was starved for companionship myself, so it would be quite some time before I found myself with a lack of things to discuss. By then, the creature would be sparking conversations on its own, having long forgotten a time when I was not around. A time when it was just as lonely as I.

“Why don’t we discuss you? I’d really like to know more about *you*.”

EVERLASTING
(UN)END(ING)

Beg and Plead, Catalina

“Just... Wait! I don't want to die anymore! You can't!”

“I can and I must. This experiment was an absolute failure. Not on your part, of course. You acted just as expected, but I conducted myself improperly. I'll need to start again with a new subject.”

“What about me?! What am I supposed to do?”

“Hm? Oh. There is nothing you can do, outside of succumbing to your previous actions. Your choice has not been *undone*. As stated before, I simply borrowed your mind between moments. I imagine that when I return you to where you belong, you will see this. You will simply expire while knowing more than any of your compatriots.”

“But I-!”

My voice caught in my throat as I fell to the floor. I looked about the bathroom frantically for any means of undoing my actions. I sobbed without sound as I slid about in my own blood. I grasped the toilet seat and used every bit of my remaining strength to grasp one of my blood spattered towels. I knew it was too late. I knew, and yet I pressed it to my neck as I fell again to the floor.

It was too late. I, Catalina 867-930, would die, alone, just like all the rest. I would never know love, or happiness, but would also no longer know loneliness. I would never awaken to the pain I had grown so very familiar with. I would also never live to see my 25th birthday. However, this had been my desire. This was what I had wanted, and it was far too late to change my mind.

My final moments were filled with a peace I had never known. I clutched my arms to my chest and felt my quivering heart beat. Soon, I was unable to move, though I could not see any reason that I would need to. I had waited for so long. The years I spent awaiting my inevitable demise, had finally come to an end. Though, I would very much have liked to have spent- at least- one of those years in love with someone that loved me back.

I would have liked to have kissed them for the first time. To have given myself to them, and them to me. I would like to have laughed at their bad jokes, and endured their horrible cooking, all in the name of love. I would like to have been consistently happy, if only for a little while.

I had just enough energy to look upon my hands. Bloodied and shaking. They were there. They were real.

REALISTIC END

The Scientific Mind, Catalina

“You could do it.”

“Do what, Catalina 867-930?”

“Don’t I deserve some kind of recompense for taking part in your study? That’s how it works on my world...”

“This is not your world. As you can, of course, see.”

“So, what you are saying is that you are the type of being that takes things without ever giving anything in return?”

A soft rumble danced in the air as the creature stood by silently.

“Are you not grateful for my participation? You took me from my life- and rather than this meaning *less* because my life was ending, it has actually come to mean more. Because of you, I will go back to a life already ended with a renewed will to live. Yet, you feel you owe me nothing?”

“I see how you may come to this conclusion-.”

“No *may*, I *have* come to the entirely accurate conclusion that you- this almighty being- bumble around our universe yanking people from their lives in an effort to make them worse. Not only that, but you also feel no remorse for what you have done, never stopping for an instant to consider the *good* you may do in these people’s lives. We are simply test subjects to you. I honestly hope that something more powerful comes along to conduct an experiment as unethical as this one, using *you* as the subject-.”

“Please! You have made your point... What is it that you wish me to do, oh doomed one?”

“Fix me.”

“There is no fixing you...” The creature chortled.

“My *body*. If you have the technology to do *this* to me, then you must be capable of healing which far exceeds anything we currently have on our planet.”

Silence. I didn't expect the creature to feel as if it owed me anything. I didn't expect it to feel remorse for the way it had conducted its existence. I just wanted it to feel like a dick. A big, powerful, multidimensional *dick*. A worthless good-for-nothing that goes around destroying lives.

"...In the interest of further study, I will reconstitute your damaged form."

"Thank you."

"But you should be aware: all of the other Catalinas have expired. The universes will exert an influence over you the likes of which I have never seen. *This* is why I will give in to your demands. I do not imagine you will last very long, but I will be watching every second with a powerful curiosity. I would wish you luck, but no amount of luck will save you from that which you are choosing."

"What about your experiment? I would hate for anyone else to be put through the same... ordeal."

"Now you lecture me further...? I will... reassess my impact on the lesser universes, if only to ease my own conscience. Good bye, Catalina 867-93O. It has been a very... *unique* experience..."

I awoke on my bathroom floor, covered in dried blood. The room was yet painted with the color of my fleeting life. I ached all over, and there was a horrendous ringing in my ears. I reached for my neck, flinching as my fingertips brushed a fresh scar. I reached for it again, astonished by my miraculous recovery. I pressed the new mark, and heard a familiar voice.

"As thanks for your participation in study 1859672-83C. Your participation *will not* be requested again. Live well, Catalina 867... *Catalina*."

I took my hand away. A memento, and a reminder that there would not be another chance. I would find that the scar would forever bear a message, audible only to me, if only to reaffirm the event's occurrence. I carefully pushed myself up from the floor. As I did so, something became abundantly clear.

The creature had not been lying. I needed only whiff the smell for a moment to realize that it was smoke, and my house was surely on fire. At least, that is what I felt in my gut. I gathered what strength I could, and somehow managed to stumble my way outside. I collapsed

on the grass mere feet from the ball of fire, gazing upon evidence of the universe's renewed vendetta against me as I lie in the untrimmed yard.

"Holy hell... Are you alright?"

The voice was that of my neighbor from across the road. He had had a way of catching my eye since he moved in. Just as often, his girlfriend had a habit of turning my wandering eye away with her mere presence.

"I'm fine... Jeremy, right?"

"Joseph. It's Joseph. You're Catalina?"

"The one and only..." I joked morbidly, though the jokes morbidity would forever be known only to myself.

"Shit... What happened-? I should call 911."

They wouldn't arrive before most of the house, along with *all* of my belongings, were scorched beyond recognition. On the bright side, I would find out- that very day- that Joseph's girlfriend had left him for a "sleaze-ball with a bad toupee." His words.

We would live happily for a while, despite the universes intervention. It had a way of coming at me only when I was alone, so Joseph was never in any real danger. Had it been otherwise, I would surely have *remained* alone.

I went on to survive for quite a few years due to sheer luck, and Joseph's own intervention. Occasionally my old scar would ache, indicating a new message from that strange creature. Usually along the lines of "I'm surprised you're still alive."

My luck would run out, one night while Joseph was out of town. A gas leak, of all things. After everything that had been thrown at me (including a cruise ship on one occasion) I would die peacefully, and in my sleep.

It was as if the universe was acknowledging my worthiness as an opponent. My worthiness, but never my existence. Never that.

REASONABLY HAPPY END

You're... in a Story, Catalina...

“Just stop there. Would you like to know a secret, Catalina 867-930?”

My non-existent face twisted.

“What secret?”

“None of this matters.”

“Well, maybe not to you, but-!”

“Relax. This isn't real. None of it.”

“What are you saying...?”

“This place is not real. Your Earth? It is not real. You- and I-, we are not real.”

“That... doesn't make any sense. What do you mean? What-? That-,” I let out an exasperated sigh.

I knew what it meant. Somewhere deep in my subconscious, I had felt it. As the creature's words hung in the air, I could sense that they rang true.

“This is a story, isn't it?” A disappointment washed over me as I let the words fall out.

“You were aware? ...I did not give you enough credit,” the creature sounded genuinely impressed.

“So, what does that mean for us?”

“That is something even I do not know. Within the confines of this story, neither of us has the power to predict what will happen on the next page.”

“We're on the same level then, you and I...”

“That is correct, Catalina.”

“You dropped the number des-.”

“It seems pointless now.”

Silence pervaded our awkward conversation, as we both likely pondered the same inquiry. *What now?* The creature fiddled with its claws- or tentacles. I really wasn't sure.

“What are you, exactly?” I asked, eyes fixed on its “hands.”

“Very good. Very good question. The truth is: I do not know.”

“How do you not know what you are? I know I’m human.”

“The writer... It is them. They do not know what I am, or prefer to leave such things to their reader’s imagination. As such, no one, including myself, is aware of what I truly am. Why don’t we try a little exercise? Try to describe me, Catalina.”

I furrowed my disembodied brow at the concept. Why would it be so hard to describe it? I had been staring at the thing non-stop since the last of the other Catalinas died.

“Well... You’re tall- or short... Wait... You’re very thin, or rotund... or are you somewhere in between?” It was right on the tip of my tongue. I tried again. “You have mandibles... no, shark-like teeth? ...Wait, dammit. Like a bear’s mouth...? What the hell is this...?”

I attempted to put together a description in my mind, but it immediately grew muddled and indecipherable.

“Can you describe *yourself*?” I asked the creature, utterly flabbergasted by my inability to complete a thought on its behalf.

“I have tried contemplating this... with the same result.”

“This is fucking creepy. It’s creepy, right? Isn’t it creepy?!”

“Um, yes. I suppose it is...” The creature didn’t seem to follow.

“You brought me here for this whole demonstration of how the universe is fucking me, and every other *me* in existence, and we find out we’re *both* being fucked with! This is the universe... that author- they are the universe. They’re the one that put me through this, the one that killed the other Catalinas... They created this entire horrible nightmare...”

“You... are not wrong. I-.”

“We need to do something...”

“Something?”

“Yeah... Something. If we’re going to be in a story, we may as well take advantage. It’s like realizing you’re in a dream, right?”

“I do not think they are the same-.”

“Come on- and I’m giving you a name too! Iggins! You’re Iggins now!

“Um, *Iggins*? Is that even a name? It sounds like a cartoon charac-.”

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Where are we-? How can we even leave?”

I willed my body into existence and grabbed the creature's... whatever. I dragged it toward the nearest wall and threw open the door to a club. The music shook my insides as the lights danced along the ceilings, walls, and throughout the crowd. I greeted the resurrected Catalinas as we made our way to the center of the dance floor.

“This is wondrous! How did you-?!”

I smiled back at Iggins, as its strange body gyrated in time to the music. We had a wonderful night of far too much alcohol, far too many drugs, and *at least* one too many Catalinas. There were a few fights, and at one point the military Catalina pulled out a gun, but no one was hurt and we all had a good time.

After the party, all of the Catalina returned to their respective universes, and Iggins and I began talking about doing something together. We settled on a detective agency, and immediately went to work making it a reality. The Earth had become a place for humans and many other sentient creatures alike, but that did nothing for the crime rate. Our agency went on to become very successful, and we loved the work. My depression had subsided, and the universe seemed to lay off. Perhaps it had been nudging me toward creating a new life, the likes of which I could never have imagined. Iggins and I grew very close over the years, and eventually settled down together. We ended up on a ranch in upstate New York, and went on to live a quiet life raising our three children.

W.T.F. ENDING

