

WHEN CATS ARE GREY

by Sergei Task

Based on a short story by Ivan Bunin

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FADE IN: Interior. Russian inn. Lobby. Winter. Night.

In a small lobby, a bell-boy, PETROVICH, is snoring in his sleep under a sheepskin coat. In the corner, above his head, hangs an icon lit by a candle. An old-fashioned pendulum clock shows 12:20 a.m. The door opens to the sound of the blizzard. Brushing off the snow, enter an animated GIRL in a black coat and a coquettish hat adorned with feathers and a MAN with a somber, hostile expression. The GIRL puts a finger to her lips, removes a feather from her hat and tickles PETROVICH, who sits up with a start.

PETROVICH

You--!

GIRL

How do you like me, Petrovich?

She struts, opens her fur coat. A nifty golden cross is dangling from her lovely neck. PETROVICH is morose.

PETROVICH

What are you here for?

MAN

What do you think, dumbbell?

Gives him a silver coin. Mumbling something about trouble with the police, PETROVICH takes them down the lobby, opens the room for them, lights two candles on the pier table. He draws down the window curtain shutting off the raging red flame as he explains.

PETROVICH

They're fixing the sewage. What can I bring you, sir?

MAN

Root beer for me, fruits for . . . the lady.

PETROVICH

No fruit. Grapes. Rouble and a half.

GIRL
(Acting "lady.")
Grapes--pooh--they must be cold!

MAN
Good enough.
(PETROVICH makes for the door.)
The key.

PETROVICH leaves the key and exits. The GIRL is striking poses in front of the pier glass. The MAN slips the key in his pocket, sits on the bed, unbuttons his coat--it's warm in the room.

MAN
Aren't you hot?

GIRL
Is there a good reason to be?

MAN
Who is Petrovich?

She comes over, playfully runs her fingers through his tousled hair.

GIRL
Are you one of those "jealous fellas"?
(A knock.)
It's open!

PETROVICH brings in a plateful of grapes, a pitcher of root beer and a mug on a tray. The GIRL shows him: "here." He puts it on the bed.

GIRL
(Sitting on MAN'S lap, eating grapes.)
Petrovich, bring us a bottle of Port!

MAN
I don't drink. You can go.

PETROVICH leaves. The MAN pours himself root beer.

GIRL

You sick?

MAN

Why?

GIRL

You don't drink.

MAN

Wine has little effect on me. My taste is numbed. I must be a pervert.

GIRL

Pooh. You could kill a horse--

MAN

What do you know! Physical strength has little to do with it.

GIRL

So how do I tell a pervert?

She slips her hands under his shirt but he promptly removes them.

MAN

By his ears. Perverts, geniuses and killers have ears the shape of a loop.

GIRL

Now let's see

He throws her down on the floor before she has a chance. She sits up, confused, rubbing her arm, her undergarment showing. A knock. PETROVICH pops his head in, showing a newspaper.

PETROVICH

Collision in the Smolensk region . . . a tractor and a plane. Shall I leave it for you, sir?

The MAN shuts the door in his face and turns the key.

MAN

Who buys you your underwear? That pimp Petrovich? Is he your uncle or something?

GIRL

I don't know what you're talking about.

MAN

Take off your clothes. No, before the mirror.
(He crosses to the chair.)
Not so fast. Do I know your name?

GIRL

What do you need it for?

MAN

How true. Touch yourself. I'm sure you know how. Does it feel good? You can get in bed now.

She picks up her clothes and, covering her nakedness, slips under the bed covers. Angle: her face as she is listening to the MAN'S story.

MAN (cont.) (V.O.)

Well, her name was Ida. This man he saw her every day--she was his wife's best friend--and yet he didn't see her.

The GIRL'S drowsy point of view: a bedbug crawling across the wall.

MAN (cont.) (V.O.)

There was nothing special about her. . . .
except for a slender figure, graceful gestures
and the irresistible charm of youth.

Angle: the GIRL, suddenly exhausted, closes her eyes.

MAN (cont.) (V.O.)

But this man he was blind . . . until he discovered it all one morning, with a stab of pain, after she hadn't showed up for five days. She disappeared--Where?--

Cut to the MAN standing at the bed side. The GIRL is asleep. Cut to the pendulum clock in the lobby showing 12:58 a.m. Angle: the door of the room from the outside. The MAN comes out buttoning his coat. Cut to PETROVICH snoring. The MAN shakes him by the shoulder. PETROVICH wakes up, instantly alert and businesslike.

PETROVICH

Grapes--two roubles, root beer--

MAN

Here's for everything. The lady wants you to wake her up at nine.

The MAN exits to the sound of the blizzard. PETROVICH prepares to go back to sleep when he realizes that the door to the room is ajar. He goes to close it. He is struck by the dead silence. He walks in.

In the oblique light of the guttering candles he sees a pair of bare feet sticking from under the bed covers and two pillows on top of the face. PETROVICH winces and makes for the door. He stops. After a twinkling of hesitation, he tiptoes to the bed, briskly crosses himself and, trying not to look, removes the golden cross hanging from the GIRL'S neck.

FADE OUT