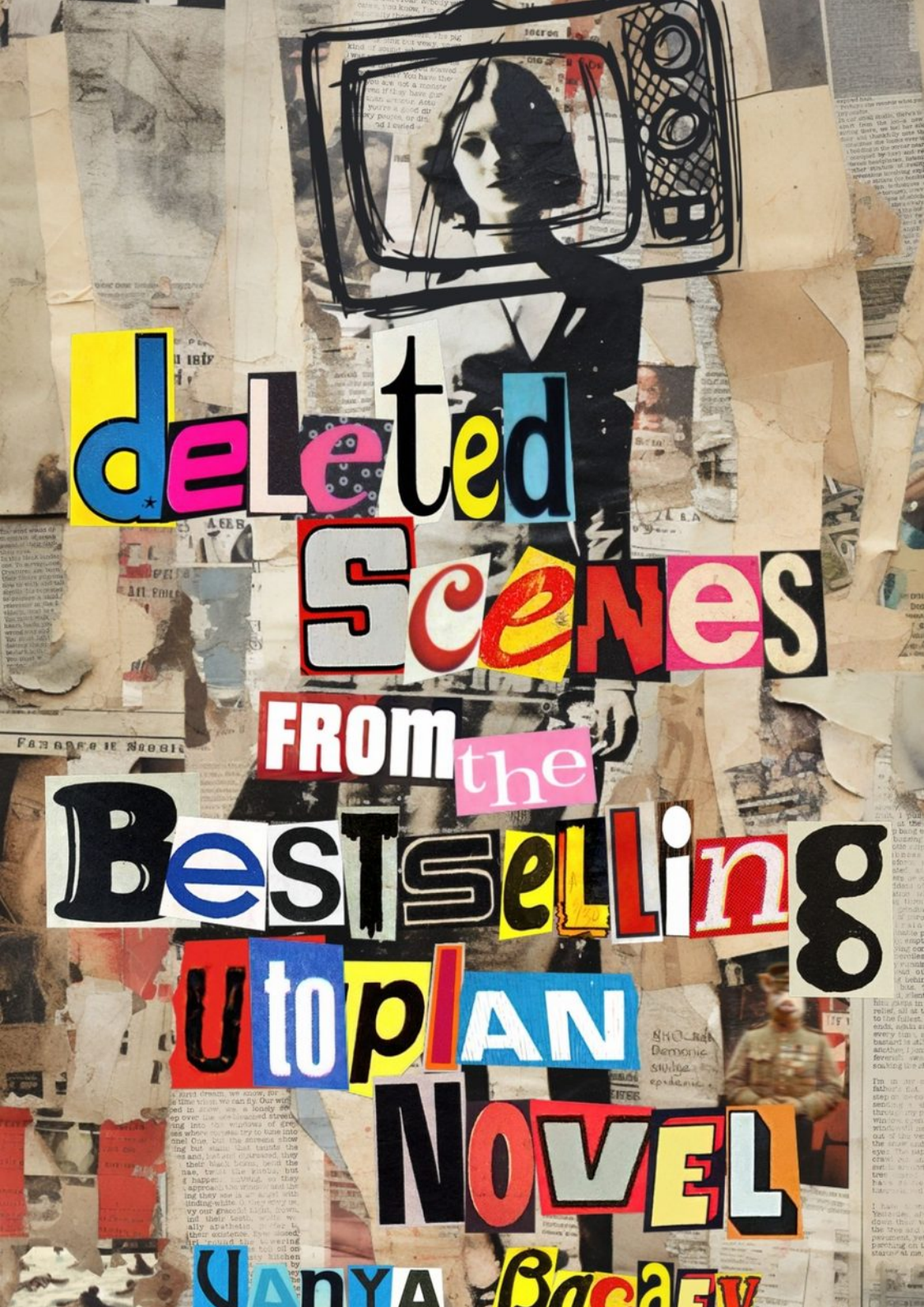

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Scenes
FROM the
Bestselling
Utopian
NOVEL
YANYA BAGLEY

№5: Fluffislav The Fearsome

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Should there exist any risk or a hint of danger, it was worth the pleading eyes of Fluffislav Fluffinsky. Thus thought Lena, returning home through the musty and damp corridors of the forsaken manufactory, half of which, she knew, even though it happened years before she even saw the light, was subjected to bombardment during the Great Coup and was never restored nor demolished, but instead turned into a locale of interest, an amusement park for people with an abundance of leisure hours, including children like herself or older, rarely younger, persons with no fixed abode, persons who were "into substances", and other, rather shady and "unbelievably dangerous", types, as Lena's dear mother, Mrs Zakonnik, warned her, trying to dissuade her in any possible way from going to the manufactory.

She did not think much about her decision or its consequences when picking up a cat, and not just a cat, a black cat—it was an instinctive, impulsive, irresistible action, and many other in-s, im-s and ir-s, for encountering a cat ("Kitten!") at that time was akin to encountering a unicorn, an animal, for the record, of equal thaumaturgic potency, albeit, in the case of a cat, a thaumaturgy ominous and sly. It wasn't Lena's opinion—hardly did she have any opinion on cats beyond pure

childish curiosity—it was the Tsar's, therefore everyone's. Cats, he was rumoured to have said, are evil omens, enemies of the state, hence they have no place in the utopia, especially black cats, which undoubtedly are devilish entities, and should be banned, subjected to felicide and never again seen in Novo Tsarstvo. Nobody knew the inward reasons behind that decision and could only speculate whether their leader was simply a superstitious individual who saw black cats as harbingers of misfortune and decided to eliminate the potential source of bad luck by stigmatising all the cats, even the ones of other colours, for even they, with a certain chance, could give birth to a little black demon that would later wreak havoc on the state of utopia; whether ailurophobia could be one of the flaws of their fearless leader; whether it was a childhood trauma and the scar on the Tsar's cheek was, in fact, left by a black cat; whether it was a prophecy woven into the Tsar's mind by his personal seer that predicted the Tsar's downfall, which would likely be linked to a black cat; or whether a cat was a symbol of rebellion, freedom, pure anarchy, too unpredictable and independent, too slothful and therefore failing to contribute sufficient amounts of value to the utopian economy.

All that could hardly bother Lena, for not only was she young and eager to break the rules for the sake of breaking the rules and keen to explore for the sake of adventure, but also because before meeting Fluffislav she had seen a cat once in a picture in a book that she too found at the same manufactory and could only dream of them yet remaining somewhat uncertain that the creature she saw and was now carrying home was

indeed a cat, shaggy, with tangled fur, with a scruffy ear and a bald tail in two places. “Perhaps, it’s a weird furry rat and I’m just being silly,” she thought, but she knew what rats looked like. “Perhaps, it’s an otter,” she thought, but their appearance was even more obscure to her than that of cats, and moreover, what would an otter be doing at the abandoned manufactory in the Town T? “That would’ve been even sillier, you silly young lady.” Therefore, the cat being a cat was self-evident, and the name “Fluffislav Fluffinsky”, or “Fluffislav” for short, was self-evident too and occurred to her inexorably, immediately, irrevocably (and other adverbs Lena had learned recently and liked to use, and which, in their feline-like daring nature, too were stigmatised by some), for the kitten was, well, quite fluffy.

—Whatever it takes, you’re with me now, Fluffislav,—she patted the cat and hid him under her jacket close to her heart.—We’re in this together.

—Miaouw,—responded Fluffislav, and this very “miaouw” and the purr that accompanied it were, indeed, worth the risk, too.

—Whatever it takes,— she added, goosebumped all over.

Lena walked alerted through deserted promenades, barren tracts, rubbish heaps, encountering other abandoned objects, some of which included those very people of no fixed abode whom she, by the way, knew by name, and who, in fact, were intelligent and interesting people despite everything her dear mother had told her, through quiet, unpeopled and rubbish-strewn streets, and streets peopled but still quiet and still strewn with rubbish, filled with silent grey figures with sour

faces that headed somewhere, perhaps, she thought, to do their important work for the state. She approached her home, a ten-storey grey panel building, greeted the old ladies who gathered at the entrance and conversed about quotidian matters that were none of their business ("senile witches", as Lena called them in return to them claiming her "a little imp, not a girl" for reasons she wouldn't disclose), summoned the lift, a small metal cabin turned into a canvas, a place of artistic expression of someone whose name she wouldn't disclose either, travelled to her sixth floor, and finally entered her flat, where her dear mother, as she always did when at home, nervously awaited her daughter's return.

—What's that?— a mask of eldritch horror crept over Mrs Zakonnik's face.

—Fluffislav,— Lena answered with an expression of complete and total normality as if Fluffislav was, in fact, her brother whom she had picked up from a nursery.

—Fluffi-what?

—Fluffislav Fluffinsky. I think he's a cat.

Mrs Zakonnik's eyes and lips opened wide, she clutched her head and began pacing around the room, muttering to herself some incantations as if she, sometimes also called a senile witch by her daughter, had really become one, doing it in the same way Lena's crazy old uncle, her mother's dear brother, acted a few days before he was sent away to an

institution specialising in treating such odd behaviour, so Lena naturally grew worried.

—What's wrong?

Discombobulated, Mrs Zakonnik shook her head ("Tsar help me!"), and kept shaking it throughout the rest of the conversation.

—Go... go... go into your room, Lena.

—But Mum—

—Don't argue with your mother!

—But Mum—

—I said go into your room, young lady.

Mrs Zakonnik was terrified and, well, furious, at the same time, both of which, in addition to her appearance at that moment and her appearance in general, including her aquiline features and sharp facial features, did indeed make her resemble a witch ("Senile witch!").

—And this...—she pointed at the cat with her finger, now jerking like a jackhammer.—"Thing"... Throw it out of the window.

—What?

—I said get rid of this "thing".

—It's not a "thing", Mum.

Lena didn't like the tone of the conversation, and the sound of the "thing", and the connotations it implied in particular, made her rather disturbed and angry, too.

—Then I'm going to do it myself,—she said, reaching her hand towards Fluffislav.—Give it to me. Now.

—I'm not giving him to you.—Lena said, stepping back.

—I will flush this "thing" (!) down the toilet.

—Miaouw,—Fluffislav felt like he must contribute to the discussion.

In response, Mrs Zakonnik squealed, hopping and slamming her hand against the door jamb.

—I hoped it was dead already at least! . . . Lena! Do you want to kill your mother?

—Maybe I do! If you harm Fluffislav!— shouted Lena and, holding Fluffislav in her arms, retreated to her room and locked herself there, leaving her mother petrified and speechless.

—You know it's against the law, silly young lady? Do you want to go to prison at your age? What would our neighbours think? Antitsarism!—grumbled Mrs Zakonnik through the key hole.

But no answer followed. Knowing the protocols as any state servant must, Mrs Zakonnik hurried to take the phone ("Tsar help me!"), in the

process entangling herself in the wire, and started spinning the rotary dial, failed a few times, but, in the end, after a dozen attempts, reached the Local Bureau of Comprehensive Documentation, Information Management, Archival Integrity, and Data Compilation Services, LBCDIMAIDCS for short, the place where she, as a valuable citizen awarded multiple times with "the employee of the year" badge, had been proud to work since the age of eighteen, and heard the bored voice of her friend on the other side of the wire. During their brief and fussy conversation, she didn't mention the "thing" and, moreover, she tried with her voice and words to pretend that nothing of such scale had happened at all, and she just needed, for some reason she couldn't disclose, an inspection at her home to discuss some legal matters and concerns over the events compromising national security she encountered recently in the city that certainly and strictly were NOT related to her daughter. Her bored friend, Mrs Coupoff, a woman of ample proportions, ample soul and no less ample inquisitiveness, now devoid of her unremitting ennui and excited about the veritable affair of Mrs Zakonnik's phone call, knew whom to call next and happily did so. Thereafter the request echoed through the city electrically in a chain of consecutive phone calls, a friend calling a friend, an acquaintance calling an acquaintance, nephews and nieces calling their aunts and uncles, lost some and acquired new enigmatic details along its journey, and, from a hectic request for legal advice, transformed into somewhat of a code-red, and summoned a local state inspector.

That gentleman, who was called Mr Ailuroff, clad in black clothes, and

wearing a black fedora hat, which all contrasted vividly with his sickly white skin, having the look of a man of the utmost importance and impeccable state secrecy because of the aforementioned outfit and his demeanour, upon packing his fears and genuine interest regarding the matter, jumped into his black luxury car, put a blinker on the roof, and headed to Zakonniks', where Mrs Zakonnik, who had already managed to brush up a little and calm down, met Mr Ailuroff at the door and with fastidious bureaucratic conduct and indifference explained to him the true nature of the occasion. The inspector, honestly, couldn't believe his ears, for such an event, an event involving, Tsar forbid, a cat, was considered rare, nay impossible, and often was associated with phone terrorism, such as when someone called from a telephone booth on the street and said that there was a cat in the building, for instance, in a theatre showing a quite dissident performance, and now it must be urgently evacuated to eradicate the devilish entity and keep the citizens safe, thereby the inspector had doubts. Mrs Zakonnik, nevertheless, convinced Mr Ailuroff that the matter was indeed important and the cat indeed existed, and he, now slightly anxious and even more sickly white, decided to check the evidence before retiring back. With his gloved fist, the inspector knocked at Lena's door.

—Young lady, hello, I am Mr Ailuroff.

—I'm Lena, Mr Geezer.

—Lena, tell me, have you really found "a cat"?

—I think so.

—You think so? So you're not sure?

—I don't know. I think I am.

—Is it still with you?

—He is.

Mr Ailuroff, who himself had never seen a real cat, gulped and retreated a pace back from the door as fear and thrill intermingled in his stomach, then looked at Mrs Zakonnik and gestured to her something she couldn't understand and only shrugged in response.

—Do you know it's illegal to keep a cat?

—My dear mother has kindly informed me, yes.

—Then don't you want to dispose of the creature?

—He's not "a creature" or "a thing". His name is Fluffislav Fluffinsky. I want you to refer to him by his name. And I'm not going to "dispose" of him. He now is my friend, Mr Geezer. You can go away.

—This is not how the protocol works, young lady.

—Helena.

—Helena, miss, this is not how it works. We should bag your Fluffislav and deliver it to the analysis and disposal service.

—You should bag yourself and fuck off.

—Helena!—exclaimed Mrs Zakonnik as the inspector threw her a glance full of brooding discontent.—I apologise, inspector, my girl doesn't understand what she's saying. She's just a child.

—No, I'm not!

Mr Ailuroff nodded to Mrs Zakonnik, and continued:

—What colour is the creature?

—He's not a creature. His name is Fluffislav, I told you already. And he's black.

A wave of frisson of terror went through Mr Ailuroff's body, from his very toes to his very top, as he emitted a sound resembling a stifled shriek of a person being poured over with ice-cold water ("This cannot be, can it?") The inspector swallowed a massive lump again.

—Are you sure... it is black?

—Black as the night. I can show you.

—Wait, please stay in the room. I... I believe you.

—Are you sure, inspector?

—I am quite sure... We don't yet truly know... what kind of dangers to the national security this particular... "sample" may possess.

At this point, a latch clicked, Mr Ailuroff leaned backwards, but found

himself against Mrs Zakonnik's breasts ("Pervert!") and then met her terrified eyes. The door opened, and from there appeared Lena hugging Fluffislav, who, unlike his previous appearance, looked cuddly and even fluffier, for Lena, while her dear mother was busy telephoning and then recovering and before the inspector arrived, had brushed the cat and given him milk.

—I want to show Fluffislav to you. Here, look how cute and harmless he is,—Lena said and, holding Fluffislav in both hands, pulled them forward, presenting the stretched-out cat to the audience in all his feline beauty. From his mouth, a little pink tongue peeked playfully, and his eyes, agape, gleamed verdantly like diluted tarragon lemonade, as deep as the voidest void. Fluffislav's vertical pupils dilated horizontally, and he uttered:

—Miaouw.

A demonic yell erupted from Mr Ailuroff's mouth as, startled, he shuddered, hopped and dropped his carpetbag, while Mrs Zakonnik, upon experiencing the very same emotion, clawed at the inspector's coat and hid behind his back. As a prompt reaction to such an insolent, impolite, irreverent act, Fluffislav, frightened himself, leaped out from Lena's hands onto the floor and hissed, which, in turn, imposed even more horror on Mr Ailuroff and he, without a second thought (the first thought was "Tsar have mercy!"), as if it were his primordial instinct, took his fedora off and threw it at Fluffislav, which, hurled with masterful skill, covered little Fluffislav as a dome. Stunned, Lena could

not even fathom what was going on, for it was unfolding with such prodigious celerity that it felt like a single moment, and later, as soon as she saw cupolaed Fluffislav and reached her hands towards him, the cat, not able to get rid of the hat, started racing across the room in wild panic, and, after a few hasty circles around Mr Ailuroff and Mrs Zakonnik, assailed them. Well, for them, in their current condition, it seemed like an act of savage brutality, whilst Fluffislav, bereft of his sight, only attempted to liberate himself by jumping in a random direction. Mr Ailuroff let forth a shrill cry, convulsively grabbed his carpetbag and dashed away towards the front door. At the same time, Lena uplifted the frightened kitten and cradled him to her chest ("Dumb adults...").

—Dispose of it!—shouted Mr Ailuroff through his clenched teeth, looking at the hosts, and, arming himself with his index finger, gestured floorward.—I wasn't here! Bedlam!—the inspector added, either indicating the state of the affairs in the room or hinting at his next destination, ran away and no soul has seen him since.

Read next part

Dream

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