

Anuba Arrives, Ray Bradbury

Anuba Arrives

The cat came first, in order to be absolute first.

It arrived when all the cribs and closets and cellar bins and attic hang-spaces still needed October wings, autumn breathings, and fiery eyes. When every chandelier was a lodge and every shoe a compartment, when every bed ached to be occupied by strange snows and every banister anticipated the downslide of creatures more pollen than substance, when every window, warped with ages, distorted faces looking from shadows, when every empty chair seemed occupied by things unseen, when every carpet desired invisible footfalls and the water pump on the back stoop inhaled, sucking vile liquors toward a surface abandoned because of the possible upchuck of nightmares, when all the parquet planks whined with the oilings of lost souls, and when all the weathercocks on the high roofs gyred in the wind and smiled griffin teeth, while deathwatch beetles ticked behind the walls ...

Only then did the royal cat named Anuba arrive. The front door slammed. And there was Anuba.

Clothed in a fine pelt of arrogance, her quiet engine quieter, centuries before limousines. She paced the corridors, a noble creature just come from a journey of three thousand years.

It had commenced with Rameses when, shelved and stored at his royal feet, she had slept away some few centuries with another shipload of cats, mummified and linen-wrapped, to be awakened when Napoleon's assassins had tried to gun-pock the lion icon Sphinx's face before the Mamelukes' gunpowder shot them into the sea. Whereupon the cats, with this queen feline, had loitered in shop alleys until Victoria's locomotives crossed Egypt, using tomb-filchings and the asphalt linen-wrapped dead for fuel. These packets of bones and flammable tar churned the stacks in what was called the Nefertiti-Tut Express.

The black smokes firing the Egyptian air were haunted by Cleopatra's cousins who blew off, flaking the wind until the Express reached Alexandria, where the still unburned cats and their Empress Queen shipped out for the States, bundled in great spools of papyrus bound for a paper-mashing plant in Boston where, unwound, the cats fled as cargo on wagon trains while the papyrus, unleaved among innocent stationery printers, murdered two or three hundred profiteers with terrible miasmal bacteria. The hospitals of New England were chockfull of Egyptian maladies that soon brimmed the graveyards, while the cats, cast off in Memphis, Tennessee, or Cairo, Illinois, walked the rest of the way to the town of the dark tree, the high and most peculiar House.

And so Anuba, her fur a sooty fire, her whiskers like lightning sparks, with ocelot paws strolled into the House on that special night, ignoring the empty rooms and dreamless beds, to arrive at the main hearth in the great parlor. Even as she turned thrice to sit, a fire exploded in the cavernous fireplace.

While upstairs, fires on a dozen hearths inflamed themselves as this queen of cats rested.

The smokes that churned up the chimneys that night recalled the sounds and spectral sights of the Nefertiti-Tut Express thundering the Egyptian sands, scattering mummy linens popped wide as library books, informing the winds as they went.

And that, of course, was only the first arrival.

The End