

Writing Exercise 1A

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“When you’re as small as I am, the world is a massive place. So full of possibility and wonder,” the small, blue-skinned man says as he gazes up into the cold, golden eyes of the orange cat currently holding him pinned under a clumsy paw.

“Today is not a good day to die.”

Something inside the cat named Azrael is excited. The prey fell easily, smelling of alcohol and too many nights away from home – and yet Azrael knows there is adventure yet to be had. Claws flex out slightly, drawing tiny droplets. The brilliant red stands out in stark contrast to the ashen blue of the skin it bubbles up from. The tart smell of iron and dirt releases a flood of saliva in the cat’s mouth and forces his pupils ever narrower – mere black slivers in shimmering, quivering, excited pools of filigree.

The man, cast out by his community because of a predilection for fermented berries, jokingly called Pariah Smurf as he was being driven into exile, feels the paw slacken.

“He wants me to run.”

He is wounded, a row of four puncture marks across his chest and a deep gash in his left calf from when the beast sprang at him from a thicket. He is wounded but he knows that if he doesn’t run it will mean his death. He will die and never have a chance to clear his name with his people. Never see his daughter’s face. Never again know the love of another.

These thoughts spur a flurry of action – a wriggle and a roll to his stomach. An almighty shrug and a burst of power and the paw is left to fall to the ground with a soft ‘thud’.

Azrael likes it better when they run. Smurfs are strong-tasting little morsels and the extra adrenaline makes their flesh more tender and sweet. A brief head start is given before the cat stirs and gives chase.

All Smurfs have scars and stories. Scars that disfigure faces. Stories of relatives disemboweled and eaten in front of them. Stories of kidnapping. Scars that paralyze a whole community in fear at the sound of a snapping branch or the sight of a circling bird of prey. The Smurfs are a happy people by nature but they are also a hunted people. Perpetually afraid, victims of their own diminutive size and the evil that surrounds them.

This Smurf isn’t afraid though; he doesn’t have time to be afraid. He knows that if he stays in the open Azrael will run him down. His short, stubby legs and potbelly are no match for the lithe, muscular power of a cat. The only chance he has is to find a bramble patch or a hollow tree. A wild dive headfirst, off the path, into some denser foliage makes him feel safer.

Azrael sees the Smurf leave the path and for a brief moment, falters and panics. Despite his bravado and seeming arrogance, Azrael is hungry. His skin is stretched tight over his ribs and his fur is matted, falling out in spots. A good meal hasn't passed through the furry lips and pointed teeth for almost a week now – the Smurf would be a welcome change from the insects and field mice that the once noble cat has been reduced to subsisting on.

It is necessary that the blue man die so that the orange cat may carry on.

This thought quickens Azrael's gait as he pushes after his meal into the bushes. The scent is high, the Smurf's fear glowing in the air, leading Azrael, exciting him almost sexually.

Blood flecks are smeared on leaves, shining red in the gloom of the undergrowth. Azrael's keen eyes spot a flicker of blue and white further ahead. This game is almost over and Azrael moistens his lips in anticipation as he careens over the dirt.

The Smurf is running, eyes wide, darting anxiously this way and that for an escape. Anything, a hole, a weapon, some sign that he has a chance. His mind wanders back to happier times, sitting outside his mushroom house, sharing a pipe with the bearded village elder, talking of sunshine and crops and the welfare of the tribe.

“This can't end!”

A tear is caught by the wind and whipped from his blue cheek, moist already with pungent sweat and a fine mist of his own blood. Fear and exhaustion are beginning to take hold. The thunderous, horrifying sound of the bloodthirsty cat not far behind him tells him that he isn't going to be able to outrun his adversary. He must stand and fight. A thorny vine is bright green and climbing up around a tree trunk a short way ahead. A plan is formulated.

Azrael feels his energy flagging. He is built for short bursts of intense power, not for extended chases – this chase must be ended soon. The Smurf darts to the right, slipping behind a tree. Azrael knows that Smurfs aren't adept climbers but quickens his pace nonetheless. In a moment their paths will cross. Azrael salivates at the prospect. In his ears he can hear his former keeper croaking for him to, “come and get it.”

The smell of the man is strong when Azrael reaches the tree, paws clutching for purchase and sending a shower of loose dirt and twigs into the air as the sleek hunter slows himself down and changes direction.

The man is there! Something is in his hands but it doesn't register, things are moving at lightning speed, each instant illuminated as if by a strobe light. Both back legs push the cat forward towards the prey, front legs extended, razor sharp claws hammering down towards the kill.

A flash of green interrupts the pace. Azrael spins and then falls, letting out a shriek as he goes down. The green and blue and brown and white are no more; all is red. All is searing pain.

Azrael is before him wailing, clawing at his own eyes. The Smurf stands, dumbfounded by his good timing and the brilliance of his plan. The cat is badly wounded – the lash of thorny vines swiped across Azrael's eyes, a thorn catching deep into one of the eyeballs, pulling the vine from the Smurf's hands, leaving his palms burned and cut.

Pride and guilt have now overtaken the little man.

Azrael feels nothing but pain and anger. He can feel one of his eyes is punctured, leaking warm and sticky down over his whiskers. Red outlines are coming back to the other eye.

The Smurf is still there, standing where he had been when he struck at the cat, hands on hips.

Pain has distracted Azrael from his empty stomach until now but as the shock of the event ebbs away, hatred and hunger rise again.

The cat stirs and the Smurf turns to run, woken from his foolish daydream. But it is too late, the pain now belongs to the Smurf as blood-soaked claws tear at him from behind, pulling his hat from his bald, shiny head and leaving deep meaty furrows down his back.

He screams but nobody comes to his aid. The cat's muzzle is sticky with blood and ocular fluid. The fur tickles the Smurf's chin as fangs burst his throat, pulling flesh, tearing great strips of it from his belly. His vision blurs and slowly turns black.

His day ended as it had begun – alone.