

Murphy's cat

Take care who sits next to you at conferences...

Joan D. Vinge

The scene: a lecture hall, slowly filling. MURPHY, carrying a canvas bag, sits down beside the distinguished researcher waiting to speak.

MURPHY. So, you got the copy of *Nature's Retrospective on the Future* in your e-load, too. Amusing, huh?

PROFESSOR [*dubiously*]. Everyone got it, at registration. And while I found it fascinating, 'amusing' never occurred to me.

MURPHY. Well, considering your research, I suppose not. ... By the way, not everyone got it: there was a glitch in the download. Some people got *The Tao of Pooh*.

PROFESSOR. Do I know you? Have we ever met?

MURPHY. Sure. I'm Murphy; we bump into each other all the time. Literally. You really need to do something about that tunnel vision of yours. [*Suddenly addresses the bag, which has begun to flop around on the floor*] Settle down!

PROFESSOR [*Rising to leave, sits back down*]. It's alive—?

MURPHY. And always at the most inopportune times. [*Picks up the sack, peers into it*] It's only sixteen hundred hours, Dingy; dinner's at eighteen. Take a nap, baby.

PROFESSOR. Good Lord—

MURPHY. No, just my cat. Schrödinger gave him to me.

PROFESSOR. Schrödinger's cat? This is absurd; there was no actual cat. It was all hypothetical.

MURPHY [*Holds up the sack*]. Tell that to the cat.

PROFESSOR [*Looks in, aghast*]. It's ... dead.

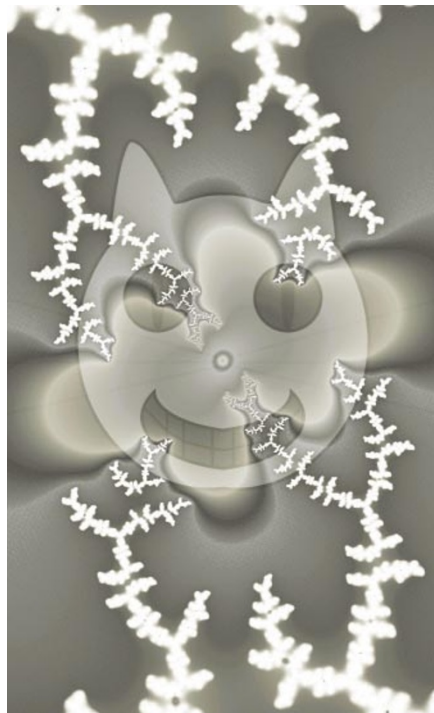
MURPHY. You miss my point. But he never misses dinner. A free vacation is the only reason we attend these snot-fests anymore. No one comes to my presentations, and no one believes he exists. He's been dead and alive for nearly a century, after all. Being a cat, he's sensitive to snubs.

PROFESSOR. And you two ... converse, do you?

MURPHY. This isn't *Waiting for Godot*. Don't be ridiculous. Our telepathic affinity is extremely high. As Sheldrake said, back in the last century, even humans possess the largely untapped potential—

PROFESSOR. Rupert Sheldrake? Oh please. Leave 'morphic resonance' in the dustbin where it belongs. No experiment ever found his 'mystery force field'.

MURPHY. But that was the point, accord-



ing to David Bohm. Chopping up dead things to discover the 'secret of life' is absurd.

PROFESSOR. I do not 'chop up dead things'. I work with nanotechnology. Besides, there is no evidence that we need to go beyond the biochemical to explain life. That is all the 'mystery' you need. And any day now we will have unravelled it completely—

MURPHY. Promises, promises ... [*Touches the Professor's shoulder with a fingertip; a spark of static leaps between them*] Boy, I hate these synthetic fabrics; I keep having to ground myself.

PROFESSOR. In reality, no doubt.

MURPHY. Cheap shot; bad aim. Speaking of reality, it was a real shame about those 'clone-the-frozen-head' experiments. Yuck.

PROFESSOR. Where did you hear about that?

MURPHY. I was there. Although as usual no one realized it. But about bioelectrics, Professor: where does the energy go, when something dies? Of course my cat understands all that better than I do. Not my department, as they say.

PROFESSOR. Obviously. Just what is your 'department', by the way?

MURPHY. Changing the subject. What do you think of Dürr's work, when he was at the Planck Institute? Or Lukens and Friedman's Y2K article from *Nature*, showing that the macrocosmic entrainment of microcosmic forces actually exists? It's in the

Retrospective packet. For so long we sought the submolecular soul of our 'orderly' existence, only to discover that it's utter chaos! Is that humour on a cosmic scale, or what?

PROFESSOR. Are you on drugs?

MURPHY. I get high on life, that's cosmic enough. But as I was saying: even better, the *Retrospective* has these odd little essays predicting 'the Future'—basically our present. They all seem to predict the perfect triumph of artificial intelligence over bestial human nature. Acrawl with nanobots, we have transformed ourselves into our own successors—or else humans are obsolete, out to pasture on a planet saved from ecodisaster by the wisdom of AIs. And nothing goes wrong along the way. As if—!

PROFESSOR. Murphy—

MURPHY. They don't even consider the socioeconomic aspects, let alone selfishness, phobias, or survival instinct! Articles written by robots about robots in a magazine called *Nature!*

PROFESSOR. Murphy, everything—including my patience—has its limits. Controlling nature, making every atom in it dance to my tune, is what I live to achieve. I'm certain that within the next 30 years—

MURPHY. Yadda, yadda. How about those AIs that live in cyberspace, that started out as minuscule bits of program? But then they linked up, rewrote their programming, mutated and grew, until all we can do now is try not to tick them off. Have you ever had one of Tildon's biomorphic 'bots malfunction and eat your shorts? How can you be sure a billion nanobots in your blood won't suddenly decide to turn you into a giant tumour?

PROFESSOR. I will be addressing control measures in my—

MURPHY [*Rises, picks up the sack*]. Well, gotta go.

PROFESSOR. You're leaving? Before my presentation?

MURPHY. I've heard it. And I have an online rendezvous with my sweet patootie before dinner. But my feminine intuition tells me we'll run into each other again. Soon.

PROFESSOR. What—?

MURPHY. I never said I wasn't a woman.

PROFESSOR. Wait—at least tell me your field of study?

MURPHY. Chaos theory. I have a law named after me, in fact. Naturally, it's the only law in the universe that always functions.

PROFESSOR. Which is—?

MURPHY. Take a wild guess. I dare you. ■

Joan D. Vinge has won two Hugo Awards for her science fiction. Her most recent novel is Tangled Up In Blue.