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### unlike the scorpion girt by fire

For all cats have this particularity, each and every one, from the meanest alley sneaker to the proudest, whitest she that ever graced a pontiff's pillow—we have our smiles, as it were, painted on. Those small, cool, quiet Mona Lisa smiles that smile we must, no matter whether it's been fun or it's been not.

Angela Carter, *Puss-in-Boots* (1979)

One day many years ago, somewhere in northwest Arkansas, a litter of kittens was born. For whatever reason—the whims of an overly affectionate child, perhaps, or more likely an impatient owner indifferent to the basics of feline husbandry—the animals were removed far too early from their mother. That much was as obvious as the razor-sharp nails that dug rhythmically, ecstatically, into my flesh the first time I held Tommy, a six-month-old tuxedo cat, in the visitors' lounge at the county animal shelter. Such “kneading” behavior, say cat experts, is a remnant of what young kittens do with their paws against the mother cat's teats to facilitate milk letdown while they're suckling. Pluck the little ones away while they're still in the nursing stage and the habit is fixed for life.

Seeing, at first, no more than a nondescript cat whose doppelgänger would be easy enough to find among all the similar black-and-whites in the world—several were in this very room—I quickly broke his gaze and moved on to a more fetching Abyssinian with a