MISSING

 You have probably seen the familiar signs pop-up now and then around your own neighborhood, attached to a tree or a lamp post: LOST CAT, or perhaps LOST DOG. A detailed description of the missing pet is included, along with a picture of the animal and the owner’s contact information. Sometimes, even a cash reward is offered. Sadly, only around 20% of the lost pets are ever found by kind, alert strangers and successfully returned to their human family. Some fortunate pets return home on their own, after a few days of wandering, to the great relief of their owners. But what happens to all the other pets who suddenly vanish, like a missing sock in a clothes dryer?

 Well, I found out. And the truth might surprise you.

 Now you might guess that some lost pets are killed by larger feral animals, or are fatally hit by cars, or get sick and die either from eating contaminated garbage wastes or from simple starvation. All of these factors are true, so you would be correct. Yet there is another fascinating explanation that I recently stumbled upon, purely by accident.

 I saw the latest missing pet alert two days ago, on the bicycle path adjacent to the creek near our house, while taking my daily morning walk.

 HELP! The newly posted sign on a lamp post pleaded. OUR BELOVED DAZZLE IS MISSING. The sign went on to detail the last time and place the attractive slate-gray cat was seen. Dazzle was a male Russian Blue with emerald-green eyes, age four, weight around ten pounds. Along with the usual contact information, a generous reward was offered, which didn’t surprise me, seeing as this particular pure breed could be costly. Clearly, this was not your typical shelter-rescue feline. A picture of two heart-broken children – from the family, the Dillards -- was included on the flyer. The boy and girl held aloft a hand-made sign, pleading: DAZZLE, WE MISS YOU! PLEASE COME HOME!

 I hoped I might stumble upon this wayward pet soon on one of my walks, for I realized that recovery chances diminished quickly as the hours went by. As luck would have it, I noticed a fleeting glimpse of gray fur (bigger than a squirrel) yesterday on my walk as I approached the wide wooden pedestrian bridge spanning the creek. I stopped and crouched down. I saw through the low green bushes on my path that it was a cat heading down under the structure. Slowly, I approached the feline. It looked like it could be the missing Dazzle.

 Making gentle meowing noises, I crawled on my hands and knees and got closer, careful to avoid any mud. The cat seemed curious yet unafraid. I got within five feet or so, with the cat’s emerald-green eyes staring watchfully at me. Suddenly, a blue-green field of some kind of energy, about three feet wide, seemed to mysteriously appear before Dazzle as he turned away from me to face it. I thought I heard a voice say, “Follow me,” but it could have just been my imagination. Regardless, I felt oddly compelled to risk entering the colorful, shimmering vortex, so I followed the cat into the energy swirls.

 Once inside, I realized I had entered what had to be another dimension of time and space. The scene was one of a serene, nature-rich paradise, with gently rolling green hills, a few sparkling streams, and many different kinds of trees and flowers. The azure sky overhead was touched with soft, white clouds, but strangely, there was no sun -- even though the panorama was brightly lit. I also saw men and women of various races, walking together and apparently conversing, both nearby and in the distance. The temperature was pleasant and comfortable, the air fresh and nicely invigorating.

 The Russian Blue was right in front of me. Imagine my shock when he gradually transformed into a human being – a handsome, light-skinned man in his mid-30’s! What was once Dazzle the missing cat now spoke clearly to me in a soothing voice as he stood up to his full height from the ground.

 “Be at peace and relax, my friend. You are safe and you are welcomed. You have arrived at what we humorously call the Land of the Lost Pets. Nobody knows exactly where we are or even how all of this exists. Yet here we are. The best way I can explain this to you is that we are in a kind of ‘way station’ for human beings waiting to be reincarnated into another human form. All the dogs and cats on Earth are actually human beings in temporary animal form. We are resting, in a way, from being people. But when we get lonely for our own species, we sneak away from our pet owners and come here. There are entry portals to this special realm everywhere in the world, in all countries. Once here, we can stay and wait until our reincarnation is due – provided we have lived a good, prior life as humans, before becoming pets – or we can freely choose to return to our owners until our natural deaths, when we will still re-appear in this dimension. Exactly how, I cannot say," the stranger explained.

 I asked the man what his name was. And how were all these people housed and fed? I noticed no dwellings or farms. Basically, I wanted to know how this world was different from the regular reality I was used to.

 “First of all, we have no names here. There is no need. We are not here long enough. You see, time in this place is ultra-condensed. One hour in this dimension is equivalent to one full year in the ordinary reality you are used to. Since most dogs and cats live no longer than 15-20 years, we have but a short wait until we transfer into our next anticipated human reincarnation. Hence, there is no need for work or homes or food. We come in as cats or dogs, materialize into human form for less than a day here, then de-materialize and are instantly reborn as infants somewhere around the world. But reincarnation is wonderful because one slowly recalls -- as one ages -- everything from every past life, until total universal consciousness and pure enlightenment is achieved,” the man explained. "Each human being is reborn about twelve times."

 “Are all animals in the world simply reincarnated humans, then?” I wondered aloud.

 “No…only cats and dogs,” the man replied. “Not birds or reptiles or dolphins or monkeys or any other animal. You have probably had a cat or dog sometime in your life. You felt love and cared for it, like it was another member of the family, didn’t you? Almost like it was a person? You looked deeply into its eyes and swore to yourself that it understood your words, your thoughts, and your emotions, right? Well, it did…because it was able to do just that! You were actually relating to another male or female soul -- only he or she was in another temporary form, complete with warm fur and a tail. Dogs and cats have been happily co-existing with people for thousands of years. Now you know why,” the man elaborated.

 “What about me? I asked. “I obviously don’t belong here. Can I return to my own world?” I was feeling a bit anxious and overwhelmed with these unique and unexpected circumstances.

 The man simply smiled and said, “Don’t worry. You’ll be leaving within the hour, and can go back to your regular life,” he assured me. “You’ll have a memory of this rare experience, but it will fade over time. Soon, it will seem like you dreamed the whole thing. Besides, nobody would believe you anyway if you told them. That’s the way things are,” the man added, with a twinkle in his eye.

 “But what about the family you left behind? Don’t you feel a special bond, or at least some sense of responsibility towards them, for taking caring of you? For instance, what about the children who are probably crying and pleading for your safe return even now?” I challenged.

 “I well understand your feelings, my friend, and I agree with you. That's why we going back together. You can make up a story about how you found me near the bicycle path, and contact the owners and return me, and everyone will be happy again. The Dillards really are a wonderful family, so living with them is a pleasure rather than a chore. They are very loving. They feed me properly and brush me and play with me when I need exercise. So take a last look around, then follow me,” the man declared.

 He led me to an area near a grove of several large shade trees. Waving his hand, the man triggered the swirling blue-green energy field. “You’ll need to crouch down…and stay close to me,” he commanded. I did as directed.

 A few seconds later, we were out again in the regular world, under the familiar wooden bridge by the creek and the bicycle path. The man I had followed was gone, because Dazzle the Russian Blue cat had re-materialized. He leapt into my arms and purred. I looked into those emerald-green eyes with new respect and understanding as I petted him.

 Walking back to the missing cat flyer on the lamp post, I used my cell phone to call the Dillard family. They were overjoyed, and asked me to meet them at the intersection of two nearby neighborhood streets. In the background of the phone call, I could hear the two Dillard children squealing with delight.

 When the family promptly arrived, I turned over Dazzle. I declined any reward, however, explaining that I was happy just to reunite them with their beloved, missing kitty. But as I was about to leave, I gave one more quick, farewell glance at Dazzle.

 I swear I saw him give me an emerald-green-eyed wink!

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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