

Stray

Tim had been missing six full days and Mom was ready to admit she was concerned on the night he showed up at my second floor window, having turned into a large black panther. I had already admitted I was concerned in my own way, by going online and tagging him in a status update: “My retard brother, @Timmy_Burns, is the lowest of the low priorities on the State’s Missing Persons List.” I typed “LOL” beneath in a comment like I didn’t give a shit, but secretly I hoped that one of his friends would say something. That’s why I made it my status to begin with.

This wasn’t the first time Tim had gone missing. He’d stayed out a lot during his last two years of high school, after our father died and then even more after he started at community college and then even more than that when he dropped out. My father died from cancer of the asshole, in case that matters. I think the house reminded Tim of something, so he stayed away for the most part. I hung out at home more than before our father’s death probably. It made me feel safe and in the right place like I always imagined new sneakers feeling when I tucked them into their empty boxes at night. Besides I was worried about Mom and she was at home, so I was always there with her even though we were almost never in the same room. I mostly watched dumb movies on the futon with my loser-boyfriend-who-I-refuse-to-talk-about-anymore and smoked all his pot out my bedroom window.

Tim was a goofball. A gawky ogre who didn’t ever have any real friends. He only had people who kept him around to egg him on and play pranks on him, as far as I could tell. I would go online and see pictures of my brother passed out with a gym sock in his mouth or vomiting on the hood of a car. I could never tell whether he couldn’t notice or

didn't care. He kind of pretended both. Meanwhile I stayed at home and ordered pizza with Mom and that loser Jeff, who I am not going to talk about again. Part of me was pissed because I thought Tim should stay home and be the older brother, but it was okay. Home was what I needed at that point.

When he went missing the last time, it was after this total nightmare brawl between the three of us over some dumb shit about sharing the car or something. It was more than that – all three of us said nasty things to each other - but it wasn't all that much more. Tim stayed out and came home four days later with a broken wrist that he blamed on "stray dogs". This time there hadn't even been a fight. Anyway both me and Mom were starting to admit we were a little bit worried he wasn't just out partying this time. Usually he came back at some point to be fed.

At dinner that evening, my mother asked me if I had heard anything. She was fidgeting with her placemat when she said it.

"Mom." I could hear myself being short with her and hated it but I didn't know how to talk to her anymore. I hadn't in years. "Don't you think I would say something if I knew where he was?"

She apologized and in the silence that followed, I apologized too.

"We're just scared," she said. Her lips looked crumpled around the edges like paper. "Our little family."

My mother started using the phrase "our little family" after my father died. Before that it was just "our family" or nothing at all. It used to make me cringe, but now I liked hearing it. Sometimes I used it to feel a connection with her. "Our little family," I said.

That night I was supposed to be up editing this demonstrative speech on growing hot peppers for my public speaking class at the community college – it was my first semester - but I was mostly just fooling around, checking my Facebook in the compulsive way a lab rat checks his bottle for water.

I even prayed a little, earlier that night. When I was a kid, Tim taught me how to pray. My parents weren't very religious. They never talked about god, but they sent Tim to Catholic school because the schools in the city sucked a big fat one. They didn't give a shit about the religious aspect of the whole thing. We'd been baptized but nothing after that. I was six and about to enter first grade, my first year in Catholic school, when Tim taught me how to pray. It was the night before I started school. I wore my little blue uniform jumper and tights to bed. I was scared they would disappear from my drawer somehow while I slept and I would get in trouble with the nuns, so I wore them to sleep. Nuns scared me, even though I had only seen them in movies. My brother told me that the teachers weren't nuns, but I didn't believe him. He told me even though there were no nuns, we would still have to pray and he would teach me how so I wouldn't be embarrassed. We knelt by my window, which was open because it was late August and the breeze was warm. My brother told me that we wouldn't have to kneel when we prayed in school, only on special days when we got out of class but had to go to church instead. He pressed my hands together and told me to close my eyes. Stop smiling, he told me. Then he taught me to solemnly mumble my way through the Our Father and the Hail Mary so I would never have to learn most of the words.

On the sixth night after my brother's disappearance, I knelt by my window and mumbled. Then I got back on the computer. I was maybe about to crawl out on the

roof and try to smoke a roach I found in my jean shorts from earlier in the month, when it was still summer. But I also felt like looking at the computer some more or organizing my clothes for the cold weather. I couldn't sleep or work on my speech. It started to rain. That's when I heard these thumps like padded hammers on my window.

I had moved over to my bed to look at my ninth grade yearbook – I know its lame, but whatever. I was focused on a photo of myself surrounded by tall, black basketball players. I was dressed as an owl. I was our high school mascot. I was focused on the big plastic bulbs that were supposed to represent my eyes. My real eyes were located somewhere behind a piece of chicken wire in the costume's black hole of a mouth. I imagined the eyes blinking at me, nonplussed. I thought you were moving out right after graduation? I was pulled out of the book by the noise at my window.

I panicked at first but felt stupid about it, embarrassed even though no one was around. I pretended like I didn't hear it. I waited. I closed my yearbook and stared at the design on my comforter. There were more thumps. And scratching. I grabbed my old field hockey stick. I expected it was Tim, but I was being cautious.

I slid open the window and yelled, "Fuck! Double Fuck!"

My brother's voice called back through the rain in response. It was the same familiar too loud whisper I was used to hearing but strained sort of, like he was yelling through the insides of a stringed instrument.

"Becky! Help me please! I'm starving!"

"Fuck!" I yelled.

"Don't call me fucker, Fuck." he hissed back. He was such a whiner.

I poked my head out the window. My hair got wet. I couldn't see anything.

“Where are you, Tim?”

“In the tree. Where do you think I am, flying?”

I could tell he was panicked for real. His throat kind of gurgles when he is convinced the end is near.

I looked into the tree but there was nothing there.

“Why don’t you come in the front door like a normal person?” I was getting exhausted all the sudden. “Mom doesn’t hate you or anything. She just wants you to come home.” I paused. I wasn’t going to be too easy with him. “And maybe get a job,” I added.

I thought I heard him grumbling.

“Are you even out there?” I waved my field hockey stick around out the window like a blind person looking for a door.

“Yes. I told you don’t hit me.”

I saw a flash of green in the branches. For a second I thought it was lightning. It was that bright.

It was my brother’s eyes.

“I’m starving.”

I asked him to come closer. He pushed his head through the wet leaves. It was large, black, and feline.

“Listen...” he whispered. Long pause. “Don’t tell Mom.”

I thought I saw one of the paws move.

“Please don’t tell Mom.”

I jumped back a little.

“C’mon, Beck. Be cool about this,” he said. He sounded all fucked up. Like he was speaking through a tin can. “Make me a sandwich.”

I stood in silence. I was still holding my field hockey stick like a club.

Beneath his nervous gurgle, I thought I heard a slight growl.

I ripped into him. I was angry. “How is that you are pissed off at me? I’m the one that that picks up the slack,” I told him. “I’m the one.”

“Please make me a sandwich,” he said.

I made him a ham and cheese with brown mustard and thin-sliced tomato. That’s how Mom always made it for him. I didn’t know what else to make. I didn’t even know what he ate anymore.

He ate the thing in one bite. I heard the plate I’d stupidly tried to hand his paws hit the ground below. It didn’t break, I could tell from the sound. Tim licked his lips. Then he asked for raw bacon. So I brought raw bacon and watched him eat it in the rain.

I woke up cold in my sheets. There was a slight chill outside but that wasn’t it. I’d been sweating through my pajamas all night. I smelled awful. I am like a skunk, I stink when I get really nervous. I would’ve rather been dealt Tim’s hand in the nervous reaction department. Gurgling a little beats skunk-pits to death every time. Anyway, I slept in. I’d wanted to wake up early and work on my speech. Instead I went downstairs to get the plate from its place in the muddy patch below my window.

Mom was up, milling about in her sweatpants. I could never tell exactly what Mom was doing because she was always doing it all at once. She was smoking a cigarette, watching the 24-hour news channel, dusting and wiping the countertops,

running the dishwasher, flipping through a magazine, talking on the phone, organizing a pile of socks into pairs, and cooking something in each the microwave, oven, and toaster. She was probably doing a bunch of other stuff, like worrying about my brother, but it was hard for me to tell exactly what.

I slunk past her. She stopped me at the door and held the phone against her hip. She was sniffing. At first I thought she had been crying. But then I remembered, my mother was allergic to cats.

“Becky, hon. Did you eat all our bacon? We had a full pack. Has Tim been home that you know of?”

“I ate it,” I said.

“The whole thing!?”

“I was hungry. Body needed protein to produce a world class speech, I guess.”

“So, you’re finished?”

“Almost,” I said. I was trying to get out the door before she could ask me where I was going. I planned to hide the plate beneath my shirt when I came back in. She was talking on the phone again. “Almost finished with the mega-speech,” I said.

Then from behind me, I heard her. “Hon? Where are you going?”

The phone was back on her hip.

“I dropped something out the window. I’m going to get it.”

“Have you been smoking pot in your bedroom again? That would explain the bacon binge.”

“No, Mom.” I knew I sounded agitated but I couldn’t help it. I hated when she asked me about pot. It’s not like we both didn’t know I smoked. I was sick of pretending.

Tim never did. “I just wanted to feel a breeze is all. It gets stuffy up there sitting in front of the computer, alright?”

She shook her head and got back on the telephone. I listened for a second. She was talking to her sister about one of their characters on television, who was depressed. They were worried. I slipped out the door.

The plate was in the mud beneath my window. If this had been a movie, and not real life, it would’ve been the moment of realization that proved I had not been dreaming the whole thing up.

The plate sat white in the mud, which had begun to dry beneath it. It was licked clean on top. There was no grease on it at all. The tree in the sideyard looked like it had been clawed by a piece of heavy machinery. Clawed. I repeated the word to myself on my way back into the house.

I spent the morning in my room, not writing about hot peppers. I had never given a speech before. I am not even sure why I signed up for the class. I guess I thought making presentations in front of groups would make me more outgoing. It just made me feel weird. I didn’t even care about growing hot peppers. It was just the only thing I could think of to demonstrate. It’s actually very easy. I’m not sure why you would need to hear a speech to figure it out.

I don’t even grow hot peppers myself. It was something my father did that he was always trying to get us kids interested in. We didn’t care that much but it made Dad happy and it was kind of fun in a way too. Each fall as school started, the three of us - my father, Tim, and I - put on gloves and harvested the peppers at night before dinner. Then we’d all figure out how to make the bland food we usually ate taste good with them

somehow. It didn't always work. Dad grew jalapeño, habanero, cayenne, poblano, and the super-intense ghost chili from Thailand. He grew them in the backyard, up against the side of our deck, around the corner from my window. Tim always forgot to wear gloves. He would end up touching himself in all the wrong places: his eyes, his crotch, his half-picked scabs. He was puffy and weeping August through September. We had fun.

Instead of researching hot peppers, which require very little maintenance because most animals including insects leave them alone on account of their heat, I went on the internet to learn about panthers. The situation was fucked from all sides. I wanted to know what they ate first and foremost. Later I would try to figure how – no, why - my brother became one among the backyards and playgrounds of our suburban neighborhood.

Apparently panthers eat everything. They are the world's most ultimate cat. A weird mutant freak – like my brother had always been – which has developed a melatonin deficiency that leaves its fur an empty black. The black allows them to become a shadow at night.

This is pretty cool, I thought for a second. I was jealous. Tim and I were both always jealous, although it was hard to say of what.

Black panthers are usually leopards, but they can also be cougars or whatever. I can't really see what the difference is except for where they live. They all look like huge black cats to me. They can live anywhere, from the "semi-desert" whatever that means to the rainforest and they will eat anything from mice to antelope. It was hard not to be jealous of my brother. Being panthers sounded like a step up for all of us.

The internet says they weigh 35-65 kilograms. I wasn't sure what a kilogram was. In relation to a pound and everything. I knew it was a measurement of weight and all that. It sounded small to me. The cat I saw in my tree - Tim - was enormous.

They can live fifteen-to-twenty years in the wild. I wondered if Tim, who was twenty-three, had already gone past his prime. I imagined him shuttled into old age as a panther. I worried about him, like always.

I was totally screwed on my speech. Well, not totally. I had a day and a half to complete it. But I had a lot on my mind, right? Come Wednesday, I had better sound like a cool motherfucker about hot peppers. I did not feel cool.

I tried to write but it sucked. I kept writing cutesy things about my father and Tim that made me sound like a total retard. I went out on the roof to smoke some weed. It was the middle of the afternoon and light out, so I crawled up near our chimney to the little nook, which is full of dead leaves all year long since my father died and creates a flooding problem in the downstairs bathroom. The nook is outside our dead brother's bedroom. Did I mention I have a dead brother? Of course not, I never knew him.

My dead brother was a year older than Tim, but Tim didn't really know him either. Griff died when Tim was three years old. It was a fever he'd gotten on the eastern shore while we were on vacation. I was one year old. They rushed Griff in a helicopter to Johns Hopkins but he died on the way. My mother was in the helicopter. We never talked about Griff very much. Any of us. My father used to make awkward toasts to him on New Year's Eve. "To Griff," he'd say, smiling drunk. "Our Griff. Living it up. Wherever

that may be, I'm sure it's top notch." It was strictly cornball stuff, but still kind of sad. It was like they wished we'd known him.

I went up to the roof. There was a pile of enormous black turds outside my dead brother's window. I went back inside without cleaning it up. It seemed important somehow. I left it alone.

Panthers, I learned from the web, are fond of marking their territory. They designate their space in three ways: Feces, urine, and the clawing of tree bark. None of this seemed too shocking for Tim, to be honest.

About a month earlier, I'd learned that pregnant vegetarian mothers who breastfeed are more likely to produce children who enjoy vegetables later in life. I assume Mom must've been into Jaegermeister and hallucinogens while she was knocked up with Tim, but she would never admit it anyway.

I smoked and went back down to my room. I was alert, waiting for my brother to return. I played Tim's old Gameboy for awhile until it started making weird noises and glitching. Then I listened to the weird noises, like a kitten with its paw caught in a mousetrap. The Gameboy would always make weird noises when it glitched. Tim thought it was funny to listen to them. That's why I thought it was cool.

I fell asleep without even writing my speech. It was the only thing I needed to do - it's not like I even had a job or anything - and I'd fucked it all up. I blamed Tim.

I figured he'd probably come back to the window for a snack and then gone for a poop above when he couldn't find me. Except I had read about how resourceful they were, wild cats. Why had he needed a sandwich in the first place? The soft part of me knew the answer. The part I try not to talk to. The mushy stuff. Even with teeth and

claws, even as a hyper-sensitive killing machine, my brother would never be able to fend for himself.

Our family had kind of fallen apart or whatever, sure, but this was definitely the worst incident. Tim had gone panther and I was the only one who knew. And I definitely knew.

It was nighttime and I still hadn't really started my speech. Not really. I said a few things out loud in front of the mirror about peppers and what they were supposed to mean to me, but I hadn't really written anything. And I couldn't figure out the point of the outline they'd given me. The outline was basically the whole speech, so what did we need to have an outline for? I'd given up on that part of the assignment even before Tim came back as a wild animal. And I now sure-as-fuck did not feel beholden to outlines.

Tim came back to my window that night. It wasn't raining exactly, but the air was wet with this weird autumn fog. He was in the tree. He leaned across and placed his front paws on my windowsill like a gymnast limbering up and yawned. There was blood on his teeth, so I figured he had eaten somehow. He stood there stretched out awhile before stepping back onto the branch, a bridge between the tree and my window. He looked smaller than he had the night before. It was crazy that he didn't fall. I wanted to get in the tree with him. I wanted to climb over him like he was a log crossing a stream. I wanted to be my brother, if only for a minute. But I didn't get in the tree.

"Don't tell Mom." His voice was jarring, like fingernail scratches on a violin string. "Help me. Don't tell Mom."

“I don’t understand,” I asked. “How can I help you? Why are you like this?” I asked him the same thing the night before, but all he wanted was food. It’s not like a expected an honest answer but I was trying to give him the benefit of the doubt, like it wasn’t his fault somehow.

Tim yawned again. I almost never remembered him yawning when he was a normal freak. He was always hyper and talking. Now, his tongue hung from his purple lips and red teeth like a giant fruit roll-up. Like I was boring him or something.

“I think someone slipped me something,” he meowed. A moth flew by his mouth and he nabbed it out of the air. He chewed so casually, I wanted to smack him for it. “I think I was drugged,” he said.

“Fuck you,” I said. “Liar.” He had to be joking. Who drugs someone that will beg for drugs?

I slammed the window, almost on my fingers.

His bright green eyes stared back at me through the glass like a scolded pet in the rain. Maybe someone had drugged him. Or done something. My heart tickled. Maybe it was somehow not his fault. I opened the window. “No ‘fuck you’ then. I’m not pissed at you but this is weird.”

“So I can come inside?”

I reached for my field hockey stick.

“Sleep on the roof. Or somewhere less conspicuous, I’d hope.”

He salivated. I don’t think he was planning on going to sleep. Panthers are nocturnal, according to the internet.

“Let me in,” he said.

“I wish I could.”

“I used to live in there. We used to be a family.”

“I will leave something out in the morning for you to snack on.”

“Hide me until we can figure out what to tell Mom.”

It was hard not to snort at that. I imagined the conversation the three of us would have.

“I don’t see this going anywhere good,” I warned him. I was about to shut the window. “Be careful out there.”

I think he said, “I love you.” His voice was getting harder to understand.

“I love you too,” I told him. I meant it.

That night Tim stayed on the roof, I think. He didn’t tell me he was going to, but I could feel him up there. His weight, the weight of a panther. Apparently he’d found his own dinner because he left me alone to work on my speech. It didn’t help though. I had trouble concentrating.

I heard a call repeat itself, a sound like a damp plank being chopped with a chainsaw. It was an icy sound to hear. I listened to it until I fell asleep feeling sick. It came at six minute intervals, just before six in the morning. I timed it on my phone. I thought about recording it to remember him by, in case something happened to him while he was like this. But the noise sounded muffled and fake. Like a mythical animal on one of those History Channel shows, like it had never been real. Tim didn’t sound real when I listened to him anymore.

But, according to the internet, that was the noise he was supposed to be making.

I went to my class unprepared, with no outline, note cards, or PowerPoint presentation. I woke up early in the morning before my mother went to the office (She works for Social Security, processing claims. I always wondered if she felt like she was wasting her life. She doesn't seem to notice.) and laid out our last three cans of tuna beneath my window. I couldn't get back to sleep after that. I sat up in bed and listened for footsteps on the roof, but heard none. I was afraid Tim would wake my mother up. He always woke her up when he crept back home in the mornings. Mom slept the light sleep of a woman who is always trying to hold something together.

When I did fall back asleep, I dreamt that my mother was lost in a cemetery and weeping. I wanted to help her but I was lost too.

There must have been nervous stink lines dancing around my shoulders when I entered the classroom, but nobody said anything if they noticed and the speech went by in a whirl like the scenery outside a merry-go-round. I could hear myself speaking and every word surprised me. I knew more about peppers than I had ever imagined. It was all just there inside me, words like caspaicin, piper, and nightshade. Part of me was afraid I was just making things up but my audience kept nodding so I kept giving the speech. The only thing I felt bad about was maybe leaning a bit on the whole dead father thing. The memories that I had of growing peppers with him seemed almost fake when I spoke about them. Like I had seen the whole thing on some TV movie. I felt guilty, like I'd ruined something special. But I think it went over well with the class. Any activity becomes meaningful when someone who loves it has died.

On the bus home I asked myself what Tim would do if he had to give a speech about peppers. I had trouble picturing him in my head. All I could think of was that big cat. “Exploit the memory,” the big cat purred. “That’s what Dad would tell you.” He was right. That is exactly what my father would say. But I still felt bad because he was not around to say it.

The canned tuna was gone when I got back home. Not just the tuna, but the cans too. I was worried. At first I thought that maybe Tim ate them, which was actually kind of a funny thought even though it would probably destroy his insides if it were true. Then I thought about my mother and freaked out a little bit. What if she had come home from work on her lunch break or something and found the canned tuna? How would I explain it? She didn’t want me feeding the neighborhood cats in the first place on account of her allergies. And she certainly didn’t want me feeding them our lunches. I knew money was tight since my father died, even if I was just going to community college.

My mother came in that evening with a pizza. I slinked around the kitchen while she had a cigarette, read the mail, warmed up a package of broccoli and cheese so we would have something green, put out paper plates and napkins, called her sister and watched the local news. She always watched the news in the evening but I think she was watching extra close. She was afraid there would be news of my brother. I wondered if she was going to file a Missing Persons report soon. I expected her to ask me what I thought about it any minute now. It appeared she had not found the missing tuna.

“None of your friends on the internet has seen...”

“No, Mom.”

“I noticed your father’s old skis were missing from the garage. You don’t think he went...”

“It’s September, Mom.”

We ate with the TV on. I made a point to ask my mother how her day went. I never used to ask, but I guess I started to feel like I should so now I try to remember. She didn’t hear me at first. She was distracted. The news anchor was reporting on three children, boys, who disappeared from a bus stop on their way home from a nearby recreation center last night. Their book bags were found at the bus stop this morning by classmates. They had been torn to little pieces.

“Those poor children,” Mom said. “And their mothers. How awful.”

“Maybe it was just a prank,” I said. “Maybe they’ll come home tonight. Or tomorrow. Or next week. And everything will be normal again.”

“Next week? That’s crazy-talk, Becky. Little boys shouldn’t be alone like that without their mothers for one night, let alone a week. They were in what, fourth grade?”

“I’m just saying they might still be okay is all.” I had only been trying to comfort her.

“Well, let’s hope they are,” she said and crossed herself. Even though she didn’t go to church, I had seen her crossing herself from time-to-time since my father’s death; I never mentioned it. Part of me thought it was cute.

“Please pass the broccoli,” she said. I carried it over to her, instead of sliding it across the table. We were still sitting on the far sides of the table from one another and it was just too far to reach with a small dish; Tim usually sat in the middle when he was home. Mom gave me a little half smile, almost a twitch, to show she was appreciative.

The man on the news told us that the community had been rallied and a search party was forming. They told us to keep an eye out for anything unusual.

I went online after dinner. Tim had never been a bully, but everyone changes. I didn't really know my brother anymore, what he was capable of. I searched local news sites, animal shelters, the pages and feeds of his friends. I looked on Craig's List for skis. I don't know what I was looking for exactly, what it was I hoped to learn from my research. I was nervous. I needed to do something with my fingers and eyes until he came back to my window, if he came back to my window. I was also starting to feel bad about my speech. Maybe it hadn't gone as well as I thought. Then I hated myself for even thinking about my dumb speech when children were missing and a search party was forming and I was a not a good daughter and my brother was out there somewhere learning to stalk prey.

People online were talking about the missing children. They were posting it on their walls. We live in the in the north end of town and there isn't very much crime around here. I expected to see helicopters outside the window any moment.

I crawled out on my roof to pray. I was sweating. I imagined my stink rising up toward heaven like a ghost. I tried to talk to god. Instead I pictured Tim out there in yard somewhere, sniffing.

Tim showed up before the helicopters. He appeared next to me like a shadow in the moonlight. He must have come from the other side of the chimney. I froze up when I

saw him. I didn't feel comfortable around my brother anymore. It felt like shit admitting it.

He rubbed his head against my shoulder. My muscles were like bedsprings. He looked so much smaller now, not all that much bigger than a housecat. This can't be the same cat, I thought, but there he was.

He made a strange noise. Not a gurgle but a little howl, almost like a wounded dog. I couldn't understand a word.

I brought the cat inside. I shut it in my room and went downstairs to check on my mother. She was still in front of the television. She was in her nightgown, watching a slightly later edition of the local news on another channel. She was also smoking, balancing her checkbook, biting her nails, and talking on the phone with my aunt. I waited in the living room for her to get off the phone. I began to see flash lights now and then on the street outside. The helicopters started in on the neighborhood. Their lights strafed the houses on the other side of the street. I thought of them like enormous bugs. That's how they sounded. Like war movies. I thought about my mother watching my brother Griff die as they chopped their way across the bay. More flashlights went past outside. Then a whole flurry of them. And a few police cars, driving slow. The neighborhood was coming to life for the lost boys.

I heard Mom hang up the phone and change the channel on the television. I got up to go into the kitchen but she wandered into the living room where I was at the same time. We almost bumped into one another. She was smiling, which I thought was weird, but I ignored it.

“Mom,” I started. “I have something important to tell you...”

Just then a loud crash and a squeal ripped through the house, loud enough to drown out the helicopters.

My mother nearly jumped out of her nightie. “What was that?”

“I found a stray cat on the roof,” I said. “A black one.” For some reason that detail seemed important.

“Does it have a collar?”

Her question caught me off-guard.

“No collar.”

“Well bring it down here already and we’ll give it some milk. Imagine keeping it up locked up in your room all night.”

“But you’re allergic.”

“To cats? I’m not allergic to cats. We had one when I was a kid.”

“But you never let me or Tim have one when we were kids? We were always asking you?”

“You two were always asking me for everything. Your father and I didn’t think either of you were responsible enough for a pet. So I became allergic. Is that so surprising to you now?”

“Oh.” I was in shock. “I’ll go get him.”

“How do you know it’s a boy?” she asked. “Is it neutered?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “It probably should be.”

I walked upstairs to grab the cat. My room was a mess. Half the things on my desk were on the ground and the little bookshelf next to the desk was knocked over. Tim's old lava lamp was on the floor the cat was resting in an enormous pile of old teen magazines like he owned the place. I went over to him and he let me scoop him up, then buried his face in my neck. "Now we're going to see Mom," I told him.

My mother definitely wasn't allergic to cats. She took the thing from me like I was a nurse handing over her newborn baby. She tickled its chest and it purred and she purred back and they touched noses like in an ad for a greeting card company, only meaningful. I couldn't remember seeing my mother so happy. "We need to feed this little guy," she said, already taking him into the kitchen. "We don't have any cat food, but I think we might have a few cans of tuna in the parlor until we get to the store tomorrow." She was talking to the cat, not me. "Yes we do," she said. "Yes we do."

My mother sat the cat on the tile floor next to her feet and it rubbed up against her legs like I remember both my brother and I doing when we were kids. We tugged and hugged on her pant legs and knees while she cooked dinner, talked on the phone, made lunch for my dad, arranged carpool, answered our inane questions, watched our cartoons with us, made us ice cream with beady peanut eyes, separated us when we pinched each other, pet us on the head and told us that she would always be in our hearts no matter what happened forever and ever and then for whatever came after that. My mom was a busy woman.

"Oh, before I forget: What was the important thing you wanted to tell me? Is it about your speech?"

"Oh," I said. I was in a sort of daze. "The cat."

“That hardly sounds critical,” she said over her shoulder. She was bent down, searching through the cabinet where we keep the little plastic bowls we used for microwaving desserts when we were kids. “I thought maybe it was something else.”

I was about to tell her something, I don’t know what, that I loved her maybe, or that Tim loved her, or that everything would be okay with time. Our conversation was interrupted by the newscast, which informed us the missing children had made it home. We sat down at the counter to watch, cat on my mother’s lap.

They were found in a treehouse in the backyard of a vacant home two and half miles from their bus stop. They had staged their own disappearance, torn their book bags apart, tried to run away from their families.

“Their mothers must be so happy,” Mom said. Her eyes looked glassy, but serene.

“What?” I couldn’t believe these brats. “But they had a whole community terrified, out looking, helicopters...”

“Their mothers aren’t thinking about all that right now,” Mom said, almost purring herself as she pet our new cat. “They’re just happy to have their little families together again.”

She doted on the cat all evening as if he were one of her own. I watched as he followed her to bed, close on her feet like a shadow. I tried to feel at peace for a moment, alone in the kitchen with the lights off in the rest of the house. When that didn’t work, I got back on the Internet to search for things I had no control over and never would. It was as easy as pressing “Search.”

Pest

I was young. It was summertime. I was working at a fruit stand after finishing my first year of high school. The school year had been rough as usual and my parents were being

over-accommodating all the time because they worried about me. My father had even helped me find my job through a friend at the gas station he managed. It was an easy job performed for the wealthy people who had summer homes just north of the city. I sold tomatoes mostly, corn and melons too. It was a boring job and it attracted flies.

One day pretty soon after I'd started, a blue coupe rolled up and inside it was a girl. She was a few years older than me and more beautiful than anyone I had ever talked to. She smiled at my bare feet sitting up on the lock box and I took them down and my chair wobbled beneath me as I tried to straighten myself. I sold that pretty young thing five tomatoes and she went on downtown without saying as much as four words to me. "Two tomatoes, sir," was all our transaction warranted I suppose, because that was all she gave out.

In the road behind her, there remained a single flying bug hovering in mid-air. I noticed it and thought nothing in particular. Just looked on, expecting it to fly off and disappear.

I looked away and looked back. The bug was still there.

He was an ordinary sort of bug I guess, not knowing very much about bugs. Like a dragon fly maybe but with a short, misshapen body and bland, grey wings. Nothing special to look otherwise, but, boy, could he hover. I couldn't help watching him; it was if he had died in mid-air while gravity was looking the other direction.

The day got sweaty fast. A freckly family in a teal blue and white Fairlane were the only customers I had all afternoon. The mother and her brown-skinned nanny were laughing at the two little boys, who were using Donald Duck voices. Everyone looked

happy; except there was tiny girl like a doll in the back seat, who had obviously been crying. I watched her over the woman's shoulder; she had big red panicked eyes that made her look lost and alone. After they left, I tried not to remember the last time I had cried, but I couldn't help it.

I was just about to finish eighth grade and I was invited to go camping with some of the boys in my class. My mother had actually gotten the invitation, not me. Mrs. Zouck had seen her at the grocery and told her about the trip. When I came home from school, I was devastated by the news. My mother was making a gelatin mold in the kitchen. She was decorating it with tiny Black-Eyed Susans she fashioned from orange slices and blackberries. Her molds were disgusting.

I slid my back down the wall until my butt hit the tile floor. I was being dramatic. "They're not my friends, Mom." They really weren't, although they weren't my enemies either. In fact, they could've been my friends if I had let them but I didn't know how.

"Sure they are, hon," Mom said over her shoulder. She didn't understand. "They invited you camping."

"No, Mom. They didn't. Mrs. Zouck told you to invite me so that you guys would have something to talk about. It has nothing to do with me. I'll look like a doofus if I show up there tomorrow."

"No you won't. I cleaned up your knapsack and ironed your Paul Bunyan, lumberjack shirt..."

"It's not a Paul Bunyan shirt!"

"That's what you always used to call it."

“It’s just a shirt, Mom. And you don’t iron those kind of shirts. And it’s too hot out to wear it anyway.”

“You never know, hon. At night, when you are in the woods, camping...”

“I’m not going camping. I don’t have any friends to go camping with! If I did have a friend to go camping with, he would ask me to go camping with him! And we would camp!”

I marched up to my bedroom and put my face in the belly of an old stuffed dog my aunt had given me until I felt stupid and shameful for crying into the belly of a stuffed dog. I could hear my mother on the phone downstairs, apologizing to Mrs. Zouck because my father needed me home over the weekend to help around the house. I felt even more pathetic; not only could I not get myself invited to something stupid like a camping trip, I wasn’t even cool enough to come up with my own excuse and cancel the invitation. I hated myself for wanting to cancel it anyway. Only losers felt weird around people. Everyone else just went camping and had fun. I was terrified to make friends or let my guard down. My face was pink and puffy from crying, like the skin of a baby mouse. I threw the stuffed dog across the room and got under the covers. I slammed my fist into the mattress and wished that I had a little brother to pick on.

I was reliving this scene in my head as I sat alone that afternoon at the fruit stand, until I realized that I wasn’t alone. The bug was still there in front of me, hovering. Again I felt stupidly embarrassed, like maybe the bug had been reading my thoughts. It wasn’t until I got up from my seat and approached him, that the thing finally moved. He dodged my fist. And disappeared.

The next day when I opened the stand, the bug was back. I cracked a bottle of soda and sat down to wait for the day's fruit to arrive. I'd much rather had the girl reappeared - that's who I was hoping for - but I got the bug instead.

This time the bug approached me promptly. He buzzed over and landed on my soda bottle. I swatted him. He circled my head until he was hovering right at face level. I tried to push him away from my face but the hot air had made me lazy and I did it with a weak hand. The bug dodged and then moved back. He waited a few seconds, to see if I was going to swat at him again. When I didn't bother, he said in a tiny voice, "Make me your pet."

"No way," I told the bug. "I have no need for pets, especially pet bugs." I thought it was an honest statement at that point in my life. "I am fine all alone, thank you."

"Please," he asked me, dancing side to side in the air on a cloud of nervous excitement. "Let me be your pet."

"No," I repeated. "No way. Not a chance."

"But *please*," he said.

I wagged my head firmly, but he remained.

At the end of a long day made even longer by the constant chattering of tiny wings, I hopped on my bicycle and pedaled toward home. I caught a hill and the wind whirled past my ears. The few customers that day had made me jumpy on account of the little insect, which'd been floating about all casually in back of the fruit stand like he owned the place. A couple of older guys, maybe nineteen or twenty, pulled up in a Corvette and bought twelve ears of corn. I wanted to look cool in front of them, but I had no idea how. So I didn't. I was afraid that they would notice the bug, even though it

seems stupid looking back on it. So what if they had noticed him? And why should they care? Who were they to notice my bug and care? And more importantly, why should I care?

I remember that I passed a raccoon smashed on the road. Its body was flattened and the tail was the only thing that gave it away as a coon; it looked like a frontiersman's cap. I didn't notice anything otherwise on my ride home and knowing me I didn't think of much either. That's how I was that summer.

I dropped my bike on the lawn and checked the mailbox for mail. That's when I heard it again. Wings. The bug had followed me home and was perched on my shoulder, apparently reading the envelopes as I flipped through them. I pulled the mail to my chest and ran inside. I slammed the door behind me. I watched it with a keen eye. I was pretty sure I'd shut him out. A few minutes later however, I was fixing a snack in my mother's kitchen and there he was again, this time perched on the spigot. I flicked on the water. He jumped and flew away.

He reappeared at dinnertime, hovering around the perimeter of the table. I didn't plan to say anything to my parents about him, but I didn't plan to say much about anything else either. It was generally my custom to eat quickly and retire to my bedroom. Besides, I didn't want to make a fuss over the bug when he could just fly off and disappear in an instant to leave me looking foolish. Instead I tried to ignore him. I couldn't.

"What's that you're looking at, son?" My father loosened his collar and put his elbows on the table. His chesthair crawled out like a mass of spiders. Mom had just brought out a plate of deviled eggs for us to eat while she finished preparing dinner.

“Nothing,” I said. “There’s a bug in the house.” I wondered if the bug was listening. Part of me wanted to scare him; the old man was certainly a threat. The other part of me felt guilty all the time and never knew what it was doing. I regretted mentioning him as soon as I had done it.

“Lot of bugs out in the summertime. Lot of bugs in too, I guess.” Dad laughed at his own joke and rubbed me on the head like I was still a little kid.

Late that night I was looking at a men’s adventure story magazine. My door was locked shut. I spotted a tiny speck on the ceiling. It was his shadow. “Why don’t you leave me alone?” I whispered because my parent’s walls were like paper. “Why do you keep following me?”

“I want to be your pet,” he answered in a warbly little voice. “I won’t try to bother you. And if I do, I’ll be sorry about it.”

“Why me?” I insisted. “Why be my pet?”

“You interest me. I see you and I think: maybe we could be friends.”

“What makes me so interesting? Couldn’t you be friends with someone else?”

“I...like you,” the bug hesitated.

“You don’t know me,” I spat. “And I don’t like bugs, okay? So just leave me alone, because I’m busy.” I turned back to my magazine. When I put it down a few minutes later, the bug had gone off someplace.

In the wee early morning when I got up to refill the cup by my bed, I swore I could hear a faint buzz from inside my closet. But when I stopped to listen, it also stopped. I gave up and hopped under my sheets. I fell back to sleep without any problems.

The next day at work I saw him again, walking across the TOMATOES sign when I pulled up. I sat down without saying a word to him and he didn't say anything to me either at first so I just tried to ignore him. It should be easy to ignore a little thing like a bug, was what I thought. But it wasn't easy. I could sometimes hear his wings, they sounded like a tiny violin on the wind. Not very loud, but still I was distracted. Mostly I could just feel him near me. His presence, if you know what I mean. I could just tell he was there. I didn't like it.

Eventually I got up to take a pee in a patch of woods near the stand. When I got back, he was sitting on one of my magazines. Right next to where I put my feet! I focused a mean glare on him. He just looked at me and said, "So when do the tomatoes arrive?"

"What!?!!" I roared. "Why do you *care* when the tomatoes arrive? How does it concern you? Unless you are a farmer, a customer or me - I don't know why you need to be concerned with the tomatoes."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was just trying to communicate. It wasn't important. I can be quiet if you want."

"I want," I said. "I want."

We sat in silence for awhile. He might have even flown off somewhere nearby and come back a few times before the tomatoes arrived with the corn and the strawberries, but there still weren't a whole lot of customers. Eventually I got bored and looked up to where the bug was hanging from the sign. I was embarrassed to show interest in him. I was embarrassed to be interested in almost anything back then. In what I thought was my most casual voice, I asked, "So...what kind of bug are you?"

"I don't know," he said. He was so cheery.

“And why not?”

“Because nobody ever told me,” he answered. His voice weakened. “I haven’t been alive very long and you’re my first friend.”

“Oh,” I said. “We’re not friends...But what about your parents? Don’t you have any?”

“I suppose I must have,” the little bug replied. “But I don’t remember meeting them really.”

“Well, you probably had about a billion brothers and sisters, I bet. That’s how most bugs are, I think. A whole lot of them come out of an egg. It’s gross.”

“Interesting,” he said. “That sounds about right. I didn’t know it was the same for anybody else. You sure sound like you know a lot.”

“Well,” I told him, picking my teeth with a piece of straw from one of the crates. “I probably know a lot more than you.”

I didn’t try to kill him the rest of that day - earlier I had halfheartedly tried to pin him to the wall of the stand after he asked me if I was in any clubs at school. I was never very nice to that bug. Of course I didn’t see myself as nasty so much as I saw him as annoying. He grew on me some, I let him start to follow me without swatting him so much.

I let him stay in my bedroom at night after he promised not to crawl on my face while I was sleeping. It was alright if he came to the fruit stand, too. After all it was outside anyway. Maybe he would get bored and fly away, leaving me alone again. Plus, I could use him there as company when the afternoons felt long at least. Having a friend wasn’t so bad. Occasionally I would even save a hunk of meat or a sugar cube for him

after dinner. Besides the way he followed so extremely close when we went places, what really bothered me about him was how much he liked to talk. About nothing most of the time. Just for the sake of talking.

“What do the fishes drink?” the bug asked me one time.

“What do you think?” I said. “Water.” Really, I hadn’t a clue.

“But even water that has salt in it? They drink the salt too? They don’t dry up?”

“Who cares what the fishes drink?” I said. He was always asking this kind of stuff.

“I did,” he said. “But I don’t have too.”

If I went into the post office, he tried to go into the post office. The sub shop, likewise. I was afraid that people would see him following me and think we were together. Think that there was something special about me, an odor perhaps, which attracted bugs. More than once I made him fly into my pocket when we were out in public. And how much do you think I enjoyed that, going through life with a bug in my pocket? I didn’t. Or at least I thought I didn’t.

Time went by and I got used to having the little guy with me. When he wasn’t right near me I found myself looking for him, staring up into the corners. I guess he sort of became my pet without me ever acknowledging it.

The blue coupe pulled up to the fruit stand and in it was my girl. The girl from the beginning of the story. I watched her park on the roadside and get out of the car. She leaned back in and took something off the passenger seat, when she turned around I could

see that it was a paper cup in a little cardboard tray. By this time the bug knew pretty much to hide on instinct, but I knew he wouldn't stay hidden long. The little guy was too curious. I was nervous that one of us was going to ruin it.

"Do you like snowballs?" she asked. She had wide round curls of blonde hair and eyes that looked like swimming pools. I could almost see her thighs through the little white dress she was wearing. "I know it's muggy out," she said.

"What kind?" I asked. Why did I ask that? "I like them all," I said. I looked for the bug. I thought I could hear him buzzing, but I also thought maybe it was just my ears. Part of me needed him there.

"It's egg custard," she said and placed the cup on my counter. "I hope that works for you..." Terrifying silence. "The melons look nice," she said.

I almost jumped out of my seat to reach for one of the better ones I tried to keep on top; in doing so, I manage to knock over my snowball. She caught it, but not before some of the orange syrup jumped onto the counter and her white dress.

"Are you okay?" I asked, as if she had just fallen out of a tree.

She laughed it off. She licked her thumb and rubbed the spot on her dress. "I'm only a little damaged," she said. "Are you okay?"

I searched the corners of the stand for a glimpse of the bug. I could feel her watching me and felt stupid. "We're okay," I said. "I mean, you and I are both okay."

"Definitely. How about a couple of those melons?"

"I'll pick out two good ones. Unless you want to pick them out. I'm sure you know which melons you want and everything..."

“No.” God, was I thankful for her interruption. I hated the sound of my voice.
“You’re the expert. I’ll let you do it.”

I snooped around the melons and made a big show of knocking on their sides to check for ripeness. The sad thing was that our melons didn’t even look ripe. They were small and a lot of them were bruised or misshapen. Even the ones on the top looked bad, at least not good enough to give her. Time inched along as I searched for the perfect melon.

Then the bug was there, sitting on what must have been the freshest melon in the bunch. He was buzzing as loud as I had heard him buzz before, rubbing his wings together like crazy. I blew him off and grabbed another nearby melon that wasn’t as good but would have to do. I went back to check the girl out. “How do you like this one?” I asked.

“It’s very nice,” she said. “Excellent choice.”

I looked for the bug. He was pacing the perimeter of the egg custard. I watched as he poked his face in a blotch of the syrupy mess. I noticed her noticing me noticing the bug. I flicked him off the counter with my finger. He flew up and bumped into the ceiling of the stand, then headed out over the road somewhere.

“Don’t do that!” the girl said. “He looked like a nice little bug.”

My cheeks were on fire. I wanted to crawl in a hole. I hoped that she would take mercy on me and never come back again.

After she drove away and the dust settled back in the road, the bug came out of hiding.
“You like her, don’t you,” said the bug. “I like her too. She seems nice.”

“Awww, I don’t *like* her,” I told him. “I don’t even know her. But she’s pretty is all and I like *that*.”

“Well, I think she likes you,” said the bug.

“Thank you, but I don’t remember asking what you thought. Besides, you’re just being nice.”

He didn’t get it. “What’s wrong with being nice?” he asked.

I blamed the bug for my failure with the girl, at least outwardly. “You make me nervous,” I said. “And when I’m nervous I act like an idiot.” Somewhere inside me I suspect I knew what the score really was.

I really gave it to him though. I didn’t try to kill him because I needed to keep him around to be rude to. I swung at him more often however. I would bat him through the sky without smashing him up against anything. He never stopped being my friend.

Repeatedly he apologized for driving the girl away, although for awhile I could tell he was secretly a little confused about the specifics of what he had done. I shrugged off the apologies with a sneer, but I let him stay. I didn’t stop him when he followed me to the diner and hid under my collar, or when he crawled on my hands in the movie house. Instead I complained about him bitterly under my breath in public and was short and aggressive with him when we were all alone.

One thing I noticed is that he kept getting fatter and fatter the longer we knew each other. And it wasn’t because he was getting into the produce I was selling. He was very courteous about that. But it was like he would never just reach a normal weight and stay there. He was swelling. I would chide him about it. I called him a “fat booger” and

things like that. He didn't complain, but I could also tell he felt heavier in the air, and tired easily. It had only been about a month and a half since I had known him, but it felt like we'd been together forever. We hadn't done anything spectacular, but in just being with each other it felt like we had done a lot. I was comfortable with him. I had never been that way before. I noticed it when he started disappearing more frequently, taking longer to keep up with me when I went places. Things like that. And he talked less too. His voice was weaker. Less buzzy. Less spunk. But still he made himself a tremendous tagalong and I made a point of treating him badly whenever I could.

Things went on that way through the dead heat of summer. The hotter it got, the earlier I left work. I would stow whatever leftover produce there was beneath a tarp in the back of the stand. More than anything, I had become afraid of the customers. I didn't want to bump into people I knew. And I didn't want to see any strangers either. Eventually, I was fired. It caused some embarrassment for my father, but he was kind about it. "Maybe next summer," he told me. "You've got plenty of time to find the job for you. I did everything under the sun when I was a boy."

"That's right, honey," my mom said. "Not everybody is cut out for that kind of work. You'll find something your better at and you'll love it."

Their words only made me feel more like a loser.

I started spending a lot more time at the house during the day on account of being jobless. There was a television set there so I had even less of a reason to talk to the bug. Secretly, I was glad he stuck by me. I told him shhhhh! plenty I'm sure and I snapped at him whenever he got up the courage to ask me questions about what was going on in the

shows we watched, which were usually adventures like *Maverick* and *Cheyenne* where the heroes were either clever and friendly or stoic and brave, but always adventurous and cool. I could tell that he hardly ever understood the intricacies of the programs - his brain probably wasn't big enough - but most of the time he went along pretending to in order to avoid annoying me. I was annoyed by his questions I guess, but I would get even more annoyed for the sake of him not understanding in the first place. Or for the sake of him pretending to understand, even though it was for my benefit. Because of my state of general agitation, he mostly just sat on the pillow beside me and rubbed his wings, sometimes hopping into the air when he thought it was appropriate. He was looking fatter all the time. Older and heavier on his wings.

I knew very little about the particular ways in which bugs live in those days and I might know even less now. I never asked questions. The bug, it seemed to me, was a given. A fact of life that I had grown accustomed to, like a mole I discovered in my armpit. I was used to him is all. So used to him that it never occurred to me to even consider the natural lifespan of a flying insect. It seemed pretty much normal that he would go on following me forever.

One day, I was sitting on the curb outside the ice cream shop with a cone - I can still walk to the same ice cream shop to this day and I often do, although the interior looks quite different and now it is a bank - when it occurred to me that I hadn't heard a buzz for what felt like an unnatural time. I squinted at the airspace overtop the cars in the parking lot, but he was nowhere to be found. I peered into my shirt pocket. Empty. I got up to search the sidewalk. I walked along with my head bowed and my eyes firmly glued to my feet.

My ice cream cone was dripping, leaving pink spots on the ground. And then I saw an anthill. It made my stomach sick.

It wasn't any great anthill in terms of size, but at that moment it felt like a doozy; it grew out of the meeting of the curbstone and a drainage gutter near a couple of faded dandelions, and it was teeming from the top like a volcano with a mob scene of crawling black ants. Big ones, too. I could even see their pinchers. I picked up my pace and in a couple long fast steps I was standing over the mound, watching the ants crawl in through a hole in the top. A broken cake cone fragment being moved over the crowd. But there was no sign of him. Then I got one of those instinctual feelings that make you do things without thinking, and I turned to look through the front window of the store where a boy was perched next to his mother at a counter sticky with mess. In one of the puddles was something like a dragon fly.

The next thing I knew I was standing behind this woman and her tiny son, staring over their shoulders at a puddle of melted ice cream. He looked peaceful there, his wings folded across his pointy chest, all of his little eyes closed. Upon hearing me gulp, the woman spun around on her stool.

"Excuse me," she said, meaning: Excuse *you*. I could tell.

"I'm sorry," I said. I watched the body lying there by the window. It wasn't moving. "Excuse me," I said, and meant it. I carefully reached forward between the woman and the child and swept the bug into my palm. I smiled and bowed my head to them both. They looked startled. Then I went outside.

I stood over top of the anthill for more than a few moments. The people in the window must have thought I had lost it completely, running out of the shop with a dead bug's carcass. I didn't care about them. I didn't even look at the window. Instead I watched the hundreds of ants, probably even thousands or millions more below the sidewalk, I thought as they climbed over each other on their way to and from the mound. I heard a buzzing sound and looked in the air above me. The streetlights had already been turned on. The sun made all of the shadows uneven and turned the sky the color of a fruit I can't remember the name of. The streetlights were attracting moths. I watched the moths dart past each other, crashing into the light. They took no notice of me.