

## CATS

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**Slice Magazine ([slicemagazine.org](http://slicemagazine.org)), , Spring 2017**

Cats. Lord how I hate them. They slink around the house like snakes, like burglars, creeping on those padded feet so you don't know where they're at until they're right behind you. And those eyes. Dead-cold stony eyes that look right past you, never at you, with an indifference beyond hatred that says nothing. Nothing but secrets you don't want to know.

Just this morning, when I went to fetch the paper at the front door, there was another one. It shot in quick. Gave me a chill that stopped the blood in my veins: that sinewy body streaking past me, claws like tiny knives. The problem is, Susannah won't do anything about it, she's so attached to those cats. They keep coming because they know they won't be shut out. And when they come, they stay for good.

The first time was a mistake. You'd think with all these cats that rats wouldn't be a problem, but last spring they were everywhere. So I went to the Home Depot and bought some poison to get rid of them, the rats I mean. Dusted the whole basement. Spread it thick and even so wherever they were hiding they'd fall in it sooner or later. Then I shut off the light and came back upstairs. Well, one of the cats must've followed me down there, because when I went to check on the rat situation the next day, all I found was a dead cat. I nudged it with my shoe and it was as stiff as a plank. I got my rubber wash-up gloves and took that cat out back to the compost pile, holding it in front of me. I threw it as far into the coffee grounds and wormy corn as I had strength, and then I went over and heaped more compost on it. I was afraid of what Susannah would do if she saw it. She might cry. She might even get angry at me, and I couldn't bear that.

I love Susannah like my own self. We're as close as sisters can be. Our lives are meshed so fine it's almost like we're the same person now. We've lived in this house for fifteen years together,

and we'll probably live here until the end. Of course, I've lived here my whole life. Daddy built this house for Mother when they got married, back when there was no asphalt in front or houses on either side, back when there was land attached. All the land except half an acre was sold off when things got tight, but we hung on to the house. Susannah and I have a promise to stay in it until we're dead or too senseless to know better.

Mother always said she hoped the house would stay in the family forever, but it looks like this is as far as it goes. My brother Frank died of a heart attack in '98 and his wife married somebody else. Susannah never had children. I never got married. I've been tending the house as best I can all these years, but Susannah and I are old. I don't like to think about what will happen when we're gone, but I'd prefer to see a family in the house than see it standing empty, all boarded up.

Susannah and I aren't much, but we're enough to fill it. We save clippings from the *Ellsworth American* and programs from the Maine Coast Baptist Church. Snapshots of cousin Donna's four children and their children. In the summertime, as it is now, we open the front door and fill the house with smells of cut lawns and pine. (We've never had an air conditioner, always preferred the electric fan. Susannah says she won't be refrigerated, thank you very much, until she doesn't have any choice.) We can fruit and beans, mostly peaches on sale from Hannafords. The house fills up with that sweet smell of rotting peaches, rising in a steam of syrup, drawing flies to the screen.

Drawing cats.

Of course, Susannah draws them, too, with her own sweetness. Sweetness and cat food and cool corners with the drapes shut against the heat. They sneak in when you're not looking, when you're fetching the paper or chatting with the neighbors at the end of the driveway. And they get lost in here, for a while, at least. Then you go into the bathroom one morning and shut the door and there's one in the laundry basket, staring at you with those dull dead eyes, waiting to see what you'll do.

Susannah doesn't believe me when I say they're evil. The devil's handiwork, set here on earth to test us. She laughs. Says, Oh Melissa, you are the most superstitious person I know. Shakes her head and strokes the cat in her lap—there's always a cat in her lap—while my head fills with wicked thoughts and I pray to the Lord to keep me from what I might do.

*As we forgive those who trespass against . . .*

If I tried to remember when this all started I'd have to go way back, before Susannah's husband died and she came here to live with me. Before she and Ed got married. Before we went to school, even. Back when Frank called me Runt.

I was the youngest. Frank was oldest, with Mariah in between. Daddy used to say I was the runt of the litter, and Frank picked it up. But it sounded different when he said it. Frank was mean to me, but he was never mean to Susannah; she was too pretty. If you ever wanted somebody to pick on, I guess I was the one. I was plain looking and quiet, never made a sound. Just yes and no, nodding my head, looking at my feet.

Frank scared me, even before I had reason to be scared. He was big and rough and he spit out of the corner of his mouth and took the Lord's name in vain. He and his best friend Justin Shanley double-dated on Saturday nights. Frank would get home real late and I'd hear him creep in, holding the screen door so it wouldn't slam, stepping on the stairs in the right places so they didn't creak. One time I was half awake and thought he might be a burglar or something, so I whispered *Frank? Is that you?* real soft. He came and stood in the doorway of my room, this huge shadow in the moonlight, and he said, If you tell Mother or Daddy about this I will kill you with my own hands. Then he left and I lay there wide awake until the sun came up, almost afraid to even breathe.

Frank and Justin went fishing on weekends. They'd come back with a line of pike and slap them on the back porch for Mother to clean, and then they'd sit on the steps with their legs spread wide and their caps on backward, whistling off tune and seeing who could spit the farthest. That's when the cats started coming. They'd smell the fish and come from everywhere, stepping

sideways as they tried to figure out if Frank and Justin were fish themselves or just smelled like it. Frank batted them away with the back of his hand, saying, Somebody shoulda had sense to drown you when you was born, get the hell out! Then he'd say, Runt, get me something to drink, you ain't doing nothing but standing there with your chin on the ground.

One hot Saturday they came back from fishing earlier than usual. Even without their shirts on they were sweating like dogs. They just sat there on the steps, too hot to even spit. I was in the yard hanging out wet sheets on the line. All of a sudden Frank said, Runt! Come here. Me and Justin got something for you to do. I went over and Frank said, Justin, you hold her, I'll be right back. He went around the corner of the house and I was all confused, Justin's sweaty fingers digging into my arms, him telling me, Just stand still and don't make a sound or you'll be sorry. Me whimpering, Please Justin let go I didn't do nothing let go please. Then Frank came back. He was holding the biggest, ugliest, meanest-looking cat I'd ever seen in my life. Nice little pussy, ain't it? Frank said. Ain't it? Answer me. He held it real close under my nose and I thought I was going to pass out from the smell of fish and sweat and that dirty cat, and I said, Frank, please. Leave me alone please, I didn't do nothing to you, just let me go. He said, Shut up, Runt. Kiss the pussy.

That cat was growling like it was going to attack me, so close to my face I could see in its snake eyes, all the way to nothing. Justin was behind me, pinning my arms. I started shaking, trembling all over, and Frank got a little scared and said, Just kiss the pussy and we'll let you go. I shook my head so hard it rattled inside, and Justin said, Aw, maybe we should—and Frank said, Naw, it's good for her. So I had to kiss that cat. It bared its teeth and hissed at me and finally Justin let me go and I fell forward, stumbling into the yard, out into the fields that used to be behind our house, running until I couldn't run anymore. Then I fell in the dry grass, too tired to cry, too tired to do anything but look at the clouds moving fast above my head.

I never did tell anybody. But after that I stayed away from Frank. I never forgave him, even when we were grown up and he had a wife he called sugar. I never looked at him directly again. And cats. For the longest time I was plain terrified; I froze up stiff when I saw one. I had nightmares,

teeth and claws chasing me, that big ugly cat with Frank's head running after me on silent paws, catching up to me, catching me.

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Even after I was engaged to Ed I had those dreams. I wanted to tell him, but something held me back. I was afraid he'd think I was making it up; Frank was so friendly to Ed, slapping him on the back and telling me, You got lucky with this one. So I held my tongue. Sometimes Ed would say, Lissie—that's what he called me—you're here but you're not here. You're on some other planet. Talk to me. And I'd smile and say, What do you mean, Ed? I'm here. You can see me, can't you? You can touch me. Don't be silly. He'd look a little troubled then, like he couldn't quite figure me out.

I've forgotten the next part, really. It's a blur. I know it didn't happen on purpose. It just happened. That's what Ed and Susannah kept trying to tell me that night on the swing, with the fireflies in the grass singing like the chorus with candles at Wednesday night services. I looked at them like I was dumb, him with his arm around her, Susannah saying she had no idea this would happen, Ed explaining how the two of them didn't plan to fall in love. Lissie, he said, we never meant to do you harm. We never meant to hurt you. And I said, Don't call me that. Don't ever call me that again.

Then I went back inside the house and climbed those creaky stairs to my bedroom and stood in the middle of the floor in a square of moonlight. Mother came up after a while with eyes full of pity and tucked me into bed like I was little, covers up to my chin. Patterns, light and shadow, on the ceiling. And then there was the wedding. Everyone was so nice, looking back at me with troubled smiles. I don't know what they were worried about; I heard the fireflies singing the Lord's Prayer in unison in the sweet night air and hummed along, trying to remember the words. Funny how you can forget them when you least expect.

After the wedding it was just the three of us, Daddy and Mother and me. I helped Mother cook and can and do the laundry, sometimes a whole afternoon with a basket of wet clothes in the

backyard, trying to fix them nice on the line with those awkward wooden pins. Before I knew it Mother would call for me, Come to dinner, Daddy's home! and we'd sit around the kitchen table as the sun went down, the hum of their voices mingling with the hum of the flies at the screen as they tried to get in, to touch the light. The years flew. Christmas turned to Easter to Fourth of July so many times I lost count. Daddy barely retired before he had a stroke that killed him. Mother lived only a few years after that. Then I was alone.

That's when I came to find the Lord, to take Him into my heart.

We'd always gone to church, to Maine Coast Baptist, but I never really understood. Then one Sunday, sitting in my pew, I felt His light touch me. I heard the Reverend Harland Hughes call me to be saved in the name of Jesus Christ, and I knew I was ready to receive Him. All the love and fear and sorrow I had inside welled up and overflowed; I felt His power so strong inside me I could hardly breathe. The chorus was singing "Have Thine Own Way, Lord" with the voices of angels, filling up all the spaces, no room to hide or turn back, and Reverend Hughes was crying out, Come! Come and be saved! Confess the burdens of your lonely hearts and accept Jesus Christ into your lives! Oh, I said, Yes, oh Lord, yes! I crept to the front of the church with the others who felt the calling and I wept with joy when I reached the pulpit, joy and happiness.

Life was brand new after that. Every flower, every weed shone in His glory. When Ed died and Susannah asked if she could come home to live with me, I accepted her with open arms. Since then we've been so happy together. We thank the Lord that we are blessed with each other. We share everything; there are no secrets between us. Except one. I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned against you and I have deceived her, but I had to do it. I could not stop myself. The first one was a mistake, as I told you. The first one was a mistake and then I saw how easy it was, that she didn't even notice, that I could make them disappear one by one and she would never suspect. The next time I mixed the poison into their food, and two of them died that way. Susannah found them out in the yard and we decided they must've gotten into somebody's fertilizer. We dug a hole for them together, and she planted flowers on top of the grave.

I drowned one in the washing machine with the lid shut tight, rinse and spin. Then I found a litter under the stairs of the front porch, four kittens, and when Susannah went out to do errands I put them in a pillowcase with a rock in it and filled up the outdoor sink by the side of the house and dropped it in, looking down into the clear water, waiting for the movement to stop. There are so many—she loves them, you see, nurtures them, babies them—that no matter how many I get rid of, there are always more. But I'm getting careless. Yesterday she realized her favorite one was missing, and she stood on the front porch in the twilight, calling, Here, Tom! Tom? Tom? in her anxious, reedy voice. Isn't that peculiar, isn't that the strangest thing, you haven't seen Tom Kitty anywhere, have you, Melissa? I shook my head, covering one hand with the other to hide the scratches on my wrist.

If I could only tell her how much I hate them, how their glittering eyes make my skin crawl, how I lie awake at night planning ways to kill them . . . But she would never understand. Before long she'll find out, and then I'll have to tell her everything. I can just see the horror in her eyes. She'll be disgusted and she'll be mad at me, and I could never stand for that. Lord have mercy, I love Susannah like my own self. Our lives are meshed so fine we're about the same person now. I would rather die than have her hate me.