

## **Cats Will Be Cats**

I'm standing at the sink, peeling potatoes for dinner, trying to decide eight or nine. Mama, Daddy, the boys and me make eight, but I add one for the pot. Mama's sitting behind me at the big oak table. I can feel her eyes stabbing me low in the back, and hear her thin, nervous fingers rubbing a deeper groove in the scratched table top. The sound is as heavy as the heat, pressing me down, and it's not even noon yet.

I want to tell her she's being a baby, which she is: all mad 'cause I talked Daddy out of shooting that scrawny gray cat that keeps having kittens, at least two litters a year. Mama says we can't afford to feed them all, but since they generally die anyhow I can't see where it matters much, and I like that old cat anyway. The thing is, I always thought Mama did too. But I don't say any of that, 'cause the truth is Mama's crazy as hell, and more so lately, and she never cares shit about what I think in any case.

She starts drumming her fingers on the table, maybe she wants me to look at her, but I don't, since more than likely she doesn't even notice I'm here. The noise starts to bother me now, which makes me think that Mama really should smoke. She needs something to do with her hands, for sure. When she talks they flit around, and of course there's this rubbing and tapping. Daddy says when she was a girl she had the prettiest hands he'd ever seen, and looking at those graceful hands while she talked made him fall in love. But ever since I can remember she's just twitchy and tapping, now sometimes Daddy yells at her for it, we'd all like to, but mostly we're so loud we just talk right over it. If she smoked though, I'm thinking her hands would be busy, and it might relax her, too, 'cause it sure does me. But she has this idea that Jesus wouldn't approve of smoking. I've heard her tell Daddy it would be right there in the Bible, only there wasn't tobacco in the Holy Land so he couldn't warn us without looking crazy. I never say they mostly thought he was for sure nuts anyway.

So now I'm thinking about it and I want to sneak out to the barn and light up from the fresh pack of Camels I stole from Daddy. I rinse the last potato and turn to tell her I'm going out, but her face scares me. She's all tensed up, like Daddy's gun when the hammer's pulled back, and there's a shell in, and your finger's on the trigger even. Just kind of waiting to go off, as certain as the heat means it's going to storm this afternoon.

"What's wrong, Mama?" I ask, hoping it's nothing, 'cause I'm still thinking of those cigarettes out in the barn and Mama's problems I can't help much with anyway. She's all gray-white, sort of that Kaopectate color and her teeth are set tight: she looks like she's going to break and I can tell she knows something bad.

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Her hands aren't doing anything now, just sort of lying there, and her mouth is open but nothing's happening there, either. But I can see her head working behind those big, blank eyes.

"Jesus is sending us another little baby, Mags," she finally whispers, those green eyes glowing with the secret. "Doesn't he love me!"

I doubt it, I think, remembering the last little baby buried in the turkey roaster 'cause Mama was so crazy afraid the maggots would get him before Jesus did. And us never having turkey again, even on Thanksgiving.

Then I think of the Mama I didn't know, with the pretty hands fifteen years ago and planning to go to the University on a scholarship, being smart and maybe even happy somehow. I've seen pictures of her then, pretty and smiling. But then she had me and had to marry Daddy instead, and her hands got nervous and she couldn't smile anymore. I think of those things, and I wish I hadn't been born like that, 'cause now Mama just keeps having the babies. After me, the five boys, then the four born dead and buried under the lilacs across the creek, and now this new one. And the dead ones all she ever thinks about anyhow. Once Mama told me it was a punishment, 'cause she sinned making me, but I can see it myself now, too. It feels pretty bad to know she has to look at me everyday and remember that. That's probably why she's crazy.

Now I'm trying to think what to do, peel another potato maybe, or shoot Daddy, but I'd better have a smoke first and just think. All this time Mama's looking at me, but kind of through me, too, confused like a kid who really knows there's no Santa Claus, but wants to go on pretending just one more year. She wants me to say something, but what? So I say, "Come on, Mama, and rest," and I lead her around the corner to the old flowered sofa and help her lie down. But she grabs my hands and holds on tight, all the while those blazing green eyes are looking right into mine and she asks, "The cat?"

"What?" I'm trying to figure out what she means, but her eyes go all dim and she lets go real quick, but I know she just remembers it's me and turns away to forget again.

I walk toward the barn, it's hot as hell out, but still, so I know the storm's coming soon. I dig my Camels and True Value matches out from under a bale of hay and light up, trying to clear my head and give some thought to Mama. It's almost airless in the barn, but the cigarette tastes great. I finish it and put it out in some fresh cow shit so it doesn't burn down the barn, certain no one will find the butt in there, either. I still can't think and I'm on my fourth cigarette, and I know Daddy and the boys are in from the hay field by now. I should get their dinner on, 'cause it's going to rain for sure and they'll need to get back out before it does.

But all I can think of is Daddy's shotgun up in the closet and the shells in his

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top dresser drawer. In my mind I already have it loaded and there's my finger on the trigger. So I just stay in the barn smoking, 'cause I don't even know who I want to shoot, Daddy, Mama, or me.

I hear that old gray cat yowling, up high in the hay, so I climb up to see her pawing around her new kittens, which seem awful quiet and still. One of her last year's kittens is up here, too, but she ignores that old one, 'cause cats can only be concerned about the new ones. It's not meanness, Mama says, it's just the way God made them, and cats will be cats, I guess. As I get closer, I can see that the new ones are still and dead, no doubt, but that old cat can't figure it out. She's meowing in that high pitched, clipped off way they do when they call to their kittens.

She's in quite a state, her eyes are wild and frantic as she scratches at those dead kittens. It makes me think of Mama clutching that dead baby to save it from the maggots until Daddy agreed to put it in the turkey roaster and seal it up tight with aquarium glue.

I call, "Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty," and that cat comes running over. She probably thinks I'm going to feed her, and I wish I had some cat food, or tuna fish, even better, for that sad old cat, but since I don't I pick her up and pet her instead. I've been up here quite awhile now and I can tell, 'cause it's getting dark and cooler, like it's going to rain, and I can even hear thunder, but far off. Holding that pitiful old cat I think about Mama and why she would want it dead, knowing that was what she was talking about on the sofa, probably still mad at me over it. But the cat is thinking about those kittens again, 'cause it jumps down, and over it goes, yowling.

Then I understand. It comes to me like a flash of lightning, and maybe I was blind before, but now I see it. So I pick up that old cat and I pet her real sweet as I walk to the edge of the hay. I raise her up over my head, and she trusts me, I guess, 'cause she doesn't even try to scratch me as I let go and throw her down on the hard-packed dirt floor. I can't see where she fell, not wanting to get too close to the edge, so I climb down, a little shaky and scared at what I just did.

That poor cat isn't quite dead yet, but I'm old enough to know that nothing important comes easy. Even though I'm kind of sick looking at that cat lying there, twitching like a horse with flies on it, I can't stop now, so I get Daddy's big manure shovel and hit her over the head. I must have hit her quite a few times, 'cause she's kind of bloody now, but dead no question.

It's raining hard, and I'm carrying that bloody cat and the heavy shovel too. There's lots of lightning and I feel kind of excited, my heart sure is beating hard. I cross the creek and start digging under the lilacs to bury that cat by those four little crosses. When I'm done I just stand there very wet and muddy and blood all over me, too. But I feel clean for once and happy, 'cause I know Mama's sins

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are washing right off me and running in little rivers to the creek, carried away.

I walk home slow, but my feet don't even touch the ground. I'm so light now. Every step is dancing in the warm, clean rain. I go into the house and daddy yells, "Where you been, Mags?" not mad but more worried. But when he comes out of the pantry and sees me he looks scared. "Jesus, honey, what happened?"

I can feel my eyes, hot and blazing, they're green like Mama's, and I tell him I killed that old cat.

Mama looks around the corner at me, she's still lying on the sofa, and she calls, "What? What'd Maggie do?"

"She killed your old cat," says Daddy to Mama, but he's still looking at me.

Now the boys are hollering, but I don't much notice, 'cause my eyes are fixed on Mama and hers on me, and I see something in there for once.

"She's not suffering anymore," I say, real steady and quiet, and they all shut up for once. Mama's still looking at me, hard, and she smiles a tiny smile, none of the others can see it, I know, it's only for me 'cause I finally understand.