

Milk

Claire is rolling around on her back in the narrow stream of late sun on the porch. Her head twists first, and then her whole body goes, belly like a soft satchel of marbles. When she rolls too far out of the sun, she gets bored and wanders back inside with me.

I am waiting for her to have the kittens. It should be anytime this weekend, maybe tonight.

Mom gave Claire to me as a gift after my twins were born too early. Claire was only a kitten then herself, really too young to leave her mother, so I used to put a loud ticking clock beneath my pillow and bring her up close to my face so that she could hear it too. I liked the way the sound of it buried beneath the feathers was more of a thump than a tick. Waking up, I'd find her draped over my neck, front paws wrapped on one side and hind legs on the other. What usually woke me was the purring, vibrating against my throat. Or sometimes, instead of feeling her paw pressing into my pulse, I'd feel her tiny claws methodically piercing my neck.

She tries to dart under the sofa, but her stomach stops her, traps her under the upholstered leg. It would be a funny pose if I weren't worried about her jarring the kittens.

I used to put hot pepper on the soil of my potted ferns when Claire first came to live with us. Otherwise, I'd find her scratching out the dirt and chewing fiercely on the fern's green tendrils. Before she learned better, she would keep going back to the plant, blinded and sneezing from the pepper's sting.

If you cut off a cat's whiskers, it will lose its balance. Or its courage. There are different versions, and I'm not sure which one is true or if there's even any difference after all.

Mom knows America's first surrogate mother. She worked with this woman's little boy in a physical therapy session at her school. On Phil Donahue, this woman says she loves having babies, just loves having them. Mom broke school policy and looked into Steven's file. It said that a difficult labor and delivery were reasons for Steven being so slow. Mom has a theory now on surrogate mothers. That the only reason a woman would do that is because the job market is so bad and her Fallopian tubes are good.

Mom called this morning to see how we were. I told her that Doug had gone to Madison for the weekend to finish the deal on the house. She thinks there's something I'm not telling her.

“I would tell you anything you asked me about, Mom.”

“I shouldn’t have to ask. Would you tell me if Claire were sick?”

“Yes,” I said. Mom always cries in sad movies and when the cats die, but never for people.

“I sent you a pamphlet on feline leukemia, didn’t I?”

She is careful about the diseases that can spread among cats. Each one now has its own bowl with its name painted on in careful dot letters on the side. The leukemia had gone from Randall to Denny to Mindy through the litter pan. Or maybe not in that order, but that’s the order they died.

“I just don’t want to go through all of that again,” she says. I think she is talking about the cats.

When I was carrying the babies, she would call me almost every day, so pleased that Randall had become so affectionate. She described the way he’d crawl up close to her, eyes focused right on her face. She said it was almost dizzying to try to hold his eyes. Purring loudly, he’d burrow into the crook of her elbow or under her neck or in the hollow between her legs. The vet told her later that that’s all a part of the disease. Affection is a symptom of feline leukemia. He was just trying to warm his limbs and nothing more than that.

She names her cats what most people think of as people names. Sometimes, it’s confusing because there’s an Aunt Sarah and a cat named Sara. Mom says it’s a way to pay some respect to family members who never saw their names rightfully passed down, except maybe sandwiched between a first and last name. And usually, middle names just become dashed initials anyway.

There was John, whom the paperboy found along the road in a snowdrift during his early morning route. John was just a shade whiter than the sooty snow, otherwise he might not have been spotted until it thawed. We buried him next to the house, first shoveling away the snow, then breaking into the icy dirt. It seemed to take forever for Mom to make the hole deep enough, and my mittens were icy with tears and snot by the time she finished. She stroked my hair while I cried into her chest and then she lifted my face up and reminded me not to look at John, just to remember him as he had been. I shut my eyes as tight as I knew. But I opened them at the last minute and so all I can remember is that frozen peek before she put the lid on the box and dropped John into the ground.

And later, there was Lily, who swallowed the string we used to lift our small turkey out of the oven on Thanksgiving. Doug and I had both complained of a little heartburn that evening when we drove to the dairy store for ice cream. When we came home, she was sitting upright and still. The cord was making its way through her intestine, the plastic yellow knobs catching on her insides like a ragged blade. The worst of it was how still Lily sat and the way Mom sat beside her, equally still. Both looking at me for any way that I could help.

People say that if a cat gets near a baby, it will suck its breath away. You will never see this happen though because it's only when a cat and a baby are alone.

Claire has claimed my mattress as the place to wait for the birth. She's too big and awkward to curl up under my chin anymore so she lays on my chest. Her weight spreads out solidly over me and I think I can feel her heart or maybe the hearts of the kittens or maybe it's just my own shallow breath pushing against her heart.

I've forgotten all of the breathing patterns that Doug and I went to class to learn. People say it is like riding a bike, but I have to wonder.

My sheets are in a tangle from last night. It has been hot and thick, promising rain. It's lightning outside now, dry lightning. To try to sleep, I put my ear to the box springs and listen for the sounds inside it. There's music in the wheezes of a stripped mattress, but I only hear it when I'm alone and frightened of bigger noises.

If a cat chews on grass, it will rain. If it pukes up that greenish foam, it's going to storm.

The black tom is back tonight, hungry for her. I saw him out the window earlier, waiting for her like a teenage suitor. I know that tomcats will come back until the kittens are born and then carry them away to kill their offspring expertly. A mother will do anything to fill the empty places at her nipples. She'll mate with her lover as many times as he comes around until she gets her kittens.

Did you know that the milk stays even after the babies die? I suppose that's something everyone thinks they know, but you can't possibly know until your breasts are heavy and swollen and there's nothing you'd rather do than leave them at the hospital too.

That's what I was thinking about when our landlord came to show the apartment this afternoon. He and the couple were inside before I even heard them. I felt silly. I'd been petting Claire as though that's all I had on my mind. I guess Jim was surprised to see me too.

"Christ, Heidi, you scared the piss out of me."

"I'm sorry," I said, laughing.

"We're sorry," the woman said, her tiny hand reaching for the man's hand, only slightly larger than her own.

"Did I get my weekends mixed up, Heidi? I thought you and Doug were going to be in Madison," he said, fumbling through the papers on his clipboards.

"No, this is the right weekend. I had to stay. The cat. She's going to have kittens," I explained.

“Oh, I love kittens,” the woman said. She seemed so delighted with that statement. I mean, really delighted, genuine.

The couple was young, both delicate and slight in an enchanting way. I watched them walk gracefully on the wooden floor, cautiously looking at the apartment. They looked at all of the photos on the walls. I can’t blame them for that. Everyone falls in love with the pictures of Doug and me. At the parties that we’ve had, people draw near those photos toward the end of the evening. They’re all grainy, black and white. We take pictures together by putting the shutter on automatic and resting the camera on nearby rocks, or chair arms, or beer coolers. Then Doug rushes into the picture. There’s always more time than we expect though, so we end up laughing at our haste.

If the couple decides to rent the apartment, it will be because of those photographs.

Cats that lose their tails in accidents will have short-tailed kittens. I wonder about the kittens of the short-tailed kittens. Is it a genetic thing like baldness or twins that will wait another generation to show up?

I’m dialing her number, out of habit, or something. Compulsion, I don’t know.

“Hello?”

I’m trying to think what to say.

“Hello? Is that you? Heidi, are you there?”

“I’m here.”

But I say it too quietly.

“I’m sorry, honey, what? Call me back, we’ve got a bad connection.”

“No, it’s okay, I just wanted you to wish Claire good luck. I think she’s having the babies tonight.”

“Oh, she’s a strong cat. It’ll all be fine.”

“Okay, thanks Mom.”

“She’ll be fine. A good strong cat.”

“Okay,” I say.

“Here, put her on,” she says.

I rub the phone’s mouthpiece against the pillow and say, “She’s on, Mom.”

“Claire, good luck with those kittens.”

I shuffle the phone a little more then just hang up. I know she’ll call back.

I want to tell her about the image that I have been thinking of. The image is of the kittens turning slowly in Claire’s womb, wrapping instinctively around each other, positioning their miniature heads for descent. I’ve carried this foggy picture around inside me like a thick dream. But what I’m afraid of is that once I say it, once the words are pushed out, nothing will be as soft and pink as I am imagining it.

— Kim McKinney