

The kitten is a scrawny thing with burrs and bits of wood caught in its coat where it still has fur, and pus coming out its eyes and nose. Its big baby head looks even bigger at the end of such a stick of a body. I found it in the woods at the end of my street where I play most days with my friends. This time I was alone. *Lucky for you I was, I think. Otherwise, David or Claude might have decided you'd be good practice for their slingshots. Those two can be mean, I think to myself. I don't like playing with them really, but they live at the end of the street and sometimes you just play with the kids on your same street, even if they're mean, sometimes, even to you.*

The kitten makes a pitiful noise.

"Don't worry," I tell it, stroking its scabby head until the mewling is replaced by a faint purr. "Everything will be okay. I'm going to take you home, and my mom will give you a bath and some medicine."

I tuck the kitten under my jacket and run out of the woods, across the street, down the sidewalk toward my house. I feel the warmth of the kitten through my shirt and start thinking of names.

---

I'm only ten, so it will be five or six years before I work for Dr. Milk. My two oldest brothers worked for him part-time and summers when they were teenagers. Now my other brother, Paul, works there. Dr. Milk is the vet out on Ridge Road. He takes care of our dogs, and he will take care of my kitten. I never had a pet that was my very own. A couple of years ago, my father got a new beagle to replace the old one that had died. Patches was his name. He called the new one Bucky and said that Bucky could be mine. But saying a thing is so doesn't mean it is.

Bucky lives in a kennel out back, keeping his beagle smell, which my mother hates, far away from the house. I feed Bucky some days and play with him, but I am not allowed to bring him inside to sleep at the end of my bed or curl up next to me while I do my homework. Bucky is an outdoor dog; he is a hunting dog.

He is my father's dog, really.

---

When I am older, I will go hunting with my father the way my brothers have done. I try not to think about this. I want to go, because I want my father to like me. But I don't want to kill animals.

One time when my father and three brothers went hunting, one of my brothers killed a deer. Most times they kill rabbits or pheasants if they get lucky. Most times they don't get lucky. But this time one of my brothers, I don't remember which one, killed a deer.

The deer was hung by its feet from a tree just outside the kitchen. I could see it hanging there when I sat at my place at the table. My father urged me to eat my venison and talked about the slippers he was going to have made from the hide. I couldn't eat. The thought of the venison made me want to throw up.

I could see the deer's eyes, even from the kitchen table. There was life in them still. Only the deer and I knew that there was life the bullet had missed; it was in the eyes.

I pushed the venison away.

My father said, "That's a waste of good meat."

My brothers teased me. One of them called me a sissy.

My mother said, "You don't have to eat it," and took the slab of gray meat off my plate.

---

My mother reaches into my jacket and removes the kitten by the scruff of its neck. She tells me to go down to the cellar and take off all my clothes and put them in a pile next to the washing machine.

"This animal is filled with disease," she says. "We can't let it touch anything in the house."

"We'll take it to Dr. Milk," I say. "He'll make it better."

"We'll see," she says, pushing me toward the cellar stairs, the kitten dangling from one of her hands.

I can feel tears welling up. "But that kitten is mine," I say. "I found it, and it's going to be my pet."

She doesn't say anything. Looking up from the cellar stairs, I see her shaking her head at the kitten. Its eyes are clamped shut. I can see the pus oozing out of them.

"You are a sorry sight," she tells the kitten in the same soothing voice she uses with me when I'm sick. "A sorry sad sight."

I feel in the pit of my stomach what the future of that kitten is. The feeling spreads through me like a sudden fever. Down in the cellar taking off my clothes, I cry so hard my body shakes.

When I return upstairs, my mother wraps me in my bathrobe and holds me until I can speak.

"Where's the kitten?" I ask.

"Out on the back porch in a box. Your brother will be home soon."

---

Paul will be going to college in the fall. Right now he's a senior in high school. I can't decide if I'm going to miss him or not. He's the brother I know best because he's been around the longest. The others left home when I was even younger.

Paul is the brother who taught me to ride my bicycle and the one who spent an entire Saturday with me and not his friends building a real igloo out of snow and ice. He's the brother who tells me how to be a man.

He is also the brother who plays tricks on me and sometimes the tricks are cruel. When I get angry, he says I don't have a sense of humor. He twists my arm behind my back sometimes until I say I'll do what he wants me to do. He makes promises he doesn't keep.

Paul is seventeen. He shaves every day and kisses girls right in front of me like it was nothing. He works at Dr. Milk's part-time and summers.

---

I am sitting on the back porch, waiting for Paul to come home and talking to the box next to me.

"Don't worry, Smoky," I tell the kitten inside. "I won't let anything bad happen to you, I don't care how sick you are. My big brother will take you to Dr. Milk's and give you shots and medicine and stuff and you'll get better, you'll see. My big brother can fix anything."

The kitten is awfully quiet. I wish it would make even a pitiful noise.

We sit in silence. I daydream that I am seventeen. I am big and strong like my brother and I can make Smoky better. I see myself driving to Dr. Milk's out of Ridge Road, carrying the kitten in its box into the back room (which I have never seen, really, only heard my brothers tell stories about), giving it some medicine, reassuring it. . .

"Everything will be okay, Smoky, everything will be okay."

In the kitchen behind me I hear my brother and mother talking in low voices.

---

Dr. Milk is not there when my brother pulls the car into the parking lot. It is after hours. My brother has a key. I am impressed by this.

"Come on," Paul says in his take-charge voice, "get that box now. Bring it on in here."

He flicks on the light in the waiting room. "You're coming in back with me," he commands. "I'll need your help."

"What are you going to do?" I ask. I am holding the box tight against my chest. I feel Smoky moving around inside.

"What do you think?" he says. "You heard your mother. That kitten is sick, bad sick."

"She's your mother, too."

"Well, she happens to be right," Paul tells me. "With an animal that far gone, you don't have a choice. It's got to be put to sleep."

I think the tears I jam back into my body are going to kill me. I think if I don't let them out they will kill me. But I won't let them out. I won't let Paul see.

"You do have a choice" is all I say. I hug the box for dear life and move to the door. Paul moves faster.

"Come on now" he says, gently taking hold of my arm, "be a man."

"I'm not a man," I tell him. "I don't want to be."

"You've got to do what's right. That kitten is half dead as it is."

"Then it's half alive, too."

He shakes his head. "You always have to one-up me, don't you?" he says.

I don't know what he means, but I do know that no matter what I say he is going to do what he wants to do.

A few minutes later, we are in the back room. The box is empty. Smoky is inside a big old pretzel can with a hose attached, clawing at the can's sides as my brother pumps in the gas. He is telling me it is good for me to watch this, it will toughen me up, help me be more of a man. Then he starts to lecture me about different methods of putting animals out of their misery, but all I can hear is the scratching. And then the silence.

---

At the supper table that night, I don't speak. I don't look at my brother's face or my father's or my mother's. I look at the tree branch outside the kitchen window where the deer once hung. My brother is saying something about taking me to the driving range tomorrow. He will teach me to hit a golf ball.

I won't go with him. I don't want him teaching me anything anymore.

In the fall he will go off to college. I will be eleven. I will be alone with my parents, alone without my brothers.

I get up from the table and no one stops me.

In the living room, which is dark, I sit for a long time thinking. I think about my kitten. I think about the pretzel can. I think about what it will be like not having any brothers around. I feel alone and small and frightened. And then all of a sudden I don't feel any of those things. All of a sudden it's as if Paul had already left and I am on my own and I know some things so clearly that I will never have to ask an older brother to help me figure them out.

I will never work for Dr. Milk.

I will not go hunting with my father.

I will decide for myself what kind of boy I am, what kind of man I will become.