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## Burial

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BURIAL

We staggered up through the brush, Ann first, brandy bottle and trowel in hand, and me behind, clutching the box that held our cat, Orvil. We loved him more, perhaps, than humans should love an animal. He had left us before his time, caught beneath our neighbor's pickup. We'd spent the day crying, but now, neither of us could stop laughing. The sunlight strained through the trees, dappling Ann's bare shoulders.

You still got the brandy, Annie, I called to her.

Right here, she said, hoisting the half-gone bottle above her head to tap it with her trowel.

We're going to bury him on top of a goddamn mountain.

Hell, yes.

It will be a sweet funeral, better even than your aunt's.

If by better you mean drunker, Ann said.

We busted up laughing. We'd been drinking for several hours from a dusty bottle of no-name brandy from our reception two years ago, fished from a back cabinet. There was a reason no one had drunk it. After I took a couple swigs, my lungs wanted to climb from my throat. The way this manifested was chuckles.

The wooded slope felt warm, the humidity wedding our bodies somehow. Our path was one deer had used, maybe, and poison ivy ringed it. If it were a happier time, I might grab Ann by the torso, edge her toward the trifoliate leaves, say, uh oh, watch out! She'd whack my hands away then we'd kiss.

Right then I was the smartest person in the world, and Annie was second, and when we got home, we'd fuck, maybe on the floor in the kitchen. I'd slap her ass with a spatula, and she'd blindfold me with a dishtowel that smelled like Windex, and everything would be all right. The prospect added gloss to this moment. We would remember it fondly. We could still have fun. Ann would say years from now, remember when we climbed... Yes, I would reply, of course. We sure were something back then. Something? More like something else. You got that right. My aged eyes would do a wistful crinkle. She'd say how well I'd acquitted myself that day,

tell me that's when she learned for the first time just how strong I was.

I doubled over, hiccupping with laughter now, slipping on accreted layers of rotting leaves. Something else indeed. I had to hold Orvil's casket with both hands, so I couldn't reach to steady myself, and the casket slid, studded my fingers with splinters, thumped the ground.

I scrambled for him as he slid away. I caught him up again, deep in a poison ivy patch, grasped with all my might.

You dropped him, Ann said, the joy gone from her voice.

Shit, shit, shit, I thought. That tore it. Sometimes Ann's emotions got to rolling so I couldn't keep up. This would be one of those times. But why? Why did it have to be? Orvil couldn't feel anything. Carrying on wouldn't resurrect him. I said I was sorry, for all the good it would do, modulating my tone, articulating like a champ.

You don't even care, I can tell, Ann said, her voice cracking. She turned and charged up the mountain, grabbing low branches for balance. I chose to think that she was grieving quietly up ahead, not plotting just the right words for a message very mean and very true. She turned around and I braced myself. You don't even care, she said again. I didn't say anything.

She was right, dropping him didn't bother me, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt that he was dead. It was so preventable. That was the hard part. I was sure she would point that out to me, day after day after day. Even though he was my cat. Or I had found him, at least, outside my office.

After work one day I had heard his weak mew. I thought he was a bird, but then I realized that the sound came from under a dumpster, so I knelt, slicking my good pants with garbage juice. I lured him with some pickled meat from the office fridge. He crawled out, and you couldn't even tell he was orange, he was so dirty, and his body shook. He held his ears back until he got a taste of the meat, which perked him right up. I tucked him in my jacket and zipped it around him. Together, Ann and I fed him and cleaned him. We took turns kissing his pink nose. Orvil bit my feet under the covers every morning, piercing the quilt with his teeth. As he grew, he nibbled more gently, so it just tickled. He tried to chew Ann's feet, but

she kicked him in her sleep so he always came for mine.

Orvil arrived at just the right time for us because Ann had been working up a head of steam about the difference in our salaries. Fair enough, too, 'cause those kids put her through hell. But it wasn't my fault, either, that the office thought I deserved the money.

Doesn't it seem ridiculous, Ann had said, that you fix computers and I mold young lives and society has deemed your work more valuable.

Seems from what you tell me, I said, you do less molding of young lives and more keeping them from beating each other with xylophone mallets. She wouldn't say anything after that.

We used to talk to each other about any old thing, all the time. She'd tell me her theories about how there was only a finite amount of happiness in the world and it didn't always go to those who deserved it, and I'd teach her the names and calls of all the birds in our yard—cardinal, nuthatch, yellow-bellied flicker.

Now hurt silence ruled our relationship. We'd speak, then one of us (usually Ann) would get offended.

When Orvil felt nervous, he'd do what we called loafing, because he looked like a loaf of bread, haunches pushed up, paws hooked under the torso. Perfectly self-contained and remote. Ann and I loafed too. We would prod the other one with a paw—either tenderly or hard—then curl back up inside ourselves. Orvil changed this a little bit, but then, too, we'd use him against each other, saying things like Orvil doesn't like it when you listen to that music so loud or you're petting Orvil wrong or Orvil can tell you're lying when you say you love me. One day after Ann had been poking me for an hour about various shortcomings of mine she said, her hand against a red welt on her cheek, I can't believe you hit me in front of Orvil.

Orvil wasn't an outdoor cat, but this had been a fine spring, and he'd been so certain that we finally just let him go. He stalked birds, though his bulk and warning-cone-orange fur held him back. He warmed his belly in the sun. He ate grass, which he puked on the carpet. He had a delicate digestive system.

This morning, a Sunday, I'd heard him meowing at the back door to get inside—half-heard, really, because I was watching baseball on TV. Ann had heard him, too, she told me later, but she thought I had let him in. But she knew how I zoned out. One of her critiques of me was that I ignored her when the TV was on. Even at restaurants, I'd see a screen glowing over her shoulder and be helpless. Wasn't marriage about accepting each other's failings? Too bad Annie had so few.

And then our neighbor Jim knocked on our door, head hanging. He cradled a lump in his arms. His truck idled in our driveway. I didn't see him, he said hoarsely. He ran right in front of the truck.

I stood gaping for a second before my manners kicked in. I said that was okay, there was nothing he could have done, we never should have let him out in the first place, etc., while Ann glared over my shoulder.

I was sorry for Jim. I was sorry for Ann. I was sorry for me. I was very sorry for Orvil. I hoped he hadn't felt pain.

I had taken Orvil's body, still warm, from Jim's hands, him saying, if there's anything else I could, and Ann interrupting, saying, you've done quite enough. I gave Jim a grimace, like, you and me both, friend, and let the screen swing shut.

Ann ran into the bedroom and closed the door. You asshole, I thought I heard her yell from inside. Probably wasn't that. Probably was something milder. You. You're a hassle. You're a pill. Maybe a burst of patriotism: USA! Nope. Not that.

I started to follow her, but I couldn't while I still held Orvil, and it didn't seem decent to set his body in the hallway. So I carried Orvil out to the garage and laid him on my workbench. I found some rough pine boards left from the privacy fence Jim and I had built together. I held a board beside Orvil to gauge size. His eyes were shut tight, thankfully, like he was asleep, one fang poked from his pink lips. I don't think I could have gone on if his eyes were open. Even as a kitten he made eye contact. Most cats avoided your eyes. I fired my jigsaw. An hour and a half later, I had a lop-sided cuboid with a lid that nearly fit, perfect for a cat or, I realized, a baby.

Some blood spackled my white t-shirt, so I wadded and arranged it like a pillow. I set him inside, tucking his tail around him. He didn't look peaceful. He looked wrecked. I nailed the coffin shut. I had a beer, then another.

I knock-knock-knocked at the bedroom door. She didn't answer right away so I went in and found her folded tight on the bed, clutching her feet in her hands like a monkey. Her face was splotched and tears glued strands of hair to it. I picked her up by the armpits and set her upright. She rolled back down. I scooted her to the edge of the bed and nudged her closer, closer to the edge. She balanced for a second then tipped forward. She took her hands from her feet just in time to catch herself. When she rose back up, she said, he was just a little animal and now he's dead.

I told her to raid the liquor cabinet because we were going for a drive.

As we sat in our driveway in the Scout, casketed Orvil in the back seat, Ann asked, where are we going?

A mountain, I told her, my voice powerful. Moving would save us, the climb would purify.

Now, as my flip flops flipped up leaf litter on my calves and the branches of sycamores and white oaks stung my face when Ann released them, I knew we had been weighed and found wanting. Proper cat care required more good sense than we had. I hugged Orvil tighter, the rough wood scraping my arms. I could hear Ann's ragged breathing, and I could imagine her slick face. Her nose, so delicate, so patrician, swelled and reddened when she cried.

We kept up the mountain. The long pods of a catalpa tree pointed down like daggers. I jogged toward Ann, the coffin tucked football-like under my armpit.

Ann stopped so I could catch up. I don't want to go back to school tomorrow, she said. The students. They'll know something is wrong. They're like that, little hyenas. They can smell sorrow. Jen had a dog that died, and she told her class about it, just to explain why she was sad that day, and

do you know what they did? One of them started saying: Dead dog, dead. Dead dog, dead. They all picked it up, then, chanting: Dead dog, dead! I can't face that. These were grade schoolers. Can you imagine a class full of thirteen-year-olds?

Take a day, I told her. We'll be hung over anyway. I sort of leaned toward her, rubbed her upper arm with mine.

She wrapped her arms around me and said maybe I will. It was awkward because I still held Orvil's box. My grip began to slip, so I broke free.

After more hard climbing, during which Ann fell and skinned her knee and the alcohol beat sharply in my forehead, my arms already tickling from the ivy, my fingers aching to the point where I thought I'd have to give up, throw him in the air and bury him wherever he landed, we reached the mountaintop. The trees stood sparser—a few scraggly clumps of pine. I thought at first that we must have climbed so high we'd reached the timberline. But when I looked down, I could clearly see my old Scout, its powdery yellow shining like a beacon, the crust of rust around the wheel wells still visible.

There's the Scout, I told Ann, pointing.

She didn't look.

She said, let's just get to digging. Where's the trowel?

I don't have it, I said.

What?

I don't. You had it.

No, I didn't.

I could have argued, but instead I said, I must have lost it when I fell. I'm sorry. We'll have to use our hands. Ann sighed long and hard, like I was the stupidest individual she knew. I hated when she did this. She was too nice to say she thought I was a dumbass, but not nice enough to let things rest. That insult she'd been working on since I'd dropped him now would be refined to diamond hardness. Still she held it on her tongue. Fine, I could wait.

We both scoured the ground for a good spot, and that's when we noticed that the mountain was not made of dirt, but rock. Native Missouri limestone. Not ideal for digging. The sunlight was weakening. Darkness would come soon.

Well, shit, I said.

Goddamn it, Jack, Ann said. Why does everything have to be so hard? You're the one who's supposed to be good at this.

What, I asked.

Nature. Knowing what mountains are made of. I plan everything. Make sure we pay our bills on time, make grocery lists in my head, remember to feed the cat, because if I don't, who will?

Purple rimmed her sunken eyes. I shivered. The sun was taking the warmth of the day with it. I was actually relieved. That could have been so much worse. My first instinct was to tell her guess what, I was exhausted too, just because I had an office job didn't mean I wasn't working hard, and she liked cooking so why shouldn't she shop because she knew what kind of shaved coconut to get and I sure never did, she was the one who lost the trowel, and how the hell could anyone know that a mountain was stone on top just by looking at it from the ground, but if I did that, she'd start crying again, and she might dole more blame. The dead cat seemed a likely place to start, and I couldn't stand to hear her say he was my fault. So instead, I said I know, you're right, I'm sorry. If you could just tell me what I can do.

That set her off. No, she barked. If I have to tell you what to do, I still have to think about it. I thought you were going to take control here. Now we've got a dead cat on our hands.

I set Orvil down and my brain started going, really trying to think about what she had said, to remember instances. Ann crying because I forgot to bring that little pillow she'd embroidered with our initials to the wedding, so we had nothing to strap the rings to, which had been my only job, her head thrown back so tears stayed in her eyes, didn't furrow down her made-up cheeks. Ann sighing copiously, scraping up stems and buds crusted to the counter from my attempts to microwave skunkweed



so I could smoke it. Ann always letting Orvil in and out even though I sat by the door, could, in fact, reach the door handle if I had leaned ever so slightly to the left. Nearly every time she'd kick my chair, say hey, he's your cat, too, or ask, how could you not hear him? I didn't know how. I really didn't. If it had been a commercial, or the seventh inning stretch, maybe. But really? That was lame. Hearing was natural, like smelling. It just happened, except in my case. Shit. It was my own stupid fucking fault that his bones got crushed like that, that his last seconds were pure terror. But she just nagged and nagged. She accused me of having no testicles. So help me, my balls twitched in pleasure when my fist met her cheekbone. And that lady, my wife, smiled. She actually smiled like, now I've got you, you piece of shit. And I've felt like a piece of shit ever since. But the problem wasn't her, it was me. Wife beater. Cat killer. Why shouldn't she have hated me?

I hugged her, the coffin pressing against our chests. My arm clenched the sticky skin of her upper back, her damp tank top, her hard shoulder blades. I wished we could blast off then, just the three of us, and dwell in the sky, not living or dead, not fighting, not talking, just there together, looking down to earth and up to stars.

It was probably just a hug to her. I'm sorry, I whispered into her salty hair. She pushed me away. My legs got caught in a fallen tree limb, and I went down hard. She came at me then, scratching and hitting with fists half the size of mine. I used the coffin to fend her off, deflecting blows meant for my arms, my face, my eyes. She caught my hair and pulled. I struck her with the coffin just on the shoulder, not hard. She ripped the coffin away and flogged me with it. I shielded my face with my forearms. The rough wood cut me. I wriggled from side to side to escape the blows. The sting on my arms turned to sharp pain. The bones would break if she kept it up, or the coffin would. Stop, I yelled, please stop.

She fell beside me and we both lay there panting. I carefully wiped my arms and face on my shirt. I knew then my big idea about outer space was wrong and could never be. We hated each other. But we were bound by this grief and by our hatred. Stronger, maybe, than love.

You know what, I said. The roots of those pine trees over there broke up the rock. I'll bet we could dig there okay.

Great, Ann said.

I set Orvil under some bushes. We kicked a hollow in the gravel, and it was clear that she had said great unironically, not like great, another idea from dumbass, but like great, at last dumbass has a good idea, and maybe, just maybe, in her head, she had replaced dumbass with my actual name and we had a chance. At last, we made the hole big enough so Orvil's casket could fit with ten inches of leeway between the top of the box and the top of the hole. We refilled the gravel and set pinecones in a heart shape over his resting place. It felt sad, but good, too, like we had done right by Orvil in the end.

Should we say something? I asked. Ann nodded.

Okay, I said. Orvil was a good cat. His fur felt soft, and it was a nice color. He loved us, but not as much as he loved tuna. Remember how he'd tear into the kitchen as soon as he heard the can opener? He was very tidy. Every time he threw up, he'd find something to cover it with, like a plastic bag or a sock. And he spent so much time sharpening his claws, then he'd come stand on you and knead your stomach with them. He bit to show affection. I admired him for that. He was his own little man. The day I found him under the dumpster was one of the happiest days of my life.

That was kind of lame, Ann said.

I ignored her because I knew the words were true. As the twilight swallowed us, Ann grabbed my hand, and we looked at the spot where we'd put him.

I worried that we wouldn't reach the car before dark—I had neglected to bring a flashlight—but we made it in time. We gulped the brandy on our way, and I threw the bottle deep into the woods. I handed Ann into the Scout.

As we bumped down the road toward a quieter house, Orvil began the long process of decay, his skin just starting to loosen from his flesh, which separated from his bones. In time, my poison ivy blisters would pop,

the scabs on my forearms would heal, and night crawlers would gorge on Orvil's bloated form. Six months later, we would get a new cat, and my flawed carpentry job would make Orvil's box collapse. In another three months, Ann and I would celebrate our third wedding anniversary and much of Orvil's flesh would have rotted away. When we finally would decide screw it, let's get pregnant, the harder tissues—the cartilage, the tendons and ligaments, would have gone. And by the night we would conceive our baby, nothing stayed of Orvil but a small rib cage and a handful of orange fur.