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Respiratory Therapies

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Respiratory Therapies

Bella the rat was white with tan fur on her face and shoulders that bled into an asymmetrical tan stripe down her tiny spine. In the days before we distinguished them by their personalities, my 7-year-old sister Mary and I learned to tell Bella and Donna apart by their stripes. Donna's was fatter and bolder, like Donna herself.

The night before Bella died, I lay on my twin bed running my finger again and again down her stripe, going over the patterns I could make of her thin fur by pushing the tan in different directions over the white. For hours her tiny ribs heaved too slow and shallow as she lay gasping, cupped in my small hands. I sobbed that I would take 10, no, 100 late slips from my fifth grade teacher Mrs. Evans if that's what it took to make Bella better. I had thought it over, considered it just, and mumbled it thick-throated again and again. One late slip was a warning. Two equaled a missed recess. Three meant detention, and that is how a ten-year-old negotiates with the world.

At Community Home Oxygen, my dad's office, Mary and I had played among the green oxygen tanks. We pushed each other around in the wheelchair Dad kept in the back room, asking him what all the tubes and machines were for. But when I asked him, a respiratory therapist, about Bella, he said he couldn't fix lungs so tiny. I overheard him suggest to Mom in the kitchen that he tap her on the head with a hammer. It wasn't necessary—at least, that's what they told me. In the morning, Bella was dead. Dad wrapped her in newspaper and placed her in a small box in the freezer. Before school, we buried her under the naked lilac bush in the front yard. Dad led our rat prayers, speaking into the wild exhalations of Montana wind. He said what we atheists always say at funerals:

“Bella was a good rat. She's not suffering anymore.”

The only thing that's changed over the years is the name and the species.

This February, I drove four hours from the University of Montana in Missoula to my hometown of Stanford, where my boyfriend was caught in the middle of calving season. Saturday night I awoke to him dressing in the dark at the edge of the bed, illuminated by the window's white blizzard currents in the porch light. A half hour later he came back from checking calves, and I woke again to the whir of a hair dryer. Rex was kneeled over a calf he had pulled into his house on a plastic sled, fanning the hot blow dryer along its cold body. The calf lay there, wet with snowmelt, ribs moving too slow and shallow, breath coming too hard. When we're in the feed pickup, calves stare at us like a game, ready to run on wobbly legs when we get too close. But this one's big, brown orbs of eyes were unfocused, his long lashes crystaled with ice. He was born earlier that day, and the storm blanketed him with snow as he slept.

"They try so hard to die," my dad told Rex the night before at dinner. Their deaths are a waste. \$2000 down the drain and a cow with swollen udders trying to steal another's baby. They are grieved shortly and without prayer, only "goddamnit" and a head shake.

I went back to bed, feigning sleep to the hair dryer hum, pretending it was wind. Rex stayed crouched over the calf with a patient frown, accepting guilt as if he could negotiate miscarriages, contagions, a blizzard. He ran the blow dryer back and forth, slow and warm and even. Later, he pulled the sled in front of the heater, undressed, and slipped back under the covers.

"They can't all live," I told him.

"I couldn't see him before," he said. "I should have looked harder."

Around 5 a.m., Rex and I woke suddenly. Our own lungs ballooned in shock, just like the calf's had right before his long-winded bawl filled the house with breath.