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Finding a Replacement

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Finding a Replacement

The day my girlfriend and I decided to steal the gray tabby that lived down the street we slept in late and watched reruns. Friends came on and I grabbed a left over bottle of champagne from the fridge. We ate grapes and cheese and drank half the bottle. A buzz in the morning was better than the frustration of a restless night. An easy way to push the doctor's appointment out of our minds.

We were lazy with tedium. Despite being wrapped up in blankets, Claire complained that she was getting cold, so I started up the shower.

I stood naked watching her shave, memorizing exactly how she held her legs and pointed her toes. I've always sketched Claire for my sculptures. No one else can see her in the wood, but I can. That curve there is the small of her back, that angle, the corner of her jaw. Her expressions are the hardest to capture, and though it's worked out in my favor with the buyers and the museums, that's the real reason I never do faces: every piece I carve is Claire.

I said to her half joking, "We really should steal that cat."

She asked me through the warm stream of water, "Are you a cat or a dog person?"

I answered tentatively, as I always do, "I guess I'm a cat person."

Dressed, we went downstairs to the living room. I opened the door and afternoon sun stretched across the carpet. Claire looked at the sunlight, rubbed the warm patch of yellow with her toes and said, "If we're going to do this, we need to be real clandestine. Ski masks, black jackets, a white van with no windows, and when we bring her back, we're naming her Pippin. And she's going to lie down right here in the sun," she pointed to the warm spot of carpet with her foot, "or we're not feeding her. Deal?"

"Pippin?" I said.

"Yes. We can call her Pip."

“Ski masks?”

“Yes, those too.”

I pushed her a little and said, “If we’re arrested, I’m turning you over, I’m telling them everything. I hope you know that.”

She giggled. “I wouldn’t expect anything less from you.”

We pulled up to the brick house at the end of the road. Its wrought-iron fence was rusted and weathered, throwing thin shadows on the lawn. I leaned my seat back. I clicked on the CD player and Tom Petty was in. I hummed “Room at the Top.”

Claire asked me, “Is “Won’t Back Down” on this album?”

I turned. Few people understand the connections I make, so I put them in wood, not words. In that moment, Claire’s eyes reminded me of the pinecones my parents used to collect for Christmas ornaments. They were free. A perfect way to decorate our wire tree. When we moved out of the apartment, we bought glass icicles, pretty bells, and little harps for a real tree that smelled like sap. After mom’s first run-in with cervical cancer, dad dug the pinecones out of an old cardboard box and hung them from the spiral staircase. Two Christmases later, when mom refused to go back for more chemo, he left them up until March.

“Nope. This is Echo.”

Dad used to tell me I had my mother’s hands. As a young boy that made me so embarrassed I would walk around with them in my pockets. I still do. My hands always find their way there.

She smiled and said, “Oh well, I like that one.”

Claire always asks me, “What’s going on up there?” and taps my forehead, but I can’t tell her about my hands and old pinecones. I can’t explain that two years ago, when she grasped my fingers and searched them for every scar, every callus from sculpting, I finally felt like more of a man than my father.

I wanted to say something clever, something that would break the tension, or hold the moment, or draw her in. But Claire saw Pip and I missed the

chance.

“Look, there she is.”

Our soon-to-be cat pranced along the fence line. I asked, “Should I grab her, or should you?”

Claire didn’t say anything. After a few seconds, I slid my hands from my pockets, climbed out of the leather seat, and picked up Pip.

The drive home helped me forget the way I pulled Pip from the lawn by her gray fur. The way she rubbed her head against my arm, purring. In the car, she jumped from Claire’s lap to mine, meowing, turning in circles, vocalizing her distaste for the vehicle.

We scratched behind her ears to calm her down. In silly voices we told her how cute she was. Then Claire pulled her down and held her tight, whispering about how she was a good kitty, how she was to be spoiled until she was the happiest cat in the entire world.

When we got home, Claire held Pip while I fumbled with the keys. As I unlocked the door and swung it open for them, she looked at me and said, “If you can’t have kids, steal a cat.”

We made dinner with Pip on the counter. Claire realized that we had none of the essentials: no cat food, no litter-box. We decided to make salmon so Pip could have some and go out later for ice cream. We’d pick up the essentials on the way back.

We let Pip eat on the table, swearing that we would never allow it again. A few glasses of red wine later and we were stealing her off each other’s laps, tempting her with more salmon, saying, “See, I know you love me the most.”

After the games, Claire went upstairs. She came down in my old VCU sweatshirt, slender in its yellow billows.

“Did you like Richmond?” she asked.

“I did. But it’s dirty and cluttered and full of jerks.”

“Is that why you came out here?”

I was surprised. I thought I had told Claire why I moved to Missoula, but she wouldn't forget something like that. She wouldn't ask me the same sort of question twice.

"No. My mom was from here. She talked about it all the time."

Claire bent down and scooped up Pip, stuffing her into the big sweatshirt pocket. Pip tried to squirm through the opening by rolling in circles. Finally, she shoved her gray head out of the side, then tumbled onto the floor. Claire scooped her up again, this time pressing her into the VCU decal. Pip stopped meowing and settled into Claire's shoulder with her claws.

"Ouch, shit." Claire turned. "Do you think we could put her on a leash?"

I pushed on Pip's paws with my thumb until she let go. "Just carry her. She'll calm down."

At Big Dipper there was the standard line. Kids from the university, parents with little guys, a handful of dog-walkers, and some awkward teenagers. Directly in front of Claire were three homeless men and one woman.

They were keeping to themselves. The woman was drunk or high, tipping back and forth like one of those little plastic birds that don't stop rocking once you push them. The men all sounded sober, or knew how to speed up their words to conceal their intoxication. The furthest left, with a heavy beard and what remained of a baseball cap pulled down over his wavy hair, said, "Hey, Sam, can I borrow your phone?"

The man to his right reached into the pocket of his corduroy vest and pulled out a cracked, blue flip-phone. The bearded vagrant took it, mumbled, "Thanks," then walked away.

The paunchy man on the far right slumped over the tipping girl. After straightening himself out with his cane, he led her to a table where they sat down. It's amazing how even among those four people there was a leader. There was a guy who could stay in line, keep a cell phone, and bring them all ice cream.

A dog noticed Pip and started barking. Pip got scared and started to claw

Claire, who pulled her in tight against my sweatshirt.

“Should I take her back to the car?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’ll order. What do you want?”

“Yellow cake with sprinkles.”

I tried to ask if I should get Pip anything, maybe a scoop of vanilla, like some people do for their dogs, but she was already halfway to the car trying to calm Pip down. When I turned back to face the line, the leader in the corduroy vest was staring at Claire.

“Pretty wife you got.”

I didn’t want to stir him up, so I replied, “Thanks.”

“Did she have a cat in her sweater?”

“Yeah.”

He laughed. It was a dirty, rough laugh that came from places I’ve never been, places I’ve only seen beneath the concrete of overpasses. I stepped back. The university girls in front of him turned in their little cluster and gawked. He kept chuckling.

When I got up to the double window to order, the homeless leader was directly to my left, trying to figure out just how much he could buy with six dollars and thirty-five cents. I ordered Claire yellow cake in a sugar cone, nearly forgetting the sprinkles. I got myself balsamic brown sugar ice cream dipped in chocolate.

As I leaned against the window, my elbow propped up on the counter, I could hear the squeak of the vest turning and feel his stare. I tried to pay no attention, to watch the woman preparing our cones dig out the spoon for the sprinkles. But finally, I looked in his direction.

“What’d you say you ordered?” he asked.

“Balsamic brown sugar, dipped.”

“That sounds nasty, brother. Weird flavor.” He paused, “You know what else is a weird flavor?”

I didn’t want to answer and the woman behind the counter was trying to hand me the cones. I put my wallet down and started to slide out my credit

card, when he repeated himself.

“You know what else is a weird flavor?”

I signed the receipt and grabbed the cones.

“What?”

“Cat.”

He burst out laughing. The mom behind him pulled her daughter close to her knee.

“Don’t you know the fucking chinks eat cats? Don’t you think they probably have cat ice cream?”

He was following me away from the window and his voice was getting aggressive. Everyone in line watched, wide-eyed and quiet.

“Maybe we should take your cat and make some ice cream. What’d you say its name was?”

I kept walking, hoping he would get tired of it and leave me alone before I reached the car. I heard the woman behind the counter saying, “Sir,” over and over again. Through the window of the Toyota I could see Claire’s face tighten with worry. I shook my head at her so she wouldn’t open the door.

I glanced over my shoulder as I rounded the bumper. The homeless leader was standing on the curb staring at me. He raised his right hand and flipped me off.

“You don’t know how good you have it. Pretty bitch wife. Pretty cat. Nice car. Why don’t you have me over for dinner some time?” He laughed again, turned and strolled back to the window, running his hands through his greasy hair.

As soon as I got in the car, Claire said, “What was that about?”

“Nothing. Here’s your cone. I almost forgot the sprinkles.” My hands wanted to slide into my pockets, but I had my ice cream and the steering wheel to manage.

On our way home, the faint lights of Missoula jittered in the rearview mirror. As we climbed the hill, I took my eyes off the road to watch them rise in their reflections like neat, crisp chips of marble smoothed out to pastel.

Halos of calm and cream invading the night sky. A flat world so unlike my own.

The hill went on forever.

At six a.m. the next morning the alarm on Claire's cell phone went off. She got in the shower without turning on the lights or fan. I went downstairs to make her coffee. The carpet was warm against the soles of my feet, but the cold linoleum in the kitchen assured me that summer was coming to an end. I picked Pip up off the counter and stared into her green eyes.

"Breakfast time, cutie."

I pulled her dish out of the plastic bag on the living room couch, rinsed it, and got an old placemat from the kitchen drawer. I watched Pip eat while the coffeemaker muttered behind us.

As Pip licked the bowl clean, Claire came downstairs. I told her I would start the car. She nodded and filled her travel mug.

"Don't give me crap for using any sugar this morning, okay? These appointments suck and you have no idea."

I put my hands up to concede. Pushing a bunch of Claire's sweaters and pea coats out of the way, I found my cracked leather jacket in the back of the closet. I grabbed it, then propped the door to the garage open with the recycling bin. As I threw the garbage into the receptacle by the car, Claire came out with her thermos. She climbed into the passenger seat and huddled over the warm lid of her coffee. I slid in behind the wheel a minute later.

She asked me, "Where are you meeting your dad for breakfast?"

"Paul's Pancake Parlor. What time did you say you'd be done with your appointment?"

"I don't know, probably in like two-ish hours."

I could tell she was worried.

"It'll be fine," I said.

"Doubtful. I still can't believe your dad followed you out here."

She was being rude, but I understood why.

“Well, I’m all he has left.”

I hit the button for the garage door. I knew that Claire was going to the doctor and I was going to see my dad, but we would both end up talking about the same thing. Claire was going to get the final word today. I was going to tell my father that he had to get over it. He always treated her well, but he would say things to me behind closed doors.

After Thanksgiving, he told me that an infecund woman, no matter how pretty and sweet, is just not the kind of woman you settle down with. I had no idea what infecund meant, so I tried asking him. He grabbed me by the shoulder and said, “Shane, I’m not going to let our family name die with you, that’s all.”

I threw the car in reverse and backed up a few feet. I stopped because there was a truck coming.

He’d said it in the kitchen, as he was getting himself a slice of cold pumpkin pie. Then he went back to the couch and offered her a bite from his fork.

Claire tapped my shoulder and shrugged. I looked in the rearview mirror. Nothing. I pushed down on the accelerator and the tire rolled over something soft. It gave beneath the weight.

“What was that?”

I told Claire to stay in the car. I remembered propping the garage door open with the recycling bin.

“What the hell was that? Shane, what was that?” She wouldn’t stop. “Shane, no. No. No. No.”

Pip was sprawled out on the concrete. A thin streak of red ran from her head to the tire. Damp fur matted around her ear in clumps. Her left eye blinked. I bent down to one knee.

“Shane, no!”

Claire was yelling at me. She threw open the door. I rushed to the front of the car and caught her jacket.

“Claire, don’t—”

“You killed her!”

She turned her back to me and started screaming into her hands, then squatted down and tucked her head between her knees. I looked to the tire. From where we were, all you could see was Pip's legs and tail and some blood. Claire thought she was already dead.

I went back around the bumper and knelt down. Pip's chest rose and fell softly. Her left eye had turned almost entirely red. She blinked. I could still see some green. I reached out and lay my small hand on her side and scratched behind her ear. I couldn't hear it, but I felt the soft vibration of her purring. After a few seconds, her chest stopped rising.

Claire drove herself to the doctor's. She wouldn't let me in the car. I called my dad and tried to tell him I wasn't coming to breakfast. He asked why. I explained that Claire had taken the car and that we had gotten in a fight. Then I told him I had to go.

I was halfway done scrubbing the streak off the garage floor when my dad came in the side door. "Shane, what are you doing?"

I tossed the sponge into the bucket of warm water. "I'm—dad, what are you doing? You can't just show up here unannounced."

"It's hardly unannounced. We were supposed to get breakfast."

His shoulders dominated the doorway. His long grey hair was tucked back in a fishing cap.

"Yeah, dad, I know. But I told you I couldn't make it."

"No, you said Claire had taken the Toyota. What happened to her Subaru?"

"Its timing belt went a couple of days ago. I told you that. I told you that it's in the shop, that we're, that—dad, why are you here?" I bent down and grabbed the sponge, smashing it against the concrete.

He moved behind me. "Shane, what's going on?"

"I backed over our cat this morning." I stood up and looked at him. "Dad, why are you here?"

His voice came out calm.

“You said you and Claire had gotten in a fight. I was just coming by to make sure you were okay.” He paused, “When did you two get a cat?”

“Yesterday.”

We stood there watching the puddle of soap and water spread across the floor, twisting. I dropped the sponge into the bucket.

“I’m sorry,” I said to break the silence.

“You don’t have to be sorry, Shane. I had no idea. How’s Claire doing?”

“She’s destroyed. She had to go to the doctor’s this morning anyway, and then this happens.”

“It’ll be fine. She’ll be fine. When your mother and I had to—”

“I’d rather not hear it. I know what you think of Claire. I don’t want to talk about it right now. And I don’t want to talk about mom either.”

“Well, when do you want to talk about it, Shane? Because it’s a conversation we need to have.” He flattened his hair down beneath his cap, shifting it back so I could see his silver eyebrows. “You know your mother would feel the same way I do.”

Then he scratched his beard as if it were nothing. So calm. So easy. Just a normal conversation about cars, or football, or power tools.

“Come on, dad, is that really why you’re here? I told you, I don’t want to hear it. You know what? Please leave.”

“Shane.”

“Please go. You can’t just come here, and open the door without knocking and bring up mom. This isn’t your house. Please, just leave.”

I followed my dad out the door. As he climbed into his Montero, he looked at me and said, “Someday, Shane, you’re going to have to learn how to deal with things. You’re not a little kid anymore.” I closed the gate and walked around the side of the house to the backyard.

My shed was cold and dark. In a few weeks I was going to have to wear gloves to keep my hands warm enough to work. After the exhibit in L.A. and the bigger one in New York, I had taken two months off. Now I was back.

I took the tarp off a massive cherry trunk and oiled my chisel. I found my

dad's old hammer. The first strike was hard and terrible. It sheered the wood. A crack ran to its center. I threw my dad's hammer into the wall and thought about crying, shoulders draped over the cool wood. But men, especially men living in Montana, don't cry.

For weeks we lived in the same house. I chiseled and sanded. Claire slept in late.

For weeks we occupied the same space. I hammered and carved. Claire watched TV by herself.

For weeks we were near each other, but we were not lovers. I wore gloves and blew warm breath into my hands. Claire put extra quilts on the bed. We made love once, but it was quiet, and she wouldn't let me hold her breasts.

In November I told her in the kitchen, "Claire, I want you to come see the piece I've just finished." She didn't say anything, just walked to the closet in the living room. I started again, "Claire, I—"

"I heard you. I'm grabbing my jacket. Is that okay?"

Waiting for her by the sliding glass door, I looked at the counter. I saw Pip stretched out on the granite, chest caved in, bleeding. I heard my father's voice, saw his cap and wavy hair—heard him say the word, "infecund."

"Are we going?"

Claire was standing behind me. I felt closer to her then than I had in months. I tried to take her hand but she grabbed her collar and crossed her arms, pulling the jacket tight to her chest.

I led her across the lawn. In the shed there was only the dull light of my work lamp. All the windows were covered. I reached down and pulled the heavy green tarp off my sculpture.

Claire covered her mouth. We stood in silence. She wiped a few tears from her eyes as her breath collected in the cold air. It lingered over the naked back of my sculpture. A woman: bare legs, knees buckled in. Every time Claire exhaled, her breath fell on grooves of wooden hair.

I watched her take steps with hesitation, with slow feet and pink ankles

around my sculpture. She wiped away more tears. She took more steps. Finally, she came face to face with her portrait. She held her breath and stared at her own breasts, her own thighs, and her own stomach, all swollen with pregnancy. All held in wood.

The face frozen before her gazed at the floor with an old expression. A slender arm ran down her portrait's side to cradle a stretched, round stomach that held the baby girl Claire would never feel kick inside her. And just above the creases in the figure's wrist, starting in the smooth surface, then twisting deep into the wood, dividing her stomach into broken, scarred halves, was the crack caused by a worn-out hammer.

Claire walked over to me. Her hand came down from her mouth and lingered in the air, then it struck me across the face. I didn't move or flinch. It struck me again. I stepped back and steadied myself. Her hand clenched into a fist. It raised itself again to hit me, then stopped. She left the shed and ran into the house.

I found my father's hammer beneath the covered window in a pile of wood dust. I carried it across the lawn and through the side gate, down the hill and by the university, over the footbridge and through Greenough Park to my father's doorstep. I put a hole in his door with the hammer. I swung it again and made another hole. The door opened.

"Jesus, Shane, what are you doing? What's happening to you?"

The words were there, on my lips. I breathed in. I looked at his strong chest and heavy shoulders. His hand running over his hair. I said, "Dad, I'm going to marry her."

I dropped the hammer and stepped down from the porch. My hands were frozen but I kept them out of my pockets. My father rubbed his forehead and nodded. If Claire had been on his lawn, if she had heard and seen me, I think things would have gone back to normal. But I had left her at home, by herself, and when I got back there was a note waiting in the kitchen. It said, "Don't try to reach me. I'll be back in a few weeks." Across the valley, thousands of lights—specs of dazzling marble—faded into pastel.