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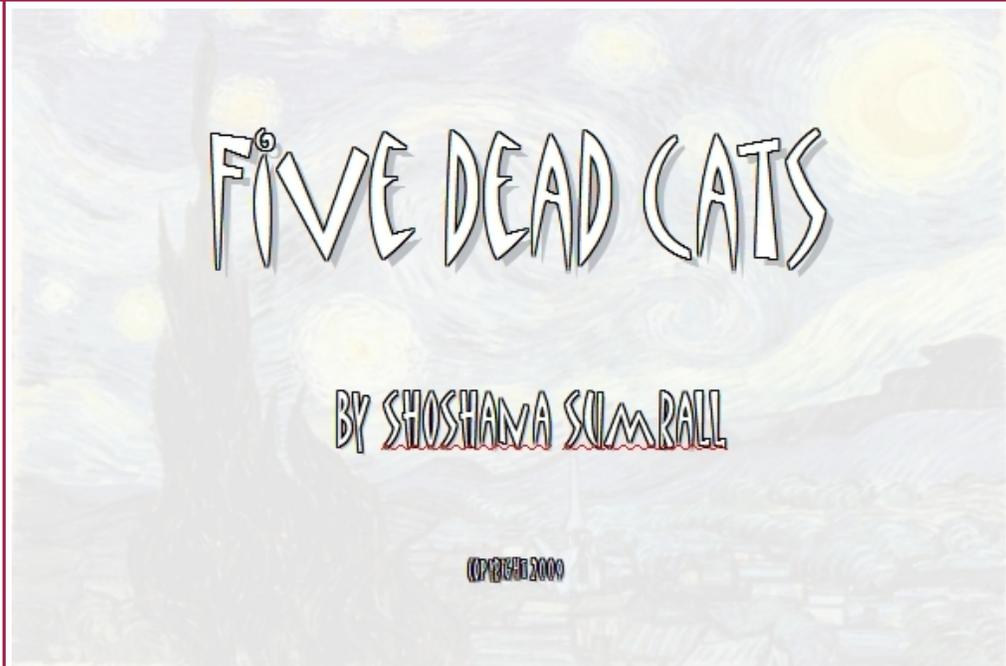
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A baby's grave. Four more will follow this one. We cannot bury them side by side, or even near one another, because of all the other dead pets buried haphazardly under the thick matting of pine needles, that one signified by a heap of limestone chunks, that one by a dead, gray slab of tree trunk, the first two letters of Joey's name carved clumsily by eleven-year-old hands, mine, before those hands grew too slick and cramped to grip the pocket knife. I'd meant to return to the job, but never seemed to find the time, these last twelve years.

Each grave the size of that of a human infant, each sheltering the remains of a doggy, a kitty, a bunny. One even holds the tiny bones and rust-red feathers of Sandy the rooster, my best friend at age eight. No new graves have been dug beneath the tall, moaning pines in three years—Dagwood the cocker spaniel was the last, and before him Joey the curly-haired mutt.

And now, five in one sitting.

It's early September, and sweat has plastered my hair against my neck as I work this shovel, despite the thick, sighing mantle of evergreen branches blocking the late-afternoon sun. My engagement ring glimmers upon a skinny twig. Beneath, my tee-shirt droops over a sap-coated stump. I'd remove my bra, too, but don't, just in case Dad should decide to wander back here again with more iced tea in a jar. His sad, haggard face has enough trouble in it without adding embarrassment to the mix.

The corpses are lined up neatly in the long freezer in the garage: Harvey, Charles, Dusty, Grimalkin, and Theodore, in the order in which we found them.

Dad's deep-lined, suntanned cheeks were moist when he'd stomped into the kitchen and announced Harvey was on ice. He didn't look to have suffered, and there were no telling marks on the body. Just dead, like that, lying peacefully out by the wood pile.

Harv: Your gray and white face, whiskers and eyelid drooping on the left side, always made us wonder if you'd suffered a mild stroke. But we can't recall you ever looking any different. Six years ago, I came home late and sat on a frozen alfalfa stack out in the corral under a brilliant, three-quarter moon, while steaming cows dozed all around, and you found me. While I shook and burned inside over how that boy had terrified me, saying those things in my ear on the long bus ride home from the Republican Valley Regional Band Competition, you were the only other person awake, and you walked between the ankles of cows, up the side of the

haystack, and curled yourself solemnly in my lap without purring.

When my tears began to freeze on your fur, you looked up once, your big, lime-colored eyes blinking with slow annoyance, but you stayed where you were, and we sat for another hour, until I realized I'd been dreaming and that an icicle had formed on my nose. That boy didn't seem so big anymore, and in my sleep I'd plotted my revenge—much cleverer than anything he could have foreseen, because I was a girl.

I kneel and spread one of the plastic garbage bags in the bottom of the hole, inside this ring of dirt, then straighten, knees and back popping, as I wipe my forehead with one arm, scouting for the next available plot.

When I'd pulled open the wooden door of the garden shed, a few curling flakes of faded, peach-colored paint fluttering to the ground, the rusted lawnmower was pushed up against one wall, instead of being in its customary position: half-buried in the gas cans, the green-tinted, slightly-used jug of antifreeze, and bags of fertilizer...which were now arranged in one corner. I'd come with the old broom, prepared to clear away the wolf-spider nests that infest the contents of the shed as I made my way to the spade leaning in the corner, which I knew wouldn't have been used in some time.

Dad can't help with the digging. He's had to be careful of his back since the snow-shoveling incident last January. Since then, roof work and treefall clearing and repairs to the tractor and bailer are postponed until David and I can drive out to the farm. David has offered to go alone on several occasions, pointing out my burden of credit hours. It would finally be a chance to spend some time with his soon-to-be father-in-law, he says, one on one, man to man.

But in my mind, I see Dad's face the day we told him the happy news; how his mouth twitched into a smile while his eyes seemed to withdraw to someplace else. I try to imagine the two of them alone together, in the absence of the one thing they have in common. I always think of a good reason why I need to come along.

Today, however, there were no cobwebs, so I set the broom aside and lifted the spade.

I discovered Charles stretched out in the garden beneath the pearl-gray lamb's-ear leaves, his fur blending in like camouflage. My voice still wet with grief over Harvey, I needed cat company. Charlie-boy, I said, you getting some shade under there? For, like today, yesterday felt like an inferno.

At the sound of my voice, Charles should have elongated himself lazily, twitched an ear, slitted one amber eye to peer up at me. But Charles lay still, like a fluffy, gray towel tossed in a corner. It's so hot out here, I said. Everything pulling thin with the heat, each moment limp and sagging, brown flowers dripping from exhausted stems. Why don't you come on inside, Charlie. We've got the air on.

I squatted slowly, putting out an unwilling hand. The body was already stiff beneath the soft fur. My bare knees came to rest in the dry dirt and I rocked there, my hand lying on his old, thin body.

Charlie had been just five weeks old when we brought him home from the neighbors' farm. I was ten, and it was summer. Joey was getting around slowly by then, arthritis in his poor little hips, most of his sight gone. He'd tolerated the incidental new farmcat with stoic patience, knowing he was too small of a dog to be much threat to them. So, when he limped out from

under the porch to sniff the bit of gray fluff that had struggled out of my arms, he only gave one perfunctory “wuf” before turning back toward the porch. But little Charlie had cried in his soft kitten-voice, waddling after the dog through the yard grass. Joey hesitated, looking around in surprise as the baby wound himself around his stumpy legs, rubbing against Joey’s chest, purring mightily, batting at his floppy ears.

The two were inseparable pals from that point on, and over the following months, as Charlie became a lanky, muscular cat, he defended the increasingly crippled Joey against the other cats. Since old Joey’s death the following year, you might walk back here on any given afternoon and find Charlie sitting on Joey’s grave.

Charlie, dear, I would put you in the ground right here, shotgun to your old pal, your most loved place in this world. But there’s a pine tree on Joey’s left side, the crumbling bones of a rabbit on his right.

We don’t know what killed them. After Charlie, I began to call the others by name, and Dad, hearing the panic in my voice, came outside, the screen door slapping behind him. It became a gruesome hunt.

The sun is now partially hidden behind a scrim of peach-tinted cloud in the west. Still enough light to dig one more.

Dusty died trying to climb up to the cab of the old combine. The rotted, crumbling seat was always her favorite spot for lounging. Also a good place to snag the occasional mouse. Had she been trying to escape earthly mortality by leaving the ground? Or maybe she just wanted to breathe her last in familiar comfort. She had accomplished neither. Her body lay in a tortoiseshell heap beneath the bent steel steps leading up into the cab, at first hidden by the tall, whispering grass that hugs the dead machine.

Dusty was my first present from David. We were college freshmen, out for summer. It was also the weekend he and Dad met. I’d wanted to get a summer job and stay in Lincoln, but with Dad out here all alone and paying for my school, moving back home seemed the only right choice. David offered his pickup truck—it had a topper. It took less than an hour to load up my meager possessions from the dorm room.

David has these serious gray eyes, so you can never tell if he’s joking or not. We were headed west out of town on Highway 6, and I was feeling the first real butterflies in my stomach when David said, “Shit, forgot something,” and turned south before the overpass, onto a dirt road.

“What?” I asked. We were nowhere near his apartment. “Where’re we going?”

“I left something at my uncle’s,” he replied, glancing over gravely.

“Something you need for the trip?”

“Yeah.”

“What is it?”

"You'll see..." he muttered. I had yet to learn that when David mutters, he's leading you on.

"You never said you had an uncle."

"I've never said a lot of things." This time, his gaze remained on the road.

David doesn't have an uncle. Twenty minutes later, as we headed away from the old farmstead David had found searching through the want ads, and back toward 6, I gazed down in wonder at the multicolored kitten in my lap. She was shivering with terror, her mottled fur coated with farm dirt.

"Happy birthday," said David. "I love you." My birthday wasn't until July, but we'd be apart then.

"Dusty" was all I said, and the little kitten had put her front paws on my chest and looked pleadingly into my eyes.

Dad's stiff expression as he shook with David melted when Dusty climbed onto his boot and attempted to crawl up his pant leg.

The body was twisted as though from battle in the high, yellow grass. Her jaws hung open, and there was a small froth of greenish vomit, a single, struggling worm lying in the puddle. I crushed the worm under my heel, grunting and grinding until sweat broke out on my forehead—why should life be allowed to go on inside her, when it wasn't her own?

It's dusk as I prop the spade by the third grave and pull on my clammy shirt. The last two will have to wait until morning.

A plastic pitcher of tea sits on the table with big hunks of ice drifting in it. Dad has created a salad of garden greens. He is just setting out the Wonder Bread, Miracle Whip, and can of potted meat spread—my favorite snack when I was a kid. I've come to detest potted meat. I'll let him know sometime soon—but not tonight.

"Doing okay?" he asks as I walk through the kitchen, the air conditioning turning my sweat into an itchy patina of salt residue.

"I'm okay, Dad. I need a quick shower before supper." In the bathroom, I peel off my sweaty clothes and reach for the towel cabinet and am abruptly blinded by tears. I'm surprised there's this much water left in me.

More often than not, when someone undressed for a shower or used the toilet, they would feel the sensation they were being watched by mocking eyes. From behind the towel cabinet door, a loud purring would emanate, sounding suspiciously like snickering laughter. Sometimes, a long, hairy arm would slide out of the door crack and pat your head or poke you gently with killer claws.

Grimalkin liked to spy on naked humans. Where this feline voyeurism originated, I can't even guess. How he'd figured out how to open the towel cabinet is another mystery that will accompany him to his grave tomorrow morning. Once in a while, I'd forget and start to undress without first ensuring my privacy, and pretty soon, that motor-like purr would start up.

Grimalkin: I'd quickly pull up my pants again and whip open the towel cabinet. There you'd be, slick and black, perched on the towels, smirking and bobbing your head in cat-laughter. You'd continue to laugh at your little joke even as I tossed you out of the bathroom and slammed the door behind you. Often you'd stretch one muscular, black arm under the door, grabbing at the carpet with those long, barbed claws of yours, showing me what you could do to my tender, naked flesh if you so chose.

I open the cabinet, which contains towels and nothing more. I choose the soft, green one Grimalkin liked best. I lay it on the toilet lid and sit down naked, and hide my grimy face in my hands. As an afterthought, I lean over and turn on the shower to muffle the sounds.

For as far back as my memory goes, the supper table has always been the place where farm matters are discussed. From the time I was a little girl, Dad has always asked my advice about whether or not to purchase that baler at the upcoming farm sale; if we should keep the bull for one more breeding season or buy another; whether to plant or wait and see if there'll be a late frost. It was my decision fifteen years ago to paint the garden shed that special shade of shell-pink.

Tonight over our cold sandwiches, Dad says nothing, shifting around in his chair, sighing and looking out the west window at the darkening horizon. I ask him, finally, how his back is doing, does he want a pillow? His faded eyes flick toward me for an instant before hurrying back to the window.

"It's fine" is all he says.

The air conditioner kicks on again, and I quickly rise to dial up the thermostat on the wall, rubbing out the sudden goosebumps on my arms. Dad sighs again, massaging the side of his sunburned neck.

I wish for David. Then I don't. Better not to have him see this. Back in Lincoln, his school buddies are throwing his bachelor party as we sit here sipping iced tea, the only sound the faint rattle of loose gears in the ancient, plastic wall clock above the sink.

Two weeks from today, we leave on our honeymoon, a week of camping and fishing on Lake Michigan. Dad insisted on paying for the wedding and reception. Although we'd planned from the start to be married in Lincoln, Dad's face looked careworn when I reminded him once more that no, Reverend Baxter would not be marrying us. I have a new church now—in Lincoln, not here. Eventually, Dad had forced a smile and said he guessed he had enough back-pain pills for the long drive. I imagined my over-medicated father driving down I-80, but something indefinable in David's expression erased whatever I'd been about to say.

I cancelled the band we'd hired for the reception and found a DJ for half the price. Then I cancelled the DJ and re-hired the band, covering the difference with my own credit card. I felt compelled to fix something before it could break down. I told no one.

It's five-thirty in the morning. In rural Nebraska at the end of summer, there is no other time like this. Every sleeping cow, every strand of barbwire, every catstep and cliff of every canyon, has a silver stillness that could almost make you believe no glaring sun will in a short time boil away the night's fleeting magic.

I'm already pouring sweat as I step up and out of Grimalkin's grave and search for the garbage bags. The four holes aren't even anywhere near one another. Why couldn't we have

arranged our pets' remains with more forethought, starting with my first taste of death at age five, when Chloe the rabbit drowned in her water pan? Was it that we'd subconsciously believed each subsequent pet would live forever? Bodies are scattered under the backyard between the pines like spilled Tylenol capsules. When the five dead cats are brought out from the freezer, it will be the last time they are ever that close to one another. The last time I saw Dusty and Harvey alive, they were wrestling under the kitchen table. Now they will be buried in earth and darkness, divided by old bones of other animals they never knew.

One last hole to dig.

Theodore was always as playful as a kitten, even as he'd gotten older. His little orange body would tremble with excitement as he tried to engage the other cats in games of tag or keep-away (often getting an irritated whack on the nose for his pains).

According to Dad's last letter, Grimalkin had been teaching Theodore to hunt bunnies. Grimalkin, with his slick panther physique, was a natural killer. It was hard, however, to picture Theodore, a small, silly longhair, stalking through the alfalfa, intent upon his fearful prey, closing in for the kill.

Last night, I dreamed they were still alive, all five of them. This morning when I awoke, I felt Theodore's warm, furry body curled in the crook of my knees. I moved my hand to scratch behind his tufted ears, then put it over my mouth to stifle the sob.

We'd found Theodore and Grimalkin at the same time, curled together, black on orange, against an alfalfa bale. Grimalkin's muscular arm lay across Theodore, no claws in sight, as if to comfort the smaller kitty in his last moments. I collapsed on the fragrant bale, tears falling between my feet onto the two hardening bodies, which only one night ago had been bounding after millers under the yardlight.

The tops of the pasture hills are igniting with the first red sun rays, and Theodore's grave will soon be finished. As I pause to push my sweaty hair out of my eyes for the hundredth time, thinking I should just shave it all off and be done with it, my gaze falls upon my engagement ring, which has hung out here all night, decorating a pine tree. There is a quiet step behind me, but I don't move.

That heavy sigh. The sound of it turns my vision red, redder than the distant, blazing hills. I slowly turn, pivoting on the handle of the shovel. He stands a few feet away, looking down at the thermos in his hands as if wondering how it got there. "What, Dad?" My voice is sharper than normal, and his eyes look up at me and retreat at the same time.

"I thought you might want some orange juice," he says, slowly extending the thermos.

I stare at him hard. After a few seconds, I take it and unscrew the lid, drink some before closing it again, the familiar tang of Bright 'n Early concentrate, nothing more, constricting my salivary glands. "What are you doing up so early?" I ask, handing the thermos back. "You never start chores before seven."

Sigh.

I clutch the shovel handle tightly, trying not to see a peeling shed door swinging open. The unaccustomed order of the plastic containers within, the complete absence of cobwebs. "I couldn't sleep, punkin," he says, calling me a nickname I haven't heard in twelve years. "I just feel so bad, you know..." He tries to look at me, then his glance slides upward through the treetops, escaping. "This happening right before your wedding and all. Folks would probably understand if maybe you decided to postpone things..."

He is still gazing upward as I swing the shovel high. It trembles here above my head for a second before I whirl with all my strength, burying the blade in the tender trunk of a young pine. Sap begins to ooze, my knuckles, bloodless, still clenched upon the handle. Behind me, fading footsteps quicken toward the house.

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