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The cat

There was a cat in the ditch by the Abrams Road. It seemed to be asleep, stretched out on its side, eyes closed. Mum told our father to stop the car, and when he had, both she and I got out. I knew it was dead.

Mum probably did too, but I suppose we were still hoping it would jump up and rush into the bushes. When we got up close we saw blood running from the corner of its mouth. Jimmy shouted to us to hurry up. We were driving him to practice, and he said something about everybody who came late having to do a hundred extra push-ups.

“Isn’t that what practice is for?” I asked Mum, but she wasn’t listening.

Crouching down by the cat she put a hand on it. Then she shook her head.

“Who does things like this? Kills a cat and leaves it in the ditch to finish bleeding?”

She got up. Both she and I recognised the cat, with its silver-black striped fur. She was usually either big-tummied or else had a kitten or two on her heels. Now, though, she looked very small and empty. She became a wild cat when the previous owner moved into town. Some people in the village would have liked to adopt her but she had been impossible to catch.

As if she had become wild the very second there was no one looking after her. Mum would certainly have been willing to take her in as well, if only dad didn’t have such bad cat allergies.

“We can’t just leave her here,” she said to me.

She removed her windcheater, folded the cat into it and lifted her up.

I saw Jimmy rolling his eyes in the back seat, pointing at his watch.

When our father saw us bringing the cat over, he rolled down his window.

“Not in the car, Ingrid!” he called.

She switched directions.

“Will you open the boot?” she asked me.

If memory serves, just a few days after Mum buried the cat she moved up to the attic. Sometimes she came down for dinner, but except for that we didn't see much of her. At first no one commented. I heard father chuckle something about “women” and “typical her” on the phone to one of his mates, but otherwise no one said anything. Of course all three of us were unbearably curious about when she was going to make one of her famous “statements”. She was something of a relic of the hippie age, our Mum. Or at least that was what the old man used to say. “This week it's the government, next week you can't have your Sunday roast, and before you know it she's off to march against some war or another they wrote a few lines about in the paper!” I didn't really think that was fair, but I knew he wasn't actually serious. Most of the time he approved of Mum's ideas, as long as they didn't mean he had to do anything. Mum has always been political, and has been known to say that she'd die of grief if she turned out to have brought up apolitical children or, God forbid, “kids who sympathised with the bourgeoisie”. That was where her “statements” came into the picture. She could make one at any time, and they tended to be pretty vehement. When my brother and I were younger, we mostly listened and took in her words with varying degrees of attentiveness, but in more recent years he and Father tended to form a united front and answer back when she started putting forward “the facts”.

Sometimes there were arguments, and if my brother started laughing at Mum when she got all hot and bothered, it drove her wild. I wouldn't

usually say much. I actually agreed with Mum on most things, but if I had said that, Father and Jimmy would have teased me to death. Jimmy always called me a Mummy's girl to his friends when I was smaller, and I really didn't want to do anything that would encourage him to start again. But Mum said nothing. She sometimes commented on the news (she read lots of newspapers, some of which she subscribed to just for herself) or asked us how things were at school. Then she said she'd enjoyed her dinner and slipped out again and up the attic stairs. I cleaned up after the meal. Once Mum moved up, Pop had to take over the cooking, a burden he had not shouldered in silence. He was always grumbling at Jimmy and me about not helping out, about being a slave in his own home, and about us being the most spoiled children he had ever known. Jimmy was just as quick as Mum at slipping out of the kitchen before he found himself in the firing line, so I was the one who ended up doing the washing up.

The funny thing was that the old man never used to help Mum with the meals, in principle, or with the cleaning, either, for that matter. Now he didn't seem to be letting that bother him. He just kept harping on about what lazybones Jimmy and I were. And he paid no heed to the fact that I was doing lots more than Jimmy! Well, our father had always been inclined to indulge him. I have no idea why. And it didn't really bother me, except sometimes, when I got aggravated with him saying, for instance: "Give Jimmy the rest of that, he's a growing boy!" in spite of the fact that Jimmy had already been six foot one for a couple of years, while I just making the transition from a short, chubby eleven-year-old into a tall, fairly slim thirteen-year-old.

When Mum had been in exile for over a week, the old man started getting

riled. All of a sudden he was up at the door to the attic room all the time, needing to get things I didn't even know we had up there. He would knock until Mum asked what he wanted, and when she offered to bring the thing he wanted down if she found it, he got even more annoyed and told her to stop being ridiculous and open up. She refused, and he went on knocking for several minutes. It would have driven me crazy. She, however, didn't seem fazed, just ignored him until he gave up and came stamping down the stairs muttering curses between his teeth.

As it transpired, she had quit her job. I heard about it way before the old man, because most days he left for work earlier and came home later than she did. The day she told me, I had come home before lunch.

A water main broke and the headmaster had to close the school for the rest of the day. So I brought home a whole stack of schoolbooks, and tossed them down the minute I walked in.

Everybody else in my class had gone off to the café they always went to when we had a free period, but since I was taking so many extra subjects I had gone home to study instead. Anyway, the girls in my class thought I was too nerdy and shy to be any fun. And I didn't think they were much fun either. The only person I really spent any time with was Axel who was in the second form at secondary school, but he didn't have much extra time for anyone, just for his piano.

Whatever. I guess Mum heard the books hit the floor, and she came out of the kitchen. She was a pretty comical sight, with a big piece of some kind of meat in her mouth (which was odd since she never ate meat) and a guilty look on her face. I'm not sure if that was because I had caught her roaming around the house or what.

"You're really early," was all she said.

“A pipe broke, so we got the rest of the day off,” I said. “Why aren’t you at work?” That was when she told me she had quit.

The truth was I had begun to miss her. Things weren’t the same downstairs without her. And the old man had developed some kind of allergy that made him even more bad-tempered. He just walked around with a runny nose and itchy eyes all the time. I missed her coming into my room in the evenings when I was sitting over my homework, missed her running a hand through my hair and asking if I hadn’t worked hard enough for one night. I missed her having fits about things my father thought were unimportant, I missed all the stuff about the world she taught me. Because if Father had a soft spot for Jimmy, then I felt, at least, as if Mum had a special place in her heart for me. Ever since I was tiny we had had little jokes that were just between us, like when we would stick our tongues inside of lower lips, cross our eyes and say “Sowassatrubblebubble?” Then we’d laugh our heads off. Jimmy said we were behaving like nursery school kids, so we would do it whenever he had friends over. She really knew how to listen, too, and she always said the right things. But above all she knew when to just be quiet.

When nothing you could say helped, like when Magdalena and Linnea called me podgy pathetic. Or when I thought I could never learn algebra, or when Axel almost never had time for me because he only wanted to be with his new mates in the band. At times like that it was nice that she actually didn’t say anything but was just quiet for a while so I had time to dissolve some of the lump of sadness in my throat. After that she’d always suggest something. It wasn’t necessarily anything special, maybe just “There’s a crossword puzzle I could use a little help with,” even though I knew she never had any trouble with her crosswords.

No, I didn't really care what she was doing up there in the attic, as long as she came down and cared about me now and then.

Once, I put on my ski pants and winter jacket and went outside and sat on a garden chair I'd dragged out of the shed. I set it in a drift over by the gate, angled so I could look up into the attic window. I just sat there staring. The window was open up there, and I could hear music playing, I guess on the old turntable that used to be in the living room and that was gone now. But I didn't go up and knock on the door. After all, *she was the mother*. If she wanted to be with me, it was up to her to come out of her secret lair. I sat there getting more and more furious. Couldn't she just glance out the window and notice me sitting there? Invite me up to see what she was doing? The least she could have done was say hello and ask if I wasn't cold, sitting out there all by myself! But she never so much as looked out.

One Friday evening while we were at dinner, there was a knock on the door and a bunch of our father's old mates poured into the hall. Mum vanished as fast as ever after giving Dad a peck on the lips and saying hello to his visitors. Just before she went up the stairs our eyes happened to meet, and I saw a gleam of something, I don't know what. It was a sly look, kind of crafty, as if she had done something mischievous, and only she and I knew about it. I felt like leaving the washing up to that good-for-nothing Jimmy, and running up the stairs behind her. But all I did was walk over to the sink and start.

The old man's mates thumped Jimmy on the back and pretended to box a little with him, said hello to me, and settled down at the kitchen table. "So I guess the rumour is true, then?" asked one of them, whose name was Jörgen. "That your wife's got herself a lover up there in the attic?"

This was followed by a cascade of noisy laughter. Dad went over to the cupboard where we keep the good china and started taking down some glasses. He was laughing too, but I could see he was a bit upset. Jimmy, who was still at the table, seemed to be in high spirits from all the amusement, and replied instead of him:

“Well, we think she’s into some kind of voodoo up there, or she’s started some mysterious women’s club.”

They laughed even more at that, and Jörgen turned to me.

“In that case you, at least, ought to be eligible for membership.”

“You won’t catch me joining any weird club,” I said in a loud voice.

I was ashamed right away, and wished I hadn’t said that. I ought to have taken Mum’s side, since it felt more or less like they were laughing *at* her.

And Jörgen was right, too – I should have been eligible.

“You look terrible,” one of the other men said to him. “Caught a bug or something?”

Dad sat down at the end of the table.

“It’s an allergy,” he said. “Really strange. I’ve never been allergic to anything around here before.”

“Maybe all the housework doesn’t agree with you,” said Jörgen.

Everybody started laughing again, including Jimmy. I wiped my hands on the kitchen towel and left the room.

I’d already finished all my homework for the weekend, a minor miracle. I was completely free, at liberty to do whatever I wanted. I knew the old man and his mates would be playing cards and drinking beer all night. Two of Jimmy’s friends were also coming over to play video games in the basement later, so they were both accounted for. No one was going to bother me.

I got my portable CD player and sat down on my bed. Soon the universe

was filled with The Cure, not a sound from the kitchen penetrated the music. I lay down, CD player on my tummy, shut my eyes and started doing the yoga breathing Mum had taught me, trying to get to that special, almost meditative place some music sometimes took me to. Before I knew it, I was asleep.

When I woke up, the music was over. It was after one in the morning. Through the wall I could hear there were still people in the kitchen, even though the old man had to get up early in the morning, I knew, to take the car in for repairs. I needed to pee, so I turned on the light by my bed, pulled out the earphones, and put the CD player on my bedside table.

When I had been to the toilet and brushed my teeth I went into the kitchen to get a glass of water. Everyone was still there, including Jimmy.

“Hiya,” said Jörgen when I came in.

They were drunk, I could tell, because they were a bit blurry around the edges and our father’s hair was unruly. I smiled at them and, like an idiot, asked “what they were doing” in a strange, cheery voice I didn’t recognise.

“We’re sitting around talking about life, sweetie,” Jörgen replied.

“Weren’t you supposed to be having friends over?” I asked Jimmy.

He had a big bottle of beer in front of him and was looking insufferably pleased with himself.

“Didn’t happen,” he told me.

“Jimmy’s sitting here listening to some pearls of wisdom from the experts,” Jörgen told me.

“And having some beer, I see,” I said, taking a glass of water.

“It won’t do him any harm to have a couple of beers,” our father said.

“He’s almost eighteen.”

“Are you on an espionage mission from Big Sister in the attic or something?” one of the old man’s mates whose name I didn’t remember asked jokingly.

I started to say I wasn’t on any mission at all, but father interrupted.

“As long as she’s holed up up there I’m the one who makes the decisions down here,” he said.

“And I don’t think a beer or two is anything to fuss about.”

“You don’t, do you?” I asked on my way out of the room.

“Oooo,” they shouted after me. “Hope she doesn’t tell on us!”

They were all laughing again.

Back in my room I realised I was mad at all of them. I had nothing to do with Mum’s secretiveness. Just because I’m a girl I was being blamed for her having abandoned the whole family! The old man could at least have asked if I wanted to join them for a bit, in fact he could have offered *me* a beer, too, but no, Jimmy got it all. Not that I would have wanted a beer, anyway.

I got into bed and pulled the covers up to my chin, but it didn’t take me long to realise I wasn’t going back to sleep. So I started reading my book, some story by Kafka about a beetle. After twenty minutes or so I heard the kitchen chairs scraping against the floor, and just a little while later I heard Jörgen and the others outside my window, heard their voices get softer and softer until they finally disappeared. Then it was quiet for a while. No one went to the bathroom to brush their teeth or anything, so Father and Jimmy must still have been sitting in the kitchen.

A few minutes later I heard the front door open and then close. I sat up in bed, turning off my reading light so I could see what was going on outside

in the dark. It was Jimmy, heading for the shed. I watched the door stick when he tugged at the handle, as it always did in the winter when the doorstep got pushed up by the frozen earth. He pulled really hard, the door opened and he went inside, and came back out carrying something long and thin. I went to the window and spied from behind the curtain, but couldn't tell what it was. He came back inside and I heard him talking with the old man, but not what they were saying. I heard some chuckling.

"I'm sure Jimmy's drunk, too," I thought, standing there in the dark feeling angrier and angrier. Suddenly I knew. "Jimmy got the crowbar out of the shed," I said to myself, as my heart began pounding in my chest.

"They're going to break into her room."

I rushed to the door, knowing I had to stop them. I pressed down the handle, and then stopped in my tracks. Why was I trying to save her? What difference did it make if they broke into the room to play a joke on Mum, or for whatever reason they were setting up this nocturnal activity? Then I had second thoughts, feeling that no matter what, they were doing something *wrong*, so I opened the bedroom door. Oddly, I felt the need to gather my courage to follow them, felt that I couldn't just shout, because that would wake Mum, whatever difference that made. Maybe she wasn't even asleep. Who could know? Maybe she was awake, maybe she spent her nights painting, communicating with spirits or dancing around naked up there. Somehow I also knew it wouldn't help if I shouted – they'd just ignore me and break into her room anyway. If I was going to stop them, I would have to *take the crowbar away from them with my bare hands*. Just as I was about to run up the stairs I heard them prying open the door, laughing and shouting something to Mum. The door made a sound like a suffering animal, and I stopped dead, like a sprinter paralysed by the

glaring sun. All at once, there was total silence. A huge wave of fear rolled over me, like a tsunami, and my body went icy cold. The next thing I heard was a moan, and someone starting to cry.

Mum.

The wailing got louder, and then there was baying. She started almost howling like a wolf. No, not howling, it sounded feline. She was mewling. Long, lamenting sounds that reached my ears and scraped painfully at my insides. The miaowing gained in force, got so loud I didn't even hear the old man and Jimmy come back down the stairs. Saying not a word, they just passed me where I was standing on the stairs, poised to run up. Their faces were completely blank, and each went into his own room, like little boys ashamed after a scolding. I felt awful, but I was absolutely incapable of going up the stairs. What would I find? A desperate female dragon whose nest full of eggs had been broken? A little girl wailing for her parents? A stranger?

Finally she quietened down. That woke me from my peculiar torpor and I went back to my room, locking the door after me, which I never did otherwise. I lay down on the bed and fell asleep immediately.

I woke up late the next day, and didn't at all like the idea of having to go into the kitchen to talk about the night before with Father and Jimmy.

But I found the house completely empty. After a bit, I realised that Father was probably still at the car workshop, so I got up. After going to the toilet, I passed by Jimmy's room and saw that his door was open. His bed was unmade. He must have gone to the garage with the old man, which was quite unlike him, especially on a Saturday morning. I just stood there for a few seconds. Then I went up to the attic.

The door to the room was ajar, and I saw dark marks from the crowbar.

Daylight streamed out onto my feet. My pulse was throbbing wildly.

“Mum?” I asked, but there was no reply.

I braced myself and pushed the door open wide.

It was amazing how neat she had managed to make it. The last time I had been up there I must have been about ten, of course, but as I remember the room it was filthy and chock-a-block with junk. Now there were just a few boxes in a corner deep under the gable of the roof, and otherwise there was a desk, an armchair, a bed and a rug on the floor – just like any old room.

Mum was curled up in the niche by the window with her legs under her and her long tail wound around her feet. There was a glare from the light coming through the window, but I could see that her ears were perked in my direction and her silver-black fur was bright and shiny clean.

She looked at me, relaxed, splaying her incredibly sharp claws to be able to get at her paws properly. I stood there for a long time, just staring, but she seemed to be completely preoccupied with licking herself clean.

When she was done she suddenly yawned and jumped agilely to the floor. Pressing her tongue to the inside of her lower lip she crossed her eyes and said in a voice full of suppressed laughter:

“Sowassatrubblebubble?”