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BREATHING DEEP

The air is thick. Full. She doesn't notice it on other days. Doesn't notice its thickness. Its taste.

The river here is a crooning thing. It, like the air, is full. Is thick. Any other day she would kick off her shoes, leave them on the pebbled bank, and skirt forward in a lacy spray of water.

But today her arms are heavy with curling and uncurling. A large striped bag, recently emptied of musty winter clothes, is now filled with the warm and arching bodies of young kittens.

She stands on the pebbles, aware of her breathing. The shallowness of it, swimming in her lungs.

Her tension is a sort of floundering. A mirroring of the arching in her arms. She can feel her pulse quickening, the drumming of it against her ears. Around her the gum trees rustle the sounds of Saturday afternoons and, somewhere a little further off, a kookaburra curdles once and then falls silent.

She heaves the bag a little higher in her arms and a kitten within lets off a mew.

She stands there a little while longer, mesmerised by her breathing. The skirting way of it. She sets the bag down, decisive. A plastic bag will not drown kittens. A plastic bag will keep them in a cocoon of warm and muddled air. She grabbed a plastic bag, when she should have grabbed a cloth one. She sighs. Still by the river. Still here, with the kittens now resting by her grubby sandals.

She could peek inside, but to peek would be to add something to the submerging of a striped and stuffed bag. To peek in would be to smell David, the boy who is not her son. Who, she imagines, is still curled and crying. Grieving this impending submerging as deeply as a parent grieves the loss of a child.

She had never dreamt of falling for a man who had already been married. Had not anticipated being somebody's stepmother. That is how she introduces herself. Hi there, I'm David's stepmother. Although she and his father are not yet married. Her ring finger tingles like a tongue touched to copper. She sometimes has desperate and gloomy dread that the proposal won't come. That her ring finger will continue to tingle like she has read that ghost limbs do.

David, sitting at the kitchen table with his feet shadows on the floor and a glass of chilled orange juice in his hands.

“Are you guys getting married?” His voice looped with thrill and shyness.

She had noticed this, the silver breeze as sweet as spring. His eagerness at having her officially in his family. Officially his stepmother. His eagerness over a ring tight around her finger, no longer tingling.

But she had felt no answering thrill. “No,” she’d snapped. Humiliated that this little boy, only 11, was welcoming and loving in a way that his father seemed incapable.

The bag crinkles by her feet. Maybe she can drown them individually. In her hands. There is more dignity in that, perhaps. She will stumble from here shouldering a deeper weight, at least. A shuddering sadness. And is there not a certain dignity in being grieved? What else can she possibly give these pitiful little creatures greater than her sadness?

She unzips the bag. A mess of colours. Four of them. She lifts out a tabby kitten with a coat like a carpet. Its eyes are slitted open and it yawns a pink mouth at her, its ears twitching. She reaches out a trembling finger and scratches under its chin. Shhh.

She thinks it is choking, but then realises it’s purring. The stupid thing, carried in a bag to a river and dragged out into blazing light only to purr and go limp in her hands.

She sits back on her heels and nurses it in her lap.

Mark had gone very still when he’d found the kittens and mother cat snuggled in the back of the garden shed.

“What the fuck is this?” he’d yelled at David. Had made David watch as he kicked the cat out of the shed and dragged the bed apart, the four kittens spilling onto the concrete.

“Get a bag,” he’d snapped at her, standing in the doorway. She’d handed it to him, trembling.

She’s often thought of leaving him. It is a fantasy she is drawn to when Mark grows quiet and angry. But alone she trips into numbness. Alone, she grows cold in beds too large, winces at the sound of too many leftovers hitting the side of the garbage bag. When Mark is silent, she anticipates his speech. When he is angry, she anticipates his calm. The anticipation is gentle and oddly sweet. A routine that she finds comfort in, if only because it dances with another.

It wasn’t always this strange and lonely touching of two. She remembers the day it changed. Late home from work, her feet aching and her mouth sticky and dry.

There had been no words. Mark's anger had always played out in ways that were quiet, were filled with motion rather than with sound.

He had smashed in her mother's mirror with his fist and walked, slowly and quietly, out onto the verandah where she had heard him start hammering at something on the decking. The mirror had mostly broken into large chunks. Awkward, scattered. There was not the fine dusting she had always dreaded when she moved it, breath caught. The mirror had not been obliterated, but fractured. She knelt down on the wooden floor in the hallway, surprised at the pounding of her heart, as though he had struck her rather than the mirror. She wanted to piece it back together. With glue or tape, maybe. But her heart was too quick and her hands were unsteady so she quietly wrapped the pieces in newspaper and put them in the bin. The frame she stuffed into the back of the wardrobe and the largest piece she picked up as Mark came back inside. She pressed her fingers so tightly around it they were marked and scabbed a week later. But Mark didn't see and her breath steadied.

The morning after, Mark made breakfast. A wilted freesia pressed against her mug of coffee. She had sat down next to David and eaten slowly with one hand.

"What happened to your hand?" David asked, staring at her marked fingers.

"Nothing," said Mark, and David looked at her and did not speak again.

She felt it strange, in that stiff and unhappy morning, that David had asked about her hand, the faint marks, and not questioned his father's purpling knuckles.

Sometimes, she thinks of herself younger. Of herself smoother and rounder and smaller. In those days when she had felt the world was bright and full. Opening up and drawing her forward. Had she even then been marked by this union with Mark? Tainted, so quietly, by the tingle of her ringless finger? She closes her eyes against some thoughts. In these moments, she is fearful that her sadness may somehow darken the way she remembers her earlier years. Those years before Mark. Those happy months, just after. The buttery warmth of them. Maybe this is why she does not breathe deep, for fear of being saturated by the glumness of her now.

"Drown the buggers," Mark said, dropping the bag into her arms. Sometimes, when she meets his eyes, she is shocked by the blankness of them. She thinks that a part of him may have died along with his wife. Been drowned with her in the deep part of the river, the driver's side door jammed in. The warmth, the happiness of their earliest moments together. She wonders at them. Whether he had known, even then, that he could not sustain them. That he would eventually trip, quite entirely, back into himself. That their life together would be one of the things not said, of motion and sadness and not of words.

“Why can’t we try and find them homes?” she asked, David nodding vigorously behind his father’s back.

“And what’ll he learn from that?” Mark asked, nudging gently past her on his way back towards the house. “That he can just do whatever the fuck he wants?”

Learning, lessons. Everything Mark says or does for David is about What David Will Learn. She cannot decide whether it is a cruel or kindly thing. Whether he gets joy in trying to better the boy, or whether it is a pleasure wrought from finding fault. From bullying. Either way, it seems to calm him. Brings him back from anger, calls his words back from the quiet. And because of this, because she foremost is here for Mark—not David—she does not intervene in What David Will Learn. In some moments, on their slim cusp, she will draw in breath or sit more readily in her chair. But she will remember her broken mirror. She will think of the heels snapped off her favourite shoes. That maybe, if she does this horrible thing, he will see her. He will hear her. He will touch her face like he did when they were younger and see how much, in this strange and altered way, she still loves him.

David followed her out into the garden. “Please,” he whispered.

David, so like her when she was young. A creature so quiet that loud noises startle him sideways. Seeing the world through watchful eyes. He is narrowly built, with dark hair that flops heavily across his forehead. He scuffed his feet on the verandah, let his arm drop from the crook of her elbow. Are you guys getting married?

Floundering in water.

She brings the other kittens out into her lap. They arch and flop, rubbing up against her hands, her arms. She lifts one to her nose and breathes it in. A young smell. Somehow similar to a baby, a puppy, things young and newly bloomed.

Mark, months ago, coming in through the door, his steps careful and slow.

“I did it,” he said, his eyes set and peculiarly blank.

But hadn’t there been a flash of something like pleasure? A flash of something that spoke of a deep satisfaction? A joy in punishing her (again and again) over the simple fact that she is not somebody else? That it is her warmth, her curve, against him in bed. Her voice, quiet in the kitchen. Her laundry, strung up on the line. When it is his wife’s photo he still carries pressed into the pocket of his wallet. The same look, sometimes, when he stood over the pale curve of David’s arched neck. Over some misspelled word or miscalculated sum. A picture drawn without perfect proportions. Played out to the scratch of an eraser, the brushing of white out painted with trembling fingers.

“Did it hurt?” she asked. The question surprised them both. She, reading at the kitchen table with her head propped in one hand. He, legs apart, standing in the doorway with the door closed firmly behind him. He sagged a little and stumbled forward to sit at the kitchen table.

“No.”

It surprised her that all the dreams she’d had of motherhood had so quietly and so gently slipped from her tingling fingers. She’d consoled herself with the idea that, had she been suitable for mothering, the idea of his vasectomy would have struck her harder. Would have brought tears, hopelessness, storming. But the hope of it all slipped away as though she had never really hoped for it at all.

And hadn’t she withdrawn a little more from David? Certain that her failure to feel more over Mark’s vasectomy was a sign she was not fit to be his mother, step or otherwise?

“Look!” David, coming home from school. “I got an A!” He slapped an essay down in front of her, written in the untidy scrawl of a boy on the cusp of adolescence. The smell of a casserole in the oven, his eyes, flicking up at hers, down at his essay and back again.

Although she was doing nothing in particular, although she had always read his essays in the past, no matter what she had been doing when he came to her, this time she pressed it away from her.

“I’ll read it later,” she said. Shoving it back at him across the table. “Well done.”

The hurt showed in his face.

She holds up a kitten in her hands. The ginger one. Its eyes aren’t open yet, it flails in her fingers, groans a little, its body rigid and struggling. Perhaps, in blindness, it senses something its bleary eyed sibling didn’t. Recognises the chuckle of water, the sadness of her fingers. How slowly they move.

In its blindness, it cannot look at her. There will be no eyes to haunt her along with the feeling of a heart gone still in her hands. Perhaps this will make it easier.

She takes a deep breath. But the air will not go deep. It pushes upward before it has more than brushed the pink darkness of her lungs.

Mark would be furious. Mark would look at her blankly, would punish her for something other than not being someone else, for being alive still. This time, she would be punished for a choice she had made, something she had done.

This thought is enough to send a shiver through her. The feeling of him shrugging away from under her fingers. I love you, followed by silence. There would be only her and only him. In conflict over this thing that she will choose not to do.

Because maybe they could find homes for them. It would be a long shot, long hours, knocking on doors and calling up friends she doesn't often talk to. But maybe it could be done. Maybe she and David could door-knock up and down the street. The kittens soft and smelly between them, when they were ready to be taken from their mother, who would have to be coaxed back into the shed. This one time, she will shake herself against What David Will Learn. Perhaps he will learn something new. Something sweet. Something, she imagines, his mother would have liked to teach him.

And it is with this feeling of being motherly, with the kittens piled in her arms and the bag slung empty over her shoulder, that she feels the peace of a belly-breath.

The slow coolness of breathing deep.

