

Where Strays Might Find Comfort

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As far as Esther can tell, the cat lives in the woods on the far side of the manmade pond that runs behind the boxy little houses on Thistle Lane. Not a good place for a small animal, especially considering the recent rumors of an alligator prowling the waters, feasting on turtles and varmints. Probably pushed out of his home by the nearby housing developments going up. The HOA sent out a warning two weeks ago to the entire subdivision advising folks to keep pets and children away from the pond. And so now, after not having seen the cat for over a week, Esther is posting hand-drawn flyers on the telephone poles along her street: *Missing: orange tabby. 8–10 lbs. Last seen near the pond. Contact Esther Novitski 349-0525.*

She wishes she had a picture of the animal to include, but pictures are for pets, not for mangy strays that come and go as they please. At least this was Vitaly's stance on the matter. To him, cats were not all that dissimilar from mice—pests that tended to linger indefinitely if you showed them even the slightest generosity. He was not entirely wrong: Myrtle Beach is lousy

with stray cats living in sewers and under houses, and the city routinely issues warnings against feeding them. Only Americans, he said, with their affinity for unnecessary things, would adopt them as their own.

But Vitaly is gone, leaving Esther alone for the first time in her eighty-three years, and maybe it is because of this that she has come to feel responsible for the animal. And far be it from an old widow to deny herself a little companionship, even if it is with a scroungy stray.

The afternoon is bright and breezy, the dogwoods and crepe myrtles rustling in the tidy front yards. Esther's feet hurt—these days *everything* hurts—but not enough to keep her from shuffling from one telephone pole to the next, posting the flyers with strips of duct tape in hopes that the coastal winds won't tear them away.

The cat started showing up a few months before Vitaly died, usually in the evenings as the sun was going down and the greasy South Carolina heat had begun to thin. Sometimes Esther would catch her on the back patio snoozing beneath the wicker loveseat or splayed out in a sunny patch of the yard. The cat was a scrawny thing, the knobs of her bones bulging beneath her yellowed skin like a bag of sticks. Her patchy fur was dappled with scabby fleabites. What had drawn her to their home, in particular, Esther had no clue, but she could not bring herself to shoo her off as Vitaly demanded. She liked the idea that their house was a place where a stray might find comfort.

On the day of Vitaly's funeral, the cat spent the entire afternoon crouched by the rose bushes in the backyard, spying on the house full of visitors. That evening, when Esther finally had the place to herself, she carried a small slab of *kholodets* on a saucer outside. She set the jellied meat dish at the edge of the patio, then eased herself onto the wicker loveseat. The evening was cool for May, a crisp wind stirring the scrub pines around the pond and casting ripples on the water's glassy surface. A couple of minutes later the cat slinked into the glow of the patio light. After an investigative sniff, she devoured the meal with large, greedy bites. When she was finished, she gave Esther a shy, lingering glance as if to offer her thanks and scampered back into the darkness.

The next night, Esther left a piece of salmon, and the night after that a hunk of lamb from a skewer of *shashlik*, items left over from the funeral reception which she did not have the stomach to finish off herself and would soon go bad, anyway. It was not long before feeding the cat had become a nightly occurrence, something to look forward to. She never attempted to pet the animal, partially for fear of being mauled (the animal seemed friendly enough, though with cats you could never tell), but mainly because she did not want to scare her off. Feeding her was the best way she knew to show affection.

As Esther is taping a flyer to one of the weather-beaten poles, a security car drifts to a stop in the road behind her. She does not even notice until she hears the guard yell, "Hey!" through the rolled-down window. "You know you need an HOA permit for that, right?"

Esther turns to face him. Out of spite she has never gotten to know the security officers. This one is dumpy and unshaven, his black Allied Security hat too small for his bulldogish head. *Gus*, the patch on his shirt says. Such an ugly name, like a mispronunciation of *gas*.

"For what?" she says.

"The flyers. You can hang them on the bulletin board at the pool, but you need a permit to post them on telephone poles."

"Bah," Esther grunts, flapping a hand at the man before turning back to the pole in front of her. "It hurts nothing."

"Lady, I'm just doing my job here."

"Perhaps you need a different job, yes?"

"You're going to get fined."

"Then let them fine me," she says over her shoulder. "I have money."

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

Esther spins around to offer a rejoinder—coming from Eastern Europe, she is no stranger to small men overwielding their ounces of power—but the officer is already sputtering away in his little white coupe with the gold star logo on the side.

The security guards were the HOA's well-intended but ultimately misguided

response to the plunge in housing prices a couple of years ago, which lowered the caliber of families moving into the subdivision—young broods with no consideration for their neighbors, who blasted music from garages and left their garbage cans out on the curb for too long and sped recklessly through the plan in their monstrous sports cars. The assumption was that the mere presence of uniformed guards would inspire residents to adhere to the HOA guidelines. But the guards are not police; they cannot issue tickets or make arrests or even intervene in the event of a disturbance, like the one Esther overheard last month between her neighbors, the Lupkins, mother and son and, as of late, the mother's boyfriend. A boorish, self-centered lot—well, perhaps not the boy as much as the adults. Esther heard the argument from next door while stepping out back to set out a bowl of *zharkoye* for the cat. The boyfriend, a rat-faced fellow with an adolescent's scanty mustache, was hollering at the top of his lungs at the boy, something about money. Esther could not make out the words, but there was no mistaking the violence in his tone. When she heard a dish smash, she finally called the police. Minutes later she spied through the curtains as the cruiser pulled up to the curb, lights bathing the houses in an angry red glow, and two broad-shouldered officers marched up to the door, thumbs hooked authoritatively in their belts. The next morning while Esther was watering the hydrangeas out front, she spotted the woman striding out of the house to head off to work, dressed in her bartender's uniform of black slacks and black polo. Esther offered her a tentative wave, but the woman regarded her with cold apprehension, as though Esther had stolen something from her, and then climbed in her dented Camaro and jerked out of the driveway.

Kyle's shoes are white and blue Nike rip-offs, with arrows on the sides instead of swooshes. At least, they were that color before he spent the past half hour skulking through the marshy woods, his feet squelching in the mud, sinking up to his ankles in places. Now they're coated in green and gray muck, probably ruined, which was sort of his plan to begin with because maybe now his mom will get him an *actual* pair of Nikes with *actual* swooshes, and everybody

else will just lay the fuck off him. Especially Todd Barry, who, in homeroom a couple of months ago, asked him in front of the whole class if the arrows were there to direct him to guys' anuses, to which Kyle forced a chuckle like he always does whenever Todd rips on him, like he's in on the joke, *ha ha*, even though it was all he could do not to jab his fingers into the kid's squinty eyes.

So, no, he's not worried about ruining the shoes. Seriously, fuck these shoes. And fuck Todd Barry, too, while he's at it.

He's looking for the cat, the one Mrs. Novitski likes to feed. Thing's been AWOL for a while now, and finding it is the only way he can think of to show his thanks for her calling the cops on Jessie back in July. He'd gone ballistic on Kyle for swiping his credit card and ordering a hundred-dollar pair of Pumas. In Kyle's defense, he had every intention of paying him back eventually, but that didn't keep Jessie raving at the top of his lungs about respecting other people's property and not being a thieving little fuckwad. Kyle, overcome by a heated gust of bravado, blurted that maybe the whole thing could have been avoided if Jessie had been staying at his own place instead of freeloading at theirs four or five nights a week. The words were out before he could stop himself, but before he could take it back, Jessie threw a coffee mug at him. It missed his head by inches, exploding against the kitchen cabinets. He played it off like he had meant to miss, but Kyle got the message all the same. Not long after, the police showed up, and Kyle didn't have to guess to know that Mrs. Novitski, the closest neighbor within earshot, must have called them—a suspicion that was confirmed when, after being led outside with his mom by one of the officers, he caught a glimpse of the old woman peeking through her curtains.

And while Kyle knows he had every right to be pissed at her for sticking her nose into their business, there's no telling what Jessie might have done if she hadn't. So now, having noticed the flyers as he was slumping off the bus, here he is, trudging through the mud and the brambles and the thick-trunked cypress trees with their dripping ribbons of Spanish moss, like a grunt weeding out enemies in some foreign jungle.

Stay frosty out there, Lupkin.

Roger. I'll find the insurgents, sir.

Attaboy. That's why you're the squad leader, because of your bravery and stealth.

Just doing my job, sir.

Your old man would be proud.

Kyle's father was an army staff sergeant who was killed by a sniper while on patrol in Kandahar. Kyle was four at the time, barely able to understand what was happening when the two servicemen and the chaplain showed up at the house one afternoon to break the news. His mother dashed to the bathroom to puke, leaving him alone with the three men, who'd lingered awkwardly in the doorway, their hands clasped in front of them like they were praying, until after a while one of the soldiers held out his fist for Kyle to bump and was like, "How you doing there, little man?" Only instead of bumping it, Kyle turned and darted down the hall into his room, slamming the door behind him and crawling beneath his bed to wait out the men's visit. He had to clamp his hands over his ears to drown out his mother's bawling, which sounded like the wail of a siren.

But Kyle's not that scared little kid anymore, is he? No, sir, and he'll prove it when he enlists after he graduates in five years. Maybe then everyone will stop breaking his balls, Todd and Jessie and all the boys in his P.E. class who call him Bitchtits, as in, *Don't pass the ball to Bitchtits; he'll probably just eat it*, because Kyle is "husky," as his mom calls it. Imagine how they'll all look at him when he shows back up in his dress blues, lean and svelte and handsome, how sorry they'll be about the way they treated him, and Kyle, in an act of boundless grace, will forgive them, because war heroes are supposed to be above grudges.

His leg sinks in a pocket of mud up to his knee. When he yanks his foot free, one of his shoes comes off, trapped in the mud. Shitballs. Briefly, Kyle considers leaving it there, leaving both shoes, and pressing on barefoot. It would be easier given the marshy terrain, but no, he knows that would only call down his mom's and Jessie's wrath again. Muddying up the shoes is one thing, but after the whole Puma debacle, ditching them altogether seems like a great way to get himself in some deep shit. This time Jessie might not miss with the coffee mug.

It's as he's reaching down to extricate the shoe that he hears movement to his right.

Kyle has just enough time to swivel his head before something thrusts out of the watery scrub—an alligator, he realizes too late, long as a surfboard, its scaly body moving as deftly as a whip, jaws open in a sideways V. Its crooked, nubby teeth clamp around his ankle like a bear trap, and Kyle screams, more out of shock than pain. Staggering backward, he falls on his rear in the mud, struggling to work his foot free, but with each frantic kick the gator twists and flips like a fish, until finally Kyle feels himself being dragged into the brackish water, and, bizarrely, his last thought before being pulled under is that he wishes he hadn't run and hid like a coward when the servicemen came to his house. He wishes he had bumped the guy's fist, taken the news like a man.

Back home, Esther prattles around a bit, straightening up the den, unloading the dryer, the television warbling companionably in the background. Keeping herself occupied is important, or so everyone tells her. The trouble is, now that it's just her, there are far fewer chores to be done. She cuts herself a thin slice from the bird's milk cake she made yesterday. In spite of being on her own now, she continues to cook as if for two. Thriftiness does not come naturally when you have spent your entire life shopping for other people. When she goes grocery shopping, she buys far more than she can possibly consume and usually ends up having to throw several items out—either that or feed it to the cat, and despite her voracious appetite, the animal can only eat so much.

With her plate of cake, she settles into the recliner to watch the local news. She feels as though she has marched twenty miles and not just to the end of the street and back, although she refuses to use the walker that her daughter Dina bought her two years ago after she slipped outside the ValuMart. "You're not a kid anymore, Mom," the young woman had argued. "You have to take care of yourself." But Esther knows it is a slippery slope from the walker to a wheelchair to just lying in bed all day, a helpless invalid. Dina might as well have presented Esther with a casket.

Strange to think there was a time when she and Vitaly could stroll around the neighborhood for hours before feeling the least bit fatigued, marveling at the immaculate comfort of the suburbs. Esther had grown up with her two sisters in the Bednost Tenement in central Brahin, Belarus, a drafty, mold-ridden housing project less than thirty miles from the Polesky Radiological Preserve, part of the Chernobyl exclusion zone. Vitaly, along with his brother and sister, was raised in a dilapidated hovel on the outskirts of town, the children of a fiery-tempered technician at one of the Soviet-era oil refineries. For most of Vitaly's childhood, the siblings had shared a room, Vitaly sleeping on an old army cot in the closet. Esther and he came to the States in the early nineties after the fall of the Soviet Union, when Lukashenko rose to power and wages plummeted, and beatings from the *militsiya* became increasingly common for those who spoke out against the Council of Ministers. Esther has never gotten accustomed to Americans' blasé attitude toward their own prosperity. They seem hardwired to reject contentment.

"It is only because they are young," Vitaly used to say. "They have no history to remind them of what is at stake."

While Esther suspected he was right, this always seemed too sympathetic. Too tidy. People should know when they are blessed.

It's not in Gus's job description to go around removing flyers from telephone poles. But the recession was hard on the private security industry—for a lot of people, it was a luxury they decided to forgo—and now Allied is so desperate for contracts they'll bend over backwards to appease the HOA. Meaning that now he gets to slog up and down the street, tearing down the old lady's missing-cat posters, his collar and back and armpits dampening in the cloying heat. You'd think someone from corporate would have the balls to stand up to them, tell them, "We're not going to do your damn housekeeping." You'd think there were more important things to worry about.

At least it's a break from his usual routine, cruising aimlessly around the neighborhood in the farty-smelling Allied Security car, getting the stink eye

from bored teenagers, shooing them off the boat-sized Sycamore Acres sign at the entrance to the subdivision. But then what can you expect when you're a thirty-nine-year-old GED grad with less than a grand in the bank? Folks don't exactly fall over themselves to offer dudes like him jobs. Anyhow, it's better than being back in the Lowe's lumberyard, hauling two-by-fours and tweezer splinters out of his fingertips.

Once he's claimed all the taped-up flyers, he marches toward the Novitski lady's house. Most of the residents he doesn't know, which is perfectly fine with him, but that one's got a reputation. Case in point, their run-in earlier. "Perhaps you need another job then, yes?" Like he's the gestapo or something and not just some guy trying to make a living. He wishes people would get this, that when he harangues them for, say, playing their music too loud or sneaking into the pool after hours or, sure, hanging flyers without a permit, it's just his job to say something. It's not *him* who gives a shit; it's the people who sign his paychecks.

Studying the crude flyers, he can't help but be reminded of the missing-person notices Jared Conwell's mother drew up after Jared disappeared when he and Gus were in the fifth grade. Kid went riding his bike one afternoon and didn't come home. Gus, who'd lived a few streets over from Jared, had nightmares for weeks. He wanted to believe that maybe Jared just took off on his own, hit the road, camping in fields under the stars as he explored the world on his terms. A wanderer like in an old country song. But even at ten years old, he understood that wasn't true. People don't just take off like that. Someone disappears like Jared did, you can bet they're not coming back.

Which is exactly what happened. Weeks went by, months, but no Jared. It became common to find the Conwells passing out flyers downtown and knocking on doors and canvassing huge swaths of the low country. You'd go to the mall and see Mrs. Conwell, with her frizzed-out hair and sleep-deprived eyes, badgering shoppers with Jared's school photo. People started going out of their way to avoid her.

Now, as Gus mounts the Novitski woman's front steps and lays the stack of sheets on her welcome mat like a cat depositing a dead bird, he tries to expel

the memory from his mind. Dwelling on the whole Jared thing is only going to leave him in even more of a funk. The strips of duct tape bind the pages together in a sloppy bundle, though apparently not well enough because as soon as he turns to walk away, a strong breeze scatters them across the yard, and for Gus it's like *Of course*. Of course you can't just do your job and move on—there's always a hitch, always something gumming up the works. If there's a metaphor for his entire life, that's it right there.

Hiking up his sagging pants, he trots after the flyers, his belly jiggling beneath his starchy shirt. They swirl in the air, dancing their way up the street toward the highway. He manages to snag one, but by the time he gets to the cul-de-sac at the end of the street, he's already too winded to chase down the rest. As a kid, he used to spend entire afternoons zipping around on his bike, sweaty from the heat but not from the exertion. Now, a brief trot down the street leaves him bent over with his hands on his knees, struggling to catch his breath, his vision spotty. This is what time does to you, he thinks. It beats you down until you no longer recognize yourself.

With his one sad flyer, he returns to the woman's front step, his face slick with sweat. At this point it's probably not even worth leaving it, but returning them to her was never the point. The point was to send a message: *Follow the damn rules*. Except, if he's being honest with himself, on some level he respects the fact that she blew him off. Sure, it only makes his job harder, but there's something admirable about her refusal to fall in line. He could use a little bit of that himself, some grit. Maybe then he wouldn't be here lumbering around in the hot sun, bemoaning his station in life. Securing the flyer in place with the small gnome sculpture by the door, Gus returns to the Allied car idling at the curb, still thinking about Jared but trying hard not to. Even now, pushing forty, a part of him still cowers at the thought of the kid being snatched off his bike so easily. By now Gus should have outgrown that fear—right? Instead, he focuses on the Novitski lady, with her stern schoolmarm face, her body squat and troll-like. He wonders how she will react when she comes across the flyer, and he wishes he could be there to see it.

It is just after eleven p.m. when Esther, hobbling into the kitchen for a glass of water, spies the police lights through the front window. Her first thought is that the Lupkins have gotten into another domestic squabble. But when she peers through the curtains, she sees the woman and her boyfriend standing in the yard holding each other like a couple of frightened children, the woman taking quick, shaky drags off a cigarette. An officer is talking to them, making notes in a little black notebook.

Clutching the front of her robe closed, Esther slips out onto the front step. If something serious has happened, a burglary perhaps, she deserves to know. The woman spots Esther lingering outside her house and hustles over.

“Have you seen him?” she implores. She is short, not much taller than Esther herself, her auburn hair threaded with white streaks.

“Seen who?” Esther says.

“My boy. My son. Kyle. Have you seen him today?”

“I have not.”

“Shit,” the woman huffs, puffing on her cigarette. She cradles her forehead in her free hand. The swirling crimson lights of the cruiser split her face into a concourse of haggard shadows.

“He is missing?”

“I got home from work and he wasn’t there. I figured he was out riding his bike or something. But no one’s seen him.”

Esther descends the steps. Up close she can see that despite the grooves on her face the woman is quite young, early thirties perhaps. Just a child herself.

“I am sure he will be found,” she reassures her. Gesturing vaguely in the direction of the swampy forest, she adds, “Perhaps he is lost in the woods, yes?”

The woman shakes her head. “He knows he’s not supposed to go in there.”

“Yes, but boys. Always doing what they should not be doing, yes?” Esther offers her a smile, but it feels all wrong, phony.

The woman tucks her hair back behind her ears. “Just let me know if you see him, okay?”

“Of course.”

She plods back over to the boyfriend. Esther watches her curl into his embrace, the cigarette jutting from her mouth like a single fang.

The commotion has left her unable to sleep, and so she ambles into the kitchen for something to eat. On the refrigerator, held up by a Garfield magnet, is the flyer that someone left on her welcome mat. She should have known the HOA would stoop so low. She will simply have to make more, show them she will not be bullied. For now, though, she takes the bird's milk cake out of the fridge. The single slice she ate earlier reveals the spongy layers of the chocolate-covered pastry. Pouring herself a glass of milk, Esther begins to eat from the cake directly, a faux pas most certainly, but there is no one around to see her.

Through the window the lights of the cruisers flash on the walls, and all at once she is thrown back to the day that she found Vitaly in the yard. He had suffered a stroke while pruning the rose bushes. When she came across him, he was lying on his back clutching the wooden-handled shears, his face locked into a look of wide-eyed perplexity, as if he had died in the midst of a startling realization. A cadre of vehicles—police cars and an ambulance and even a fire truck—had swooped in to retrieve the body. Since then, even the distant echo of a siren is enough to make Esther's nerves ring like tuning forks.

Ordinarily the cake, one of Vitaly's favorite treats, would last Esther at least a week. But she is so absorbed in the memory that she almost does not realize she has devoured the entire thing in one sitting, not until she feels a tremor in her gut and hobbles to the bathroom just in time to vomit it all up. Sweating and panting, she remains seated on the floor with her back against the bathtub, waiting for the nausea to subside, for her body to feel empty again.

Gus is wearing duck boots, and his feet squish up to his ankles in the gray-green muck. The sheriff's deputies have given all twenty of the searchers orange vests and whistles in case they find anything. "Be on the lookout for critters," one of the deputies told them. "No telling what's living back here." Gus has heard rumors of the gator, and he keeps a watchful eye on the pools of water

around him. The last thing he needs is to lose a foot or a leg. Would his health plan even cover that?

Two days and no kid. Not a good sign. If there's one thing he knows from watching *SVU*, it's this: if you don't find the missing person within forty-eight hours, it's not likely you're ever going to find them. In the meantime, a fleet of news vans has assembled at the entrance to the subdivision like a pack of hungry animals, the pretty business-skirted reporters speaking soberly into tripod-mounted cameras. He spends most of his days making sure they don't hassle the residents, who are understandably shaken.

If there's any silver lining to this whole mess, it's that it's given him plenty of opportunities for OT. That's the only reason he's agreed to join the search crew, because the boss is allowing him to stay on the clock. Well, not the *only* reason—Gus isn't completely heartless, he wants to find the kid as much as anyone. But making a few extra bucks in the meantime certainly sweetens the deal.

The crew creeps through the trees, ducking beneath branches and swatting at the Spanish moss and kicking over piles of leaves and pine needles in search of clues, although Gus's mind isn't really on the search. It's on Jared Conwell. If the missing-cat flyers were a reminder of that whole episode, this is like reliving the entire experience. Some things rip a hole in your life that maybe you don't notice at the time but you're never able to stitch closed again. You look back years later and it's like, right there—*that's* where things started to slip. And that's how it was with Jared's disappearance. After something like that, school didn't seem worth it anymore to Gus, not when you could just vanish any second without a trace. When his grades bottomed out, his parents tried tutors and counselors, but what was the goddamn point? Nothing made sense anymore. A kid Gus had known, whom he'd ridden bikes with more times than he could count, was gone, and the world just kept turning, and how could anyone not think that was totally fucked up?

Once, a year or two after Jared's disappearance, Gus happened to run into Mrs. Conwell at the county fair. She was outside the gated entrance holding a

poster board with a picture of her son on it, their phone number printed in large block letters at the bottom.

“Gus Meacom!” she cawed when she spotted him, swallowing him up in a bony, musty-smelling hug. “How *are* you?”

“Fine,” Gus replied.

The friends he’d come with had quickly breezed past the woman and were now lingering inside the entrance behind Mrs. Conwell’s back, sniggering. Gus, chunky even then, hadn’t been quick enough to dodge her.

“You’re getting so big!”

“Thanks.”

“How’s school, sweetie?”

“It’s good.”

“Yeah? What’s your favorite subject?”

Gus glanced around at the people flooding past them, giving the woman a wide berth. Like maybe she was carrying some kind of deadly disease.

“I have to go meet my friends,” he muttered, slipping out of her embrace.

But Mrs. Conwell grabbed his arm as he was moving away. That manic smile remained, but there was something menacing in it now. Something dangerous.

“It could have been you, you know,” she said conversationally, as if she were commenting on the weather.

“Mrs. Conwell, I have to—”

“It could have easily been you, Gus. You lucky little shit.”

Jerking his arm back, Gus broke free from the woman’s grasp. He hustled over to his friends. As they ambled to the ticket booth, he threw one last look over his shoulder at Mrs. Conwell, standing alone in the sea of people like a shark in a school of fish.

So now here he is, tramping through the muggy woods in search of another missing kid, and you have to wonder: If Jared had never disappeared, is this still where Gus would have ended up? Or might he actually have done something with his life? Would he even want to know?

But hello, what's this? Something half-submerged in the mud. A shoe, he sees as he tromps closer. Gus glances around. He can just make out the nearest searcher's hunter orange vest about a hundred yards away. Too far for him to call over. Hunkering down, he pulls the thing out of the muck. It makes a sound like something being slurped up a vacuum cleaner. He studies the shoe the way a man might study an unfamiliar hair on his wife's blouse, a mixture of apprehension and disbelief. It's blue and white and caked with gray gunk, the laces still tied.

His first thought is that the kid is probably dead, which means Gus can say bye-bye to any more overtime. His second thought, though, is that maybe there's an opportunity here. No one ever found a trace of Jared, not a shoe or a hat or a body or a damn strand of hair. But this here could be an honest-to-god clue to the missing kid. And *he* found it, him, Gus Meacom, and who knows, maybe this will be the clue that solves the case. He'll be a hero. There'll be newspaper articles, TV interviews. It'll be a life-changer.

For some reason, the image of Mrs. Conwell smiling down at him with that twisted grin of hers flashes through his mind.

You lucky little shit.

Gus grabs the whistle around his neck and blows.

Ten p.m. and the air outside is warm and silky with moisture. Rain on its way, no doubt. Esther sits in the patio loveseat listening to the creatures in the woods tweet and caw and croak. Sleep has become a luxury, something she can only wish for. "We glory in our sufferings," says Romans 5:3-4, "because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." Father Kozlov read this verse at Vitaly's funeral, and as much as Esther wanted to take comfort in the sentiment, it felt too patronizing. Why must suffering be the precursor to clarity? Why can an all-powerful god not offer the latter without the former? She felt the same way at the reception, with all the casserole-bearing well-wishers rattling off their inane benedictions. *God has a plan. Everything happens for a reason.* Esther did not bother pointing out

that a reason does not always justify an outcome. Criminals have reasons, killers and rapists, but no one would dare excuse their actions on those grounds. A reason is not a validation, only a motive.

In her hand she holds the flyer from the refrigerator. She is not sure why she felt compelled to take it off the fridge—perhaps out of some childish hope that it would magically prompt the cat’s return. In any case, she has yet to tape up any new ones; the news of the missing boy has everyone upset, justifiably so, and posting a new set of flyers seems in poor taste. Besides, they will probably just be torn down again. One would think HOA would *want* the animal recovered, if only because it might make them appear charitable by association. But if there is one thing that Esther knows about regimes, it is that charity runs counter to their objectives.

A few yards away, the Lupkins’ back door squeaks open, and Esther watches Ms. Lupkin glide out into the yard and light up a cigarette. She dips her head at the woman in somber recognition. As if having been beckoned, Ms. Lupkin drifts across the grass and sinks down into the plastic Adirondack chair across from the loveseat. Her face is as drawn and colorless as an old rag. The polite thing would be to offer her something, a drink perhaps, but Esther knows that nothing she can offer will give the woman what she needs.

“They found a shoe,” Ms. Lupkin says, expelling plumes of smoke from her nostrils.

“Yes, I heard this.”

“No body, though.”

Esther does not say anything.

“Why would he lose his shoe?” the woman asks. “And why just one?”

“Children, they do this. My daughter, she lose things all the time when she is young. She lose her retainer many times. We have to go looking through the trash to find it. Very unpleasant. But that is kids. A shoe, this does not mean anything.”

The woman, clearly aware that she is being placated, gives Esther a look. “Where are you from, anyway?”

“Belarus.”

“Where’s that?”

“In Eastern Europe.” Then, because Americans are only able to orient themselves by their proximity to their enemies: “Next to Russia.”

“Yeah, I thought you sounded Russian.”

The woman flicks the butt out into the yard. Esther watches the ember’s arc out into the darkness as if observing the trajectory of a missile. She stops herself from asking the woman not to dispose of her cigarette butts in her yard. Then Ms. Lupkin worms her hand into the pocket of her ratty jeans for another one.

“My husband’s grandmother was Russian, this little round blue-haired lady. Real sweet. Smelled like peppermint and onions.”

“They are all little and round and blue-haired,” Esther jokes.

“You’re not.”

“I am not Russian.”

“Well, to the folks around here you might as well be, that accent of yours.”

“To these folks I am an old widow. That is all.”

“We all gotta be something,” Ms. Lupkin says, lighting up. Her voice has the aloof quality of someone talking in her sleep. She gazes out toward the moonlit pond. “I was sorry to hear about your husband.”

“Thank you.”

“I never got a chance to talk to him, but he seemed like a good guy.”

“He was. A very good man.”

“My husband died, too. In Afghanistan.”

“When was this?”

“About ten years ago. He got shot by a sniper. Kyle was just a kid.”

“This is terrible.”

Shrugging, the woman puffs on her cigarette. “You’d think I’d be used to losing people. You’d think I’d be a pro by now.”

Esther has to keep herself from reminding the woman that the boy is not lost yet, only missing. She understands that the body can only hold so much—sometimes you have to spill your guts to make room for your grief. It could be

that this is why she considers telling her about the day she found Vitaly in the yard, what happened at the hospital. The nurses had given her a few minutes alone with him in a curtained-off med bay. Vitaly lay on his back with the sheet pulled up to his tawny bare chest. Sitting motionless beside him, Esther watched her deceased husband's colorless face as a child might watch a balloon ascending into the sky, her heartbreak and her rage competing for purchase in her gut. To her own dismay, she found herself fuming at him, a cold, visceral anger she had not experienced in decades. It had heft, this anger, weight. Of course Vitaly's death had not been deliberate, but when you are staring down at your dead husband of over fifty years, it is impossible not to feel otherwise.

She slapped him across the face, hard enough to make her palm sting. A small part of her half expected his eyes to pop open. When they did not, she slapped him again, harder this time, and then again, over and over with both hands, pounding against his slack face and his bare chest and his shoulders, her knuckles knocking unceremoniously against his old bones, her breath coming in ragged huffs as she pulled at his hair and clawed at his skin, until Dina and her husband, Brian, alerted by the commotion, rushed in and wrestled her away from the bed, Esther's face streaked with tears and snot, teeth gnashing like an animal caught in a trap.

The woman motions to the flyer in Esther's hand, rousing her from her daze. "I've seen that cat prowling around by the pond. You think something's happened to it?"

"I do not know." Esther looks down at the flyer as if she forgot that she was holding it. "I hope not."

"Maybe someone took her in."

Esther shrugs. "It is silly, being sad over a cat. This cat is not even mine."

"You can love something that doesn't belong to you. It isn't silly." The woman hoists her cigarette in the air. "Here's hoping everything turns out okay." She takes a deep drag.

Esther looks over at the woman, smoking in the dark. Okay for whom? Perhaps it is possible to love something that is not yours, but then how can

you know whether it belongs to you in the first place? She glances down at the crumpled flyer. What might she say if she knew that at this moment Gus Meacom, on the opposite side of town, also unable to sleep, is considering this very notion, that maybe all love amounts to is the devastation you feel when something is taken from you, and how steadfastly those losses can stay with you? How would she react to see him, spurred by the curious resolve he has felt since finding the shoe, a sense of courage he has not experienced since he was a child, climb from his bed and sit down at his computer in his boxer shorts to print up new flyers, fancier ones this time, which he will post on telephone poles in the Sycamore Acres development to replace the ones he tore down, the HOA be damned?

Possibly she would be buoyed by this. But Esther does not know these things. All she knows is that she is not ready to give up searching for the cat, to accept loss. And so a moment later she rises to her feet and wanders into the kitchen. She paws through the refrigerator, gathering up cartons of deli meats and Saran-wrapped leftovers, as much as she can hold, and then hauls it outside. She slings cold cuts out into the yard like Frisbees, tosses hunks of pot roast and whole pieces of apricot chicken, the sweet brown glaze leaving her fingers sticky. Then she heads back inside for another armload of food, all of the extraneous items she purchased because she does not yet know how to be alone, and this time the Lupkin woman follows her. She does not say a word to Esther. She does not need to. Together, they tear apart the kitchen for foods that might attract the cat, cans of diced chicken and pouches of tuna, blocks of cheese, a carton of vanilla ice cream, carrying it all outside and tossing it into the grass like an offering to a god, until the yard is strewn with food. Then they collapse back into their seats, gazing out at the delectable mess they have made, and they wait, silently, for the animal to slink into the light.

