



# A MARMALADE CAT FOR JENNY, BY APRIL FORD

PUBLISHED ON OCTOBER 13, 11:55 PM

We never left them dangling there for long, swaying back and forth between the fenceposts, little Jenny's skipping rope suspending them above the ground in scuffed pink neckties. Sometimes Jenny would spy on us, then come running over with glossy red eyes, flailing her knobby arms in the air, crying for her skipping rope back. Then Mark would step in front of her with arms folded over his chest, the way the old man always did before he removed the belt from his pants one self-satisfied loop at a time, and



did, though, cause she knew her neck was the perfect size for a little pink necktie, and she also knew Mark enjoyed just the thought of her in nothing but that. Jenny was smart for a nine-year-old.

So when she ran to us all wild-eyed and well-eyed that dusty Sunday morning in late summer, raw streaks of skin on her face swelling through a week's worth of no bathing, it was nothing unusual when Mark started to fold his arms over his chest.

“That one's still alive,” I said, nodding to the last of three orange tufts dangling from the skipping rope. The poor thing gurgled and swatted its claws at the air.

Mark turned his head over his shoulder and launched a wad of spit the size of a half-dollar onto the creature's head. The spit landed on its good eye (Mark had melted the other shut with the brass Zippo the old man had given him for his seventeenth birthday that spring), and the kitten gasped. “Choke on *that*.”

Jenny dug her heels into the dirt like usual, but she didn't turn back for home that time. Though her whole body vibrated with shakes, she willed herself in place and only



“Ma’s bleeding,” she told Mark, as if he would care. Our Ma wasn’t his. According to Mark, he didn’t have a Ma, but everybody knew different. The day she got bail was the day he never saw her again, and by then he hadn’t seen her since he was five so he didn’t care none when the court placed him with us. It’ll be nice living with the Dearths, Mark told me the judge said to him, the Dearths are a good family, and the Missus’ll take good care of that growing boy’s appetite. Sure, Ma fed Mark good, and he liked to brag about it to Jenny, telling her he could feed her good too. But the old man had had her first and even though he didn’t like the old man any more than a person likes to stick a lit match in his eye, Mark kept away from little Jenny.

“Ma’s bleeding bad,” Jenny pushed, leaning straight-legged towards Mark until her calves looked like two glue sticks about to snap backwards. When he just kept on standing there she turned to me with tears and prayer all over her face.

“Scott, please come home. Pa’s in one of his ways again.”

Mark reached back and yanked the skipping rope when the



Jenny crouched down to look at the kitten and cried out when it made a raspy noise and kicked its hind legs at her.

“Can I have him, Mark? Please? Please can you give him to me? Marmalade color is my favorite kind!”

“Go home,” Mark ordered, yanking the rope again.

“Nobody ever lets me have nothing.”

“Now.”

With that, Jenny let out a big huff and spun homeward so sharp she left one of Ma’s sandals behind.

“Jenny’s right, you know,” I said, scuffing my boot on the ground. “She has no friends around here. A little girl shouldn’t be lonely like that.”

Mark’s eyes followed Jenny until she disappeared into the trailer park. “She don’t need friends. You see how girls her age dress around here? Bunch of little whores.”

He glowered over his shoulder at the last kitten. The unforgiving sun had welted the dirt, blood and spit onto its face thicker than piecrust, and the two others were starting to shrivel like day-old party balloons.



Mark poured the backwash from his flask onto the live kitten's head and made it yelp. "What Jenny needs is a dog. Something real ugly and mean to keep that filthy bastard in his place."

It was rare Mark showed concern for what the old man was doing to Jenny. Most often he accused her of lying about it, making up stories to win his attention. Then she'd start to blubber and follow him around the trailer with her rosary, swearing on every last bead she was telling the truth. One time Mark made like he believed her, and Jenny went to hug him, but then he snatched her rosary and smacked her across the face with it and told her the next time she lied like that a doctor would have to remove each and every bead from her stomach one by one with a rusty butcher's knife.

Mark yawned. "Garbage truck should be here by now."

"Bill says to burn them right away now," I reminded him, taking out a can of gasoline from my rucksack. "Says it reeks up his dump too much doing it there."

"Bill's a lazy son of a bitch. All he does is drink and fuck."



didn't want to live somewhere where his social security officer could make him get a job, and Ma really wanted a trailer with awnings on the windows and found the perfect one in Neverlee. It was a small community, only twenty lots besides ours, and the neighbors were quiet except one guy whose pit bull bitch moaned and groaned so loud after he took her in at night the old man sometimes called the sheriff. There wasn't much to do, especially during summer when school was out, but Ma enjoyed cooking and cleaning for the senior neighbors, and the old man made some pals at the tavern. Me and Mark found ourselves a job, if you could call it that, "keeping the community clean" by killing off strays. Kittens mostly, there seemed to be a new litter born every day, but sometimes there were pups and Mark liked dogs better so he went easier on them. He was always keeping an eye out for a good pup for Jenny, even though he knew she wanted a kitten. And that last one hanging on the rope, well, it was kind of cute despite its burnt eye and all.

"It's Jenny's birthday tomorrow," I said.

Mark leaned his leg against the fencepost and rolled two cigarettes. He lit one for me, the other for himself, and



“I thought about giving this one to her,” he drawled proudly, admiring the flame as it grew and crept up the tiny orange tail. “Then she come over and seen it so it wouldn’t be a surprise tomorrow, now would it?”

“Guess not,” I answered, feeling a bit sad for the squealing animal.

Once the squealing became too much for even Mark, he untied the kittens from the fencepost and kicked them into a pile to pour gasoline all over them. The three together didn’t amount to the size of a full-grown cat, but they smelled as bad as any burning thing. After that, we packed our stuff and headed across the field for home to see what was the wrong with Ma.

“What about Jenny’s skipping rope?” I asked.

“She can get it herself.”

“It’s no good now.”

“So?”

“So she don’t have another, and she likes to play rope after mass.”



It was nearing high noon, and the sun was so heavy and sticky everything around us looked flattened to the ground with a layer of see-thru glue. The cracking sounds under our work boots confirmed we had been in a drought all summer, although the trailer park rippled and shimmered ahead like a freshly watered plant. About a quarter-mile away from home we came to a pile of deflated truck tires and crushed beer cans, and sitting right on top was old Millie, one of the neighbor's cats that was having a new litter every month, it seemed. She gazed up at us with lazy yellow eyes and stretched a front paw in the air as if to say, *Why y'all lookin' so sour?*

"Whore." Mark walked past Millie so close he knocked one of the tires sideways, and she slid off her fort. She landed in the grass heavy, like the babies inside her were rocks instead, and suddenly she didn't look so self-satisfied anymore. I watched the old girl work at standing up, spreading out her four limbs to steady herself, and called to Mark when she let out that unmistakable pre-birthing groan.

"She's gonna have them tonight."

"So?"



Mark stopped and turned to watch Millie, who had finally assembled herself into a standing position and was waddling over to me with that combination look of fear and expectation all females get before they birth. Ma had looked that way before she gave birth to Jenny. Everybody else had been excited about my little sister's coming into this world, and I remember not being able to understand why Ma was preparing for the event like a person prepares for a funeral.

Mark made like he was going to come over and inspect Millie but in the end he said, "If it means so much to you then bring the cat back and hide it under the trailer," and continued home.

I thought hard about bringing Millie home and keeping her until she birthed, but if she had her babies when the old man was around then not a one of them, not even little Jenny's kitten, would live to suckle its first milk. Truth was I didn't like the old man and what he was doing to Jenny any more than Mark did, but I couldn't stand against him the way Mark did.

Most of the neighbors were getting ready for afternoon



the tavern, and everybody walked there together, chit-chatting the whole way about anybody who hadn't come along. Me and Mark would go with them, but the old man always took Ma and Jenny through the backroads. Didn't want them subjected to foulness, he said, and he certainly didn't want Jenny mixing with kids who spoke with mouths dirtier than their folks'.

One time before we left for mass Mark pretended to be the old man making the sign of the cross then choking on the wafer cause his sins were too great, and Jenny joined in laughing her little girl's laugh. I kept an ear out for the old man as I sat on the trailer step watching them cause I knew this was not something he would find funny. Mark didn't care and Jenny, why, she was only seven at the time and all she saw was Mark having fun and that meant something to her. When the old man came outside, Mark up and walked off to join the neighbors and left poor Jenny none the smarter for it, dancing around in mock convulsions singing *Praise the Lord!* I had a mind to say something, but the old man saw me thinking it so I just sat there until Jenny's screeching apologies disappeared after the old man and her hit the backroads. There was no point in mentioning anything by the time I caught up to



“Hear the Missus ain’t doing so good,” an old lady said as we neared her trailer. I had seen her around often enough, and she had spent dinner with us one night after her husband died, but other than that I didn’t know who she was. Ma knew everybody in the park cause of her cooking and cleaning, and it always made me uncomfortable when people talked to me like they knew me too.

“She’s fine,” I answered, stopping at the old lady’s step when she raised a wrinkled hand. Her fingers were long and curled, with knuckles that looked like Boy Scout knots, and fingernails painted the color of tea that’s been left to sit too long.

“You’re a good son, Scott,” she croaked from underneath her floppy Sunday church hat. “You go and spend the day with your Ma while the rest of us pray for her.”

“I will,” I assured the old lady, who rolled her head back with a drooping, toothless smile.

Mark had continued on ahead and was pulling off his work boots by the time I reached our trailer.

It sounded like there was a small party going on inside. I leaned against the puckered aluminum side to remove my



Inside, our little trailer was even littler with three ladies dressed all proper and a fat man holding Jenny on his lap, all of them sitting outside Ma's bedroom. Me and Mark watched Jenny bury her face in the fat man's greasy beard, watched the three ladies watch us, then Mark asked, "What's going on?"

"Oh, *honey*," one of the ladies wailed, holding her hand out.

Mark folded his arms over his chest and looked towards Ma's bedroom. "I said, what's going on?"

Mark was a handsome boy in those days. Nobody believed he was just seventeen, especially when they learned I was, too. See, he was near six-foot-two and the sun had done him well. His eyes looked like crystals against his dark skin, so clear and so blue and green all at once you never knew which color they were. Even though Mark was still in grade eight he spoke with the coarse voice of a man who'd seen many things. People never asked if me and him were brothers cause they knew we weren't, but I knew the neighbors chit-chatted about us on those Sunday church walks we didn't attend. About how lanky Scott wasn't a man like Mark, couldn't stand up to the old



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chocolate eyes, sweet the way the old man liked.

“Your Ma’s resting now, honey,” one of the other ladies informed Mark. Her eyelids sagged with bright blue shadow, and her lashes looked like they’d been dipped in tar. She batted them at Mark the way most ladies did, especially on Sundays when they felt holy and attractive, but he paid no attention. He didn’t have eyes for anybody but Jenny.

Mark glared at the gathering outside Ma’s bedroom for a while longer, then left without another word, slamming the screen door behind him so hard it jammed on the inside of the doorframe.

“Scott, good boy,” the first lady crooned, patting her meaty thigh for me to come closer.

Jenny peeked up from under the fat man’s beard, her eyes all pink and warning me something was very the wrong with Ma. This was confirmed when the lady dropped her voice.

“Seems your Ma was *expecting* and there were some *complications*.”



“When your Pa found this out this morning,” the lady continued, “he went down to the tavern looking for the man that done it.”

“You stop this right now, Ma’am.” Maybe I hadn’t known Ma was expecting, but I was one hundred percent sure she hadn’t been with another man. If there was something I did know, Ma wasn’t with the old man cause she had no choice. Him, me and Jenny, even Mark, we were her choice.

“Scott, please be kind and let me finish.”

“Not unless you got something real to say.”

“I do! When your Pa couldn’t find the guilty he came home and got into a bit of a fight with your Ma. She was already having stomach pains this morning so this is how she knew she was expecting, and then with the fighting and all, and you know how your Pa can have a rough hand sometimes. So it was an accident you see, and now your Ma’s just resting up.”

Jenny started to sob, and the two other ladies dabbed their eyes. The fat man sat there all content, keeping



I felt sick looking at the heap of soggy paper towels on the kitchen table, the blood that had spilled between the cracks on the floor reminding me of one time as a kid I knocked Ma's fresh-made strawberry jam on the floor to get the old man's attention away from her.

The lady lowered her head and reached over to pat Jenny's leg. Jenny tucked her leg tight into her stomach, and the fat man tightened his hold on her in case she might want to wriggle off his lap.

I forced my upset back down my throat. "Everybody has to leave. Now."

But it wasn't me who made it happen, it was the old man yelling into the trailer so loud that like magic everybody jumped to their feet and scattered quick and quiet as church mice.

Jenny ran to her bedroom and slammed the door, even though the old man had just ordered her to get dressed for mass. "No!" she screamed, pounding her cup-sized fists on the wall. "Ma's hurt, so I'm staying."

The old man must have gone right to her window and



bathroom to wash up. I was still standing in the hallway about as useful as a blind person without his cane until I thought of something to make her happy.

“Saw old Millie before. She’s gonna have babies soon, and we were thinking of getting you one, a little marmalade like you want.”

“Millie ain’t gonna have marmalade babies,” Jenny mumbled. “She’s a black cat.”

“So?” I chuckled, feeling like I was talking to a miniature adult. “Maybe the daddy’s orange.”

“Don’t matter, Scott. Takes two marmalade cats to make a marmalade kitten.”

Jenny patted her face dry and went into Ma’s bedroom, closing the door firm behind her. She was in there a long time it felt like, and when I tried to go in she leaned against the door and told me to stay put.

“Pa says Ma has some ribbons I can put in my hair.” A few minutes later, Jenny slipped out with pigtails tied in pink ribbons, a matching imitation pearl necklace dangling down her neck.



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present.

“Yeah?”

Jenny didn't answer until she had dug out a pair of black patent Mary Janes that fit her almost perfect.

“After Pa and me leave, you and Mark should call Bill.”

“Did you see the fight?”

“Pa's been drinking so much he don't even remember having affections with Ma. By the time she made him remember, he'd kicked the baby right out of her.”

After Jenny left the trailer, I opened Ma's bedroom door and peered in. Even though Bill wasn't the right person to call, Jenny was a smart nine-year-old for having kept the secret until after everybody left.

Wherever Mark went after he left that afternoon, he didn't come back until dark, so I had to make the call myself. The neighbors who hadn't gone to mass all kept to themselves when the ambulance flashed its silent emergency lights as it pulled into the park, but they did a poor job of sitting on their front steps pretending not to be watching what was going on. The EMTs didn't ask me many questions, but



“Yes, Sir,” I answered, with the eyes down of a person who knows he can’t see such a promise through.

“And you’re sure this was an accident, right?” one of the EMTs pretty much concluded, leaning away from the screen door like the old man was going to come barging through any second.

“Yes, Sir,” I agreed, in reality more worried about cleaning up the kitchen mess before anybody else stopped over.

“Well I’m sure Buster’s gonna miss Lily. She was just twelve when you were born, you know.”

“I know. We’re gonna miss her.”

But as the EMTs covered Ma and lifted her thin, hard body onto the stretcher I felt more sad for little Jenny. She wouldn’t have anybody to run home to anymore.

“Pa, stop! That hurts!”

Jenny’s scream was so loud that night I thought I was dreaming. I had only heard a scream like that once before



That was how me and him got our job “keeping the community clean,” though it was only Mark’s skills that were needed really. He was quick as a jackal while I just ended up his partner cause the old man had a long history with Bill and Bill wanted to do right by him. In the end we made for a good team with my keen abilities to spot strays, though sometimes I pretended not to see them, especially if I knew they belonged to anyone in the community. To Mark they were all the same, but I had my standards.

“Pa, please!”

Jenny’s cries sounded like they had been stuffed inside a tin can, our bathroom was that small. The bath water started running and I heard the old man mutter something, whatever it was bringing Jenny’s volume down to a scratch no louder than a record player’s.

“...pa... no....”

Mark sat up on his cot. “Shit. Wife ain’t dead and gone one full day and he’s poking his filthy fingers around.”

“We should stay in here,” I tried, my breath catching in my chest when I heard the old man’s belt buckle clank against the bathtub. “You remember what happened last time.”



were, the color of retribution, and I knew there wasn't anything I could say to stop him. "You can stay here, you goddamn coward, but this is the last time that bastard's going near your sister."

Jenny howled again, and I swear I felt Mark shudder. I never saw him move so fast when the old man started to yell. All of a sudden there was pure noise. Things crashing, water splashing, voices hollering, I couldn't make out what was what. I sat there like a deer in the headlights the whole time—seconds, minutes, I really can't say—then next thing I knew Mark turned on the bedroom light with Jenny in his arms. She was dripping wet from top to bottom, naked and shivering like Millie's kittens probably were if they'd been born yet.

Me and Jenny stared at each other, and it wasn't until that point in our lives I noticed how much she looked like the photographs of Ma from when she was young. Her eyes were wide and scared, but her face was unreadable just like Ma's had always been after the old man and her got into a fight. And even though her teeth were banging against each other hard as hammers, Jenny's lips were sealed so tight it looked like she was trapping a scream



Mark was shaking too, and his hands were rinsed in blood, but otherwise he spoke with the voice of a man who knew he had been fair in his dealings.

“Get her dried and dressed,” he told me, lowering Jenny onto my cot so tenderly she blushed.

“It’s okay, Baby,” he rasped, the drops of water on his face tricking me into thinking they were tears. “He ain’t ever gonna hurt you again, but you and Scott have got to leave now, hear?”

“For how long?” whimpered Jenny, flinching when I started to dry her with my bed sheet.

“Am I hurting you?” I asked, even though I knew the truth. I was the only man in our family who never had, physically anyway.

“No, Scott. Mark, where are we supposed to go?”

Jenny kept flinching as I helped her into one of my t-shirts and tied her hair in a ponytail, and she kept staring up at Mark until he gave her the answer we all already knew.

“Go with Scott and knock on somebody’s door, maybe one of them ladies from this aft. Say you need a place to stay



Even though Mark was speaking to Jenny, his eyes were fixed on me, and I could hear the undertone of threat in his voice. *You take care of her or you're next*, it was saying to me. So after we were dressed I took little Jenny's hand and we left the trailer. Left Mark behind to find me and Jenny a place to stay until the sheriff came and arrested him, until the ambulance came and took the old man's body to the hospital to join Ma's, until the court decided what would happen to me and my baby sister next.

"Jenny," Mark called through the screen door when we weren't even a few feet away.

"Yes?" Jenny spun around, the prayer for possibility so heavy in her voice I thought I saw Mark's hands come together behind his back.

"Happy birthday."

Everything happened pretty quick the next morning. The sheriff came and got Mark after he phoned and turned himself in, and then a car was sent for me and Jenny a while later. We had spent the night with the Mandys, a



bake for Sunday mass and even had the nerve to ask if I knew the recipe.

“That was her recipe,” I answered, feeling insulted by Mrs. Mandy’s talking about muffins while the lights flashed outside mine and Jenny’s trailer and the sheriff came out with Mark, his hands cuffed behind his back. Mrs. Mandy caught on cause she suddenly changed the subject and invited Jenny to have a peek at her dress-up jewelry in case she wanted to take any with her.

“Take any with her where?” I snapped, a littler harsher than I had meant. It’s just I was real tired, having stayed up all night comforting Jenny, who didn’t shed her last tear until sunrise.

“Well with your parents gone they’ll probably place you somewhere, and probably not together.”

Just the mention sent Jenny into a new stampede of tears.

“We ain’t going to no foster homes,” I said with certainty, though in truth just the mention made me want to cry too.

Mrs. Mandy’s pancake batter face bloated with suspicion.

“You’re not thinking of running away with her, are you?”



of Jenny. Law says at eighteen a person under special circumstances can. The trailer ain't a big expense if I quit school and get real hours from Bill, so I'll inform the court me and Jenny are staying together."

Mrs. Mandy shook her head like I was talking nonsense but Mr. Mandy, who had been sitting at the table all quiet with his morning paper and chewing tobacco, peered over the *Neverlee Daily* and sided with me.

"Nothing wrong with a boy who wants to take care of his family," he said to his wife, whose eyes bounced out of their sockets. "That Buck kid managed okay with his sister."

"They didn't have the same kinds of *problems*," Mrs. Mandy sputtered all self-important.

"And just what kinds of *problems* do you mean?" I challenged, dropping my elbows on the table and leaning towards her. "Do you mean the kind like we're dirt poor like everybody else around here? Or do you mean the kind people like me and Jenny are sure to have cause of the old man?"

Mrs. Mandy's whole fat face jiggled like it had just been



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“And I’m saying to you, Missus Mandy, none of it has made me the worse. And little Jenny, why, little Jenny here’s tough as nails.”

When I looked over at Jenny, she was giving me that tulip of a smile I’d seen her give Mark so many times. “Yeah, me and Scott are tough as nails.”

It took some negotiating the judge, of course, before he banged his gavel and declared me a capable person to care for my baby sister, and it didn’t come without rules. First I had to get a real job, not the killing-stray-animals kind, and the pay had to be more than the old man’s Social Security had been. I had one week to do this.

The judge was asking the impossible on purpose (even though the law was there I could see plain as day he wasn’t happy about it in my case), so wasn’t it my luck a construction company opened that summer just past the tavern and the church and was looking for roofers. The foreman snickered when he first saw me, said no way a scrap of a boy like me could hold two shingles together, but after I spent a full twelve-hour day out there under the unforgiving sun with men twice my size, he took me to the tavern and bought me a draft.



me and Jenny all over Neverlee, came to check up on things. Things like how clean the trailer was, how much food was in the kitchen and how healthy it was for a growing girl, what little Jenny wore, signs of alcohol around the place, did we still go to church. All this was recorded for a weekly report to the judge. That wasn't the biggest hassle though, cause me and Jenny lived clean, and the roofing job paid me good for my long days. The biggest hassle was the stuff that had to be taken care of between Fridays, the stuff not on Debbie's checklist but that I knew was being watched too.

For example, once summer ended and Jenny went back to school, somewhere in between my waking up, twelve-hour shift, and going back to bed, I had to get her lunch ready for the next day which meant needing time to buy lunch food in the first place. When Jenny needed help with her homework, it didn't matter if I was tired. There was keeping an eye out for who Jenny spent time with after school, and that was almost impossible since I usually got home after dark. Then again, Jenny wasn't interested in playing with other kids and Mrs. Mandy, mealy-mouthed Mrs. Mandy, kept her, feeding her and everything, on the days I worked late.



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turned himself in for the old man's death.

Though nobody dared to say it out loud, everybody knew Mark had made up his mind that night, and it would always be in his nature to make up his mind about a person like that again. *First degree manslaughter!* one juror had railed. *Self-defense!* another had insisted. In the end, the judge took pity on Mark's life circumstances and sentenced him to a locked rehabilitation facility until he turned twenty-one. Mark didn't argue none. Even when little Jenny started to bawl as the court officers cuffed his hands and feet and led him to the van, he kept a solid back. Every man watching him leave that day dropped his head in shame cause he couldn't stand the way Mark did.

"What'd Missus Mandy wanna know?"

"How Mark's doing, and when I told her I didn't know she asked me how come cause he's like our brother."

I had been dreading this conversation from the beginning, not knowing how it would start, and knowing Mrs. Mandy had started it angered me. But in all my time dreading and even obsessing over it, I hadn't taken just one second to plan what I was going to say when the conversation



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“So how come we ain’t heard from Mark?” Jenny pressed, the fine baby hairs on her arms lifting up goose bumps all over her skin.

Everybody had tried to assure me the reason Jenny wasn’t much interested in playing with other kids was they all had Ma’s and Pa’s to go home to and she didn’t want to be reminded of that just yet, but I knew it was cause she missed Mark. Oh, the people made sense in their logic cause Jenny told me sometimes she missed our parents, but in the way she never told me she missed Mark, too, I knew that she did. And even though he had been hard with her, enjoying making her cry even, I was sure Mark missed her something mean. Having grown up seeing the old man wear Ma down to her death with his yelling and beating and drinking, though, I had learned some kinds of love were dangerous, and I didn’t want Jenny to have to find out the way Ma had.

“Mark can’t talk to people outside the facility, Baby. It’s like jail in there, all those guys living in four-by-four rooms with doors that lock from the outside and no windows to let the sun in.”

“But we’re family, Scott. Mister Mandy told me when Buck



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“They were real family.”

“Maybe you think Mark ain’t real family,” Jenny spat, slamming her fork onto her plate so loud I got potatoes stuck in my throat, “but all you ever do is *think*.” Then she pushed her chair back and scampered to her room like a wounded animal that’s more aware of the fact it’s been wounded in front of another pair of eyes than the fact it’s actually wounded.

Life went on like that for the next two-and-a-half years, me working my twelve-hour days putting a roof over Neverlee’s first housing project, Jenny going to school, then staying with the Mandys until I got home. On the summer of her eleventh birthday, Jenny asked me to register her in a babysitting course going on at the church. It’s not that I didn’t want her to learn those skills, but there was no way for me to walk her to and from the church every day with my work schedule, Mrs. Mandy was getting fatter by the month so she was no good to count on, and there were no other proper kids taking the course. I had just been promoted to supervisor, though, and that meant better pay, so I made an offer to Jenny.

“What about going to camp?” I asked one afternoon after I



“What kind of camp?”

“I was thinking a nice Christian camp. Saw a sign for one at the church when I went to see about your babysitting course.”

“Oh. I don’t care for church anymore, Scott.” Jenny’s voice was as thin as she was slight, and her lids were slipping down fast over her eyes.

“You been sleeping a lot lately,” I said, changing the subject with a concern I was proud to be feeling cause it meant I was doing my job as good as any parent. “Do you wanna see a doctor?”

“No.”

“I can afford it now so don’t let that trouble you.”

“No thanks, Scott. I’m just bleeding like girls do when they become women, is all.”

I wanted to respond and I was angry at myself for not having anything at all to say, but the only time I’d seen a woman bleed had been after the old man had his way with Ma and I knew this was not the same situation.



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I just sat there all dumb and blank. “Girls?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it’s not so usual for girls to do the same bad things boys do, but I imagine there’s a place for them too.”

“I mean living with Mark. Are there girls there he can see every day?”

Even though me and Jenny had been facing each other the whole conversation, I suppose I wasn’t really looking at her more than enough to notice she was near falling asleep. But her question about Mark living with girls caught me so off guard that I really looked at her, and that’s when I saw a flush in her cheeks that little girls aren’t supposed to have. And when Jenny asked me again if Mark lived with girls, the humidity in her voice made me understand what she had meant by just bleeding like a woman was all.

Mark was let go from the facility one morning in early spring, just before his twenty-first birthday. Jenny was asleep when he phoned the night before with the news.

“You’re talking kind of funny,” he snickered, in a way that



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“No,” I whispered, “I don’t wanna wake Jenny up.”

“I’m sure she’d love to talk to me.”

I said nothing so Mark changed the subject. “Making good money on the job?”

“Sure, but Jenny’s starting highschool in the fall so there’ll be new expenses.”

“No big deal,” Mark drawled. “I’m coming home soon and I’ll be working. too, so there’ll be lots of money.”

My ears started to burn at Mark’s talk of returning home, though I had always known the day would come. He didn’t have anywhere else to go. His three years in the facility had been restricted so any friends he had made were from the inside, and from the stories he had told me they weren’t guys anybody would want to know on the outside. Mark had made good use of his time in lockup, getting his high school diploma and learning mechanics. That was more than I could say for myself, even though my roofing job was secure and word was I would be getting another promotion soon. I felt what I had always thought of as my respect for Mark turn into flat-out jealousy.



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dead from cancer, and trapping strays is a job for kids.”

“I was thinking you could set me up in the projects, maybe as a welder or something.”

Of course Mark was thinking that, and of course he knew even if I made like there was no room the foreman would snatch him up in a second. The foreman was always looking for certified men. Even though I’d been promoted to supervisor cause of my natural ability to oversee things, the guy who took my old job had certified skills and was always one step behind whatever position I stood in line for next.

“You want a job, Mark, you talk to the foreman.”

With that, me and Mark hung up and I went to bed, staring at the ceiling for hours and feeling like little pins were nicking my sides every time I heard Jenny moan from the other side of the wall.

I don’t know what exactly I was expecting to see when I came back from work the next night, whether it was Mark sitting at the kitchen table tearing into a thick red steak, or an empty trailer cause he was at the tavern welcoming himself home. Or maybe he had decided not to come



“If it ain’t the old bricklayer’s son!” Mark boomed as I stopped outside the trailer to take my work boots off. “Build any sandcastles today?”

Jenny was sitting beside Mark on the couch, her math book open on her lap and the only thing between his brawny hands and her.

“Scott!” she exclaimed, jumping up to come show me a page scribbled with equations I barely remembered doing before I’d left school. “Mark says he’s gonna help me with my homework since you work so late. Says he can make me an A-student in no time!”

Oh, how little Jenny’s eyes were bright with happiness. Her cheeks swelled with smiles, and she pranced around me on spindly legs like a colt that’s figured out how to keep up with its momma. Even Mark looked content as I watched his eyes follow her, content like on those rare occasions the old man had done something nice for Ma, and she went on thanking him for hours after the rest of us went to bed. As much as I tried to fight it, a feeling of relief started to warm me, and I sat down at the kitchen table, Jenny’s giggles and squeals rocking me into a sort of



Mark slept in the living room that night out of a common decency he had never lacked, I admit. Jenny went to sleep in her bedroom, but I could hear the desire racing through those little veins of hers. That, of course, kept me up all night with one ear cocked for the sound of her eager feet padding to the living room, but she had always had a sense of decency about her, too.

The next morning, Mark got up first and cooked us bacon and eggs shining in grease. When Jenny started for a second helping, he tapped her hand and said since she was a woman now she had to watch what she ate. If it had been me doing that Jenny would have curled her lip and said I wasn't her Pa. With Mark, her mouth twitched and her eyes grew muddy, but she pulled her hand back and sipped all tame-like on the orange juice he poured for her.

"I'll speak to the foreman about getting you onboard," I said in my best effort to sound sincere. In reality, I was doing it for Jenny cause the foreman had offered me a six-week job in Eshewall City, and I wanted to make sure she was taken care of while I was gone. I should have been worried about bigger things for her at the time, but then again it didn't take a genius to see Mark's return had permanently changed the order in our trailer.



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me at twelve dollars the hour.”

Twelve dollars the hour. That was high starting pay for a welder all right. That was what I was getting as supervisor.

“I ain’t leaving for good, Mark. Just six weeks.”

“Don’t matter,” Mark drawled, winking at Jenny. “Foreman says there’ll be other contracts coming up, and he wants you to head the crews.”

“I’ll refuse. I’m just taking this one cause it pays high.”

“What about when you come back?”

“What about when I come back?”

“Your supervisor position’s already been filled by somebody else, and I can’t support *three* on twelve dollars the hour.”

The whole time me and Mark were discussing the situation, little Jenny sipped her orange juice like we were talking about what was going to be for supper that night. Every so often she’d peek up at Mark and he’d wink at her, but whenever I tried to make contact she acted like she didn’t notice.



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good, right?”

“Sure,” she said, leaving the table to get ready for school.

Me and Mark sat across from each other like we used to when we were boys, only we were men now. And even though I was still scrawny and lanky compared to Mark, the past three years had taught me a lot.

“I’ve been saving every extra penny from work, Mark. I’m going to get us a nice little bungalow.”

“Us?”

“Me and Jenny, in Eshewall if the city’s nice. Don’t want her doing school here any longer than she has to. Girls her age are out fooling around already.”

“Does Jenny know? Last thing I heard from her she’s looking forward to having a little party here first week of school.”

“She can do that in Eshewall.”

I had a mind to keep the conversation going until Mark got fed up and told me to just take Jenny and have a nice life in Eshewall, then I realized two things. One, Jenny was



saw fit. Once I turned twenty-one, no more Friday visits from Debbie, no more living under everybody else's surveillance on the days in between, no more Neverlee County. As if Mark could read my thoughts like a billboard sign on the side of the highway, he leaned back in his chair and dug into his pocket.

"Here," he said, tossing a scrap of newspaper across the table. "This is what I'm planning to give Jenny to show her how much I've missed her, so you can see why she might rather stay here."

I unfolded the damp paper, having to be real careful not to rub my fingers across the ink else it would smudge. It read: *Two marmalade cats to give away, one boy one girl.* There was a small black-and-white picture of the cats, and the female's belly looked swollen.

"She's expecting," I pointed out, for no good reason cause Mark had already made a plan.

"Once she has her babies I'll drop them across the field for the Hewitt boys. They're a bit timid like you always were so I thought I'd help them along."

I had a vision of me and Mark in the field, hanging litter



How come we hadn't just drowned the litters or, better yet, shot the momma cats that kept on having them? I was sure if we'd just shot the momma cats we could have cleaned the community in a matter of days.

Mark scratched his chin and admired the ad after I tossed it back to him, and then he decided he'd even allow Jenny to keep a kitten or two as long as there was money to have them stopped from getting pregnant.

"What about the males?" I challenged.

"Won't be us dealing with the babies."

Before I left for Eshewall that week, after Jenny had gone to school and Mark was out welding things in place, I thought about leaving a note for Jenny to reassure her I'd be back, maybe even tell her my plans to take her with me next time to the place that would be our new home. But I knew Mark would find the note no matter where I hid it, and so my words would have just been wasted.

"You sure he's feeding you proper?"

"Yes, Scott. He's feeding me like he's hoping for twins."



“Yes, Scott.”

“Okay, Baby. See you soon.”

“Sure.”

I held the receiver against my face after little Jenny hung up, listening to the static and closing my eyes to see if I couldn't trace it all the way back to the trailer kitchen where I knew she was sitting. It had been six months since I'd left for Eshewall City—Mark had been right, after all, and the contract had turned into another and then another, and I hadn't been back home yet. The workdays were long there, sometimes longer than they'd been in Neverlee, but the money was getting better and better, and soon I'd have enough to put a down payment on the nice bungalow me and Sarah had spotted on our way home from mass one Sunday. In the in-between time, I was sending money to the trailer to make sure Jenny wasn't missing anything. It was a sure way to keep her under my care in case Mark ever wanted to fight me for it. Since I wasn't showing signs of coming back too soon, though, he had backed off with his threat to take me to court over our Jenny.

I knew that was partly cause between me and him I was making better money, but it was mostly cause I was



Some of the guys I had worked with in Neverlee were keeping me updated and told me Mark hadn't been promoted yet and that was making him bitter. Once or twice, he phoned me in Eshewall to tell me this court person or that had come to the trailer to ask about me and made like he was getting ready to tell them the next time I had up and abandoned Jenny, but I knew he would never do that cause then he'd lose her, too. Course they'd have every right to take little Jenny away if they found out she was expecting from a man of almost twenty-two, so I was just as guilty of keeping secrets. Thing was, I had good reason, moral reason for having stayed in Eshewall longer than I had meant to. I just needed a little more time, then I could bring Jenny to a good life, marmalade cats, baby, and all, and give her opportunities she had never even known to dream of.

As I sat there in the office that late winter morning, the feeling of hope infected me and suddenly I had to go back to Neverlee right then and get Jenny.

Sarah sensed my change of plans and leaned over the desk to pat my hand. "Go. Every bone in your body is grinding against the other."



eyes on her I knew she was the reason I had been sent there. I mean, there I was, a young man who had never had a girlfriend before, let alone allowed myself to think of having a wife someday, and there was Sarah sitting at that front desk with flowers for eyes and ribbons for hair. I knew Jenny would like her, and Sarah was excited to meet Jenny and perfectly willing to have her and her coming baby live with us.

“I could go with you,” Sarah offered, even though the boss didn’t like to give her time off. With a silky voice like hers answering the phones, he joked, it would be a loss to him if she were gone too long.

“No, Sweetheart,” I said, thinking of Sarah’s best interest. “I’ll be back with Jenny in a blush and then we can get all settled into our new home.”

And what a perfect home it was. There was a nice green patch of front yard where Jenny would be able to sit with her baby, and plenty of space in the back for her cats to scuttle around—though I would need to talk to her about just how many cats she could have. Mark, I had heard, had let her go a bit wild with her marmalades, and I didn’t want our place stinking up with litter after litter, especially since



So I left Eshewall by car that day, my own car and the first any man in the family had owned since I could remember, and drove with the windows down and the radio twanging the whole way to Neverlee County.

I got to say it was a bit strange passing by the projects and seeing Mark driving a bulldozer into one of the units where the roof had collapsed. There were some other guys there, too, but they were eating hot dogs and slapping each other's thighs, while Mark's torso glistened like raw steak as he gutted the proof of my first real job in Neverlee. I considered honking the horn, maybe even pulling over and getting out for a word, but I didn't have much to say to him, really. The jealousy I had once felt towards him had been replaced with the more adult feeling of pity, and I didn't see any good in him being able to read that on my face.

I suppose it's no surprise when I say I felt even weirder pulling through the entrance of the trailer park. I had never driven a car through the park before, so it was something of a delicate task going between the rows of trailers. The neighbors sitting on their front steps along the way gazed with lazy interest, but then looked away when I smiled, and I couldn't remember them having ever



the old lady with the Boy Scout knots for knuckles pulled the tip of her floppy hat over her face when I waved at her. Finally, I thought maybe it was the car making too much noise (though the dealer had promised me it was top of the line and purred like a kitten) so I parked it in an empty lot, the Mandys' old lot, and walked the rest of the way to our trailer.

First thing I noticed was the awnings on the windows. They were full of holes like a pack of moths had been starved then set free on them. And the front step of the trailer, all around the front of the trailer for that matter, was covered in what looked like cat fur and shit. It smelled so bad I had to squirt the air around me with the breath freshener Sarah had put in my travel pack.

“Jenny?” I called, pressing my face to the screen door. The radio crackled from the kitchen and I heard water running in the bathroom, and then a few seconds later came little Jenny’s pitter-patter footsteps.

“Who’s there?” she asked from behind the safety of the hallway wall. I smiled at how much wiser she got every day, how clearly wise enough she had become to ask who was at the door before showing her sweet little face.



Inside, the stench of cat shit was worse, but I forced myself to breathe through my mouth so as not to make Jenny feel insulted I mightn't think she was doing a good job keeping house.

“Scott?” Jenny poked her head around the wall, and her face lit up. “Scott!” She ran over and wrapped her pipe-cleaner-thin arms around me.

Now, me and her had never been too affectionate with each other, mostly cause I figured with the way the old man had been with her the last thing she wanted was me touching her too no matter which way, so I kept my arms straight until she finished her hug. Besides, except for the hard little belly sticking out from under her t-shirt, there was even less of Jenny to hold on to than when I had left six months earlier.

“You sure Mark’s feeding you proper?”

“Yes!” Jenny answered, a bit annoyed-sounding. “There’s more food in the fridge than we used to have. Go see for yourself.”

“I believe you, Baby, but you’re awfully skinny. Sarah’ll



“Sarah?”

“Sarah’s my wife, but I was gonna keep that a surprise for when we got to Eshewall.”

I saw the confusion start to turn Jenny’s face a different color, but I can’t quite describe what that color was.  
“Eshewall?”

“Sure, Baby. You, me and Sarah. She’s real excited to meet you, and we’re all gonna live together in this nice bungalow I’ve been saving to buy.”

“What’s a bungalow?”

“Bun-ga-low. You’ll love it, Baby. A house all on its own with a nice big backyard just for us.”

Jenny spun on a dime and went into the bathroom. I followed her up to the doorframe and extended my arms on both sides. She had filled the tub with soapy water.

“It’s for the momma marmalade,” she explained.

I watched Jenny lower down to her knees and make a clucking sound. Soon after, a round orange cat ran mewling between my legs and rubbed up against her belly.



her gently into the bathtub. I stood there all silent while she squeezed a sponge over the cat's back and then another mewl, more scratchy this one, sounded from the hallway.

"No, Buster," Jenny warned, flicking water at the male marmalade to keep him away. "This here's Lily's turn for a bath."

It took Jenny ten minutes or so to give Lily her bath, dry her off and tie a pink collar around her neck, and then she started looking for Buster, who had gotten bored and gone somewhere outside. Jenny eased down onto her hands and knees at the front of the trailer to see if Buster was underneath, and I asked her when she wanted to leave.

"Leave?"

It was as though we hadn't had a trace of that conversation back in the bathroom. "Yes, Jenny, for Eshewall. I can't be away from work too long cause the boss needs me to keep the crew in check."

"Then you'd better start heading back. Maybe next time you can visit longer. Heeeere, Buster! I'm sorry I got all mad at you before, but Lily was in real need of a bath."



longer we waited the less time Jenny would have to pack what she wanted to take with her.

“Jenny! Get dressed proper and let’s go.” I felt a bit bad about sharpening my voice, but we had to get moving.

“I am dressed proper,” was her muffled reply.

Then suddenly I lost my patience with her, the first and only time I ever did, and reached forward and yanked her to her feet, the way I had seen the old man do to Ma too many times to remember. Jenny’s eyes turned white with shock, and I stumbled back a few steps cause it felt like Mark might have been driving his bulldozer so hard against the projects it was making the earth growl.

“Baby,” I began, my voice catching cause I was scared she was going to start crying the way Mark used to make her.

“You know I didn’t mean anything by that.”

But Jenny didn’t start to cry. She didn’t blink, and her eyes didn’t even get a shine to them. Instead she took a deep breath and flattened her t-shirt over her belly and looked me square in the face. There was nothing but a slight tremor in her voice, as slight as a night’s breeze during a drought.



come back in a car and your shoes are all glossy don't mean you can make me leave. Mark works real hard all day doing the same thing you used to do, and he looks out for me now. He's just a little mad at life like everybody around here, but at least he came back to face it."

"It's not like that, Baby. I promise you it's not like that."

"You mightn't remember, Scott, cause I know you wanted so bad to erase all them memories and pretend like nothing ever happened, but I remember. I watched you help Mark hang those kittens by their throats out there in the field so don't you go pretending you're all proper. You ain't my Pa."

Jenny shook her head as if to get rid of the memory, then Buster came running over to her and she picked up her marmalade cat, the marmalade cat I never got for her, and brought him back into the trailer.

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