

King of the Castle

I remember when mum first brought it home, not much bigger than my hand, refusing to come out of its little bed thing, hiding at the back of the small cave-shaped soft habitat. Clutching to the fabric like a toddler clutches to their mother's hands the first day of pre-school. It was white with grey spots all over, eyes like little pools of obsidian reflecting a confused 6-year-old's face. Suddenly all the attention in the house was shifted to this little beast, a glory in which I had previously basked; being the youngest child, I was the favourite, the most spoilt, the king, allowing my subjects to pamper me. My sister Tracy was 13 at the time, and we were close. I looked up to her. She spent every waking moment with that cat from there on, making sure it was fed, constantly worrying about the temperature of its water. It would only venture out of its little hidey-hole when it thought we were not looking, one tiny paw at a time, pressing the hard floor a few times before taking another step forward, eventually sniffing different objects, surveying the scene the same way a thief cases a joint. We'd never owned a pet before, Dad mentioned having a dog when he was young, and a dog was what we originally wanted, a purebred golden retriever.

"Our house is too small. It wouldn't be fair to the dog," Mum protested, much to Dad's disappointment. I had hoped to be the second choice, the cat wouldn't be too much of a disruption to my life, but I was wrong. This cat was a thief, it was stealing my family, and I was being usurped.

I awoke one night in a cold sweat, I'd had a nightmare, my own fault for staying up with Tracy to watch the Babadook, I walked downstairs, my tired hands bouncing off each mahogany stair bannister to keep me steady, making sure to miss the last one, which had developed a wobble in the past couple weeks and dad had told us to not touch it. I went into the kitchen to make myself a glass of orange squash, taking one of the kitchen chairs to the cupboard to stand on, making sure not to dare make any sound, as I pushed my small 6-year-old body up to the cupboard, the chair wobbled, I made sure to steady myself before opening the cupboard and retrieving the half-full bottle of Robinsons. As I closed the cupboard, I heard a small hiss and looked up to see the cat on top of the cupboard, staring at me with those dark eyes. It looked at me as if it knew already what would happen; I was unsure of what to do. I reached out to try to pet it. I had seen cartoons of big cats playing with each other's tails, I assumed this was the same, I grabbed its tail, and it lunged at my face, it scratched me, lodging one of its claws into my cheek. I yelled out in pain, falling back and tightening my grip on the tail. As the claw remained in my face, I fell off the chair, and my head hit the small dining table. The family rushed into the kitchen to see the commotion. Mum and Dad asked if I was okay. Tracy, however, was more concerned with the cat, the thing had run off to its bed, leaving a trail of piss, my head and face were bleeding, and she cared more about the animal that wounded me.

From then on, I developed a phobia of animals, cats in particular. I would refuse to be in a room alone with the animal and kept a wide berth to it, this caused Tracy to gradually harbour a sense of disdain toward me. By the time I was 8, we rarely spoke, Tracy would have different friends over, the odd boy every now and then which dad joked about being against, she would always be with that cat, it was always in her room, relishing in its triumph of replacing me. The cat had an easy life, it just did

whatever it pleased, and it was showered with affection. It would hiss whenever it saw me, the scar of its handiwork plastered on my right cheek like a brand of ownership. The animal just stared at me.

"You just need to be calm around him," Mum said, "He'll warm up to you."

I spent most days in my room, coming out for food and school. I slipped up, swore, hit a kid in class, got low scores in class, mum would yell at me, the cat would knock over glasses or shit on the floor and it was fine, it was disregarded as cute. I could feel my blood boil just thinking of the little animal like I could hear its thoughts. I knew it was purposefully looking to be rid of me.

Mum came in one day and revealed that she had spent £120 on a brand-new climbing frame for the cat. The excitement painted itself across Tracy's face, she never looked that excited with me, and I had never had that much spent on me. The cat began to play with the large pillar of different amusements, a monument to my family's enslavement to this creature. They were laughing, laughing at the cat, at me? Laughing at how I'm no longer wanted. The pang of jealousy ravaged my soul. I only saw red. I screamed and charged at the frame. The cat leapt to the sofa as the frame fell and broke into two pieces. Everyone looked at me, Tracy and Mum began to yell, and Dad hit me several times.

I shut myself in my room, my face red raw from being struck by my dad, the image of my sister crying, telling me she hated me burned into my mind and my mother's look of disappointment. Voices and feelings swirled my head.

"The cat."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"Not my fault?"

"No."

I slipped into a tear-soaked slumber as my mind worked for reasoning. The sounds of my family yelling about me faded into oblivion.

One afternoon, I was out in the woods near our house. The warm glow of the setting sun dominated the swiftly receding blue of the image I was seeing above me as if someone had thrown orange paint into a swimming pool. I was flying a remote-controlled drone I had begged Dad to get me from my last birthday. It even had a small camera feed sent to the remote control, I liked the feeling it gave me, the ability to see anything, the feeling of control bestowed unto me.

Suddenly, I saw it, the cat, by a tree near me, not four metres from where I was standing. It tried to move but was limping, its leg was bleeding, probably from some less-than-pleasant exchange with a fox. It looked at me and meowed loudly. My heart began to race. I was terrified to walk towards it, thinking it might lash out at me again. My heart pounding faster and faster. The meows grew louder, signifying the pain it was in. I began to walk towards it, my legs controlling themselves as my hands began to shake and perspire. I got to the cat, and its meows louder and louder as I looked into its eyes, those same eyes that had taken my sister from me, turned my family against me, scarred me. Again, I saw red, and my pounding heart began to pound harder, but not fuelled by fear. The previously overpowering fear had been exchanged for excitement, adrenaline, as I felt the bones of the small skull

crush under my shoe, each small crack and crumble resonating within me like an organ playing the symphony of my soul, the meowing then stopped, silence, just the smell of grass as I wiped the remains off from my boot.

I felt the wave of adrenaline rush over me, and the pleasure that followed, the feeling of power, the control, the warm realisation that this was how things should be, the red was gone, replaced with the truth, the powerful deciding what they do with their subjects. I had regained my title.

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I awoke to a sharp pain as a pen was thrown at my head.

“Wakey wakey dickhead” chuckled Matt as my head rose from my desk, making other people in my class laugh as there was a small puddle of drool on my work, my face burned as even the teacher chuckled at me, I buried my head in my textbook for the rest of the class. I was 17 and a puddle of hormonal confusion. The smell of Lynx Africa and pencil sharpening’s filled the air as I threw the pen back at him, it missed and hit Stef in the row in front of him, she turned around, face an image of disgust, said nothing and turned back.

“Can’t believe we got stuck in the same fucking class as the weird kid.” She whispered to her friend next to her.

I didn’t care what they thought, I just continued to draw on the desk.

The school day ended, and I began to walk out of school, cutting through the woods to get home quicker, passing the cats grave on the way, Mum and Dad had always looked at me differently from that day, I don’t know why, I helped rid them of the evil controlling them, they weren’t grateful. Dad began to drink more, and Mum was always silent, even more so after Dad smacked her for saying that I should go to therapy. Words like “unstable” and “denial” were thrown around.

“You want everyone to know we got a problem son?” Dad would yell.

“N-no, I guess not” " Mum would sheepishly reply.

“I’m sure it was a simple phase; he’ll grow out of it.”

They argued a lot, mostly about me. I didn’t care; the king knows what is best for his subjects. It’s the responsibility of others to choose how to react.

“Oi!” shouted a voice as I closed the door after arriving home.

I turned to see my now 24-year-old sister. We weren’t close by any means anymore. She never found out about the cat. Dad told her it got sick and had to be put down for some reason, and she just grew colder and colder after that, like a wedge had been lodged between us, growing ever so larger as we grew up.

“What?” I asked, glaring at the familiar stranger.

“Mum needs you”, she replied, a flash of sadness and worry dancing across her face, a quiver in her voice that precipitated to me that something bad had happened.

I traversed the creaking floorboards, the ones dad had been saying he’d fix for the past five years, into the kitchen to see my mum sitting on one of the kitchen chairs, slumped to the side, eyes puffy from

clearly having cried, nails an uneven, rough mess from having been chewed on. She looked up at me with scared eyes, reflecting my confusion as she explained to me that she and Dad were getting a divorce.

“He just said he doesn’t love me anymore,” she explained. “I just don’t know why.”

She broke down in more tears. Dad had left for a while for a walk or a shop none of us knew. My world had been shaken. My parents, the two who were there to serve me in the castle that is my house, are gone. I was flush with anger and confusion, my skin burned, and my heart pounded, I ran past my sister into my room and slammed the door so hard the plastic Beavis and Butt-head poster I had hanging on my wall fell. I just sat on the edge of my bed, a million thoughts rushing through my hormonal brain, staring at that one dark patch on the wall, maybe a shadow, maybe some mould born of the age of the house, maybe the house was falling apart like my family was, my kingdom was crumbling. I lay back, looking at the ceiling as tears faded from my vision. I blinked them out as I drifted off to sleep.

I was awoken by a clattering in the kitchen, my room was closest to the stairs, and so anything down there was in earshot. I got out of bed to investigate, slipping into my navy dressing gown and black Adidas sliders as I walked out of my room, creeping down the stairs. I poked my head around at the bottom of the stairs to see my father in the kitchen, filling a bag with food, money and his passport. And on the table, his phone, as I approached the kitchen, lit up. It was on silent so as to arouse the least amount of noise, even though he hadn’t noticed it had gone off. I looked at the cold blue screen, it was a text, and my insides began to churn.

“Hurry up, baby,” the text displayed. “I just got here, and I parked down the road like you said.”

I looked at the man I thought I knew, closed my eyes to fight off tears, then opened them and saw a stranger. A stranger who was stealing from my house, my castle. Again, my heart began to pound, I was reminded of the cat, but I no longer saw red. Just clearly, unconsciously, my hand found its way to the wall, grabbing a large kitchen knife off the metal rack. I brandished my sword and heroically advanced towards the enemy. As the man of the house, it was my sworn duty to protect against outside invaders, mum and Tracy would love me after this. I could see the adoring crowds and hear their screams for my love, my protection.

The house groaned with the wind outside, trees shaking in anticipation. I stepped forward, and the floorboard creaked loudly. He turned to see me, and his eyes widened.

“Wait.”

That was all he could say. As the word left his mouth, I lunged forward, sending my weapon of justice into his traitorous throat, he grabbed onto me, and his eyes rolled back as his body crumpled. The blood circled on the floor, coating my hand and baptising me. A smile sneaked onto my face. I dropped the knife. It clattered to the floor, along with my worries about my castle’s safety. As I sighed my relief, the floorboards creaked behind me, and my neck swivelled to see my mother and sister, no doubt admiring my handiwork, their saviour, come to solve their problems. They were both pale, their faces the same pigmentation as the body on the floor. Tracy ran off, making retching noises. Mum just looked at me, confusion in her eyes, her hair messy and split, a still image, frozen in time, mouth wide open, before the screaming started. I smiled, proud of my noble work protecting my castle. My smile remained as I heard the sirens in the distance.

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These days, my castle is padding, my royal robes keep my arms restricted, and I no longer see Mum and Tracy. Servants still bring me food, showing the correct fear for me. They struggle to even meet my gaze, as they should out of respect. I still hear the crowds screaming my name, calling for their king. My padded room provides the comfort needed to support me. I am bathed, fed and given entertainment by my servants as I wait to leave this place. I don't know how many years it has been. Maybe one, maybe six, one of my servants will come in sometimes and give me special juice, no doubt a kingly beverage, to aid me in resting most days. As a leader must do before they bring the cavalry over the hill to take land. Sometimes I see glimpses of the outside, walking between the cold, damp hallways, glimpses of the trees, of cars driving by the scent of a nearby barbeque. I see the cat in my solitude, white fur with grey spots and eyes of obsidian. To some degree, I'm thankful for it, allowing me to awaken to the truth. With that first sacrifice freeing me from the shackles of society, and my father's reminding me of what I am. I am a king, and once I leave my padded palace, I will visit Mum and Tracy and regain my kingdom.

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