

Whisper

I wandered around town after my wife's funeral to think, but all that came to mind was how very dead her dead face looked while it lay there staring up. So I decided to visit Driscoll. He'd been in one of the back pews at the church and I knew that he was still holed up in the same musty apartment in the middle of town, so I hurried over and knocked on his door.

The first thing I noticed upon entering was the assortment of cats roaming around, all of them colored a different shade of gray or black. They hissed at me when I tried to approach them, with cloudy eyes and fur clutched tight to their bones.

"Sit on down, buddy, take a load off!" said Driscoll. "I got something to show ya."

Driscoll's front room had to be called that because it wasn't possible to imagine living in it. Double-carpeted with burnt beige Berber and empty fast food bags. Walls pocked with black smudges and tiny claw marks. There were just two pieces of furniture, a dusty coffee table and an easy chair broken in two. I decided not to sit.

Driscoll eyed me suspiciously but quickly replaced the look with a kind of smile. He picked up a plastic wand from a child's magic set and arched his wrist like a maestro. The cats, noticing Driscoll's instruction, rushed into a straight line in front of us. Then Driscoll began to command tricks from them as I watched, smiling at me for approval as the cats did somersaults

over the coffee table, or walked on two legs. The cats were uncommonly well behaved. This is something I felt I was expected to make note of. I golf-clapped and nodded whenever it seemed appropriate.

Driscoll's training was serious. The cats' movements remained cat-like but their maneuvers contained another dimension: their twirling legs and expressive meows appeared mechanical, awkward, nearly human. I wondered just how many days or weeks they'd spent in training for impromptu performances like this one.

Driscoll's clear-eyed conduction proved that he found nothing strange in the cat show. Like a madperson he twirled his plastic wand and sneered if any of their leg circles or pyramid configurations lacked. He barked orders and shooed them around with a real sense of accomplishment.

I ruffled a little when the cats started a conga line.

"Driscoll, buddy, you didn't need to go to these lengths. I'm no foreign dignitary."

"I wanted to get them to kneel for you, like good little kitties." He was frowning and gesticulating. "But the little bitches refuse me at every turn."

I waved off his outburst and shook the brown-bagged bottle in my hand. "It's just the cheap stuff. I didn't bring any frankincense."

He only gave me his wide, crackly smile, temple to temple. It reminded me of so many other jagged grins he'd given me, other brown bags and bottles. Life had been full of totems like these. I'd spent a lot of time with Driscoll in my youth and we'd been pretty close proximally at different times, but there was no intimacy in our relationship. I'd never felt like I could really trust him in the way you might a brother, or a pet.

"Should I take my shoes off?" I asked.

He seemed not to notice the question. "Let me introduce you to the kids!" he yelled.

At Driscoll's call the cats lined up in a row and stood on two legs at attention. He pointed to the first one on the left, an emaciated gray kitty with a missing eye.

"This here's Cocoa!"

At the sound of its name Cocoa did a backflip, right there in front of me.

Driscoll went on, grinning without falter. "And Jasper's the other gray guy here, and there's Cookies, the sorta grayish, blackish one there, and the one that's blacker'n hell, that's Whisper!"

Jasper and Cookies actually looked identical, I thought, with their grayish-blackish hue and variously offset bone structures. They both managed excellent backflips, considering. But Whisper, the last cat in line, was a traditional midnight black, like a witch's familiar. He was the thinnest, and smaller than the other cats, but his eyes were less fogged, his gaze more focused.

Though he'd been a contributing member of the troupe up to that point, Whisper refused to do a backflip when his name was called.

Driscoll's smile dropped.

"Sonofabitch!"

Driscoll grabbed for the cat but Whisper flung himself onto the couch and took off into the hall. The hall was so dark that he simply disappeared.

"Why'd you call that one Whisper?" I asked.

"Oh, because the little bastard can't hardly speak. I mean *meow*. Some asshole must of run him over or beat his ass before I found him 'cause his voice box is totally fucked."

Driscoll motioned for me to follow him into the kitchen. To get there we had to pass by the apartment's dark hallway where Whisper went. I glanced into the dark and felt an animal presence, something squirming with life back there, but I couldn't see any figures or shapes.

The kitchen was in no better shape than the rest of the apartment. Shattered cups filled with soggy tea bags, empty cereal boxes torn to pieces. There was just enough room for a

kitchenette table and three stools in there, and perched on one of them was a man I'd never seen before. He didn't say anything as we came into the room, didn't even lift his head, only continued fiddling with a box cutter. Driscoll started rummaging through the cupboards while I eyed the visitor. He kept trying to produce the blade from the box cutter but couldn't do it, though at the same time he gave the impression that he didn't care if he ever actually succeeded. It was just something to do.

I sat down on the stool across from him and watched him work curiously.

"Hey," I said.

He didn't so much as twitch when I spoke. I tried him again, but nothing, no sign of life. He still hadn't responded when Driscoll came back to the table with a couple of soap-spotted glasses from the cupboard. I took the bottle out of the bag I'd been holding and poured generously for each of us.

"You want some?" I asked the visitor.

"Oh, he don't drink much," replied Driscoll on the visitor's behalf. I found this odd, of course, but not that much odder than the rest of Driscoll's bizarre apartment, so I let it go.

Driscoll started telling me about his job driving truck. Inanities I could relate to. I was trying to pay attention and um-hmm when I thought I should when I felt something soft brush between my feet. I looked down and found Whisper there, staring up at me from under the table, his eyes glossy and whited out. He had returned from whatever dark haven he'd been hiding in since Driscoll's outburst, and I couldn't tell if he was begging for my attention or a scrap of food. I tried to ignore him, but Whisper wouldn't let up, pawing at my jean leg, tender and insistent.

Finally joining the conversation, I asked, "Hey, Driscoll, who's this guy?"

Driscoll looked over at the visitor. "Oh, that's just my buddy. He don't say much."

Driscoll jumped back into the banal tale he'd been telling. It made me uneasy that his friend still hadn't responded in any kind of way, but I was already starting to feel a little warm from the whiskey. I tried again to let it go.

Knowing that Driscoll expected me to talk back from time to time, I made up fake stories about myself that were more interesting than my actual life. On that day, the day of my wife's funeral, my mouth only seemed to be able to traffic in lies, or points so frivolous that their certainty would've meant nothing anyway. Driscoll's friend only kept working at his blade.

Eventually Whisper got adventurous and climbed up into my lap.

"Get yer ass down, kitty!" Driscoll screeched.

"Don't worry about it, man. He's not bothering anybody."

"That ain't the point. He's just now finally startin' to learn some goddamn manners."

A magnetic pull from the dark hall; I felt it even stronger than before, like it was trying to voice something to me. Before I could bring it up to Driscoll, Whisper began climbing up my shirt towards my neck.

Driscoll's eyes glassed over murderously. "You ain't fuckin' with anymore houseguests, kitty!"

Driscoll caught Whisper by the nape and tossed him viciously into the corner of the room. I watched the cat soar through the air, graceful and twisting. He thwacked loudly against the wall and slid to the floor. Rattled but essentially undeterred, Whisper got back to his feet, shook his head, and got back to skimming between my legs.

Driscoll cursed something I couldn't hear and refilled the two glasses on the table. He held his glass high over his head as if to give a toast, but only looked at the amber liquid in the kitchen light. He might have smiled, staring blankly into the glass. Then he downed the glassful without saying anything at all.

Driscoll quickly refilled his cup and eyed me, wondering why I was being so hesitant with mine. I winced a little, ashamed that I'd abandoned my friend like that. I took my glass and drank.

Again, from the corner of my eye, in the shaded hallway, there was a flicker of movement. But when I looked over and searched, the source of the flicker was gone: the hallway was empty.

"What's going on back there?" I asked Driscoll.

"What do you mean?"

"Is there somebody back there?"

"I got no idea what you're talking about, buddy. There ain't nothin' worth talkin' about back there."

Driscoll immediately went back to drinking and refilling. Driscoll's friend didn't bat an eye. I tried to inquire further but Driscoll only waved my questions away with his hand: he was not going to tell me any more, and I had to accept that. I got the feeling that at this point he could only speak in routines anyway, in concentric circles, like a ghost attached to some lost keepsake.

For a while, I sat in silence as Driscoll droned on. Internally I was trying to justify staying, and the only graceful action that I could think to do was to stay and keep Driscoll from being alone. Driscoll's speechless buddy notwithstanding. And if I stayed, I wouldn't have to think, or remember anything. So I decided, with an audible sigh, that I wouldn't leave just yet.

As soon as the sounding breath escaped my mouth, I spotted Whisper again, creeping along the kitchen wall behind Driscoll. Whisper's white eyes were watching me, marbled and shining. He crept closer and closer and when he breached Driscoll's hazy peripheral Driscoll yelled at the cat to get the hell away again. This time, Whisper silently obeyed.

Inexplicably, as Whisper retreated back to the hall once again, I began to miss him.

And then, from somewhere in the bowels of the apartment, there came a mangled cry, stunted short by the strain of its effort.

“Did you hear that?” I yelled out.

At first Driscoll didn’t respond at all. He just leaned over and pried the soft edges of a hole in the kitchen wall. But after recognizing the look of fright on my face, he seemed to regain his hold on the moment and tried to steer himself back in.

“What?”

He seemed like he honestly didn’t know what I was referring to.

“That scream! It sounded like a banshee or something!”

Driscoll’s face was mute, open. “I didn’t hear nothing, guy,” he said. He shook his head and smiled, and went about his plying.

The cry had me on edge. I glared over at Driscoll, but he only continued with his stories. He’d started retelling the same ones over again, with increasingly improbable details added in. Earlier he told me that he’d once run into a deer on his way hauling car tires to Youngstown, but then in his second telling it seems he’d actually hit a whole family of them, “smashed them into dust and guts” he included with a disgusting laugh. I didn’t reciprocate with any sort of chuckle. I might’ve grimaced, if anything.

Even Driscoll’s ridiculous tales didn’t cause any stir in his buddy, who’d finally managed to get his box cutter blade from its cheap plastic sheath and was preoccupied with using it to dig gunk from his fingernails. I could see tiny swirls of blood forming under his cuticles, but, as before, he didn’t seem bothered by anything.

I was properly drunk by then, and my thoughts were jumping and flitting around in my skull like solid objects, floating just out of reach, but even so I still had the sense to become more and more disturbed as Driscoll’s tales spooled on. “What’s your deal, man?” I finally asked Driscoll, interrupting him midsentence. “What’s happening here?”

Driscoll's response didn't match my question. "You know, I don't love selling that shit but I'm starting to think the selling loves me. And I only run tires but once a week now, maybe ever' two weeks when the money's tighter." He tried to swallow more whiskey, but most of it dribbled down his chin. "And I'm not using as much anymore, man. Not nearly as much."

I already knew this, because he'd already told me all of it before. Driscoll drove truck for the same tire factory that I'd worked at for years, a job I'd quit just a week before the funeral. Driscoll would come into work in the morning and take a trailer filled with car tires from one end of the state to the other, where the company had a warehouse and outlets. He'd drive back to the factory and do the same thing, two or three times a day depending on his shift. That was a life. Until he started selling the stuff he'd been shooting and made enough side money that he could go part-time.

I still wanted Driscoll to acknowledge the cry from the hall, so I tried baiting him out of his trance.

"Driscoll, friend, what would your daddy say about that? Selling the same shit that lost him his job? That killed your brother?"

I felt miserable as soon as I said it.

But before Driscoll could respond, his friend put down his box cutter and directed his eyes at me. His pupils were enormous, dark and solid. The meager light of the kitchen bounced off of them.

"I got a story for ya," he said. "A ghost story."

His voice contained some baritone, but his speech was spindly and cracked. I imagined he sounded a lot like an arm being slowly broken. In that way, it was almost painful to listen to him.

"I love ghost stories," I told him, trying to break up his lacerating speech. It was true: my obsession with the supernatural got me excited for whatever he might have to say.

Driscoll's friend started telling his story, shaking more and more as he went on. But he didn't let up until it was over, as laborious as the telling was.

"I knew a young man once, he was maybe halfway through his twenties. He worked down at the old rubber plant. 'S abandoned now. But when the plant was running, this young man, he had it all: a partner in life, a few acres of land, and a big farmhouse out in the middle of it. It didn't matter that they didn't know how to grow anything on it, and they weren't much for businesspeople trying to lease it: that land was theirs. I assume no one in this room has ever known that feeling, owning something like that."

Driscoll's friend's hands slid over and around each other as he talked, and his pupils seemed to deepen and grow as the moments passed. I didn't know if he'd taken something or if the story was just propelling him upwards.

"As with all ghost stories, this one starts happy and quickly takes a turn. Just as the couple decided to have a child, the guy's wife starts to feel pains in her stomach. Thinking maybe they'd succeeded and her early pregnancy was giving her complications, they went to the doctor on a rainy Monday afternoon, with tears waiting at the corner of their eyes and their hands held tight together. Or, so I imagine. It turned out that the prognosis was worse than they'd imagined: what she had in her belly wasn't a baby, but a cancer."

As trite as the line was, my eyes couldn't help but pinch and water at the thought. That was just how I was. But Driscoll shared none of my sentimental streak. "How ironic!" he yelled, with a nasty air. He was mocking his friend; I guess he was already bored with the story. "Never heard that one before!" he jeered.

Unflinching, Driscoll's friend ran his shaky hand through his hair dramatically and continued. "So on the afternoons when they would've been lying naked under the bedroom mist of a grey sunlight filtering softly through the panes of their rain-sparkled window they were

kneeling instead, in postures of prayer, with pillows under their knees and a plastic bucket by their side in case she needed to be sick. Now, no matter how this story ends up, you can't say this guy didn't stay right by his wife's side right to the very end, like that, with his knees on the wood floor, near prostrating himself to a cruel and angry God that couldn't be bothered to offer him any solace or sign. Because there he was, praying, on a gray rain-spackled day like the one I've just described, holding his wife's hand, when he felt her grip go slack; upon further inspection, he could see that she was gone."

Driscoll's friend hadn't yet looked at Driscoll or I. He seemed to be focused on some hidden third entity in the room, some consciousness that perhaps only he could see. I raised my hand in front of his face to see if he would recognize that I was still there, too, but he made no gesture of acknowledgement. Driscoll was slugging from the bottle and tsking under his breath with every line his friend delivered.

"He was devastated, broken, traumatized. One day he was moving with her to the mysteries in muscle and grip and loin and the next day she was dead, vanished. I think he must've lost his mind when she died, walking around all day thinking about the impossible nature of feeling all that love for her, this person who had been alive with him, this person who had been there to give it recognition, this person who was now disappeared forever. Who else would ever accept that sort of outpouring from him, that flowering that he'd been so careful not to allow himself to feel until he met her and couldn't help himself anymore? These were questions he asked himself every night, over bottles of whiskey and whatever other salves he could find. He ambled the halls of his country house all day and night, looking around at everything that'd sprouted up around him, and feel empty. He let it go to ruin, along with his livelihood and his connection to family and friends. He grew obsessed with his wife's death, her absence, and as her phantom grew inside him, his love grew with it. It might even be said that he loved her more dead than alive."

With this turn of phrase, Driscoll's friend smiled ever so slightly, tragically, it might be said. Driscoll's smile, however, was wolfish, and it erupted into a howl. "Seem pretty happy with that phrase, buddy," Driscoll said to his friend, accusingly. "How long you been working on that one?" Driscoll leaned forward obnoxiously, waiting impatiently for something else to critique.

I'd almost forgotten about the strange noises and animal magnetism I'd been sensing from the pitch-black hallway until I felt the ghostly presence beckon once again. It felt like it was tugging at my sleeve, some live thing lurking in the back of the apartment. I peered into the hallway's abyss and the harder I looked, the more I thought I could start to make out two tiny eyes, opening and closing at a slow, steady pace. They seemed to be getting nearer and nearer as Driscoll's friend continued on.

"Some time passed. And then, on a really stormy day, the bereaved shows up in the middle of town with hardly any clothes on. He was yelling at anybody who dared look at him, 'Hey, hey, anybody help! My house is haunted! I'm being haunted! Somebody help!' Needless to say, no one wanted to engage with a character like that. He was whirling around on the sidewalk in the rain, half-naked, his eyes shot through with terror. But there was somebody, she was young like he was, and not afraid to ask people if they needed something. She was also pretty sure she recognized the wild young man twirling in the street. When she walked up next to him, she realized she was right: they'd gone to high school together, not so long ago. Even in his frenzy, the guy managed to recognize his schoolmate, too, and this calmed him down a bit, so that he was able to explain what had him so riled up. 'Joanna,' he said, for that was the young woman's name, 'Joanna, you gotta listen to me. Joanna, I've got a ghost in my home, and it won't leave me alone! I'm losing my mind over there, can you help me!? Do you know how to exorcise ghosts!? Do you know somebody who does!? Please, Joanna!' Joanna, being an extremely good person, Joanna listened to everything the lost young man said, and to his incredible fortune Joanna *could* help him, it turned out she

actually had herself a small business ridding homes of spirits and poltergeists and other unwanted eidola, she'd been born with the gift of clairvoyance and had honed her craft so that she could permanently eject those unwelcome guests from people's houses and places of business. She started talking to the guy about spiritualism and séances, subtle bodies and energy deferred and all of these things, and his face perked up like a cartoon."

Still feeling the constant pull from the hall, I watched the two tiny eyes grow wider and clearer as I watched. Suddenly, silently, slower than possible, Whisper broke the surface of the dark and entered my vision. He snuck over to me under the table and sniffed my pant leg.

I checked Driscoll's face to see if he'd realized that Whisper was back in the kitchen, but he clearly hadn't noticed. He was completely closed in around the story that his friend was telling, scowling at every word choice and indulgent description. I wanted to smack him.

But Driscoll's friend continued. "Joanna followed the poor young man back to his house, and as they came onto the scene Joanna could see that the front door was swung wide open and all the windows were shattered and rain was pouring in. There was an inch or two of standing water on the first floor of the house, soaked through the carpet and wood. Joanna was careful not to make mention of this, to not embarrass her poor young friend, so instead she removed her shoes and socks at the threshold, placed them on the kitchen counter and waded into the mess without complaint. And at first it seemed the young man'd hit the nail on the head: the house seemed *very* haunted. He led Joanna upstairs and at almost every step a picture would fly off the wall, or a candle would flicker alight, or a groaning would sound from some hidden space further inside. Joanna, of course, wasn't frightened: she worked with haunted houses all the time. But the extreme, theatrical degree of this haunting did give her pause. She couldn't remember ever being inside a more haunted house. As they made their way up the stairs, cinematic stair creaks upon each step, she became a little concerned about the unreality of the haunting. The young guy led

her up the stairs by the hand, and Joanna could see on his face that he was happy that she was there to finally witness what he'd been living through, that he must've felt accepted, in some way, having her there, a bona fide medium and spiritualist extraordinaire in his empty house seeing all that haunting, all those ghostly maneuvers. She didn't judge him for that."

Driscoll cut in again. "I don't know, sounds like she's patronizin' the poor sonofabitch!" He swigged and swigged. "Coupla assholes!" He laughed uproariously and poured more for each of us. I hated him in that moment, but I never learned to resist a drink, so I kept up along with him.

"The young guy led her to the top of the stairs and then up another short staircase to the one room in the house that had a door that wasn't swinging: the attic. There was a faint glowing light coming from underneath the door, and Joanna could hear whispering on the other side. But it didn't sound like the usual whispering she was used to hearing in her line of work: there was something, I don't know, *questionable* about it. She tried to shrug it off but it was hard to shake, so she cautiously went with the young guy into the attic.

"The guy walked Joanna into the room and stood behind her. 'This is where the bulk of the supernatural activity seems to be coming from,' he told her. He was almost grinning with the affirmation he expected to receive. Joanna stood in the bluish haze of the attic and listened to the strange, off-kilter wails and screeches, her skin bristling at the unfamiliarity of the haunting, and then suddenly her attention was drawn to the far end of the room, where a cloudy light started to develop just above the flowery border that ran along the center of the wall. As Joanna watched, an apparition started to come into focus. With every second more definition accrued, and soon she could see a young woman wearing a white gown, her eyes purple and bruised with shock, her mouth agape in agony, her teeth chattering on and on.

“The apparition came into full view, and as Joanna went to grab the young guy’s arm for support, because she was feeling real terror for the first time that day, because the ghost on the wall had truly scared her, as she went to touch his arm she reached out and felt nothing, an absence where her young friend’s arm should’ve been. At first she thought she was alone. That the poor guy might’ve himself turned out to be a ghost and he’d led her to this place where he was stuck for eternity at the behest of some yearning attachment to this old house, this rotting wreck where he had once loved a person, and held their hand when they grew sick, and prayed with them as they grew sicker still, and eventually buried them with tears in his eyes and a hole growing in his chest.

“Joanna had all of this in her mind when she whirled around and saw that she was not wrong about most of this, that she’d only been wrong about one thing: the young man was no ghost. He was crouched on the floor in the back of the room, working a hi-tech projector that was aimed at the wall. This was the source of the phantom. When this illusion was broken, Joanna finally noticed that the bulb in the ceiling was a black light, and that there were a few speakers lining the rafters where the wails were coming from. When the poor young guy saw that Joanna finally understood, she’d worked out his ruse, his face contorted into an expression that bespoke the grandest anguish and melancholy. Joanna ran from the room and went down the stairs and peeled away at the wallpaper behind the pictures that’d flown off the walls earlier to find that there were spring-loaded mechanisms in place that were responsible for the launching. She checked the phantom candles and saw that each one was plastic, set to light up and go out at regular intervals. While Joanna revealed what hid behind the young guy’s metaphorical curtain the poor guy could only crawl behind her, sloshing through the rainwater collected on the floor, begging her to stop, sobbing incessantly. Now, what you need to know about Joanna is that she may be some kinda saint living amongst the sinners of this wretched plane, for though she’d been duped by this man she did not want to upset him any further. She stopped in her tracks and looked down at her

groveling schoolmate. He came up to her foot and began pawing at it gingerly, keeping his head low in supplication. Wanting no living being to snivel at her feet, to linger below her, and owing absolutely nothing to this minor acquaintance of hers, Joanna bent down and kneeled beside him and carefully took him completely into her arms. This was the strongest feeling she felt in response to his trickery, to hold him and comfort him. She cooed him to rest, and his clamorous sobbing eventually subsided and turned to low, rumbling sighs she could just barely hear. Joanna held him like that for hours, the story goes. Maybe she's there holding him still, in that drowned house. Myself, I prefer to see it like that."

After a few moments of silence, I realized that the story was over. No final spook, no climactic screech telling us the ghost was right behind us. Just a minor, lingering conclusion.

Driscoll's friend picked up his box cutter and worked it back under his fingernails without saying anything more, digging and goading, the blood beginning to drip onto the table. Driscoll sat staring at him with his fingers steeped together and a disgusting grin on his face. He asked his friend, "Now, is that how it *really* happened?"

I wanted to go up to Driscoll's face and scream into it, as hard as I could, but before I had the chance there was another ghastly moan from the hall, this one loud and agonizing, full of bitterness and incredible suffering. Whisper seemed to hear it, too, because he leapt up onto my leg, clawing at my belt to get a better footing.

I stood up and yelled at Driscoll. "What the fuck is *that!*?"

As soon as I got up Whisper took his chance and leapt up onto my chest. I wasn't sure how I ought to respond, but I remember grabbing him and holding him close.

Driscoll's mouth fell open and garbled sounds came out. He looked as if maybe he'd frayed his last bit of sense down to a core, and every motion thereafter would be as dangerous as

snapped electrical wire. He squealed and reached across the table for Whisper but the cat was quicker this time. He leapt into one of the many holes in the kitchen wall.

It was chaos from there. Raw shrieks from Driscoll as he ripped at the wallpaper with his fingernails and punched more holes in the wall. It became clear how the other holes had gotten there. The wailing from the hallway rose to a violent pitch while Driscoll rampaged, punctuated with loud coughing and gasping in between the screams. Even Driscoll's friend intensified his digging, and was essentially just slicing into his cuticles with the box cutter at that point.

I didn't know where to begin. But I ended up trying to restrain Driscoll before he tore the entire kitchen apart.

"Driscoll! Calm your ass down!"

I wrestled him back into his seat but he didn't stop flailing towards the wall. "You gotta help me!" he yelled.

I felt a powerful desire to rescue Whisper as well, having already developed some kind of attachment to him, so I did what I could. With his last wit somewhat more about him, Driscoll and I set to peering in through the holes more attentively, bending our ears to any sound in the wall.

After a few minutes, we heard Whisper's fractured meow and Driscoll's eyes lit up.

"If I just reach in through here..."

Driscoll planted his body against the wall and stuck his arm in to the shoulder. We heard another meow and Driscoll redirected his reach. One more lunge into the wall and he had him.

"Yeah!!!"

I watched with some amazement as Driscoll pulled the cat from deep inside the wall. Tears poured down his face as he drew Whisper to his chest, wrapping his skinny arms around him as gently as he could. I watched Driscoll regain himself, little by little. He petted him and petted him, pressing softly on Whisper's fur.

Driscoll sat down and saw the remainder of the whiskey smirking at him from its bottle on the kitchen table, and he finally let go of Whisper to pour a final glass. The cat ran and jumped out the kitchen window and presumably tumbled down the roof out into street, as any trained circus cat would.

I expected he would be okay. Or better, probably, without Driscoll breathing down his neck all the time. So, with Whisper accounted for and the energy in the apartment back to a buzzing lull, I could return to my investigation of the dark hallway and the rest of the apartment.

I started in on Driscoll again, but he was simply lost at that point, babbling like a child in nightmare. He was so fried that he hadn't even noticed that Whisper was gone. He just kept rubbing his hand like he was still petting Whisper, even though all he held was his whiskey glass.

I decided I was going to have to look into it on my own. Driscoll didn't seem to hear anything, or if he did it didn't bother him. And Driscoll's friend only cut at his fingernails like he'd been doing all night.

I got up and crept over to the hallway. The groaning floated from the back, from the furthest unlit corner, behind the door that must have led to the apartment's single bedroom. The light switch had been torn out of the hallway wall so I had to push on through the dark.

When I got to the bedroom door I bent in for the sound. I heard muffled cries, soft rustles of bedsheet. In my other ear I could still hear Driscoll going on about nothing in the kitchen. And then, like a crashing wave the silence in my head toppled over and I could hear myself thinking, for the first time in a week. My thoughts were muddled, obscure but deafening. Memories flashed by and terrified me. I was shaking as I turned the knob and opened the door.

In the middle of the room there was a woman lying fetal on a caved-in mattress. No matter what I told myself I could only see her as my wife, whose funeral I'd escaped earlier that day.

Seeing her there, writhing in unknowable agony, I wanted to hug her and tell her it was going to be okay, but honestly I didn't know.

When the weak light from the kitchen finally snuck through the doorframe, the woman rolled over and saw me standing there, crying. Her eyes went wide.

"Who the fuck are you!?" she yelled.

I wasn't able to respond, because no matter how hard I applied the rigors of logic she still only appeared to me as my wife. I knew she had to be someone else, someone alive, but I only saw her there, dressed in her deathclothes, laid out and full of emptiness.

"You must be one of Driscoll's friends!" she cried out.

In my mind, the muted thoughts began to coalesce into a single thought, a single phrase I could say out loud to my wife, in that room: I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I approached her deathbed and went to my knees. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't there, I'm sorry I didn't stop it. I'm sorry you died restless and unreachable, I'm sorry you died alone, a needle in your foot, your ghost spiraling up from our bedroom through the roof out into the empty world outside, a runaway ghost with no house to haunt. I begged and begged, on my knees, I begged and begged.

"You sell that junk, too?" she said. "Or oh, no, I get it, you're buying it from him, aren't you? You're a piece of shit, aren't you? I bet you let *your* wife lay in the bedroom all day pissing and moaning and don't ever check on her or talk to her or nothin,' too, right, just like that asshole out in the kitchen!?"

And then Driscoll appeared at the door. "What're you doing back here with my girl?" he jested, wearing his miserable grin.

He snapped the bedroom light on and my vision broke and I remembered that I was in his beat-up apartment, with the cats and his odd friend and, from what I'd just learned, Driscoll's girlfriend. She started yelling something at Driscoll but I couldn't make it out; Driscoll replied in

kind, and for a while they flickered around me in a panorama of bickering. I hadn't gotten any solace from that waking dream, supplicating to my wife's ghost. And despite the commotion in the room, I felt more alone than ever.

It didn't seem that either of them would stop before the sun came up, and I knew I wouldn't find my peace in that apartment, so I tiptoed out of the room and made to leave. On my way out I passed by the kitchen and saw Driscoll's friend sitting there, on the same stool in the same awkward posture as before. The box cutter was gone, and it looked like he'd smashed the whiskey bottle into pieces, out of frustration, or fear, or boredom. His hands were a bloody mess, dripping and pooling on the table. He sat staring at them, wordlessly, as if waiting for a prophecy.

Wanting to help, but not knowing how, I took a dishtowel and dropped it gingerly over his bleeding hands. "Thank you for the story," I managed to say.

On my way out the front door I mouthed a silent "goodbye and good luck" to the remaining circus cats.

I travelled listlessly through the town, my vision of the place washed in pink and blue lights bleating like traffic signals, the trees on the sidewalk blooming purple and black, the carbon mist that always hung in the air fuzzing out the edges of things until there was nothing that I could really see for certain. After walking around for hours, I stumbled into the side of my car, which was still parked behind the funeral parlor.

I found my key and opened the door and sat on the seat. I sat for a while with the door open and the early morning breeze cruising in, giving the sun a chance to come out if it decided to. At some point I heard a crying in the street, faint and faraway but then closer and closer while I listened. Eventually I could hear it coming from underneath the car. I slid off the seat and knelt on the asphalt so I could peek under and found a little black cat hiding behind the front tire, wailing. I looked closer and saw that it was Whisper.

I slowly reached beneath the car, careful not to startle him, and Whisper let me pick him up. I drew him to my chest, wrapping my skinny arms around him as gently as I could. I regained myself, little by little. I petted him and petted him, pressing softly on his fur.

“I did love her,” I told him. “I know I did.”

He nodded his head, yes, yes, I believe you. Even if nobody else does, I do.

I lay Whisper down on the passenger seat and he stretched out to rest. I watched him for hours as he slept, smoothing my hand over every bristle of fur, every twitch of muscle while he dreamt of terrible, terrible things.