

Cat Trap

A knuckle—a woman's, I guessed—tap-tap-tapping at the kitchen door: exactly what we didn't want to hear. *Hello there!* it seemed to say; it was not the kind of rap to bruise you.

"Mom wouldn't knock, it isn't her," I told Lu, nearly certain I was right. My heart juddered, pulsing in my ears. Lu only shrugged, ran her hand through her hair—one silky slide of fingers from part to end. She was like that lately: queenly, almost. Tap-tap, went the knuckle, hidden by slanting blinds. Jump-jump, went my heart. It could be anyone out there.

Sitting in the kitchen, me and Lu, I took a picture in my head of everything around us, wondering what someone would notice, looking in. It had been just the two of us all week—our longest stretch alone so far—and we had kept the kitchen pretty clean. That was the one thing, housekeeping-wise, our mother guarded like a captain. A stack of unwashed dishes was insubordination. The sweet stink of those old cabinets, rot swelling in the wood grain, brought on sporadic fury in her—though the rotten cabinets, at least, were not our fault. No telling what she'd do, when flaming hot.

The knuckle tapped again.

"Maybe it *is* Mom," said Lu. "Open the door."

It was only Mrs. Mallory, from down the road. I let my breath out. "Have you all seen my cat?" said Mrs. Mallory. Her yellow-white hair was loose and sticking out in all directions.

"Our mom isn't here," Lu said, behind me, which wasn't what she should have said at all.

"Good lord, Alexandra," said Mrs. Mallory to me. "When did you get so tall?"

She wore a bright cinnamon smudge of lipstick and a silky

blouse with daffodil-petal sleeves and a pleated skirt. Hose that shaded her legs tanner than the rest of her. She looked like a bouquet of dried flowers and smelled like one, too. Mom's scent was different: molasses-dark with a pang of lemon; sweat and cold metal underneath. That smell had wafted into my dreams all week. Woke me up every time, a jumper cable to my veins.

Mrs. Mallory licked her lips and smiled. "I didn't mean to interrupt your dinner, girls. I'm worried about, Timmy, is all," she said. "You know Timmy. My handsome old Tuxedo? He darted out this morning and hasn't returned. I don't have time to look for him just now. It gets dark so early, this time of year." She bobbed her head a little this way and a little that way, trying to see past me into the kitchen. "Your mom is out again?" she said. "Isn't that a nice skirt, Lucinda," said Mrs. Mallory. "How grown-up you look."

The skirt was khaki and narrow to her knees. I guessed it was from the back of the closet: that one time when Mom had to dress neat for a job interview at a rental car company. The skirt nearly fit Lu now, but it wasn't meant for her. It still wore its store tag, jutting from the waist at a crazy angle, like a tiny broken arm. Lu tugged at the skirt from the bottom—to keep it straight, I guess.

I elbowed her, hard, in her shoulder. An elbow that said: take that thing off, right now. You want Mom coming after you if she finds out you helped yourself to what isn't yours?

"We should probably clean up dinner now," I said, "and start on homework, Mrs. Mallory." We hadn't been to school all week, in fact. But that was the kind of thing that grown-ups liked to hear.

"I'm just sick about Timmy out there hungry, somewhere," said Mrs. Mallory. Then she brightened up. "How would you girls like to earn some money?" she chirped. She put a hand over her heart. "Poor old Timmy." She gave us a nice round number then: forty dollars. "Why, you can split it in half," she said. "Do you think your mom would mind you helping out?" A bead of perspiration perched at the place where her hairline met her ear.

"She wouldn't mind," I said. Mom called Mrs. Mallory names behind closed doors: Featherbrain, and Snoop, and worse. But Mom wasn't here to make her opinion known.

I knew that, pooled together, the forty dollars would be just enough for that cooler at Dempsey Brothers Hardware in town. We didn't have enough cash yet for a tent—a tent was one-hundred-percent indispensable, I had explained to Lu a hundred times—but we did also need a cooler. Lu didn't want either of those things. She didn't want to leave.

But I was thinking, just at that moment, as I inhaled a damp cloud of Mrs. Mallory: We can buy the cooler tomorrow, first thing, me and Lu. As long as we catch Timmy tonight. If Mom stays gone at least another night, and we buy the cooler tomorrow, well—I rose on the balls of my feet and tapped the doorframe with my fingers twice, for luck. It served to block Mrs. Mallory's view into the house, another boon.

"Okay," I said. "We can find Timmy for you."

Just then there was a honking. A big white car waited at the end of Mrs. Mallory's drive, down the hill, shaded by poplars. That's why she was all dressed up, I understood then. Going somewhere.

She swiped her tongue over her teeth. "I'll be back tomorrow morning, girls. I'm visiting with a friend tonight. Poor old Timmy. He'll be hungry," she said, turning to us again, fluffing her hair from underneath. "His hunting days are over. You do your best, now, and you'll have your money. The kitchen door's unlocked. Just bring him in."

And then she clicked her way down the gap-toothed brick steps, holding her arms out for balance. You could see pinkish patches on her tendons, above the shoe rims, even with hose on. She scuttled down the road in her high heels, fluttering her palm overhead. She got into the car and it drove off.

"Why do you look like that?" said Lu.

"Like what?" I said, and plastered my expression smooth. In truth, I was nearly giggling with the prospect of it—not just the money, but the chance to make an animal trap at last. I was itching to master the figure-four deadfall. All it takes is three sticks and a weight: a diagonal stick hinged onto a straight-up stick, which holds a heavy stone; and a trigger stick, forming the triangle's base,

which holds the bait and brings the whole contraption down. I had checked out that wilderness-survival book from the library three times last year before I somehow lost it. I wished I hadn't, though; there were all kinds of useful tips in there for living out in the woods all on your own.

I had been telling Lu about the figure-four deadfall for ages, telling her how you can eat all kinds of things out in the woods if you have to rough it for a while. If you're laying low.

"I can chisel the sticks with my pocketknife," I said to Lu.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said. "Where the heck did you get a pocketknife, anyway?"

I grabbed her hand and drew a figure-four trap—wrist to knuckles, side to side, in blue pen—to remind her of its basic parts. "And go change into jeans," I said.

She pulled her hand away.

"You want to get that skirt messed up?" I said. "Mom's skirt?"

"She isn't here," said Lu. "Who cares?"

But then she disappeared into our room. I heard a drawer bang shut.

Out behind Mrs. Mallory's, we gathered three sticks; the longhorned beetles had gnawed at the oaks and elms and there were twigs everywhere, like storm debris. Then I levered a giant rock out of the ground, flipped it dirt-side up.

"It'll only be for a minute," I said, when Lu, grasping the plan at last, tried to roll the rock back into its hole. "Just enough weight to keep him there till we can grab him."

"Can't we find an empty box, instead?" said Lu. "I bet Mrs. Mallory has one somewhere. To fall on him and trap him. Won't that work?" She tugged at my arm like she did when she was little. It had been a long time since she had done that. Her fingers were electric, pulsing worry. "What if we hurt him by accident?" she said. "What if we break his little legs? What if we break his skull? Without even meaning to."

She shut her mouth up tight then, puckered it closed till her lips whitened. Like she was afraid something might fly in there—or fly out, maybe. It seemed to me that everything about her was knitting together, lately: her mouth drawn closed over her

teeth, her skin tightening over bumps and bones, and her clothes tightening, too. Her hair was growing darker, I had noticed. She wetted it down and combed it to either side these days, two auburn waterfalls. Like Mom sometimes used to, when she was going out for fun. Lu looked a lot like Mom, lately.

"I promise we won't hurt him," I said. "But we need to use the rock. To pin Timmy in place. I know what I'm doing." Saying it like that, I almost believed it. But I don't know if Lu did. She scrunched her mouth up tighter, crossed her arms, and watched.

I chiseled the sticks to points, wishing for a better pocketknife than the one I stole from the Mt. Olivet Church yard sale. I cut notches too, and I fitted the sticks together to make the triangle, just like the book had said. I called Lu over to hold the thing in place while I leaned the rock against the sticks. But it was too heavy for the sticks, and I couldn't get the angle right. The whole thing collapsed. I tried again, over and over. Lu's knees hurt from crouching so long on the acorns, she said; she complained her hands were cramping up.

"Just hold your horses," I told her. "Don't be a baby."

"What if Mom comes home tonight and we're not there?"

"She won't," I said. "Not tonight." But of course, I wasn't sure. Neither of us even knew where she had gone, this time.

By the time I got the trap to stay upright, the sun had set. The woods beyond the yard were fuzzed out in the twilight. The breeze brought a sharp, sooty odor—someone burning dry leaves, even farther out of town.

"The next step," I said, "is bait."

Mrs. Mallory had left the back door unlocked. Timmy's food and water lined the wall next to the pantry in matching purple plastic bowls. His food looked like chocolate cereal and we each tried a piece, just to see if it tasted like chocolate, too. In truth, my stomach was pinging and rumbling—tomato soup for dinner hadn't filled me up. The cat food wasn't bad; I could pretend it was tuna and pretzels, maybe. Only a hint of liver.

When we picked up the bowl, a few bits scattered on the tulip-patterned linoleum. "She must have a broom around somewhere," said Lu. Always the one to mind her manners.

"We're not getting paid to clean up," I said.

She shrugged and kicked some kibble toward the wall. We brought the bowl outside and dumped some of Timmy's food around the trigger stick, under the shadow of the giant rock.

After that we lay down, our legs and backs uneven on Mrs. Mallory's warped deck. Sleeping bags were another thing we would surely need that we didn't have yet. I had brought us bath towels from home and a moth-eaten thermal blanket. That would have to do for now. All you could hear for the longest time was the crickets trilling from the woods and the wind in the yellow leaves. There was a pond back there in the woods, if you went in far enough. I wondered if there were fish in it, and if there were, what kind, and how hard it would be to catch them, and how to clean and cook them.

It's hard to say what time it was. I was trying to train myself to tell the hour of night, from the color of the sky and the temperature of the ground, and whether it was frogs bleeping or crickets humming or birds calling—just like the wilderness-skills book advised. But I didn't know how to do that yet.

I didn't say anything. Lu didn't either. I could feel her breathing next to me, though. Spidering my hand toward hers, I felt her pulse beating through her fingertips.

What woke us the first time was a wheezing squeak—though maybe, really, it was just the trap collapsing that startled us awake, and I only imagined the sound of a tiny life expiring.

I grabbed the flashlight. When we lifted the rock from the ground, the light beam showed a mouse there, on its side. A red-jelly glob of bloody matter on the grass next to its head. There were bits of dry cat food scattered all around. I know I shouldn't have—bacteria and all—but I put a finger on it. The tip of my pinky on the mouse's stomach. "It's breathing," I said. "Just barely. No, don't look."

I hauled up that rock as far as I could and smashed it down till I was sure the mouse was dead. Again and again, upon the soft furry body that lay between the rock and the grass. I had

to. How could someone hurt a little thing like that on purpose? I asked myself, afterward. Maybe you never truly mean to hurt something. The bones snap without you really trying. Not an accident, exactly—more like an overflow of current, a leap too far, a fiery possession that makes you into someone else. It's true: I didn't mean to kill that mouse. But I did mean to set that trap. And I meant for the trap to work, no matter what.

"Don't look," I said again. Don't look at the mouse, I meant; and don't look at me. I was near to crying, my nose twitching with the holding back of tears. Crouched low to the ground, I picked the mouse up by its tail and tossed it toward the woods, less far than I would have liked. Lu threw around the flashlight beam for a second, till it found the mouse's carcass near a scraggly, orphaned backyard tree.

We stood up, wobbly, and clicked the flashlight off. I hooked my arm through Lu's. I put my head against her shoulder, an awkward angle, and she let me. Me: tall for fifteen, a freckled giant; Lu: short for twelve, a little woman—it was easy to tell us apart, and always would be.

I guessed it wasn't even midnight yet; Lu said she didn't want to guess what time it was. She shrugged my head off her shoulder with more force than needed, and she moved back toward the deck.

"Are you mad at me?" I said.

She didn't answer. We lay down, shivering, again.

A car rumbled up the street. We held our breath. The car passed by; it wasn't Mrs. Mallory. Up the hill, it slowed and turned into our drive—we could see the headlights. But I couldn't tell from where we lay if it was Mom.

Lu saw too.

"I think Mom's home," she said. She sat up.

"We don't know who that is. It could be Hammond." Hammond was mom's ex-boyfriend—nearly our stepfather, once upon a time.

"Hammond?" Lu scoffed. "He doesn't even live around here anymore." Mom must have told Lu more about Hammond than she told me. This didn't surprise me, exactly, but it still caught me in my chest somewhere, a tiny aching shard.

"It could be anyone. And, besides, we promised Mrs. Mallory."

"We didn't promise shit." When had she ever used that word on me before? I ignored the provocation.

"Timmy needs us," I said. "You want to leave him out here to die?"

Lu inhaled sharply; it wasn't fair, I knew, to put it like that. But oh, the forty dollars, I thought. The forty dollars and the camping cooler. Me and Lu and the camping cooler, out in the deep and silent woods. Just for one night or two, that's all at first, and before the winter came: long enough to see that we could do it for even longer. That's all I wanted—to show Lu that we could do anything, together on our own.

She crossed her arms over her chest—I could sense her elbows jabbing sideways more than see them.

"Mom's going to kill us," she said. "Let's just go home. I'll make something up to tell her."

"It isn't Mom up at the house," I said. "It isn't her. Don't worry."

"Who said I'm worried? I hope it's Mom. I do."

"You don't," I said.

"Shut up," she said.

I was thinking thoughts that jabbed like splinters. It might be Mom, and it might not, I was thinking. I was thinking: What if we don't catch Timmy? What if we don't earn the money for the cooler? What if Lu sees that we can't make it even this *one night* outside? What are we doing out here on Mrs. Mallory's back deck, our jeans trapping the chill and our legs weighing a million pounds, if Mom awaits us at the end of it?

I lifted my teeth from my tongue and practiced clamping my lips shut, like Lu was always doing lately. It did have a calming effect. My teeth stopped chattering.

No lights shone from our windows up the hill. The car up at our house was silent, or it was gone altogether. Maybe we had dreamed it after all. But no one was looking for us, that was the most important thing. Not yet.

I listened to the last of the crickets, wondering if they had stopped and then started up again, wishing I had paid them more attention. Maybe the crickets knew that dawn was coming soon. A dog barked its head off somewhere for a while.

I dreamed I'd left the shower on by accident. Water was up to my knees, and I couldn't find my swimsuit. Lu, pointy-teethed, laughed at my legs; one was shaved, but not the other. Mom yelled my name, yelled and yelled it—frightened this time, not angry.

I startled from sleep, once, at the sound of rustling near the deck, a shuffling. Something on two feet, not four, it seemed. *Who's there?* I called. Or whispered, really. But nobody answered; I told myself no one was there.

The next thing I remembered, Lu had grabbed me by the knee and was shaking me awake. "I think it's Timmy," she said. "I think you caught him in your trap."

It was him. Yowling, mad as anything, the rock pinning his tail. Almost escaping. Lu lifted the rock. I clamped my hands down onto Timmy's back, his cat spine sectioning beneath my fingers, and scooped him up. His legs batted at nothing, like the moment between jumping off a high-up rock and smacking down into the water.

We were going to get that money after all. I was bubbling up inside, my mouth a cork, my heart pounding out a chant: our money, ours, ours, ours. Timmy squirmed and growled against my chest as I carried him into the house.

Timmy's eyes were yellow holograms in Mrs. Mallory's kitchen when Lu shone the flashlight on him. The mouse was hanging from his face like a crazy cat-beard, its dead tail dangling. And above that, Timmy's eyes: startled, glowing, with empty black slivers at their centers. His cat eyes, saying *please oh please don't take it from me*. We let him go, and he ran off somewhere to eat the mouse.

I did a little dance right then: squatting, shaking my tail, whooping like a maniac. And then Lu laughed. That flute-laugh of hers, high up, like she had something in the back of her throat that was tickling her to death. And I laughed, too, then, from my stomach to my ears. We clutched each other, giddy.

"Told you I could catch him," I said. "Told you so."

I started a chant, and Lu joined in: *Timmy, Timmy, Timmy cat,*

we caught you in our deadly trap. We kicked our legs out, hopping, dancing all over, till we both fell down in a heap, exhausted, like little kids. Though, in truth, I felt like throwing up—remembering that jelly glob beside the mouse's smashed-up head. And now the taste of kibble on my tongue.

If you can trap a mouse with a figure-four deadfall and kill it, it's good practice for something bigger. Something you could eat, if you had to. If you were to run away from home. I understood that right away, and Lu did too. She never held that against me, afterwards: killing the mouse by accident with that first trap. At least I don't think she did—she never said.

There were some things we didn't ever say about that night. How I realized, wheeling and hooting with her in the kitchen shadows, that Lu's jeans were damp against her skin from dew; how I knew, in just that moment, that it had been Lu who earned us the money. Lu in the grass, night-watching for Timmy, while I slept; Lu rolling the smashed mouse out with a stick, maybe, to lure the cat closer, when all she wanted to do was go home, no matter what waited. Lu pinning Timmy under the rock in the dark.

But all I could think of, lying in darkness on the peeling linoleum of Mrs. Mallory's kitchen floor, was that beautiful blue camping cooler, with room enough for two days' worth of perishables. How it had wheels and everything.