

Class Mammalia

Finola was pissed and didn't care who knew it. Normally strict about these things (you had to be, according to the pediatrician and the behavior specialist and the goddam phases of the moon) she let Mae roll their shopping cart down every aisle at Whole Foods while calling out the products they passed. Yelling them actually, loud enough for other shoppers to stare. At Finola of course, because wasn't she the parent? The person in charge? The *adult*? And now Mae was demanding they go back to the cereal aisle to pick up another box of BluMoon Protein Bars.

"Absolutely not."

"We really, really need it." Mae opened her palm to display a neatly folded coupon. "See? It's only valid when you buy two. Any other use constitutes fraud. It says so right here. Mom? Do you see?"

"I see it's forty cents, Mae. And in case you haven't noticed, there's a blizzard outside. I'd like to wrap up this little adventure and get us home by spring."

"Mom, Mom, it's eighty cents. Know why?" She tried to wink and failed.

"Can't imagine."

Her voice dropped to a whisper. “They double the coupons here.”

“Eighty cents off some crap no one eats.” Finola grabbed a bottle of cold-pressed apple juice and placed it in her cart. “We’re leaving, Mae. Now”

“Mom, wait. They’re protein bars, not you-know-what, and Carl eats them. I eat them too. I mean, I ate half of one. Actually, half of Carl’s half, and it was tasty and satisfying, like it says on the box. And know what else? It’s only snowing. Winds have to exceed thirty-five miles per hour with visibility under one-quarter of a mile for it to be considered a blizzard.”

Finola bit her lip against what she knew was coming.

“The Great Blizzard of 1899 lasted four days. A record thirty-four inches of snow fell in New Jersey.” Mae rocked from one foot to the other, keeping time to some private rhythm. “During the Blizzard of 1977, thousands of residents were trapped in their cars. Twenty-nine people died.”

“Let me guess,” Finola said. “No protein bars?”

“In 1996, Newark had a record-breaking snowfall of twenty-seven point eight inches. One hundred people died. The Federal Emergency Management Agency declared our state a disaster.” Mae elongated the word. “Disaster. Disaaster. Dissaa –”

“Stop that.”

“I’m just telling you what they declared it, Mom.”

“And I’m telling you to stop.”

People called her child brilliant, teachers mostly, but they were just blinded by the facts she could recite. Not just about snowstorms, either. Mae knew all fifty state mottos,

the scientific name for every flower Carl planted around their house, even the percentage of water in a pizza. Bullshit, all of it. Because facts are a waste of time when you can only wring your hands at a friendly joke or have more to say to a tank of goldfish than to your own mother.

“The Blizzard of 2003 lasted from February 15 until February 19. It was named The Presidents Day Storm. Get it? Mom, do you get it?”

“I get it.”

Mae stared at the damp coupon in her hand. “We can get fifty cents off four boxes,” she said. “That’s one dollar after they double it.”

“Two’s enough.”

Mae blinked and came to a sudden stop next to a high-rise of disposable diapers. Finola stopped, too. She felt her stomach tighten, the prelude to a familiar panic, and considered abandoning the cart and herding her daughter to the car. She couldn’t take a scene. Not today.

“Listen Mae, we –”

But her daughter simply shook her head and continued to the cereal aisle. After picking out her bars, she placed them gently in the cart and continued down the aisle chanting *two’s enough* in that monotonous, buzz-saw way she had. Finola followed behind, fishing in her purse for a Tums.

She had no one to blame but herself. And Carl. Definitely Carl. After the wedding they spent an entire summer, three heady, steamy months, teaching Mae how to behave in public. It had been Carl’s idea, he was always looking for someone to save, and

Finola was willing to do anything to keep him. They would strap her other daughter Libby into a baby carrier and walk Mae through the mall until she wore them down with her screaming. She was five at the time, sad-eyed and round like her stepfather, so similar that people would look from Mae to Carl and say *Daddy's girl*. He never bothered to correct them.

There was something else too, an identical hitch in their brains that made them worry over things the way other people tongued a bad tooth. For Mae, it could be the number of beetle species (350,000 and growing) or the migration of the Alaskan King Crab, while Carl was all about Finola. He wanted to please her and more than that, he wanted the world to please her. He was always bringing home some gift, a brassy cocktail ring or tickets to a show, weekend trips to the Poconos, anything to make her happy. And she *was* happy, really, and she *did* love Carl (most of the time) because it was clear he loved her in a way that was absolute and sweet and largely undeserved, so what did it matter that he scared her sometimes? It only mattered that he stayed.

Finola grabbed the handle of their cart and pivoted it out of the path of a toddler. Shopping was Carl's job, damn it. He was good at it too, and he was good with Mae. But Carl was home nursing a backache, the result of being too pig-headed to pay some kid twenty bucks to shovel snow off the driveway. He couldn't even drop Libby at ballet class, Finola had to, though this was her Saturday to sleep in. And now she would have to unpack all the groceries and put them away herself or let Mae do it and find the tampons in the refrigerator next to the tangerines.

They reached the checkout line and Mae placed their groceries on the rubber belt.

She took her time, comparing weights and dimensions, switching the apple juice for three cans of tuna, the olive oil for a jar of chunky salsa, a melon for an artichoke. When the cashier reached for a box of cereal in the center, Mae shielded it with her hands. The girl, smooth-skinned and blond and spitefully normal, smiled at Finola.

People always did that, treated Mae like a dumb animal and Finola like the mother of a dumb animal. Well, not today. She grabbed the bag she'd just finished packing and emptied it on the metal well behind the cashier.

“Mom, Mom –”

“It’s her job,” Finola said, glaring at the girl.

Screw it. Let Mae put everything away when they got home, she didn’t care. She was going to take a gloriously hot bath and afterward, a nap that would last through the weekend. The girls could rent movies all night and order anything they wanted for dinner. Twenty bucks? That would seem like a bargain.

Finola threw her money on the scanner and zipped up her thermal hoodie. After waiting for Mae to finish smoothing a crease on her down jacket, Finola handed over the key fob. It was a reward for not losing her shit in the cereal aisle.

“Wait a minute,” she said, but it was no use. As soon as the automatic door opened Mae aimed the remote at the parking lot.

“You know it won’t work from here.”

But Mae thumbed the button anyway, counting each step as she followed Finola into the crosswalk.

“You’re draining the battery,” Finola said, but Mae was trapped in a world of

even numbers. Gripping the hem of her daughter's sleeve, Finola guided her through the shuffle of traffic to the row where they'd parked.

"Now."

Mae raised the remote above her head and pressed. The sharp bleat of a horn answered and she pressed twice more, unlocking the doors and popping open the trunk of their silver Lexus.

"At least that's over for the week," Finola said when they reached the car. "As soon as we get home, I want you to –"

But Finola could never recall what she wanted Mae to do that afternoon. The bag of groceries, the one with the chili ingredients and a gallon of almond milk, slipped out of her arms and onto the asphalt. It was heavy, too heavy, she'd ordered the cashier to pack it that way. Fewer bags for her to carry, she reasoned, but that wasn't why she let it fall. Finola had glimpsed something, matted fur and naked tails, a family of demons. She banged the trunk closed even as Mae reminded her that the hood had a hydraulic latch and could be shut with the touch of a finger.

"Get in the car," Finola shouted, and threw the other two bags next to Mae in the back seat. She set the shopping cart adrift in the parking lot and got behind the wheel. The cart rolled to a stop against the door of a red SUV.

"Mom, I think you dented that car."

Finola held up one hand to show she couldn't listen right now. She wanted to be home or anywhere at all, far from this once lovely vehicle (another of Carl's surprises) that she had on occasion dreamed of running away in. As she backed out, the wheels

made a sickening crunch over a glass jar of tomato sauce.

“Mom, I think there’s glass in the tires now.”

“Just be quiet, okay?”

But Mae couldn’t help herself, she had to keep talking, had to keep saying *Mom Mom* like some infuriating robot. It took every bit of Finola’s concentration to drive the 4.9 miles home (calculated weekly by Mae and reported the minute she and Carl walked in the door) and not think about what was living in her trunk.

“Mom, know what? We have to tell them to clean up the glass. And know what else? We have to leave a note on the windshield of that car you dented. I saw a show on *Dateline* where –”

“Shut up.”

Mae pressed her tongue against the roof of her mouth to keep from talking about the dent and the Armistice Day Blizzard of 1940 and the broken glass in the parking lot. She tried to think of something funny to say. Carl was excellent at that. He said things that made her mother laugh when it seemed like she would never smile again.

Just because I’m round doesn’t mean things roll off me.

Carl said that a lot, though it wasn’t technically a joke. *Knock knock, who’s there?* was a joke. Still, Mae laughed every time and planned to say it herself one day.

Talking to you is like shouting down a well.

That was something her mother liked to say. Mae was pretty sure that wasn’t a joke even though her mother made a face after she said it.

The minute they got home Mae would take a fresh notebook from the stack on

her desk and write down every joke she knew. It would be the small spiral book with the pink suede cover, *faux suede* according to Libby, which actually sounded nicer. She'd keep it in her pocket when Finola took her places and rub it with her thumb when her mother got mad.

The title of the notebook would be LAUGHS, written in orange marker on the first page. Or maybe LAFFS, which wasn't a real word, but one she'd seen on the cover of a joke book in the school library. According to Libby it was wrong on purpose and that's what made it funny.

"L -a -f -"

"Goddam it, do you ever listen?"

She closed her eyes and mouthed the letters over and over, sending them to her future self. She had to remember to spell it exactly that way when she got home.

When they pulled into the driveway Finola ran inside the house without closing the car door. An invisible chime sounded, softly insistent. The bags of food Mae's mother hadn't dropped, the ones packed with chicken breasts and ice cream and other things that had to go in the refrigerator immediately, were left on the seat.

Carl sat on a high-backed kitchen chair in front of the television, dozing to a muted football game. When Finola shouted his name, he rose from his seat a few inches, groaned in pain and dropped back down.

"What is it?"

Finola pressed her hands against her throat, conjuring her signature hives. "Dear

God,” she said in a teary whisper, “do you have any idea what’s in my trunk?”

Carl winked at Mae who had plopped down on his recliner. “A body?”

“Rats, Carl. Goddam fucking *rats*.”

He nodded, and in a valiant but doomed effort to calm his wife, said, “Probably just field mice.”

Finola shook her head in disbelief. “That’s supposed to make me feel better?”

“No, of course not.” Carl cleared his throat. “I just thought you wouldn’t be so frightened if –what I mean is –”

Mae covered her face with her hands.

“I mean, I don’t think it’s a rat.” He smiled. “Or a body.”

“Very funny.”

Mae peeked through her fingers, hoping that what Carl said *was* funny and her mother was heading upstairs to take a nap. But no, she was still here, scratching the spreading rash on her throat.

“I’ll check it out.” Carl rose, heavy with purpose, and took baby steps to the hall closet.

“There are at least three,” Finola added, as if that information could inject a youthful enthusiasm into his walk.

“Four,” Mae said, sliding the padded lever on Carl’s three-position recliner. The two of them had spent an entire afternoon in a La-Z-Boy showroom trying out each plump seat, giggling at names more suited to horses –Titan, Galaxy, Champion –than furniture. When Carl decided on the Vintage Longhorn with optional seat cushion

upgrade, Mae was relieved. Her stepfather was not only round but large. Most of the seats on the delicate wicker furniture her mother brought to the marriage were stamped with the outline of his generous behind.

Finola nodded. “See? Mae saw them too.”

“I’m not exactly sure I saw them, Mom. Maybe I saw, um –”

A panicked scrabbling. A can of pinto beans rolling into the path of a boy in a grey hoodie. The long rope of sound that came out of her mother’s mouth but began somewhere deeper. Mae tried to make that sound now but stopped when she saw the blue vein swell on her mother’s forehead.

“Know what, Mom? Mice travel in pairs and multiples of pairs. That means if you saw three mice there are actually four, and if you saw five there are actually six, and if you saw –”

“Carl, *do* something.”

Which was not a request but a spell and had the same effect as if Finola had waved a magic wand. Carl pulled his work jacket, a plaid relic, off a wooden hanger and felt in the pockets for a pair of gloves. And though his movements were deliberate and slow there was a brightness in his eyes that worried Mae.

Finola helped him into his jacket and then, standing on her toes, kissed him on the mouth. “Fix it,” she whispered in her fairy voice, the one that made Carl do nutty things.

“Please, babe.”

He cupped her chin in his large hands. “I’ll take care of everything.”

They'd only been married six years but sometimes, late at night when everyone was asleep, Carl wondered if he'd made a mistake. There was no question he loved Finola. He just wasn't sure what came after love. When he first saw her in that night class at the local college he was charmed by a determined toss of her head and a shy catch in her voice. There were other things too, wild curls caught in a blue scarf and a way of stroking her neck that reminded him of his mother, thirty-four when she died, her sweet stupidity no match for a husband with a gun.

Carl couldn't remember the day it was decided he should sell his condo and move in with Finola and her children, or whose idea it was to get married. He couldn't recall the exact sequence of events that brought him to the Griffin County municipal building on a warm afternoon in April, matching wedding bands pinned to the inside pocket of his best suit. But there he was, like the sand wasps that had been fooled into rising from the earth that morning, squinting at a future that seemed to cool overnight.

On the day of his wedding Carl shifted his weight on the hard seat of a folding chair and thought of running away. But when he heard the clatter of Finola's heels on the tiled foyer and Mae's loud questions and Libby's excited lisp, he walked down the two flights of steps to meet them. He wouldn't worry about what came after love. It might be boredom or elation, courtesy or rage. Perhaps it was happiness. He hoped so.

When Finola went upstairs to change (her clothes would be dropped off at the cleaners on Monday, picked up on Wednesday, torn from their plastic bags and sent back) Mae followed Carl outside. His steps were flat and leaden, and he was slower than

usual. Still, she was breathing hard when she caught up, her chest pounding with optimism. There was so much to tell him.

“Carl, know what? Even though mice are related to rats, they are colossally different. For one thing, a mouse is half the length and one-tenth as heavy as a rat. And know what else? Mice have fewer chromosomes.”

Carl gave her a tight smile. “Chromosomes.”

“Pairs of chromosomes. Mice have twenty. Rats have twenty-two.”

The sun was out, and the air pinged with the sounds of melting ice. Carl pressed the four-digit security code on the garage frame and waited for the door to engage. The two of them stood side-by-side on a deckled patch of slush, peering over the furniture that had been stored there since he moved in.

“Why don’t you wait for me inside?” he asked, staring ahead. “Keep that chair of ours warm.”

Mae stared too, picturing a family of grateful rodents living in her bedroom closet. She would line one of Carl’s shoeboxes with strips of newspaper and feed them bread and macaroni and apple peels. She would give them names, all beginning with the letter M. Max. Mossy. Mikko. Mim. In the spring she’d set them free, but only if they really wanted to leave.

“Mice are exceptionally intelligent, Carl.”

“Is that a fact?” he asked, as if Mae were capable of making up anything.

Nodding, she forced her mouth into a smile. People who smiled usually got what they wanted according to Libby. But it was impossible to smile and talk at the same time

and anyway, Carl wasn't even looking at her.

“Mice have extremely short life spans. Know why?”

Carl shook his head.

“They have more natural enemies than any other mammal.”

“We can't rely on that.”

She moved in front of him and smiled again, too quickly for him to notice.

“Maybe you could just set them free.”

Carl stared down at his hands while Mae hugged herself, trying not to talk. He was considering it, she could tell. He might even agree to let her keep them in her room. Not all of them. The babies. Mikko and Mim.

“They'll only come back,” he said, with such conviction that Mae shook her head in wonder.

“Really? They'd remember where we lived?” She hadn't read that in *A Field Guide to North American Mammals*.

Carl hobbled to the back of the garage and studied the tools hanging on a white pegboard. He took down a stainless-steel garden trowel and smacked it against the edge of his worktable. A clump of dirt, left from the fall planting of the tulips Finola loved, dropped to the floor.

“Ever hear of the bubonic plague, Mae? It killed millions of people during the Middle Ages.”

She blinked as he limped past her. Carl was trying to change the subject, true, but facts like that were intoxicating. “How many millions?”

He waved off the question. “Three mice are missing from a lab in Newark.”

“Are you sure it’s not four?”

Carl lowered his voice. “They were injected with the *exact* same virus.”

Bubonic plague. Mae wished she could run inside and look it up on the computer.

Middle Ages sounded like the Medieval Times Fair they went to last year where the Queen talked about chivalry and knights on horseback pretend fought with wooden lances, and women who were as pretty as her mother served soup in bowls made from real buffalo horn. Carl promised they’d go back. She’ll remind him tomorrow.

“Go inside.”

Mae looked at the blade in Carl’s hand. It was shaped like the heart that decorated the box of chocolates he bought for Finola every Valentine’s Day. She acted surprised and happy when he gave them to her but threw them out as soon as he left for work the next day. Mae secretly dug them out of the trash and stored them in a Tupperware container behind her dresser. They never lasted more than a week.

“Know what?” Imitating his limp, she followed Carl to the driver’s side of the car. “Lab mice are albinos. These are brown. I know because I saw them. I mean, I think I saw them, but maybe I didn’t. I’m not even sure there’s anything in the trunk. I’m really not, Carl.”

He pulled the key from the ignition. The chiming stopped. “It’s time, Sweetie.”

Mae felt something racing around in her chest. A squirrel or a hamster maybe. “Phylum Chordata,” she said, hoping those words sounded as magical as Finola’s had.

If Carl just pressed the trunk button – he wouldn’t even have to get close, he

could use the remote – the mice would have time to escape. He could shut his eyes and count to ten or maybe twenty and tell Finola they'd run away. It wouldn't be a lie, not exactly. Mae would help him clean out the trunk right after she made sure the mice were safe from birds and foxes and had food and a warm place to live. It wouldn't have to be in her room. She didn't have to name them.

“Subphylum Vertebrata.”

“Go help your mother.”

“Order Rodentia.”

Carl's shoulders sagged. Mae wondered if these could be the right words, the charm to reverse her mother's spell.

“Please, baby?”

He turned and looked at her sharply. “*What* did you say?”

Mae shook her head. “Nothing, Carl.”

He walked to the back of the car, tapping the trowel against his thigh. The steel head caught the reflection of a dying afternoon sun and threw it back in Mae's eyes.

“Inside,” he said, and his voice was no longer friendly. “Now.”

Mae put her hands over her ears. She wanted to tell Carl that she loved him and would always love him, in spite of the fact that talking to him now was exactly like shouting down a well.

“Fine,” he whispered. “Close your eyes.”

By the time Carl went inside, Finola was already asleep. He ordered the girls a

pizza and poured himself a drink from the bottle of Jameson's he kept on top of the refrigerator. There had been four, just like Mae said, though he never doubted her. They'd been alive and sheltered and a family, cowering in a nest made from shredded upholstery and a box of Girl Scout cookies. He wanted to believe he'd been merciful but the legs of the largest one jerked for a long time, as if it were not dead, but running from death in a dream. The babies were too small to have been very much alive in the first place.

What came after love? A brief return to those first moments when love is skin and tongue and the glissando of fingers on old scars. Forgiveness, sometimes. Acceptance, or at least resignation. And the knowledge that when a barking dog kept Finola awake or a neighbor parked too close to her driveway he'd have another opportunity to save her.