

When the Jehovah's Witness' came to the door with their pastel pamphlets that tell about how the world is going to end in fire, Mary's father would wonder if they've looked at the sky lately. He only muttered this, not answering the door even though Mary was sure the JW's could see that they were home, the fan pinched into the front porch window, exhausting at full speed in an attempt to keep the smoke out. All the electronic ju-ju wasn't enough, and Mary found her throat sore and aching in the mornings with the fans still spinning the wisps her dreams out the window.

The forest was ablaze through August in the regions all around Tacoma, from below The Dalles, to Yakima National Forest, and on up into British Columbia. Mary chanced a rare thought aloud, asking if it will get so bad that a ragtag band of last survivors will play "Ring of Fire" from an old radio as they sail out of the Puget Sound. Mary's father grunted a little, and she remembered that that had been one of her mother's favorite songs.

Mary watched outside one morning while the smoke patrolled the streets, peaked under eaves, and cloaked the hemlocks that stood like sentinels over the roofs. The Inkwel Man pulled up to the edge of the street in a crippled Chevy Suburban. He was blasting The Eagles' "Take it to the Limit," and both of the front doors of the SUV were propped open. His sleeveless tee revealed muscles that looked like the smooth arcing of the hills she remembered from the drive out of Eastern Oregon. The man circled the SUV, leaning into the doors as if searching for a lost piece of equipment. By the time the song had reached the chorus, Mary's father had his binoculars and was standing at the window like a birder, carefully searching.

The Inkwel Man slid on fingerless gloves and ran his hands back through his hair in a preparatory gesture. Mary's father tossed the binoculars to the couch, and rushed upstairs to his

bedroom, reappearing with a shotgun. Mary knew that he kept the guns under the bed in locked cases, along with what her father called go bags, thick canvas backpacks bulging with survival gear.

The gun's stock protruded between his ribs and elbow, barrel pointed safely down. He picked up the binoculars again with his left hand and watched as the man paced outside of the low slung housing complex, alternating between sitting on its cement steps and walking around to the bushes at the corner, staring up at the second story window.

Mary's heart thumped in her chest as they silently watched. The man was sitting on the cement steps again when a woman who looked like Tom Petty's twin sister stepped out to greet him. They embraced, and both went into the apartment complex.

Her father sighed and let the binoculars hang by his hip, turning to Mary, relief in his eyes, but mouth pinched tight. You can never go outside, Mary, he said. Not on your own. When Mary asked why she had been allowed to do so when she was even younger than she was now, in Oregon, her father responded that though the woods were dangerous, they were indifferent. In the city, people harmed with intention.

Mary wondered about a lot of things, like why the streets around the city stopped and started, meandering unpatterned. She was curious about the man across the street, his thick hair slick with oily black as if God had spilled His ink over the man's head while sketching him, and decided to leave it that way, tired from a day of creating. Mary had taken to calling him The Inkwell Man in her head. Her mother used to write using a pen and inkwell on special occasions, and the relationship between the two seemed to stifle her worst fears about him.

Mary had been accustomed to directing questions to her mother, who had always answered patiently, sometimes presenting new information to Mary to consider along with her. It wasn't that her father didn't answer questions, only that he didn't share his thoughts unprompted, and it made Mary less likely to seek them.

For as long as she could remember, her parents had prepared for an ending to the world. It seemed to quiet her father, now that he was faced with an end that couldn't be fought with weapons and canned food. Mary didn't know the phrase that was so often associated with people who stockpile things in anticipation, though it did seem that her father had been more prepared for an invading horde than the sighing absence of his wife that had situated itself between the walls of their settling home. Mary's father had retreated further into a cocoon, and she waited for his metamorphosis alone.

When she would walk with her father around the neighborhood, the sun appeared as a veiled bride, making its slow stride across the sky to wed the ocean. Some people took to watering their lawns this time of year. They never turned full green, only patches of it where the water hit. As they walked, she watched the neighbors stand in clerical repose. They shook their hoses gently as the water splattered in steady arcs, each one of them handing out a priest's blessing to the bathing blades of grass. Occasionally, the two cats would follow. She didn't let on that she fed them scraps from dinner almost every evening after he left for work.

In Tacoma, she thought up stories about the people she saw and the things they did. The woman with short blonde hair was a poet like her mother, sitting amongst her flowers and dreaming about the world. The rough man with shoulder length hair was a washed-up musician, dreaming of guitar amps crunching out power chords. When her father caught her staring too

long at these people, he would squeeze her hand tightly, and she would look away. She could hear his voice in the powerful grip telling her that it was impolite to invade people's privacy.

In the early evenings, Mary would sit on the steps of their porch. The two neighborhood cats would come out from their hiding places under porches or cars, tentatively making their way to where Mary sat. The cats had no collars, so she had named them herself. Max was the striped orange tabby that hopped from the stone wall surrounding the JW parking lot, padding swiftly to flop between her legs. Hattie was the long hair that looked like a walking marled cotton scarf, always appearing like a ghost, howling a haunting tale of past wrongdoings to Mary. Hattie wanted nothing but the scraps from the table. Her meow grated at Mary's ears until she peeled a few pieces of waste from a plate. Hattie's begging quieted to an idling purr, and she allowed Mary to stroke her back where it met the tail.

On a Wednesday, Hattie was curling her tail between Mary's legs, twisting her body like a cooked noodle on the rough cement steps. Mary's hair was pulled back into a wispy ponytail. Her mother used to cut it into a bob, but her father seemed content to let it grow. As she buried her fingers into Hattie's belly, The Inkwel Man stormed out of the apartment complex, carrying a metal toolbox towards an ancient sedan with oddly crisp paint, like an old boot freshly shined. He slammed it to the ground with a clatter, and Hattie's body tensed under Mary's fingers. The Inkwel Man turned on the car stereo, rolling down the windows. As the classic rock blasted from tinny speakers, he rattled through the toolbox. When his hand withdrew, he was holding something with a short handle, and a metal band around the end that reminded Mary of a shorter version of the tools that dog-catchers used.

Her father was at work, and so Mary continued to stare at the man as he scooted under the car. Before long, Max joined Mary and Hattie on the porch, and she had to use two hands to keep the cats satiated. Mary was thinking about what her father would say if he found out that she was conducting these little forays into the outside world alone. A woman walking her dog passing by on the street below, and Mary grabbed the two cats by the nape of the neck until she passed, avoiding eye contact with the stranger even though she looked friendly.

Later, when her father returned, she was happy to see that The Inkwell Man was no longer out by the car. She lived in constant fear that someone would reveal the fact of her evenings outside.

The following day the smoke lifted like a slow and graceful heron, leaving increasing ripples of sunshine radiating out over the city. Mary's father left for work after dinner, and Mary watched as his truck moved like viscous molasses down the street before turning onto the main road. She counted down the minutes until she was certain her father wouldn't return, stomping inside to grab some unknown thing that he had left behind. She slid on a pair of strappy sandals and scraped her way down the porch steps. The sun's return was an augur of conviction in Mary.

In Oregon, she had known the way the river bends, where the salmonfly and acorn weevil waited, how the geosmin crept from the gravel after a rainstorm. Despite her familiarity with the forest around her old home, she could use the power of her own senses to divine new discoveries that fed her imagination. Without her father by her side in the city this time, she anticipated the return of her ability to make what seemed familiar new again, and then familiar all over in her own way.

On the street, Max appeared behind her, and she bent to rustle his ears and smooth his back with her hand before continuing around the JW parking lot. She glanced around for Hattie, and even called quietly for her once, before giving up and continuing to walk. She stared as long as she liked at the varying house colors, strung together like the prayer flags hanging from the window in the apartment complex where The Inkwell Man lived, across the street from her home. The residences in the city were mismatched, new renovations housed in neglected fences, solar panels attached to weatherbeaten gables. The pavement appeared to Mary as if some ancient and lumbering creature had been awoken to walk down them, leaving divots and stress cracks through the center. She imagined that one day the beast would appear beside her. It would bend its knee, pick her up in its teeth, and place her on its back where she would proceed to ride like a lord through the streets.

She was a fearless anthropologist, walking with her trusty kitten sidekick, integrating fully into her environment, uninhibited. She passed the elementary school under construction, equipment scattered across the worksite in quiet repose, hulking artifacts of destruction. A few walls remained in a simple maze, cinder blocks of various colors, a childish sun mural painted over a wall that used to border an art class. She imagined the coming war that her father seemed to fear. She pictured men in camouflage creeping around the torn down school, wearing gas masks like the ones under her father's bed.

Mary's walking took on the shape of a makeshift trapezoid around the neighborhood. Max had left her behind when she had rounded a street corner. A thought playing on the edge of her mind that she had spent all of the time alone that she should. Her pace quickened as she drew closer to home. The turns that she had chosen meant that she would have to walk by the

two-story apartments near her house where The Inkwell Man lived, approaching the building from its rear.

She glanced towards the side street between the apartment complex and a row of homes. Trash cans littered the gravel that had begun to break in chunks and stones, some of the cans tipped over on their sides. Max appeared again on the street corner ahead of her but did not approach. She paused for a moment, something drawing her gaze again back to the scene, and she started down the anorexic street towards the overturned trash can.

On the other side of the can, what she had initially taken for a stuffed animal, was Hattie, the cat. Her tufts of back leg hair matted together, her tail sticking straight out from behind the trash can. Hattie's head was missing, cut off at the shoulder.

Mary sucked in her breath. The familiar feeling of seeing something once living rushed back to her mind, and she felt her insides crack, a sick feeling creeping out like a thousand disturbed insects from a rotted branch. Mary took two steps back and then ran full tilt towards her porch, the question of Hattie's death and the horror of it lingering in her mind. As she reached the steps of her house, she remembered The Inkwell Man's tool, its metal loop large enough to slip over the head of a cat. New predators hatched in her belly and fed on her thoughts until she grew sick and expelled them into the toilet, flushing them to fester in the pipes beneath the city.

She cried alone as she brushed her teeth that night, small tears slipping down her cheeks and sneaking past her lips where their salt mingled with the minty foam from the toothpaste. When her father came home, she awoke to the sound of him dropping his keys on the floor somewhere down the hallway. She had been dreaming of The Inkwell Man, his muscles

maliciously tensing as he pulled the metal loop of his tool tight around Hattie's neck until her head popped off suddenly as if it were a plastic doll, no blood or sound escaping from the cat's throat.

The next morning, as she made breakfast for her still-sleeping father, Mary briefly considered revealing her suspicions to him. She wanted justice for Hattie, but the potential consequences of explaining how she had discovered the headless cat kept her from telling him. She kept peering out of the window, looking for The Inkwell Man or Max, half-expecting to see an iteration of her dream in front of her, a crime perpetrated in broad daylight. She imagined yelling for her father to do something and watching as he would exit the house brandishing a pistol, finally wresting control from the deranged killer with gelled hair that was black as a cartoon hole. All of her father's repressed feelings would be released with a single squeeze, and in time, the kindness would return to his voice.

It was nearing the end of August, and Mary's father still hadn't indicated whether he would let her return to school at the beginning of the year. She thought that if he did, she would stop her early evening walks and front step reprieves from their empty house.

She took several days off from her evening walks, relegating herself to the stoop with Max. Every time she stepped outside, Max appeared, and she would relax as he trilled and flipped to expose his belly in front of her. Max followed her a little further each time, though she was careful to walk in the opposite direction of The Inkwell Man if he was outside.

The following week, Mary resumed, feeling brave enough after seeing that no harm had come to Max. She paused at the edge of the side street as had become her custom since the discovery, a small act of memorial for a deceased friend. The sun was brightest at this time of



day, blazing boldly in the absence of the smoke. Mary could feel her neck burning as she stood in silence. A rustle from somewhere behind her made her jump, and she turned half-expecting to see The Inkwell Man with his tool, caught in the act of another crime.

Instead, a skinny dog stood across from her on the sidewalk. The canine panted patiently on the lawn that belonged to the dilapidated house with graying wood and a shutter hanging loosely from its window. The dog's coat hung in shaggy clumps as if someone had started to shear its fur, but was unable to finish. She could hear its steady panting from where she stood. Mary turned from the dog towards her house and spotted Max, her remaining cat companion, at the corner.

The dog's quiet regarding held danger. She knew that steady gaze because she had seen it in her father in the days after her mother's death, and again several weeks ago when they watched The Inkwell Man together. Mary walked quickly towards Max, keeping the dog in her peripherals. She hoped to scoop Max up before the dog spotted him.

The dog trotted towards her, and she began to walk quickly towards her house until she realized that it was headed for Max on the corner. Mary was only steps away from Max when the dog lunged towards the cat, grabbing his tail in its jaws. Max yowled, and curled its body around towards the dog, trying to scratch its nose. Mary snatched an abandoned trike from the sidewalk, raised it above her head, and ran towards the snarling animals. Max managed to escape the canine's grip and scooted off towards the Inkwell Man's sedan, parked on the street in front of the apartments. The dog gave chase, sliding its head low under the car, letting out unfamiliar yips and yelps.

As Mary walked tentatively towards the car, she held the trike in front of her like a shield, the branding on the side of it a makeshift coat of arms. She yelled and made guttural noises while beginning to shake the tricycle and bang it onto the blacktop.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the oily black hair of The Inkwell Man, charging out of the apartment complex, a baseball bat in hand. He shouted and raised the aluminum bat above his head. His movements seemed both fluid and slow to Mary as if the whole city block was suddenly under water. He brought the bat down on the dog's hindquarters, his shouts cresting over hers like a wave before the dog turned tail and ran down the street.

Damn coyotes. I saw one on the other side of North Slope just last week, The Inkwell Man said. Mary had never seen a coyote before this one, but she had heard her dad talking about them once. The Inkwell Man continued, I saw that poor cat out by our garbage cans a few days ago. Pretty likely it was that coyote, right there. He motioned towards the street where the dog had run.

Mary leaned under the car to inspect Max. His tail was matted with dark blood, and he remained crouched by the back tire. The Inkwell Man disappeared back inside of the apartment building, returning a minute later with a small piece of boiled chicken that he tore into small pieces and set down by the car. The sun was well below the trees before Mary coaxed Max out from beneath the old sedan. While he ate, Mary gently stroked his back. Quiet words slid from her mouth, produced from moments of her own pain, both remembered and forgotten.

The next day, while her father slept, Mary peered out of the front window. The Inkwell Man was at the old sedan again, half of his body bowed under the hood. When he emerged, a broken rubber engine belt in his hands, he raised his eyes towards her front porch. Max hopped

off of Mary's front steps and trotted over to the man. He squatted down to scratch Max behind the ears. Mary wished that her father would be watching this display with her, the man that had seemed so insidious, now gently attending to a creature.

She wondered why her father was so scared of the city. It didn't seem inconceivable to her that there were other good people there, loving intentionally. She remembered a moment when she was still young enough to be strapped into a car seat just behind her mother while they drove the vast empty roads in Oregon. Her mother had pulled over to the side of the road where a man slowly walked wearing clothes that hung from him in patches like mange. She had pulled a package of cakes from the grocery bag in the back seat and handed them off to the man who never spoke a word.

By the time her father woke, Mary had fried two eggs and several strips of turkey bacon for each of them. As her father's fork scraped over his plate, he focused on Mary with a foreign tenderness. You look like your mother with your hair like that, he said between bites. Mary looked towards her eggs, cutting them into small squares. If she had met his gaze, she would have seen the way his eyebrows knitted together slightly, the new creases in his forehead a little deeper than they had once been.