

Cracks

She wouldn't have noticed the spot in the wall if it hadn't been for Maribel.

After two days without the normally active cat trying to trip her when she was in the kitchen or doing other household chores, Connie Frampton began to worry. This fear caused Connie to set down the load of laundry she was carrying and search for her pesky feline friend.

The grey tabby had been her own cat from the beginning, showing up on Connie's front porch in the middle of the night, barely old enough to have opened her eyes. Full of curiosity and vitality, the kitten had brought joy to the Frampton household. Right now that joy was what Connie was searching for amidst the haphazard stacks of schoolwork, discarded socks, mismatched shoes, and general odds and ends that littered her house.

Connie tried to make sure everything was where it was supposed to be and to keep everything as clean as possible for her kids, but the fact she had children at all seemed to be enough to turn her house into a suburban jungle of extraordinary proportions. It was because of this clutter that Connie didn't find Maribel until she began cleaning off the chairs surrounding the dinner table.

Once the bags, the skates, the hockey pads, and a pair of socks that appeared to have been transformed into moss-colored gelatin had been removed from the corner, she found Maribel staring at the wall.

"What's the matter bella-kitty?" Connie asked, reaching down to stroke the cat's back, the already tense muscles twitching under her downy fur. Maribel turned around, her pupils dilated until almost nothing was left of her green and gold flecked irises. She

purred and twitched her whiskers, and, if cats could speak, Connie was sure this would be Maribel's translation of *Hello, friend*.

After she stroked Maribel's head for a few moments, the cat gently placed her nose into Connie's palm and gave it a hard nudge before leaning back down to the small crack. Following Maribel's lead, Connie quickly found herself crawling on all fours, leaning into the wall.

"Did you follow a bug into the hole?" Connie wondered aloud. Most cats were well known for their mouse catching abilities, but Maribel was more likely to stalk anything that happened to crawl by her. Whether it was beetles, ants, or flies, if it came in the house, it belonged to Maribel.

When she had been a very small kitten, barely able to jump on the couch, she had once sat in front of the kitchen cabinet door and meowed for two days straight. She had been so inconsolable that Connie had been close to just putting her out on the porch and letting her go explore in the backyard, mistakenly thinking the cat wanted to go back outside.

But when Connie had opened the cabinet and looked around, she'd found a line of ants marching across the tile. So she didn't question the insanity of it all when she found herself crouched down on all fours peering into a sliver of cracked drywall that was only two centimeters wide. After all, if there was an infestation of something behind her walls, she wanted to know.

But it wasn't bugs she found.

She could feel a soft breeze billowing out of the tiny crack. The tangy smell of ocean water assaulted her senses. Connie hadn't been near the ocean in years, but she

had never forgotten the sharp smell of the salt as it mingled with the air. Now, on the floor of her home in southwestern Oklahoma, the smell of the ocean didn't seem as odd as she would have thought.

Another thing she hadn't noticed before was the way the crevice expressed a deep red light, as if a heat lamp were directly behind the wall.

Connie knew she should have moved, that she should have gotten up and shuffled around her house and tried to forget this, knew that if she stayed there too much longer the preoccupations of everyday upkeep and chores would somehow cease to matter. If she were to get up and move on in the next few seconds, however, she could put this whole incident behind her until the memory was filed away and forgotten.

After all, through the years there had been many things that had been buried. When she did allow herself to remember them, the only thing she could see or feel was the twisted metal of the wreck that had taken so much from her. It wasn't enough that she had seen what the car had done to his flesh and bones, but sometimes, late at night, she could hear it shrieking as it twisted beneath him.

For a moment she thought about the cycle of grief that followed her and how there were things in life so tragic the best way to deal with them was to pretend they didn't exist.

Besides, there were other things she needed to concentrate on.

Connie opened her eyes to the realization that she was lying on her side, her nose inches away from the wall. Maribel's whiskers brushed the side of Connie's face and she sneezed, causing Maribel to stare at her thoughtfully for a moment before inching toward the wall until the cat was so close her nose was pressed firmly against the crevice.

She then let out a long meow and began nervously pawing at the wall. Maribel was declawed, so the soft pads of her feet did nothing. It wasn't long before she noticed the lack of progress and began clawing at the wall even harder.

Connie scooped Maribel up and carried her to the kitchen. At first the cat tried to climb over her shoulder and return to the wall, but the farther away they moved, the less she struggled, until eventually she was her normal, plump, purring self.

They stood like that for a long time, frozen to each other, neither one wanting to look back. Eventually Connie moved close enough to kick the swinging door closed before sitting Maribel on the ground. She poured herself a giant cup of coffee and leaned against the counter.

“What was that?” she wondered aloud. At first she had been afraid to say anything, afraid her recognition of the strange crack would cause the walls to split apart entirely.

But nothing happened.

Maribel continued to purr as she lay down in front of Connie's feet and rolled onto her back. Without even pausing to think about it, Connie stretched out her sock-clad foot and massaged the cat's exposed belly.

Gradually fear and tension eased their hold on her, and although she knew it wouldn't be much longer before the curiosity that had first pulled Maribel to the wall would return, she at least felt a little more balanced.

She rinsed out the cup in the sink, and then, to avoid opening up the door, she went ahead and unloaded then reloaded the dishwasher, scrubbed off the counter tops, emptied out the fridge (screaming only once when she encountered a Tupperware

container that had completely changed colors on her), and swept the floor. When she was done, her kitchen was cleaner than it had been in months, maybe even years, but only two hours had passed. The kids wouldn't be home from school for another three hours, and, until then, it seemed there was nothing to distract her. But somehow that thought didn't seem as undesirable as it had only moments before.

Looking to the door, Connie noticed Maribel was sitting directly in front of it, staring back at her.

“Well, I guess we can't ignore it forever, huh, girl?” Connie asked as she pushed open the door and the pair walked back to the dining room.

Connie's cleaning rampage in the kitchen had not made the mysterious object disappear, but rather it was larger, widening to almost a half-inch across and over three inches tall. The warm, red glow had seeped out of its confined space and spread across the carpet, pooling in a circle on the floor as if it had substance.

Connie dipped her fingertips in the light and was immediately greeted with a tingling sensation that coated her fingers and spread out across her arm. She jerked her hand back and the feeling stopped.

Maribel sniffed at Connie's hand and then leaned into the crack, pressing her nose firmly to the wall. Connie was about to push Maribel back when the cat disappeared through the hole.

If she hadn't been sitting right there she wouldn't have believed it, but she watched as Maribel's full body flattened until it looked like a two-dimensional cartoon character, then slid through the gap.

Connie gasped, and called out for Maribel. A soft meow answered from between the walls, and Connie thought of her poor friend gone, lost to some other existence.

She knew if she gave into impulse, she might disappear with the cat. But maybe disappearing was what she needed. Maybe losing herself somewhere between the walls was what she should have done all those years ago.

Connie closed her eyes and placed her fingertips to the wall.

There was nothing, not even the tingling that had greeted her earlier. Just the warm, salty breeze as it pushed against her hand and down her arm. She could smell the ocean and hear the cry of the seagulls. When she looked down, she saw her feet were now bare and buried in the sand at the shoreline.

Next to her sat Maribel, squinting against the brilliant rays of the setting sun.

Connie wasn't sure what she had been expecting to find when she crossed the threshold, but a deserted island paradise was certainly not it. If nothing else, she had at least expected some odd form of talking cartoon cat to greet her. However, Maribel sat as stoic and as three-dimensional as ever, and the only vocalization was her constant purring.

Connie.

The call startled her, but she had been looking at Maribel when it was spoken so she knew that it the cat had not decided to talk. Although, she was not sure who was calling to her.

Connie looked up and put her hand to her forehead to block the sun. Someone was approaching across the sand, the form rippling as it moved. It could have been the heat from the sand, or an effect of the setting sun, but Connie knew it was an indication

of what she was about to see. She held her breath, waited, and tried to decide if she should run or cry.

It had been thirty years since he'd died. The loss still hung hollow in her abdomen, and the emptiness ached when she saw his face form in front of her.

She hadn't meant for him to come to any harm.

She was his sister, his family, and he'd told her he was going to miss her wedding. While his justification had been that he could not get off from his two jobs for the entire weekend, she'd suspected he was punishing her for marrying Daniel. So when James had told Connie he wasn't coming, it had been inexcusable. She'd cried, begged, and cajoled until he agreed to make the ten hour drive, attend the wedding, and immediately head home.

Only he never finished the return trip. He'd fallen asleep on the long stretch of I-40 between Oklahoma City and Albuquerque and driven off the road. She'd been headed to her honeymoon when she found out.

James touched her cheek, brushing his thumb across her flesh, reaffirming that he was as real as anything else here in the space in-between.

And when our dad died two years later, and Daniel just fifteen years after that, whose fault had that been? Surely not yours, Connie, you can't control everything.

He was faded around the edges, like an old photograph. He had on his favorite pair of bell-bottoms and the Hawaiian shirt he used to wear all of the time in high school. His dark hair flipped up a little at the edges, and his green eyes crinkled when he smiled.

Connie put her hand over his and let her tears go. There were too many pent up tears, and she thought she would pass out from dehydration before she stopped crying.

He sat next to her and held her hand. The sun never moved in the sky, but they stayed like that for hours, Connie in the middle with Maribel on one side and James on the other.

She remembered that the kids would be coming home soon, knew she should be getting back before they thought their mother was gone forever, but the sun seemed to have sapped her energy and her limbs were so relaxed she could barely move. For once she felt as if there might be something else in the universe, some other form of meaning besides guilt.

It was a good feeling.

A while later, Connie opened her eyes and realized she was once again sitting on the dining room floor next to Maribel.

The crack on the wall was almost completely healed. Only a thin gold line stood out against the wallpaper. If she hadn't known it was there a few moments before, she wouldn't have seen it at all.

Maribel snorted and sauntered back to the kitchen door while Connie stood up and walked over to the other side of the wall. When nothing happened, Connie sat down and stared at her sand-crusting toes.

"Where were we?"

Maribel looked at her and cocked her head to the side before letting out a brief chirp. Connie stared fondly at her cat.

"You aren't going to tell me one way or the other, are you?"

A tail swish was Maribel's only reply. Connie thought it wasn't much of an answer, but maybe there had never been any answers. All she knew was the guilt was gone, and that was something.

“Yes, Maribel, that is definitely something.” Connie said as she slid her bare feet into a pair of slippers and picked up the forgotten laundry basket. She might not be able to prove what had actually happened, but somehow she knew that if she ever needed it again the crack would return, and Maribel would find it for her.

And that was also something.