

A Mother's Love.

Rose's eyes squinted open to the vague shape of her cat, Bob, staring back at her. The morning had not yet come, and Bob himself was only a vague shape standing on her chest with two greenish dots in the middle of his head that glared into her. As he noticed her shift to lucidity, he stepped closer to her and gave a small cry.

"Bob... too early," Rose mumbled as she settled deeper into the blankets which she had swaddled herself in during the night, trying to displace the stubborn cat. Bob hissed as he was moved, and with a growl wormed his way next to her ear and gave her a sharp nip. Just enough to wake her up the rest of the way.

"Ow, Bob!" Rose shot upwards into a sitting position as Bob fled to the foot of the bed, staring at her with his ears pressed against the sides of his head. His tail was held stiffly and puffed up, and behind him a shaft of light spilled through her cracked open doorway from the hallway. He let out another cry, more urgent this time.

Rose squinted at the light, wiping the sleep from her eyes.

Bob was not a nervous cat. He was probably the most unbothered animal she had ever met and was endlessly nonchalant about the mischief her children constantly exposed him to. The previous year, the Christmas tree had somehow been toppled over and Bob hadn't so much as flinched or shown any sign of unease. He had never attacked her before, either.

A glance at her alarm clock told her that it was just past four in the morning, which was far too early for her two children to get up. She had taken care of them by herself for the past three years, since the day after the younger one was born (coincidentally, it had also been his

elder brother's second birthday), and not *once*- not since they were babies crying out in the middle of the night- had they gotten up this early. She had always prided them on that.

Bob continued to stare at her for a few more seconds before he hopped off the bed. He stopped in front of the doorway, silhouetted by the light, and turned to face her again. Rose's stomach had twisted itself into a tight knot, and her heart had begun to beat a little faster than what was comfortable. She crept out of bed and into yesterday's clothes before grabbing the switchblade she kept in the top drawer of her bedside table, flicking the blade out to bare.

She let Bob lead her out into the hallway. Her eyes had already dilated, but she still squinted in the light as she realized that almost all of the lights in the house were on, including the overhead lights in her kids' room and their bathroom- shining through the wide-open doors of both rooms. The bare hardwood floors bore odd trails of abrasions that went down the length of the hallway, towards the living room, and into the boys' room. She peeked inside their room first.

Not there.

The floor was covered in the same light abrasions, though- scrawled around the floor in pairs like animal tracks. Bob cried out again, softly, from the other end of the hallway- near the living room. He was stiff as a piece of plywood and staring at her with a sense of urgency that had begun to dig deep within her.

"Boys?" She called out, desperation coloring her voice. "You guys up?"

"In here, Mom!" Her eldest child, George, called out from the living room. His voice was immediately echoed by her younger, Joseph, and both voices carried notes of a jauntiness that she had heard dozens of times over. The relief that she felt was immediately gratifying, and the subsequent wash of wariness regarding why they were up so early felt paltry in comparison.

They had always been happy children, but at hearing their voices Bob only puffed up even more.

“Christ, Bob, what is into you?” Rose chastised, folding away her knife and walking into the living room. “I mean, I woulda thought you saw a ghost... if you were smart enough to know what a ghost looked like.”

Bob lingered just around the corner as she walked in.

“Guys seriously, *what* are you doing up?” Rose had asked, but the last syllables felt like they died halfway out her mouth. At first, she didn’t know what she was looking at; her children, assuredly- but more than a moment spent looking at the two things that stood in her living room would prove that theory to be unreliable at best. Most would consider it downright insane, though.

They were person-like, certainly. They were short, the two of them, about the height of small children. One was a few inches taller than the other, and they had been standing in front of her grandfather’s antique mirror which dominated the far wall of the room. That first moment of uncertainty (“Kids, is that you?”) was dispelled the moment Rose looked at the reflections they cast in the mirror, and as they turned around to face her there could be no room for doubt that these were monsters.

The two of them were as many parts porcine as they were person-like, with tusks that curled like toenails in front of their faces and eyes that were small, wet, and beady. Straw-colored hair, the same as Rose’s, sprouted from their scalps in tufts and messy sprays. The bodies of these things were oddly proportioned and misshapen, with sharp hooves that dug into the hardwood floor.

Upon seeing her, their mouths twisted open and upwards to bare long, gently curving, rectangular teeth. They wore her children's clothes, and Rose screamed.

The two things shrank back, their faces falling as confused sounds bubbled up from their throats; the voices of her children.

“Mom?”

“Mom, what's wrong?” The taller one cried.

There were a few moments of silence as Rose stood there, gaping at the repulsive things that wore her children's clothes and spoke with their voices. They gaped back at her, very human uncertainty and confusion dotting their expressions where before she had been unable to read anything other than the snarl of a pig.

“Mommy? Why'd you scream, are you okay?”

These were monsters, obviously, but their voices, their clothes- those were her kids'. Furthermore, the way that the shorter one stood slightly behind the taller one, tugging at its shirt with both hands, was immediately recognizable to Rose as something that Joseph did whenever he was startled.

She was staring at her children. She didn't want to believe it, but she didn't see that she had any other choice but to do so.

Rose felt faint as she sloughed into a nearby chair, passing the one that was closest to her and instead sinking into the old, overstuffed thing that she kept in the corner of the room; the farthest she could sit from the two of them.

“What happened to you two? I mean this is,” She forced out a nervous laugh, keeping the sour taste of abhorrence off her tongue. “Wow, right?”

“We don’t know what happened.” The taller one. ‘George’, said. “We woke up and... yeah.” It shrugged.

“Seriously? You have no idea?”

They shook their heads, their new ears flapping through the air like flaccid balloons.

“Are you mad at us?” ‘Joseph’ asked timidly.

“No, no I’m not mad at you, I’m sorry if I scared you. I’m just trying to process what I’m looking at.” Rose grimaced. “What were you two even doing up this early? Turning on all the lights... stomping all over the floor?”

“We woke up and saw that we looked like this, but the bathroom mirror was too small to properly see ourselves at the same time.” ‘George’ said, its face splitting into a grimace similar to the one from earlier- as much a smile as its new form could afford. “Don’t we look so *spectacular* now, Mommy?” It emphasized the new word it had learned in school, and the other one echoed its sentiment.

Rose managed a “Sure, honey.” There was no point in wondering why they thought this was so swell. They were children; of course they would be enamored by it. They didn’t see anything wrong with this, and they couldn’t see how disgusted Rose was- how dirty she felt just being in the same room as them. How horrified she was at the abominable forms that her children now inhabited.

“We didn’t mean to wake you up.” They said.

“You didn’t. Bob did. He must’ve wanted me to see this for myself.” Just then, Rose realized that Bob had slunk into the room. He must have just crept in, and his back was arched like an accordion as he stared down the children.

“Bob!” The children cried out, merrily oblivious to the cat’s body language.

“Thanks for bringing Mommy to us, Bob!” ‘Joseph’ said. The thing lumbered towards the cat with outstretched arms, its teeth bared in that same grin.

Rose shrank back in her chair as ‘Joseph’ got much closer to her than she had expected, far quicker than she had anticipated. “Don’t chase him!” She snapped, much harsher than she had intended. Bob was already gone, though- as if a spring had been released, he vanished into the hallway and likely somewhere farther than that.

‘Joseph’ slowed to a halt, its expression twisting defensively.

“What, why? We were just playing. Bob *loves* playing with me.”

“Why can’t we play with Bob, Mom?” ‘George’ asked, having walked over to ‘Joseph’s’ side. “Is he okay?”

“Look, everything’s okay- just leave Bob be for now. You can play with him later, okay?”

‘Joseph’ grumbled and whined a bit, but otherwise agreed. ‘George’ followed its younger brother’s example.

“Great. Hey, since we’re all up... what do we think about breakfast? We hungry?”

At the mention of food, their eyes lit up and gleamed as if candles had been placed before them. Any frustration about Bob was ephemerally forgotten.

“We’re starving, actually.”

Rose got them to sit down at the table easily enough, though as she began preparing food for them, twice she heard a small voice say to her, “Please make more.”

So she did, not knowing what else to do.

She flipped over a dozen eggs and two handfuls of bacon, half a loaf of bread for toast, and several oranges on the side. When she glanced over her shoulder, she saw them sitting anxiously still- snouts twitching as their hooves tap tap tapped against the sides of their chairs.

She set a new rule for them. Just for the day, she told them. The window curtains were to stay down, and they were not to go outside. She did not tell them that she didn't want them to be seen, but she hoped the intent translated clearly enough. The children, solely focused on the food being prepared, agreed without a second thought. When she asked if they understood, suspecting they hadn't, they assured her that they did. So that was that.

Once the food had been placed before them, they set into it immediately. She hadn't even had time to put everything on the table before they began to dig in. Though they began eating at a reasonable enough pace, it didn't take long for that to change. Silverware was quickly abandoned. They shoved their tusked snouts into their plates as grubby hands clawed at the rinds of oranges and entire sticks of butter; the yolk of eggs that were sucked down their gullets not seconds before dripped down their chins as the dulcet clatter of their plates rattling against the table mixed with the sounds of their gorging and scarfing and swallowing. She felt nausea build in her stomach, just watching the affair.

She imagined what it might look like for a pack of hungry coyotes to dig into the rotting cavity of a faun's abdomen, how they would rip and tear strips of flesh and gristle off the bones of the animal, how the blood and viscera would coat their muzzles and drip from their brows and cheeks and chins. She imagined the sounds that such a feast would make; such squishing and squelching and cracking and squealing and all the throaty noises of a feasting, starving mass of predators. She would have rather bore witness to that than to have to see 'George' and 'Joseph'

eat, for she imagined it to be no less morbid than what she saw- but at least she would know it to be an extension of the natural state of things.

She bore witness to their feasting for nearly an entire minute, as if she was paralyzed by the macabre fascination of how they ate and ate and *ate*. It took the sound of glass breaking, from a stray hand that was aimed for bacon, to snap her out of it. The offender, 'George', looked up momentarily- muttering a vaguely sensible "I'm sorry" before its eyes affixed themselves back to the task at hand.

She turned without a word and briskly walked outside, slamming the front door behind herself. Rose shivered as the crisp air kissed her skin, and the world was still dark; no one else was outside, and the other house's windows were unlit. Only hers had the glow of light behind the curtains.

She sank into a sitting position, her head coming to a rest against the door, and she fought the urge to slam it against the solid wood. She couldn't hear them out there, but just thinking about them *eat* drove nails into her skull. Tears welled in her eyes, hot and unwanted. Her beautiful babies... how could the things currently in her house be the same children? How could they be hers? Rose could only contemplate her past sins and transgressions, searching for what could have been an offensive enough lapse in morality to turn this mockery upon her now.

She was not afforded too long to think on the matter, and her peace was interrupted about ten or fifteen minutes after she had sat down. There was a muted banging sound from the window next to where she sat. Rose turned and saw that 'George' had climbed on top of the couch, which was sat underneath that window, and parted the curtains to knock on the glass with an open palm- waving with its other hand to get her attention. Various bits of food-based detritus stuck to the glass where its palm struck.

Rose cursed, briefly checking her surroundings to make sure that no one could see the thing (she was still the only one outside, most likely one of the few people on her street awake).

She burst through the door.

“What did we agree about staying away from the windows? Get off of there, now. You guys done eating?”

“Yeah,” ‘George’ hastily climbed down, and Rose leaned past him to wipe off the window with her sleeve and close the curtains again. “Mom-”

“Don’t touch the curtains. Do not.”

“Mom, Bob won’t play with us. Something’s wrong with him.”

“Is that what this is about, that’s why you broke the rule? I said you guys can play with him later.”

‘Joseph’ stomped into the room, its face a mess of frustration. “*Mom*, Bob keeps running away from me and when I tried to play with him, he hissed at me. Why won’t he be nice to us?”

“I told you to play with him later. Maybe you should do as I say next time.”

“This *is* later, Mom! You’ve got to do something, you have to.”

“Mom, make Bob play with us. Please. It’s why I broke the rule, that’s how you know that this is *important*.” ‘George’ said.

"You need to get over yourself; both of you do."

"No! Make Bob play with me!" 'Joseph' shrieked.

"Alright enough. *Enough*, be quiet!" The children flinched at her sharp tone. "Listen to me. Bob doesn't want to play with you, hell I'd wager even be near you because you are *hideous* now; both of you are. I wish that you didn't have to be seen by anyone- not even him."

That was too much for them to handle. They had hoped that their mother would be as fascinated- as happy- with their transformations as they were. They had woken up that morning to what they saw as gifts- gifts that had made them far more chic (they'd use the word if they knew it) than they were when they had fallen asleep. Her words killed what remained of that hope and cut the message of her disgust deep into them.

The children started to throw a tantrum, and as they wailed and began to stomp their hooves into the floor they demanded that Rose tell them that she was lying about what she said. She only doubled down though, and this set them off even further. They began to thrash about, fully in the throes of a horrible fit that- in their current forms, Rose found to be perhaps the most horrifying demonstration of flesh and teeth and squealing unrest that she could have ever dreamed of. When one of 'Joseph's' tusks snagged through the couch cushions and tore through the fabric like a straight razor, Rose finally swept forward to try to regain control over the thing's frenzy.

'Joseph' squealed in rage as Rose grabbed its shoulder, and it whipped its head around to scream at her. As it did so, its tusks slit through the wrist that held it, carving a thick line through the skin. It didn't mean to hurt her, of course. It barely understood the new form that it inhabited; it was just a child upset with the cruelty with which its mother had spoken.

Rose yelped and recoiled as blood began to run down her hand. Her surprise quickly hardened into a desperate fury, however- one that had been tempered by every little thing, every fucked-up detail, about that morning so far. She seized them both by the hair, one in each hand, and dragged them- kicking and screaming- to the basement. No windows there for them to peek out of. She marched them down the stairs and tossed them onto the ground before loping back up and locking the door behind her.

Her head was buzzing with the ragged and uneven breaths that her lungs tugged in, and the cantering pace of her heart. Her blood dripped from her wrist like a thick summer wine that smelled like hateful iron. She moved as if in a trance, binding her wound with an unsteady hand before grabbing her car keys and leaving the house.

She just needed a change of scenery. Rose knew that she was doing her best; she just needed to catch her breath. So she drove off, and somewhere along the way- after driving listlessly for a couple of minutes- she realized that she was going to her sister's house. Perhaps just an instinct; her sister had always been there for Rose. She'd be there for her now, too.

Rose killed the headlights before she pulled into her sister's driveway. Had she had any other morning, she might have laughed to herself as she pulled out her phone- being so conscientious not to wake her sister up with the lights of her car only to call her and wake her up that way. She supposed there was a level of etiquette to it.

The phone rang three times before her sister picked it up.

"Hey. I'm outside. Lemme in?"

"Are you fucking kidding me, Rose? It's like... so *early*, dude."

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry. I just really need you right now."

Her sister groaned. "G&J with you?"

She said they weren't. They were asleep, of course. It was way too early for them. Her sister asked if she could turn Rose away, to which Rose said 'no'. It was rhetorical anyway, and sarcastic; before the phone call was even terminated her sister had appeared at the front door and motioned to usher her inside.

She stayed with her sister for about an hour or so. They talked about absolutely nothing and everything at the same time, though Rose didn't mention anything about what had happened

with the two boys. They were asleep at home and were, as always, model children. Even in sleep. Her sister bound her “knitting wound” more properly than Rose had done, chastising her about how careless she could be, and both of them drank several glasses of morning wine over worn-out jokes and petty complaints.

By the time Rose got home (she had sworn to her sister that she was fit to drive herself home, and her sister had been too tipsy to tell otherwise), the sun was bleeding over the orange clouds into the pale gray of middling dawn. Her mood, which had been raised by her sister’s company, had been souring rapidly back down to the low point where it had been prior. What on earth was she going to do about those things in her basement?

Rose trudged inside, immediately wrinkling her nose at a strange foul smell. She figured it to be coming from the mess of the dining table but decided to take care of it later. She really wasn’t in the mood to clean right then.

She decided to check on the basement- she certainly didn’t hear any wailing- but as she walked up to it she stalled in her tracks. She might as well have sobered up completely at that moment, greeted with a clear view of the stairs leading down into the basement. The door was wide open, and an inspection of the lock made it clear that it had been knocked out of place from the inside.

“Mom?”

She whipped around to see ‘George’ standing around the corner. Its oddly proportioned snout was sniffing intermittently, and there was a wetness running down its face from its eyes. She realized with a start that it had been crying, and as it spoke its voice was raw and desperate.

“Mom, something happened.”

“You weren’t supposed to leave the basement yet.”

“Mom, please.” It sniffed. “I need to show you. You need to fix it.” It turned and motioned for Rose to follow it. She did, and the two of them made their way to the room that had been her children’s- and that foul stench that she had smelled upon entering the house only got stronger.

Inside, ‘Joseph’ was huddled against the side of its bed. It was crying too, and when it saw Rose it stood up immediately and she saw a complete terror in its eyes. It began to struggle for words, but her eyes fell to the carpet in front of it.

Bob was dead. His body was lying across the floor where a deep red stain surrounded him and covered the mess that was his flank. Two of ‘Joseph’s’ tusks matched the shade, and a thin line of drying viscera hung from one of them.

“What on earth did you do?”

“I don’t know,” It sobbed. “I just wanted to *play* with him and- and-”

“*What happened?*” Rose demanded.

The thing stammered helplessly, tears streaming down its face. Rose didn’t wait for any other response. With a terrible swiftness she reached forward and snatched ‘Joseph’ by the hair- wrenching its small body to the ground as it bawled out in pain.

‘George’ had frozen in place, its mouth stuttering slightly open. Rose grabbed it too, her fingers finding purchase in its tangled locks of hair. She began to drag the two of them out of the room, ‘Joseph’ sobbing helplessly as its hooves scraped and kicked against the floor and ‘George’ begging Rose to stop as it tried to wrest itself from her iron hand.

“You are staying in the basement this time.” Rose said, her head buzzing with adrenaline. “I think I’ll put a bookcase in front of the door so that you won’t come out again. You are going

to *stay* there. You are not my children, and you have no place in this world. As far as I am concerned, my children died when you woke up *like this*.”

“No, no!” They shrieked, fighting against her clutches.

“Mom, *stop!* We *are* your kids, Mom, *you’re hurting us!*”

“*Please!*”

They twisted and yanked in her grasp, crying out as she gripped their hair tighter and tighter, cursing them and their relation to her.

As the basement loomed closer, they writhed and fought and pleaded with her but her ears were deaf to any plea for mercy, and her hands twisted tight around their hair. It was an accident that freed them from her grasp. It was the third accident of its kind that morning, only this time it stuck just below Rose’s right kidney. Her breath was expelled from her body in a single sound. Not a scream or a cry, just a simple “Ogh” as pain flooded her system. ‘George’- who wore the tusk that bit her this time- wrenched away from her as she faltered, and the tusk tore upwards in her abdomen before it broke off in the seventh rib with a sickening crack.

She collapsed to the ground, her grasp on ‘Joseph’ going lax. He tore out of her grip as well and stumbled backwards as Rose’s trembling fingers fumbled for the knife in her pocket.

The two children cried heavy tears and told Rose that they were sorry; they didn’t know what was happening, they didn’t know how to help her. They pleaded for her to get up, and in response she finally managed to bare her knife’s blade at them. They were too far away for that to do any good though, and the blade trembled in her weak grasp. As consciousness failed her and her blood became a puddle for her to lie in, the last thing that she saw were the things that had once been her children, and with her last breath she hated them.

They didn’t understand any of it. They were just kids, after all.

George and Joseph would end up fleeing from their home. They initially grabbed most of their toys and stuffed them into their backpacks, but then they realized that they would get hungry. They were already hungry, actually- not that hungry, but just a little peckish. So, they ended up only taking the toys that they could carry in their free hands. Their other hands clasped each other's as they wandered away from their home and from the cooling body of the one person to ever take care of them, who had loved them more than anyone else had.

No one ever saw those boys ever again.