

## Waltzing the Cat

---

I dreamed of the place where the scream lived inside me. I dreamed I was a meteor returned again to crash into the top of Upheaval Dome. I dreamed of riding the V-slick again and again into the dark heart of a rapid. I dreamed of a life alone inside the Land Behind the Rocks.

"Christ almighty," I heard Henry say, "did you see the way Josh passed that semi?"

The sun beat down through the windows and the sweat poured out of me and I couldn't tell Thea's breathing from my own. In my dream everything around us was soft and bright, like water.

## Waltzing the Cat

FOR AS LONG AS I can remember, my parents have eaten vicariously through the cat. Roast chicken, amaretto cheese spread, rum raisin ice cream: there is no end to the delicacies my parents bestow on Suzette. And Suzette, as a result, has developed in her declining years a shape that is at first glance a little horrifying. It isn't simply that she is big—and she *is* big, weighing in at twenty-nine pounds on the veterinarian's scale—but she is alarmingly out of proportion. Her tiny head, skinny tail, and dainty feet jut out from her grossly inflated torso like a circus clown's balloon creation, a nightmarish cartoon cat.

I remember choosing Suzette from a litter of mewing Pennsylvania barn cats, each one no bigger than the palm of my

hand. I was sixteen then, and I zipped Suzette inside my ski jacket and drove back to the city with my brand-new license in the only car I ever really loved, my mother's blue Mustang convertible—the old kind—passed on to me and then sold, without my permission, when I went away to college.

At first Suzette was tiny and adorable, mostly white with black and brown spots more suited to a dog than to a cat, and a muddy-colored smudge on her cheek that my mother always called her coffee stain. But too many years of bacon grease and heavy cream have spread her spots across her immense and awkward body; her stomach hangs so low to the ground now that she can only waddle, throwing one hip at a time out and around her stomach, and dragging most of her weight forward by planting one of two rickety front paws.

Suzette has happily accepted her role as family repository for all fattening foods. She is, after all, a city cat who never did much exploring anyway, even when she was thin. She didn't really chase her tail even when she could have caught it. My parents are happy now to lift her to the places she used to like to get to under her own power: the sideboard in the dining room or the middle of their king-sized bed. Suzette has already disproved all the veterinarian's warnings about eating herself to death, about my parents killing her with kindness. This year, as I turn thirty-two, Suzette turns seventeen.

The cat and I were always friends until I left home and fell in love with men who raised dogs and smelled like foreign places. Now when I come home for a visit the cat eyes me a little suspiciously, territorial, like an only child.

I don't have any true memories of my parents touching each other. I have seen pictures of them the year before I was born when they look happy enough, look maybe like two people who could actually have sex, but in my lifetime I've never even seen them hug.

"Everything was perfect with your father and me before you were born," my mother has told me over and over, confusion in her voice but not blame. "I guess he was jealous or something," she says, "and then all the best parts of him went away. But it has all been worth it," she adds, her voice turning gay as she fixes the cat a plate of sour cream herring chopped up fine, "because of you."

When I was growing up there was never anything like rum raisin ice cream or amaretto cheese spread in the refrigerator. My mother has always eaten next to nothing: a small salad sprinkled with lemon juice, or a few wheat thins with her martini at the end of the day. (One of my childhood nightmares was of my mother starving herself to death, one bony hand extended like those Ethiopian children on late-night TV.) My father ate big lunches at work and made do at night with whatever there was. When I came home from school I was offered carrots and celery, cauliflower and radishes, and sometimes an orange as a special treat.

I have forgotten many things about my childhood, but I do remember how terrified my parents were that I would become overweight. I remember long tearful conversations with my mother about what my friends and teachers would say, what everyone in the world would say, behind my back if I got fat. I remember my father slapping my hand at a dinner table full

of company (one of the few times we pretended to eat like normal people) when I got caught up in the conversation, forgot the rules, and reached for a warm roll. I remember my mother buying the family clothes slightly on the small side so we were always squeezing and tucking and holding our breaths. My mother said that feeling the constant pressure of our clothes would remind us to eat less.

What I know now is that I was never fat, that none of us was ever fat, and I have assembled years of photographs to prove it. The first thing I did when I went away to college was gain fifteen pounds that I have never been able to lose.

After college, when I left home for good, my father, in a gesture so unlike him that my mother attributed it to the onset of senility, began to listen with great regularity to the waltzes of Johann Strauss, and my mother, for reasons which are for me both unclear and all too obvious, started overfeeding the cat.

In my real life I live in California and volunteer twice a week at a homeless shelter, where I stir huge pots of muddy-colored stew and heap the plates with it, warm and steaming. My friend Leo stays over at my house every Saturday night and we watch movies until daylight and then we get up and work all day in my garden. I love watching the tiny sprouts emerge, love watching them develop. I even love weeding, pulling the encroaching vines and stubborn roots up and away from the strengthening plants, giving them extra water and air. I love cooking for Leo entire dinners of fresh vegetables, love the frenzy of the harvest in August and September when everything, it seems, must be eaten at once. I love taking the

extra food to the shelter, and at least for a few months, putting the gloomy canned vegetables away.

What I love most of all is lying in bed on Sunday mornings thinking about the day in the garden and hearing Leo puttering around making coffee. It's never been romantic with Leo and I know it never will be, but still, on those mornings I feel a part of something. With the moon sliding behind the sunburnt hills, the sun up and already turning the tomatoes from green to red, the two of us get our hands dirty together, pulling out the dandelions, turning the rich dark soil.

Aside from the weight issue, which always gets us in trouble, my mother and I are very close. I told her the first time I smoked a cigarette, the first time I got drunk, the first time I got stoned, and at age sixteen when I lost my virginity to Ronny Kupeleski in the Howard Johnson's across the border in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, I told my mother in advance.

"It's just as well," my mother said, in what I regard now as one of her finest moments in parenting. "You don't really love him, but you think you do, and you may as well get it over with with someone who falls into that category."

It wasn't the last time I followed my mother's advice, and like most times, she turned out to be right on all counts about Ronny Kupeleski. And whatever I don't understand about my mother always gets filed away behind the one thing I do understand: my mother believes she has given up everything for me; she will always be my harshest critic, she will always be my biggest fan.

My father has had at least three major disappointments in his life that I know of. The first is that he didn't become a basketball star at Princeton; his mother was dying and he had to quit the team. The second is that he never made a million dollars. Or, since he *has* made a million dollars if you add several years together, I guess he means he never made a million dollars all at one time. And the third one is me, who he wanted to be blond, lithe, graceful, and a world-class tennis champion. Because I am none of these things and will never be a world-class sportsman, I have become instead a world-class sports fan, memorizing batting averages and box scores, penalties and procedures, and waiting for opportunities to make my father proud. Fourteen years after I left home sports is still the only thing my father and I have to talk about. We say, "Did you see that overtime between the Flyers and the Blackhawks?" or "How 'bout them Broncos to take the AFC this year," while my mother, anticipating the oncoming silence, hurries to pick up the phone.

My mother believes that her primary role in life has been to protect my father and me from each other: my rock music, failed romances, and teenage abortion; his cigarette smoke, addictive tendencies toward gambling, and occasional meaningless affairs. My mother has made herself a human air bag, a buffer zone so pliant and potent and comprehensive that neither my father nor I ever dare, or care, to cross it.

The older I get, the more I realize that my father perceives himself as someone who, somewhere along the line, got taken in by a real bad deal. I am not completely unlike him—his selfishness, and his inability to say anything nice—and I know

that if it were ever just the two of us we might be surprised at how much we had to say to each other—that is, if we didn't do irreparable damage first. Still, it is too hard for me to imagine, after so many years of sports and silence, and he is ten years older than my mother. He will, in all likelihood, die first.

My parents, I have noticed in my last several visits, have run out of things to say to each other. They have apparently irritated and disappointed each other beyond the point where it is worth fighting about. If it weren't for the cat, they might not talk at all.

Sometimes they talk about the cat, more often they talk to the cat, and most often they talk *for* the cat, responding to their own gestures of culinary generosity with words of praise that they think Suzette, if she could speak, would say.

On a typical afternoon, my mother might, for example, drop everything to fry the cat an egg. She'll cook up some bacon, crumble the bacon into the egg, stir it up southwestern-style, and then start cooing to Suzette to come and eat it.

The cat, of course, is smarter than this and knows that if she ignores my mother's call my mother will bring the egg to her on the couch, perhaps having added a spot of heavy cream to make the dish more appetizing.

At this point my father will say, in a voice completely unlike his own, "She's already had the milky-wilky from my cereal and a little of the chicky-chick we brought from the restaurant."

"That was hours ago," my mother will say, although it hasn't been quite an hour, and she will rush to the cat and

wedge the china plate between the cat's cheek and the sofa. My parents will hold their breath while Suzette raises her head just high enough to tongue the bacon chips out of the egg.

"We like the bak-ey wak-ey, don't we, honey," my father will say.

"Yes, yes, the bak-ey wak-ey is our fav-ey fav-ey," my mother will say.

I will watch them, and try to search my conscious and unconscious memory for any time in their lives when they spoke to me this way.

The more years I spend living on the other side of the country, the better my mother and I seem to get along. It is partly an act of compromise on both our parts: I don't get angry every time my mother buys me a pleated Ann Taylor skirt, and my mother doesn't get angry if I don't wear it. We had one bad fight several years ago Christmas Eve, when my mother got up in the middle of the night, snuck into my room and took a few tucks around the waist of a full hand-painted cotton skirt I loved, and then washed it in warm water so it shrank further.

"Why can't you just accept me the way I am?" I wailed, before I remembered that I was in the house where people didn't have negative emotions.

"It's only because I adore you, baby," my mother said, and I knew not only that this was true, but also that I adored my mother back, that we were two people who needed to be adored, and the fact that we adored each other was one of life's tiny miracles. We were saving two other people an awful lot of work.

When I am at home in California I don't communicate with my parents very much. I live a life they can't conceive of, a life that breaks every rule they believe about the world getting even. I have escaped from what my parents call reality by the narrowest of margins, and if I ever try to pull the two worlds together the impact will break me like a colored piñata, all my hope and humor spilling out.

One Saturday night, when Leo and I have stayed in the garden long after dark, planting tomatoes by the light of a three-quarter moon, I feel a tiny explosion in the core of my body, not pain exactly, or exactly joy, but a sudden melancholy relief.

"Something's happened," I say to Leo, though that's all I can tell him. He wipes the dirt off his hands and sits down next to me and we sit for a long time in the turned-up dirt before we go inside and get something to eat.

When the phone rings the next morning, so early that the machine picks it up before Leo—sleeping right beside it on the couch—can get to it, and I hear my father say my name once with something I've never heard before in his voice, something not quite grief but closer to terror, I know my mother is dead.

I hear Leo say, "She'll call you right back," hear him pause just a minute before coming into my bedroom, watch him take both of my hands and then a deep breath.

"Something bad?" I say, shaking my head like a TV victim, my voice already the unfamiliar pleading of a motherless child.

Later that day, I will learn that sometime in the night my mother woke up my father to ask him what it felt like when

he was having his heart attack, and he described it to her in great detail, and she said, "That isn't like this," and he offered to take her to Emergency, and she refused.

But now, sitting in my bed with the sun pouring in the skylight and Leo holding my hands, I can only see my mother like a newscast from Somalia, cheeks sunken, eyes hollow, three fingers extended from one bony hand.

My mother was scheduled to go to the dentist that morning, and my father tried to wake her up several times, with several minutes in between—minutes in which the panic must have slowly mounted, realization finally seeping over him like a dark wave.

On the phone he says, "I keep asking the paramedics why they can't bring one of those machines in here." His voice loses itself in sobs. "I keep saying, why can't they do like they do on TV?"

"She didn't have any pain," I tell him, "and she didn't have any fear."

"And now they want to take her away," he says. "Should I let them take her away?"

"I'll be there as soon as I can get on a plane," I tell him. "Hang in there."

"There's a lady here who wants to talk to you, from the funeral home. I can't seem to answer her questions."

There is a loud shuffling and someone whose voice I have never heard before tells me, without emotion, how sorry she is for my loss.

"It was your mother's wish to be cremated," the voice goes

on, "but we are having a little trouble engaging reality here, you know what I mean?"

"We?" I say.

"Your father can't decide whether to hold up on the cremation till you've had a chance to see the body. To tell you the truth, I don't think he's prepared for the fact of cremation at all."

"Prepared," I say.

"What it boils down to, you see, is a question of finances."

I fix my eyes on Leo, who is outside now. Bare-chested, he has started the lawn mower and is pushing it in ever-diminishing squares around the garden and in the center of the yard.

"If we don't cremate today, we'll have to embalm, which of course will wind up being a wasted embalming."

I count the baby cornstalks that have come up already: twenty-seven from forty seeds, a good ratio.

"On the other hand, you have only one chance to make the right decision."

"I don't think she would have wanted anyone to see her, even me," I say, maybe to myself, maybe out loud. I want only to get back in bed, wait for Leo to bring me my coffee and replan my day in the garden. I think about the radishes ready for dinner and the spinach that will bolt if I don't pick it in a few days.

"In this heat, though," the voice continues, "time is of the essence. The body has already begun to change color, and if we don't embalm today . . ."

"Does she look especially thin to you?" I ask, before I can stop myself.

I cannot leave, I think suddenly, without planting the rest of the tomatoes.

"Go ahead and cremate her," I say. "I can't be there until tomorrow."

"They're going to take her away," I tell my father. "It's going to be okay though. We have to do what she wanted."

"Are you coming?"

"Yes," I say, "soon. I love you," I say, trying the words out on my father for the first time since I was five.

There is a muffled choking, and then the line goes dead.

I hang up the phone and walk out to the middle of the yard. I say to Leo, "I think I am about to become valuable to my father."

After a lifetime of nervous visits to my parents' house, I walk into what is, I remind myself, now only my father's house, as nervous as I've ever been. I can hear Strauss, "The Emperor's Waltz," or is it "Delirium," streaming from my father's study.

The cat waddles up to me, yelling for food. No one ever comes to the house without bringing a treat for Suzette.

"I thought cats were supposed to run away when somebody dies," I say, to no one.

*Run?* Leo would say if he were here. *That?*

My father emerges from his study, looking more bewildered than anything else. We embrace the way people do who wear reading glasses around their necks, stiff and without really pressing.

"Look at all these things, Lucille," my father says when we separate, sweeping his hand around the living room, "all these

things she did." And he is right, my mother is in the room without being there, her perfectly handmade flowered slipcovers, her airy taste in art, her giant, temperamental ferns.

"I told the minister you would speak at the service," my father says. "She would have wanted that. She would have wanted you to say something nice about her. She said you never did that in real life."

"That will be easy," I say.

"Of course it will," he says quietly. "She was the most wonderful woman in the world." He starts to sob again, lifetime-sized tears falling onto the cat who sits, patient as Buddha, at his feet.

The night before the funeral, I dream that I am sitting with my mother and father in the living room. My mother is wearing my favorite dress, one that she has given away years before. The furniture is the more comfortable, older style of my childhood; my favorite toys are strewn around the room. It is as though everything in the dream has been arranged to make me feel secure. A basket full of garden vegetables adorns the table, untouched.

"I thought you were dead," I say to my mother.

"I am," my mother says, crossing her ankles and folding her hands in her lap, "but I'll stay around until you can stand to be without me, until I know the two of you are going to be all right." She smooths her hair around her face and smiles. "Then I'll just fade away."

It is the first in a series of dreams that will be with me for years, my mother dissolving until she becomes as thin as a

sheet of paper, until I cry out, "No, I'm not ready yet," and my mother solidifies, right before my eyes.

On the morning of the funeral, all I can think of is to cook, so I go to the market across the street for bacon and eggs and buttermilk biscuits, and come back and do the dishes that have already begun to accumulate.

"If you put the glasses in the dishwasher right side up, I discovered, they get all full of water," my father says.

I excuse myself, shut the bathroom door behind me, and burst into tears.

I fry bacon and eggs and bake biscuits and stir gravy as if my life depends on it. My father gives at least half of his breakfast to the cat, who is now apparently allowed to lie right on top of the dining-room table with her head on the edge of his plate.

We talk about the changes that will come to his life, about him getting a microwave, about a maid coming in once a week. I tell him I will come east for his birthday next month, invite him west for a visit next winter. We talk about the last trip the three of us took together to Florida. Did I remember, he wants to know, that it had rained, like magic, only in the evenings, did I remember how we had done the crossword puzzle, the three of us all together? And even though I don't remember, I tell him that I do. We talk about my mother, words coming out of my father's mouth that make me believe in heaven, I'm so desperate for my mother to hear. Finally, and only after we have talked about everything else, my father and I talk about sports.

Before the funeral is something the minister calls the "interment of the ashes." My father and I have our separate visions of what this word means. Mine involves a hand-thrown pot sitting next to a fountain; my father, still stuck on the burial idea, imagines a big marble tomb, opened for the service and cemented back up.

What actually happens is that the minister digs up a three-inch square of ivy in an inconspicuous corner of the church garden, digs a couple of inches of dirt beneath it, and sprinkles what amounts to little more than a heaping tablespoon of ashes into the hole. I can feel my father leaning over my shoulder as I too lean over to see into the hole. Whatever laws of physics I once knew cannot prepare me for the minuscule amount of ashes, a whole human being so light that she could be lifted and caught by the wind.

The sun breaks through the clouds then, and the minister smiles, in cahoots with his God's timing, and takes that opportunity to refill the hole with dirt, neatly replacing the ivy.

Later, inside the parish house, my father says to the minister, "So there's really no limit to the number of people who could be cremated and inter . . . ed," his voice falling around the word, "in that garden."

"Oh, I guess upwards of sixty, eighty thousand," the minister answers with a smile I cannot read.

My father has that bewildered look on his face again, the look of a man who never expected to have to feel sorry for all the things he didn't say. I pull gently on his hand and he lets me, and we walk hand in hand to the car.

After the reception, after all the well-wishers have gone home, my father turns on the Strauss again, this time "Tales from the Vienna Woods."

People have brought food, so much of it I think they are trying to make some kind of point. I sort through the dishes mechanically, deciding what to refrigerate, what to freeze.

It has begun raining, huge hard summer raindrops, soaking the ground and turning my mother, I realize almost happily, back to the earth, to ivy food, to dust. I watch my father amble around the living room, directionless for a while, watch a smile cross his lips, perhaps for the rain, and then fade.

"Listen to this sequence, Lucille," he tells me. "Is it possible that the music gets better than this in heaven?"

Something buzzes in my chest every time my father speaks to me in this new way, a little blast of energy that lightens me somehow, that buoys me up. It is a sensation, I realize, with only a touch of alarm, not unlike falling in love.

"She would have loved to have heard the things you said about her," my father says.

"Yeah," I say. "She would have loved to have heard what you said too."

"Maybe she did," he says, "from . . . somewhere."

"Maybe," I say.

"If there is a God . . ." he says, and I wait for him to finish, but he gets lost all of a sudden as the record changes to "The Acceleration Waltz."

"I love you so much," my father says suddenly, and I turn, surprised, to face him.

But it is the cat he has lifted high and heavy above his head,

and he and the cat begin turning together to the trimetric throb of the music. He holds the cat's left paw in one hand, supporting her weight, all the fluffy rolls of her, with the other, nuzzling her coffee-stained nose to the beat of the music until she makes a gurgling noise in her throat and threatens to spit. He pulls his head away from her and continues to spin, faster and faster, the music gaining force, their circles bigger around my mother's flowered furniture, underneath my mother's brittle ferns.

"One two three, one two three, one two three," my father says as the waltz reaches its full crescendo. The cat seems to relax a little at the sound of his voice, and now she throws her head back into the spinning, as if agreeing to accept the weight of this new love that will from this day forward be thrust upon her.