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Trespassing

Tomás Brockett-Delgado

“Oh my fucking god, you killed it!” Teresa’s hands snapped up to cover her mouth as she stared down to the first floor. The end of her shout was muffled, but it still bounced off the walls of the abandoned mall, much louder than I wanted. Not far to her right, Jeremy peered over the smudged guardrail. He was dumbfounded, and stood perfectly still, but I could see the corners of his lips moving silently.

“H-how could I have known it,” he said, trailing off and taking a step back. The sarcasm that usually coated his tone was gone, instead replaced with an unfamiliar sincerity that surprised me; the way he spoke was normally all I needed to tell how he was feeling.

Christ Jeremy, what did you get us into? I mentally chastised, walking between the two of them to look over the railing for myself.

It was the body of a cat, legs and tail splayed in separate directions to form a morbid star. Where its head should have been was the cinder block that Jeremy just *had* to hear smash against the ground. I dared not look too closely at the horrid pieces that orbited the cement. The cat rested among the wreckage of the first floor, surrounded by twinkling glass shards and shredded strips of plywood covered in crude graffiti. Moonlight fell through cracked skylight windows above our heads and dimly illuminated the feline. I turned to Jeremy and was met with a desperately pleading stare. He scoured my face for sympathy, then clutched my shoulders. I could vaguely feel his arms shaking. His tongue must have caught up with his brain, because he was finally able to get out a “dudeyougottabelieve.” I stared at him stupidly, and his brow unclenched some and he became more articulate.

“I had no idea that cat was down there. Please.” I pried his hands off and simply nodded, not yet trusting my voice. Then Jeremy pulled Teresa away from the edge and gave her the same pitch. She glared at him, then her shoulders slumped, and they stood quietly. I braved the silence,

“So, what do we do now?” Jeremy and Teresa shook their heads glumly, the common indication that they had no idea. I opened my mouth for the next sentence, but didn’t even get it out, for I was interrupted by a thunderous “HEY!” that sprung from the first floor. We dropped to the ground, sharing wide eyed glances before whoever yelled struck again.

“I KNOW YOU BASTARDS ARE UP THERE. YOU KILLED MY TOOTS.” The sound of glass shattering followed. My heart thumped wildly, but I crawled towards the glass guardrail. Exposing as little of myself as possible, I stole a view of the person below us.

Even from twenty feet above, I could see that the man was breathing heavily. He moved in a jagged circle around the cat, stopping sometimes to look for us before shuffling to another point. He wore torn cargo pants with a blotched work jacket and a scraggly beard of white and brown tumbled from his jowls. One of his hands floated above his hip, fingers splayed like a cowboy ready to draw his

six shooter in a western. The other's fingers were wrapped around the neck of a beer bottle with its bottom broken off, a makeshift shank glistening in the weak light.

I wriggled away from the edge and crawled back to Jeremy and Teresa. The severity of our circumstance must have painted itself on my face, as theirs turned ashen. I muttered our new plan:

"We need to go. There's a homeless guy down there."

"What if he's fast?" Jeremy said, glancing toward the rail. I shook my head,

"I think he has a limp." I wasn't sure if the man had a limp, but I also knew that if I told them anything else, they would not move from our ultimately doomed location.

"On three?" I prodded. Teresa shook her head, not yet ready.

"Three." Jeremy rose into a crouch.

"Two." Teresa's arms shakily pushed her body from the ground.

"One." I found footing on the floor, and signaled

"Let's go." We exploded from our hiding spots, arms and legs churning in the direction of the second-floor entrance from which we entered. Behind us, the man screamed in outrage. We hadn't been very far from the entrance in the first place, and we only ran for a few seconds until Jeremy pushed open the propped steel door marked "Exit Only." Teresa dashed through, escaping into the overgrown parking garage. With only a few feet left between me and freedom, I slowed to a jog, then to a walk.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jeremy hissed, looking over my shoulder. But he soon understood why I stopped. There were no sounds of shambling chase, and after his indignant roar the man had said nothing more. I arrived at the door that Jeremy still held open and strained my ears. Outside Teresa panted, nearly drowned out by the swell of blissfully ignorant crickets. Then I focused on the interior of the mall, and in the distance, I could just barely hear the man weeping. Jeremy's eyes widened and his gaze flicked to the ground. His bottom lip began to shake. With nothing else to do, we stepped outside and let the weight of the door slam itself shut. We left the homeless man to mourn over the broken body of his cat, lit only by the moon and surrounded by the remnants of an abandoned mall.

Teresa jumped when the door slammed.

"Is he not going to chase us?" she asked. I shook my head. Jeremy sank onto a cement parking block and lowered his head into his hands, browned blonde hair poking between his fingers in clumps. Teresa sat beside him, grabbing his shoulder in consolation.

"You didn't know it was down there."

He didn't move his head, but his shoulders shook gently in Teresa's embrace.

"I took his friend away," he said from behind his hands. He sniffled. "What if that guy has to be alone now?" Teresa said nothing but looked at me for support.

"We'll uh... make it up to him somehow," I said, and Jeremy looked up.

"Yeah, we have to. I have to."

We stayed under the stars for a few minutes, allowing ourselves to calm down. Then we started the walk back to Teresa's car. The flashlights on our phones illuminated a path, and we navigated between the thickest of clumped weeds and trash. I kicked a beer can and it clattered across the floor, eventually rolling down the ramp to the first floor of the garage where we had parked a couple hours earlier.

Teresa's hatchback had been tucked inconspicuously in the furthest corner from the entrance to the garage. Its baby blue paint job did not lend to any secrecy but was still muted enough to stay hidden from the casual eye. I clambered into the backseat where I had left my backpack. Jeremy took the passenger side and Teresa sat behind the wheel, reaching up to the overhead light so we could get our bearings. It flickered on, illuminating the gray cloth seats and black plastic lining of the car's interior.

"Let's break out that water," Teresa said, looking over her shoulder. I obliged, but didn't want to rummage through my bag, and instead decided to empty the items inside onto the open space next to me. Three plastic water bottles, a few granola bars, an eighth of weed in a sealed baggie, an extra shirt and a few other odds and ends tumbled out. I distributed the bottles, taking a few seconds for a good long drink once Teresa and Jeremy each had their own. Jeremy took a sip, but then placed his head in his hands once more.

Teresa backed out of the spot, reversing until she had space, and slowly pulled out of the garage. We crept through the small roads that encircled the mall, the beams of light occasionally passing over a looming lamppost or a particularly large plant that had managed to breach the cement. The green display on the dashboard read "2:49 AM," but was always eleven minutes ahead, no matter how many times it was adjusted. We drove until we reached the chain link fence gate that separated the forgotten roads from the outside world. A large lock, which had been broken for a long time, kept the fence closed.

"You're on gate duty, Shane," Teresa said, turning off the beams. I stepped out and closed the door behind me, then jogged to the gate. I listened to the night, ensuring that there were no oncoming cars, specifically of the policing variety, then removed the busted lock. Just as it had earlier, the fence swung open easily, and I waved Teresa through, closing the barrier behind me and re-looping the lock.

The drive to my house was silent. Even at such a late hour Jeremy would usually have something to say, but he brooded in the front seat. However, he now supported his head with one arm that balanced on his knee, a position he only adopted when an idea—typically a bad one—was formulating.

Teresa, wearily, asked, "so, Jeremy can sleep over at yours?" I nodded. She spoke again, "can the next idea not involve going onto some homeless guy's territory?" To this I nodded once more, then Jeremy spoke for the first time since we left.

“Sorry, but uh, I think we’re gonna have to go back.” Teresa groaned, but he wasn’t done, “the next idea miiiiight have to involve some theft too.” She looked at him.

“Now you want to steal from the guy!?” Jeremy smiled at her, then gave me the same grin.

“No, we’re gonna steal and *then* go back. But you’re just going to have to wait for now.”

“No way,” Teresa huffed, “we did not just go through all of that for you to make a second, probably worse plan B and not tell us. What’s the idea?”

“If you insist,” Jeremy said, clearly happy that she asked, “we’re going to steal a replacement.”

“From where?”

“You know that house in town with the surplus of cats?”

“Oh god.”

“And the one old guy?”

“You want to steal one of Mr. Hinkleferts cats?” I interjected. Jeremy laughed.

“Jeremy!” Teresa said with a rising tone, “that’s not funny!”

“I don’t think it is either! I didn’t know his name, it caught me off guard. But think about it. He has like *a thousand*, he won’t even notice that one is gone.”

Teresa shook her head as she turned onto my street.

“Dude it really is a bad idea,” I said.

“Yeah,” Teresa added, “it is.” The car came to a stop where the road met my house’s driveway. “Just go sleep, and maybe tomorrow morning we can toy with the idea of possibly stealing a cat.”

Jeremy shrugged, happy with how his proposal was received. Then we said goodbye and left Teresa for her drive home as we crept into my house through the garage.

Jeremy always insisted on waking up early. No matter how late the night before was, he rose to his cell phone alarm at 8 AM without fail. I was only mildly annoyed when he shook me awake, even though I had only gotten four hours of sleep. Sunlight beamed through the small basement window. I groaned and turned onto my back, then sat up while rubbing my eyes.

Jeremy laughed, “dude, the jouch left wrinkles all over your face.” The “jouch” he referred to was the denim couch that I had slept on, a remnant from the 80’s that my dad refused to get rid of but my mom wouldn’t allow in the living room. So, it was sequestered to the basement, and Jeremy and I would alternate nights sleeping on it when he stayed over. Jeremy’s sleeping bag was already neatly rolled into its drawstring sack, leaning against the foot of the jouch next to his day trip hiking backpack. He was dressed, sporting baggy jeans and a light gray hoodie with a Nike swoosh over his heart. A white shirt poked from the bottom of the pullover. His hair was a ruffled mess, and he had eyebags, but a grin straddled his face.

“You’re already dressed?” I asked, “How fast do you shower?”

“We need to get to the Modest Muffin,” he said, ignoring me.

“Can I just wake up for a second, man?”

Jeremy huffed melodramatically and threw his hands in the air.

“*Fine* sleeping beauty, do that first. But the sooner we get up the sooner this is over with.”

Tracing the indented denim lines on my face I glanced at my phone. Surely enough, it was 8:11 AM on Sunday, the third week of summer coming to a close. I stood, stretched, and made my way to the basement bathroom where Jeremy and I had our very own set of toothbrushes for mornings just like these. After brushing my teeth and a quick shower, Jeremy told me that we were meeting Teresa at the local coffee shop for breakfast and a breakdown of his plan. Teresa’s brother had apparently claimed the hatchback for some morning commitment, so Jeremy and I had to walk.

The air was pleasantly brisk as we started the twenty-minute journey to the Modest Muffin. Jeremy walked at my right shoulder, between me and the road, occasionally kicking any stones that happened to be in his path. We were alone, which gave me the opportunity to tell him something that had been lingering in my mind for a week or so.

“So, uh,” I started weakly, “my mom offered to buy a mattress for the basement. Nothing fancy, just something to make it more comfortable.”

Jeremy kicked at a rock and missed. “If my dad found out-”

“I know, man, he’d be pissed.”

“He’d say he can take care of his own son just fine.”

“He already doesn’t notice that you don’t even sleep there half the time.” To that Jeremy was quiet, finding another rock to kick instead. A few minutes of walking passed.

“Two days ago, the cops showed up at my house with him. They said he was trying to tell people in the town square that the government was coming for them or something. Apparently, they did us a favor by not tossing him in jail,” Jeremy said. I hadn’t known that, so I didn’t know what to say. “It’s so weird, though. Like when you come around, he’ll be totally normal, and a lot of times when it’s just me, too. But then the other times, it’s like something inside of him is switched. And he’s so angry, not even at me, but I’m the only one in there so he’ll yell crazy shit about the FBI and religion and how western medicine is fake.” This was a rant that I was used to hearing.

“Have you worked on the prescription?”

“Yeah, they’re some sort of antipsychotics. Something that ends in *dine* or *zine*, I can’t remember the name. Fat chance he’ll take them, though. You know what he thinks of doctors.”

“Yeah. Are you guys still good with money and everything?”

Jeremy nodded, “I’m surprised how far his military pension has brought us honestly.” As these conversations usually went, I found myself lacking the right words. But Jeremy always said that it was just nice to have someone that was actually listening, and that he wasn’t looking for solutions through me. “Anyways,” Jeremy concluded, “I don’t want the mattress. I think I at least owe him that. Let’s not talk about this anymore, I’m hungry.” The Modest Muffin was now in sight, and Jeremy quickened his pace with me in tow.

The Modest Muffin, years ago, was a gas station. Long before I was born, our little town in northern North Dakota was quite busy, and more in the medium range. Furthermore, there were several other medium-ish towns in the area, which provided enough of an economy to support the mall. However, when a new highway was constructed, it made the local highly trafficked route all but obsolete, and the businesses of the region's towns went elsewhere. Most of the people followed, save for the four thousand or so here in Quinttown. At some point a particularly entrepreneurial towny must have seen the potential within one of the abandoned stations, and they turned it into the Modest Muffin.

A bell at the top of the doorframe rang as we entered, and Teresa waved from a window seat to our left. The table she chose was a half-circle pushed against the wall, allowing all of us to look directly out of the window as we sat. After I ordered for Jeremy and I—two breakfast sandwiches on croissants with one iced and one black coffee—I returned to the table so he could solidify his plan.

“It’s going to be easy,” he said, wasting no time, “we know they’re outdoor cats, you can see the damn things all over the place if you go by his house. All we have to do is corner one without being seen.”

“I don’t like stealing,” Teresa said.

“But I bet you also don’t like the idea of that poor homeless guy without a cat.”

“How do we even know he’ll accept it?”

“Of course he will. A cat’s a cat, what difference does it make?” Jeremy said so with such conviction that it really made sense to me. It wasn’t much longer before Teresa finally gave in as well. We ate our breakfast sandwiches and drank our caffeine, discussing what type of bag would be ideal for cat theft, and establishing that Jeremy would have to be the one to do it.

From the Modest Muffin, we looked at Google Maps to see exactly where Mr. Hinkleferts’ house was. It was a short walk from the Modest Muffin, and from the opposite sidewalk we scoped the place out. Surrounded by trees on three sides, the ranch style home was an elementary schooler’s idea of every house: an entrance centered between two windows, with a one door garage on the right side. It had once been painted yellow, at least as far as I could tell, and shingles and siding alike were hanging and missing. Ironically, the lawn was relatively well tended, albeit lazily, with thin lines of grass clippings indicating that it had just been mowed. Guilt, not unlike how I felt when we left the mall, sank in my stomach. A real-life person really lived in there, and we were about to steal his property? We could walk into the woods and grab a cat so easily that Mr. Hinklefert would only be left to wonder if he noticed the disappearance. I turned to Jeremy, who looked back at me.

“Are we really doing this?”

“Yeah. I have to help.”

“But maybe he doesn’t want our help,” I said, but Jeremy didn’t listen to me. He turned on his heel and continued down the sidewalk, and Teresa fell in line behind him. I figured that I had to at least

see our plan through, so I walked with them until we were out of the sightline of the little yellow house, then crossed the street and entered the woods.

The trees were mostly pine, with a few small birches growing where enough sunlight reached the ground. After a few minutes of walking, we started to see the cats. They seemed comfortable in the forest, lounging on low hanging branches, and roaming freely. Most ignored us, though a few watched as we searched for a suitable one to capture. The first two cats that were vaguely interested in Jeremy fled with ease once he got too close. The third was completely white and scrambled up the base of a tree to a branch that was far too high. It stared down at us with wide eyes, panting heavily, and all its hair stood on end. Teresa and I chuckled to ourselves as Jeremy looked for another.

“Walking after them didn’t work as well as I thought it would,” Jeremy said. This time I laughed out loud at him.

“Why the hell would that work?”

“Because we’re made for endurance and other animals aren’t. I saw it online, that’s how early humans did it.”

“They did that with deer, Jeremy,” Teresa said, “deer can’t climb trees.” Jeremy mumbled something under his breath as he slowly approached another cat. He adopted a new technique, rubbing his fingers together as if holding a treat and whistling gently. This cat, black and brown with white just on its feet, eyed Jeremy suspiciously, though was intrigued by the prospect of food. When the cat allowed him to get closer, Jeremy visibly tensed to pounce, and for the fourth time he was left with nothing. But the white footed cat made a mistake in its escape. The tree that it chose to climb was small, a birch that was barely more than a sapling. It drooped slightly under the weight of the feline, which had managed to make it nine feet high into the crook of a branch.

“Aha!” Jeremy proclaimed, “now this should be easy.” He stepped to the base of the thin tree and removed his backpack. Everything inside had been relocated to my bag. He unzipped it, placing it against the base of the tree.

“Jeremy be careful, you don’t want to hurt it!” Teresa advised. He did not heed her words and wrapped both arms around the tree before rocking his whole body back and forth. The cat was dislodged quickly. It howled as it fell, a writhing mass of teeth and claws that landed square on Jeremy’s back. The cat, with all its tiny fury, clawed and bit him. He shrieked. For a few seconds they were entangled, then Jeremy finally tore the enraged thing off his own back and shoved it into the bag, where it still struggled and hissed mutedly.

“Jeremy!” Teresa yelled, “you didn’t have to do all that.” The commotion spooked every feline in the vicinity, and in a flurry of scrambling we were left alone with the bag that was still writhing.

“*Relax*, damn thing had me to cushion its fall,” he said, nursing his right arm where a particularly nasty scratch was beginning to well with blood.

"Alright, we can get you a band-aid back at my house. Open the bag a little so the poor thing isn't just trapped in the dark," I responded. Jeremy grabbed the zipper and created a little hole. Immediately the cat shot an arm through and slapped his hand. He yelped and shoved the bag to Teresa, who held it a safe distance from herself. We walked back towards the street, moving diagonally away from the house. As we moved Teresa cooed into the bag, which worked to some extent, because the cat was still in its little prison.

"We need to come up with a name," Teresa said, allowing herself a small smile.

"You're just gonna get attached if we do that," Jeremy responded, though we both knew that the cat would end up with a name anyways.

Back at my house we released the cat, dubbed Frank, in the basement bathroom. Teresa was the only one to stay with Frank, and I grabbed some ham slices from the fridge for her to feed him. We stayed at my house for a few hours, waiting for Teresa's brother to drop off the hatchback. Finally, thirty minutes after finishing lunch, Teresa received a text notifying her that he was home. By the good graces of my parents, we were able to get a ride to her house. Teresa sat in the back behind my father in the driver's seat, with her hand stuck into the bag between her legs, comforting Frank lest he decide to escape and wreak havoc. We were dropped off at her home, then drove straight to the abandoned mall.

The propped exit door creaked as it opened, and light spilled onto a portion of the second floor.

"Are you ready?" I said to Jeremy. His brow was set, and he clenched his jaws, but he nodded. I looked to Teresa, who also nodded. Before going in, I stuck a piece of cracked concrete under the door so that it stayed wide open in case we needed to flee for a second time. Jeremy walked in first, followed by Teresa and I. On her back, Frank's head poked through a hole in Jeremy's bag, and he seemed content to look around with the free ride.

The interior of the mall was brighter during the day, but not too much so. Light beamed in from the distant skylights, but darkness still huddled in the corners of closed shop fronts and behind the pillars that lined the ledge. The glass guardrail was even more noticeably smudged in the light, and we approached to look down to where the disaster had occurred. The cat was gone. In its place was a large sheet of plywood. Centered in the sheet was some sort of grave, a collection of shattered concrete, cans, and bottles.

Then the door behind us slammed shut. Like a choreographed dance we all spun at once and looked at the back of the homeless man as he fidgeted with the door handle. When he turned, he was just as surprised to see us.

"Woah! Beat it kids, you scared me," he mumbled, starting his pained walk towards a long defunct escalator. In his right hand he held a cracked solo cup, and in his left, he was dragging a piece of cardboard that read "homeless, anything helps."

"Excuse me sir—"

"I said beat it! Are ya stupid?" The man shouted without stopping, though looking at Jeremy who had taken a step forward. Jeremy took a deep breath.

"Wehaveacatforyou."

"Huh?" the man stopped, "say it slower, boy." Jeremy's arms shook visibly.

"We brought you a cat." The man's eyes widened, then narrowed.

"So, it was you punks. You know how long I had Toots?"

"I-I'm sorry sir. It was an accident, I wanted to-"

"I don't give a DAMN about your apology!" he barked, "you have some fucking NERVE to come back here!" Jeremy took a step back, stammering. "You think a living breathing thing can just be replaced? Did you think you would come in and save the day with a brand-new cat? Yeah? That the homeless guy would forgive you, my heroes?" He glared at Jeremy, then Teresa, then me. His gaze burned me with shame, and then embarrassment, and then shame from being embarrassed.

"I just wanted to help," Jeremy said in a small voice. His shoulders slumped in defeat.

"That's not the kind of mistake you get forgiven for, boy. That's the kind that keeps you awake at night. Hopefully it does. Where's the cat." His outburst had been so ferocious that I had forgotten about Frank, who was craning his head behind Teresa to locate the racket. Teresa slowly took the bag off and unzipped it, letting Frank walk out to the floor.

"His name is Frank," she said meekly.

"Hah! What kind of idiot gives a cat a human name?" the man said, crouching down to the ground and extending a hand for Frank's inspection. Frank was delighted and weaved between the man's legs while rubbing his face. The man took a second to return the kindness, before looking back at us.

"Why are you still here? Get the hell out." Jeremy looked at Teresa and I, then back at the man.

"Let's go Jeremy," Teresa said, grabbing him by the arm and walking towards the exit. I didn't move until she grabbed me as well.

"I knew this was a bad idea," she muttered under her breath. From behind us the man yelled.

"Don't even think about coming back! And I'm keeping the cat." We pushed open the steel door and it slammed behind us. This time, we didn't make sure it was propped as it closed.