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Daniel

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Daniel

Abstract

Nancy thought about it often now: the day that Daniel was born. Her water had broken just hours after Bilko, her fourteen-year-old Labrador, had passed away. When the medics arrived, they were distracted by the red herring of his sheet-covered body on the dining room floor. Nancy heard them gasp when they ran to the supposed victim's corpse and saw a flaccid set of hair front paws peeking out, curled under at a death-specific angle of resignation.



ABOUT ARCHIVES CONTESTS PRINT SUBMIT

February 17, 2012

Daniel

A Short Story by Alissa Nutting

Nancy thought about it often, now: the day that Daniel was born. Her water had broken just hours after Bilko, her fourteen-year-old Labrador, had passed away. When the medics arrived, they were distracted by the red herring of his sheet-covered body on the dining room floor. Nancy heard them gasp when they ran to the supposed victim's corpse and saw a flaccid set of hairy front paws peeking out, curled under at a death-specific angle of resignation.

When they lifted Nancy onto the stretcher, she'd pointed her finger toward the kitchen. "My dog is in there, dead," she told them. The tone of her voice suggested this was some type of clairvoyant statement. The medics did not shift their focus from her; she was losing blood.

A flurry of motion and sound formed atmospheric layers above her head; the back of the ambulance possessed a traffic all its own. But Nancy had felt oddly still amidst the chaos—perhaps the last time in her life she would ever be calm. When they assured her they would do everything they could to save the baby, Nancy Holmes thought, *My dog has died and is*

being reincarnated as my baby. I am about to give birth to my dog.

*

Nancy's son Daniel took his vampirism seriously. After months of Daniel pleading, their family dentist Dr. Bosch reluctantly agreed to attach enamel-colored fang caps to the boy's upper right and left cuspids provided Daniel brought in a permission slip from his mother and promised never to attempt home removal when he wanted them off. Daniel forged the signature but got busted when Dr. Bosch's secretary did a precautionary call home to double-check. Finally he embarked on a hunger strike that lasted four days before his mother agreed to what she considered an act of self-mutilation.

Following their installation, Nancy taped the orthodontic bill for Daniel's round of braces, a two-year stint from ages 10-12, to her son's bedroom door. At the bottom of the invoice she added a message in Sharpie marker: "YOU OWE YOUR FATHER AND I SIX THOUSAND TWO HUNDRED AND EIGHTEEN DOLLARS PLUS FORTY-THREE CENTS.". "At least they're not permanent," she kept telling her husband Chris. "But my god. We paid all that money for beautiful teeth, only to have him return to fangs." When Daniel's baby teeth had fallen out, a series of curiously mismatched adult ones had replaced them—each appeared to belong to a separate human being. Dental intervention occurred, though it was not a simple project of straightening: There were extractions, shaving, veneers. "He traded one monster mouth for another."

"Is there a special type of toothbrush we should get him?" Chris asked softly. He was always quite practical—disappointingly so in Nancy's eyes. He never displayed anger; he didn't find it to be functional. "I just think we should keep all eyes on the prevention of decay."

"The fangs aren't real; they're just caps. Like a crown." Her real mistake, Nancy was sure, had been marrying Chris; Daniel was just the tainted fruit, the reaping of her poorly sewn field. On the other, it meant there was no hope. No way for Daniel to escape his curse. "They're not permanent," Nancy repeated.

She couldn't bring herself to look at her husband, who had begun to sketch the outline of a toothbrush with bristles arranged in a bilateral design.

Nutting: Daniel

Despite his mechanical intellect, Nancy often felt her husband was a bit slow. When they were dating, she'd appreciated his silence and the space it had allowed her. But she'd also assumed his quiet suggested a bustling interior world of the mind. Now she was no longer convinced.

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Daniel

Pickle, their stout, aging Pug, sauntered into the room and lay down at Chris's feet. *Wasn't that also an indication of being slow*, she thought. *Don't animals love slow people?* Nancy imagined her husband in a wetsuit, swimming with a group of chattering dolphins that immediately began to fawn over his presence. She could almost hear the childlike giggles he'd make when their gray bodies encircled him. Maybe there was a way to give Chris an IQ test without him knowing it. If he tested in a borderline region, perhaps she'd be eligible for a clean divorce.

Looking sad, Pickle rose up onto two legs and slowly mounted Chris's large loafer-sheathed foot, embarrassed eyes toward the floor, then began to hump. Chris shook him loose and turned the page in his notebook.

Pickle stayed close, continuing to look at the shoe in a victimized manner.

"Maybe it's not even his fault," said Chris. Nancy found herself unsure whether he was referring to their dog or their son.

"Why a Pug, Chris? He looks like he's being squeezed and flattened at the same time."

She'd been asking some variation on this question since Chris had given

her the pug for Mother's Day, a few years after she lost Bilko. Every time, Chris gave a different answer, but none of them were ever satisfying.

"Daniel picked it out," he said this time with infuriating matter-of-factness. "He said it looked like a fun dog that might be able to make you laugh."

"You couldn't have gotten a Labrador? Those don't look like practical jokes."

A loud burst of organ music came from above. Daniel. "There he goes, composing the soundtrack to industrial misery," she said. The music made their conversation take on a dramatic, hazardous effect, as though something shocking was going to be revealed at any moment. And then it was.

"I worried a Lab might be too painful."

It upset Nancy when Chris displayed a note of tenderness that could indicate love. Where her husband was concerned, she had long ago resigned herself to mere duties of common preservation; for example, she laid out his vitamin each morning but did not pressure him to exercise. He didn't need to live an exceptionally long life in her opinion. Were he to have chest pains, sure, she would call the hospital. But basic acts of courtesy were all she felt she owed him, and she wished he would be equally sparing with her, anything more only made her seem cold.

"Well, it wouldn't have. Unfortunately, I live in the present."

She walked to the bathroom in a fast clip and shut the door, though not tightly enough. Pickle soon approached, sniffed, and nudged the door's tiny crack until it swung open to allow him entrance. They sat together, Nancy on the toilet and Pickle flat across the floor. Both appeared to be waiting for a natural disaster.

Nancy thought of that day, when Daniel had arrived. Maybe that was the cause of Daniel's problems. Some type of neurological damage incurred during birth. He'd seemed more or less normal when he was younger, though. Except of course the teeth, which the dentist claimed were hereditary. She'd always felt like his teeth had been her fault. She'd tried to

fix them, and thought she had. Now he'd made them her fault again.

She wasn't proud of what she'd tried that day after Bilko's death. But even if she could take it back, even if she had clear proof that what she'd done had in fact somehow damaged Daniel, she wouldn't. It was her one protest on record that her life was not good and was certainly not going to improve, and the years had deemed her right. If she'd ever come close to loving Chris, it was through him respecting her most important request. "I don't ever want to talk about this," she'd told him in the hospital the day after it had happened, and he'd never asked her to. Ignoring that one thing was the one area where the two of them were a real success as a team.

*

Daniel looked down at his penis, hoping it might grow and widen along with the rest of his body. It was very pale, so pale that its dark veins seemed closer to the surface than they actually were. He thought about how it had never been exposed to sunlight. He liked this; it made him admire his penis. It had lived an ideal he wished he could proclaim for the rest of his body. Its smooth, strange skin confirmed Daniel's instinct that it should never be placed in front of a bright light lest it recoil, or wither. He thought briefly of doing a window test, pulling back the thick velvet curtain of his room and placing himself inside a shaft of light. But of course, a neighbor might see. He wouldn't want it to get back to Mother that he'd done a sunlight penis experiment.

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Daniel

For Daniel, the sensations in his new fangs tugged on the same awkward, nascent wires as a variety of other hormones, so he didn't realize at first exactly what was happening to his body. That afternoon, something amazing happened, but he wasn't even focused enough to realize it: Lifting a glass of water from his nightstand, he brought it to his mouth, inserted his prosthetic fangs, and drank, sucking in as if through a dual straw.

*

Nancy hadn't thought it was possible, but since school had let out for the summer, Daniel had started to get even weirder. He no longer sat for meals and had recently informed them he was to be strictly nocturnal. In addition, he'd begun shaving his head and applying a thin white cream across his face, neck, and scalp. "He looks like a clown with leukemia," Nancy lamented to Chris.

"The sun *hurts*," he told his mother, his fangs gleaming against the pale lakes of his cheeks. His diet had changed completely—he wanted rare meat, cold cuts, and juices with a tomato base. Nancy had offered him a donut one morning, and he'd looked at her as though she'd offered him a bowl of broken glass. He went on a long streak of beet-eating until Nancy found out why: Eating a large amount made his urine look red like blood.

"I'm not buying any more beets," she told him. "Your body is not to be used as a magic trick."

Nancy bit her lip. After all, she knew more about the body and magic, and blood, than Daniel realized. She could still remember the pleasant surprise at how much of it there had been, the lifelong hidden well she had tapped the day she'd cut herself. She'd meant to disappear, but instead found that the trick was on her: she was the hat they'd pulled a rabbit out of. Nancy had woken up with a scar on her stomach far larger and infinitely more tender than the ones she'd made on her wrists, and with Chris in a chair next to her, smiling despite everything, holding a baby that seemed to have materialized out of thin air.

*

For his fourteenth birthday, Daniel wanted bats. Not as pets—that was illegal, though that was the least of the reasons his mother wouldn't allow it. Instead, in what Daniel considered the thinking-man's solution to bat-keeping, many wildlife enthusiasts built enclosures for the bats that were affectionately known as bat boxes. As a present for his upcoming birthday, he wanted to build a bat box on his grandparents' lake property.

He'd put a great amount of preparation into the pitch, gluing a collage of glossy photographs onto a poster board rife with hand-drawn fact bubbles meant to reassure his mother; facts such as "Bats do not attack humans and will not get caught in your hair." "The hoary bat of Florida, which is furry and I know would freak you out, is rarely seen during the summer." "Vampire bats don't live in America. But even those bats don't suck blood." He omitted harsher truths, such as how these bats *do* lick it out of scrapes made on human flesh. And how the Brazilian free-tailed bat, the species most likely to move into the bat house, has a prominent odor gland and can often be identified by scent alone.

Breakfast, he'd ruefully accepted, was the time to strike, his parents' objections somewhat softened by the haze of sleep. With great anxiety, Daniel watched the thin sliver of light gradually appear beneath his bedroom door. This was the only sign of daylight that still crept into his room; he was usually asleep when it did, but today he waited for it with a willing resignation that imbued his quest with a near-biblical significance.

Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, he knew he was about to place himself into the hands of his persecutor sunlight. The cause, Daniel assured himself, was worth the sacrifice.

To placate his mother, he hid the poster board with all the pictures behind the Second Phase poster board, which listed the raw materials needed for the building project along with their cost. Daniel had calculated this online with the help of a home improvement store's website. He cleared his throat to begin the presentation when Daniel glanced his father's ketchup-covered scrambled eggs and involuntarily licked his lips. Ketchup was by far the most addictive thing that Daniel ate; he suffered daily cravings.

"What's with the poster board?" his mother asked, snapping Daniel back to attention.

"You mean this?" he asked, playing dumb. "Well, I'm glad you asked."

When his presentation concluded, his mother began shrieking prohibitive arguments. It was during this tirade that Daniel realized he identified his mother as Loud. This was her greatest categorizer, the very first thing that came to mind when he thought of her, before any type of memory, relationship tie, or feeling. It was sometime after she'd lifted the poster board with the bat portraits, but before she began ripping it down the center that Daniel mentally assigned her the following taxonomic rank —:Domain: Loud, Kingdom: Sound, Phylum: Yelling, Class: Human, Order: Female, Family: Holmes, Genus: -Mother, Species: -Total Bitch.

Though his father was only a few feet away, dragging a forkful of eggs through a puddle of ketchup, Daniel didn't look to him for help with his mother—he had learned long ago that was useless. Instead he gave his father the kind of look that asked a question; it begged to know why she was here, this Nancy, this sound, what good she was doing the both of them. Daniel's father retreated from his plate of half-finished eggs and wished his wife and son a good day before disappearing around the corner.

Daniel turned back to his mother, on his own, as usual. "Think globally, mom. Bats are growing endangered. This is a way we can really make a difference. Plus they eat bugs. Like, a lot of them. You want fewer bugs, don't you?"

Nancy picked up Chris's plate and dumped its contents down the garbage

disposal, which she ran for an extended period of time with a dramatic amount of water gushing down into the sink. It looked to Daniel like she was taking comfort in this violent, grinding display; it appeared to be a metaphor. Here is what I think of your hopes and dreams (switch flips).

“The way to get rid of a cockroach is not to invite in a rat, Daniel. I won’t hear of this one second longer. I absolutely won’t.” Nancy poured herself a glass of water and added three spoonfuls of a powdered fiber supplement, stirred, and drank.

“Fine,” Daniel whispered. He stood and shuffled over to the staircase in a defeated manner. “We don’t even have to celebrate my birthday.” Thinking he’d gotten the last word, he started up the stairs. But his mother was too quick, or maybe just too loud for him to escape her voice.

“An infestation of flying, defecating rodents is not really my idea of a party, Daniel. If you ever want to rejoin civilization, you should ask your father and I for some sunless tanning lotion and swim trunks.”

Daniel stopped on the fourth step, suddenly furious. His fangs pulsed in a way that made his mouth water. This ends today, he thought. Today he would not merely run to his room as he always had. Today he would give her a piece of his mind.

But by the time he got back down to the kitchen, he saw his mother shutting the door to the bathroom. Her fiber beverage was fast-acting.

*

The pains came in sharp, dizzying spells that were good at making Daniel doubt his own body. He’d begun to feel a tightening sensation all through his body that made him worry that he had some kind of rare cancer, or maybe he wasn’t growing properly. When the pain zeroed in on in his fang caps, though, he got a different idea—more hopeful, but much less likely than cancer—that it might be the ache of forming bone. The caps had displayed an uncomfortable pressure, as though they were perhaps on too tightly, or had trapped a cavity. He was reluctant to speak up or go to the dentist, however, for fear that they might be removed.

The most troubling development, though, was Pickle.



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Daniel

Pickle often slept with Daniel. The dog had an asthmatic wheeze that would've kept anyone, save a teenager sleeping the regenerative sleep of the young, wide awake. It softened Daniel's heart, the way the awkward dog would strain and bumble to get up onto the bed and lay beside him, tick-like, legs splayed to allow the entire girth of Pickle's mass to expand into the mattress' cushion. "Pickle naps around twenty-two hours a day," Daniel once remarked to his father.

But lately, Daniel couldn't sleep next to Pickle. All he could hear was the dog's heartbeat, the slow, leaden thumping that often seemed to lose its rhythm before clumsily regaining it seconds later. His urge to bite down on one of the many ripples of fat in Pickles' neck, gently of course, hopefully so gently that the dog's heavy breathing wouldn't even be interrupted, increased nightly. When he listened to the heartbeat, Daniel's teeth began to throb, just the fangs, with the sort of independent heat one might associate with an erection.

And now, Daniel was afraid that if he were to bite Pickle and suck, it would hurt the dog, make Pickle fear Daniel, or worse, kill Pickle if he drank too much. But this urge seemed to have a strength all its own, an imperative that elevated the act to rightness: He *needed* to do it. His heart and brain seemed to have retreated behind a new command center, a track that ran

from the consuming aches in his groin directly to his two prosthetic teeth. It felt like they were weakening—though he now drank through them all the time, they longed for the pressure and resistance of skin. He feared that if he didn't bite something and drink, they'd fall off; withered fruit from an unwatered tree.

Anticipation made Daniel's pulse rise to the point that he could hear it beating just as loudly as he heard Pickle's heartbeat, except his own was infinitely faster. It sped ahead as though Pickle's pulse was a slow, yet ruthless killer chasing it. He took a fold of Pickle's extra skin, lightly blew the loose hair away, and placed the tips of his teeth against the roll. Then he waited.

There was no movement, no interruption in the dog's labored snores. Gently, Daniel began to increase the pressure of his bite, until a sudden, tiny pop filled his teeth with a disorienting sensation that frightened him at first. Though he felt air going in and out of his nose, it felt like he was drowning. Pickle shook just barely, almost involuntarily, but did not wake up. It was only after another minute of resting his teeth inside the dog's neck like a still fork, listening to Pickle snore, that Daniel started sucking.

It immediately expanded his understanding of gratification. Like the first time he'd had one of his grandmother's holiday biscuits, he could not believe the delicateness of each particle of taste, the miniscule dissolving of sugars inside his mouth. He'd told himself he would pull out after five seconds, but upon feeling the complexity of the pleasure inadvertently extended it to seven. When he released, two small beads of blood rose up to cap the tiny wound; Daniel was surprised at how small it was. Only the very ends of his teeth had sunk into the flesh. He was thankful he did not have to bite down to the root.

Satiated, he fell asleep cuddled with Pickle. The satisfied sleep of new lovers who have gotten every needed pleasure from each other and needn't dream to fantasize; they simply close their eyes and rest.

*

It was that time of year, love bugs swarming. Landing on the front picture window. Mating, dying, and drying there. Nancy lugged the Shop-Vac out to the front porch. Vacuuming was one thing Nancy had always liked; it

made her feel powerful. There were^{Nutting: Daniel} certainly times she wished she could suck up far bigger things, people and houses and cities. Perhaps the whole world.

She began around the windows, tracing the thin tube along the glass then down into the square frame baskets that might, if she had enough energy, be filled with flowers by July. Then there was a loud signal of distress from the machine; it had eaten something treacherous.

Nancy shut it off, then screwed off the attachment. Holding its tube up to her eye like a telescope, she found could not see out to the other side. Something was plugging it up.

“Damnit,” Nancy said. A car drove by and gave a firm honk that caused Nancy to jump. Rachel Cannon waved from inside her luxury station wagon. In its backseat, two children with giant headphones silently watched personal entertainment consoles. In return, Nancy raised the vacuum attachment slightly, the subtle version of a barbarian raising a stick after a victorious hunt. The motion was somewhere between friendly and threatening.

Nancy scanned the yard for something she could use to poke out the blockage inside the hose. Her eyes settled on the handle of a nearby rake. Awkwardly, she held the attachment hose between her feet and used the rake to jam the blockage downward. It was slow going, but she could feel it move. She gave a final jab, the object fell to the ground, and she screamed.

It was the head of a dead bird.

“What is it?” A pajamaed Daniel stood in the doorway, clearly wrought from sleep. She couldn’t believe how pale he’d grown.

Not long ago, Nancy would’ve tried almost anything to get Daniel to come outside in the daytime. But she was past that now; the shame of him superseded any healthy maternal wish for him to get some sun. “Get back inside,” she growled, resisting the urge to use the handle of the rake to push him back.

Suddenly there was another light car honk, a tap on the horn meant to summon. Nancy spun around. To her horror, Rachel had put the car in

park and was walking up the driveway. Nancy turned around to Daniel and made wild shooing motions. “So I don’t know if you’re as ape for scented candles as I am,” Rachel started, “but some of the other neighborhood ladies and I—”

Rachel stopped, her mouth still open. The tan seemed to drain from her body. She put her hand to her mouth and began making shrill, challenged breaths. “Is he...is that...”

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Daniel

Nancy threw down her implements, and ran over as Rachel began to faint. She grabbed the woman's bony hips, but her top half flopped backwards. A muted screaming came from inside the station wagon. "It's okay, kids!" Nancy shouted, guiding Rachel's limp body down to the grass. But when she looked up, she saw that the children were looking past their stepmother, past Nancy, to the porch. Nancy turned around in time to see Daniel lift the bird's head to his mouth. Nancy dropped Rachel. The car doors popped open, and for a second, there was so much screaming that it seemed to be coming from everywhere at once, an atmosphere of sound. Rachel was finally roused awake. Hazy, the distress of the children caused her confusion to quickly turn into panic.

"It's fine, it's fine." Nancy's words were nervous and crazy-sounding. "My son's just playing a trick on you," she assured them. "I'm just going to go have him stand back inside."

The rage on Nancy's face caused Daniel to bolt toward the door. Then he locked it behind him so that Nancy was madly turning the knob and pounding the door when she heard Rachel's car start and turned to see the station wagon speeding away. Nancy dropped her head against the door. "Daniel, I'm not going to kill you," she said. "Please just open the door so I can come inside and drink some alcohol."

With that, there was a quiet click. Nancy left the plugged-up Shop-Vac out in the yard with the rake; she wanted only to shut the door and beget behind closed walls. Daniel had scurried back away to his bedroom. "It's Chris's fault," she finally decided. That helped. A glass of white wine also helped. The fluffy safety of a robe would help, too, she decided, so she took off her shirt and walked to the bathroom in her bra for the first time since Daniel was born. *If he can drink blood out of the Shop-Vac, she reasoned, I can walk around in my bra. There is no way I can scar him more than he has scarred me. Not any longer.* In a small way, the thought was freeing. Perhaps she had failed, but at least now she could finally quit trying.

*

Since he'd tasted Pickle, his urges had grown. There was now a telepathy about them—when he'd woken up to his mother yelling and opened his bedroom door, Daniel had nearly sleepwalked downstairs to the bird's corpse. And then, when he'd found himself standing before it, his eyes had moved directly to the tiny dead animal concealed inside the vacuum tube, to its settled blood, and the rest had been instinct.

That evening when he woke up for the night, he went downstairs to find his mother sitting in a chair in the dark.

"Look, it was kind of a trick, like you said. I didn't think that they'd react so bad. I'm sorry."

Nancy nodded her head a little. This gave Daniel pause. Why wasn't she yelling?

"Mom, are you okay?"

"Did you...put the blood into your mouth?" It was almost clinical, the way she posed the question.

"No, I just pretended to." The lie felt awkward to Daniel; he didn't normally lie. It was usually more rebellious for him to tell the truth.

"That blood was from a dead bird. Who knows how long it'd been dead. It probably had diseases."

Nutting: Daniel

She stared at him, and Daniel felt like a ghost; she seemed to be looking behind him and through him and around him, trying to make out his shape, squinting her eyes as though she'd almost processed what was standing before her but then had lost its definition just as suddenly. "Help me up," she said quietly, holding out her hand. Daniel smelled the sourness of alcohol about her. She was drunk, he realized.

"Do you want me to walk you upstairs?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. I'm making it; I'm doing well." She walked to the banister slowly, the bottom of her robe dusting the floor.

*

Chris woke up as Nancy climbed into bed. He glanced at the red numbers of their digital clock: It was later than usual for her.

"You know," Nancy began, "maybe you and Daniel should spend more time together. I think he needs a stronger role model." She paused. "And he certainly doesn't like me, so I think you would be a better choice."

This statement struck Chris as odd. It took a moment for him to place his finger on it, but then he realized that Nancy was being conciliatory. She'd just mentioned one particular area and suggested that, within its confines, he might possess a greater level of skill.

"I dunno," he said. "What if I helped him build that bat box?" Daniel didn't like leaving the house or being awake during the day, Chris knew. The bat box project seemed like the only thing that would interest the boy enough for him to break his own rules.

"It might be better if it didn't have anything to do with vampires. He's taking it too far, Chris. I keep waiting for the village to arrive at our door with torches and pitchforks."

"What else would he be willing to do?"

With that question, Nancy seemed to snap out of her dolor; she turned, and he could see the gleam of her moving eyes. "Yes...you're right. So

here's what you do: You make it an absolutely terrible experience for him. Try to get him to connect this stupid creepy box he wants to build with sweat and hard work and accidentally hammering his hand. " He recognized the manic tone of her voice. This was excited Nancy. This was Epiphany Nancy, Nancy who felt she had all the answers.

"I'll sure try."

She turned off the light and rolled over, her bottom a rotund mound beneath the covers. It occurred to Chris that he had no idea how to make love to her anymore. Not the faintest idea of how to approach it. Just as he had no idea how to approach hanging out with his son. He tried not to let these facts convince him that he should be labeled a failure; on the contrary, he told himself, he was a good man for sticking things out in a rough situation.

*

He'd done it again last night; he hadn't meant to. Pickle had jumped into his lap while Daniel was watching television. Daniel leaned in for a short taste and found it quite painful to withdraw after he began drinking. It scared him, how hard it was to stop. Afterward he'd ran to the fridge and got several slices of lunchmeat for Pickle to enjoy. He didn't want the dog to become anemic.

Now, as Pickle snored atop Daniel's pillow, Daniel watched him with equal parts love and anger. Why did the dog still come to his room, follow him around, sit against him and fall asleep? Didn't it have instincts? Wasn't it still more of an animal than he was? Couldn't it tell that it was taunting him, that it was putting its life in danger? Daniel jumped when he heard the knock; his parents hadn't knocked unexpectedly for quite a while. His panicked brain imagined Nancy standing on the other side of the door with the bird's corpse in her hand. She would enter his room, point to the two pricked holes in its throat, then plunge a stake into Daniel's heart while lamenting, in her usual voice of punishment, that she was only doing this for his own good.

"Son?"

Daniel felt his fangs fill with warm fluid in relief. It was his father.



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Daniel

“I know you’re resting now. Sorry to bother you. I have some news though, hopefully exciting news. I convinced your mother of something.”

This was a coup. Daniel opened the door to find his father offering a slight smile. “She’s going to let us build your bat box.”

The box. It took Daniel a moment to remember. The past few weeks’ events had made him forget all about his recent request.

Now Daniel thought of the bats surrounding him, their small, beating bellies filled with the fresh blood of that night. Would he be able to behave if one arrived in front of his father?

Daniel stood silently. He felt no pressure to give an immediate answer or to hurry up; he liked this much about his father.

“Are you worried about being out during the day?” Chris asked.

Daniel looked up and smiled. His dad really was a thoughtful guy. “Well, it would be kind of hard to build in the dark, right?”

Chris paused. “I’m sure, if we wanted, we could bring our own illuminating

device. That way you wouldn't have to disrupt your schedule." He paused again. "I read an article, once, about the impact schedule changes have upon one's body. It really does wreak havoc."

"But you'd be disrupting your schedule."

Chris brought his hand to his lip. Apparently he hadn't thought of that. "It's okay," he said at last. "I'm older and no longer growing. I can offset the negative side effects though proactive behavior, like increased electrolyte intake."

"So you'd do it at night? Really?"

"Of course."

Daniel was a little surprised to find himself hugging his father. Chris's large, gentle hands began to pat his back, and Daniel tried to fight back his tears. *If he sees you crying, he thought, he'll know everything.* But the more he tried not to cry, the harder his hands squeezed around his father's chest, feeding the pressure of the mounting sob. He made only a small noise, but it was undeniable.

"Daniel? What's going on? Hey, everything's just fine."

Then came a silent, five-second window where the course of events could have changed completely. Daniel almost blurted out a word, and one word is all it would've taken to begin the entire confession. He would've pulled his father into his room, showed him the pillow that Pickle slept against, lifted the heavy tapestry from his window and torn away a piece of the aluminum foil to reveal where he had hidden the dead bird's body. The day would've ended with a clear conscience, but also the heavy weight of knowing that his future may not be so rosy, and could even result in the new changes of his body leaving, or being taken away by force.

Instead, he remained quiet, and his father did the rest.

"Son, I'm so sorry. I had no idea that doing something on your schedule would mean so much. We're going to make more of an effort now, as a family. I promise."

Daniel pulled back, nodding heavily. "I didn't mean to get all emotional or

whatever.”

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Daniel

Chris placed his arms on top of Daniel's shoulders. Daniel had liked this a great deal when he was younger; it was like they were bridged together. "There is nothing at all wrong with crying, son. Actually I've always wished that I could cry more. Sometimes I feel like I'm...I don't know. Not human enough. I know that sounds strange, I just don't know any other way to describe it. It's just that sometimes when your mom is on one of her fits and she's screaming and crying and yelling and doing all of that—I wish I could do some of that myself. I'd love to be able to cry. I can't remember the last time I did. I thought I'd cry when you were born; it was the happiest day of my life. But then you were here, and suddenly it was like we'd always had you. The first time I held you didn't seem like the first time at all. Gosh, digression. All I mean, Daniel, is this: Cry whenever you can." He gave Daniel an extra-hearty pat on the shoulder.

Daniel shut the door behind him, walked over to the mirror, and lit a candle, holding its flame at different angles to explore his fangs. It felt like they were growing longer; now they seemed to reach all the way down to the bottom of his jaw when his mouth was closed. He puffed his lips forward and gave a slight whisper. "I am a vampire," he said. It felt real. For the first time, it felt even more real than it looked.

*

But Nancy had not given birth to her dog. Instead it was a baby, pink and teeming with veins, screaming just as loud as she had feared it might. As she watched Chris's awe, his gloved fingers reaching for a knife to cut a cord, Nancy silently wished for him to take the baby to his paper-gowned chest, to walk the smeary thing to the door, and never return. She couldn't believe the dog had seriously died. Throughout her pregnancy, a part of her mind had engaged in the hopeful fantasy that the dog would somehow raise the baby—of course not feed or dress it, but always be there, a sarcastic and comforting presence to guide Nancy. "Give it what it wants," she could pretend the dog said to her when the baby started wailing. "Please, please, shut it up," its eyes would say.

During her first nursing session, Nancy had the same sense of dread that she'd had just after marrying Chris, when it became clear that the various miseries she'd known before the marriage had not magically abated after the ceremony. That awful, unfulfilled feeling would not be going away because of a child either. Instead the fear was worse, heightened—when his mouth found her breast, it felt like Daniel was sucking life and energy out of her, tapping her already low reserves that couldn't afford to be shared. She could only force herself to do it by going back to that calm moment on the floor, closing her eyes and telling herself that Daniel wasn't there at all: she'd succeeded, she'd prevented it. Her leaking breasts were not her breasts but her wrists, the milk leaving her body was warm blood.

Alissa Nutting is author of the short story collection Unclean Jobs for Women and Girls (Starcherone/Dzanc 2010). Her work can be found in The New York Times, Tin House, BOMB, Fence, and other anthologies, and will appear in the Norton Introduction to Literature (2013). She is currently an assistant professor of creative writing at John Carroll University.

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