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from The French Were Here

Bison Collins Messink

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in the deepest most dark part of the lagoon
with its teeth bore into my head,
my eyeballs punctured and lopsided,
and my cheekbones visible through my skin
like a bra, through a cheap
torn shirt.

Our lake Silver Lake because of the time dad caught a log by the island
in the yellow boat
and it snagged so hard like a whale was on there
and I thought a whale was on there.
Also because of the dreams that started shortly thereafter—
the shark and large mammal parades in between the island and our
beach,
loud joyous musical celebration parades
that left me utterly terrified
that a whale shark was
and is
living in the shadows, underneath our raft.

Margaret stood frozen before the dead cat. She didn't know what would
happen next. She inched forward to it, afraid, as if a switch may go off
and it would spring back to and claw off her face. She crept to it, stooped,
stuck out one solitary finger and poked it. Nothing. It was dead. She backed
away. The French had murdered Cakes. What kind of sick people come look
at someone's house and while they're there, murder the cat? And to stick its
own leg down its throat. Those sick, sick French!

She called Steve. He told her he didn't know what to tell her. She went
to the kitchen and called the realtor. The audacity they had to leave the card
behind.

The realtor said they had also found the cat like that. She said it was a
little disturbing.

"You're lying!" Margaret answered back, a bit surprised at her own harsh-
ness. Her voice began to quiver just a touch. "Cakes was fine when I left," her
voice disintegrating further. "She was just fine."

"I'm sorry," the realtor said. "I really am, but that's how we found it."

"That cat was murdered and you know it!"

The realtor hung up. Margaret's tears were full blown now. She called
Julia.

"Hi Mom," she answered.

"Julia, it's your mother," she said, crying still.

"Mom, I know." Margaret was overwhelmed. She sobbed into the phone.

"Mom, what's wrong?"

"Cakes is dead," she said, composing herself slightly.

"Cakes is dead?"

"She was murdered."

"What? Murdered? What's going on?"

"A French couple came to see the house today and when I came back she
was dead. They killed her," Margaret said, now composed and speaking mat-
ter-of-factly.

"What? How do you know?"

"They stuck her leg down her throat."

"What?"
"I said they stuck her leg down her throat," Margaret in her loudest, clearest voice, thinking Julia had simply not heard her words.

"What? That's crazy. Are you sure?"

"Half of her leg is jammed down her throat, Julia, I'm pretty sure."

"Alright. Alright. I'm coming home."

"No dear, you don't have to come home. You'll miss school."

"Mom, you just called me and told me my cat was murdered. I'm coming home."

Margaret didn't touch the cat the rest of the day. Gloria came home from school shortly and was shocked, of course, but ultimately unconcerned for either the cat or her mother's near hysteria.

When Steve got home from work Margaret had him try calling the realtor. He resisted but she insisted and the realtor stuck to her story, denying the murder.

Not knowing what else to do, Margaret called the police.

An officer came out to the house and wrote up a report. "There's not much we can do," he said. "You can get an autopsy done if you want. There's vets that do that. But we don't usually do autopsies on animals."

The vet had already closed and Margaret would have to call the next morning.

Julia arrived home at 8:30 and the cat hadn't been moved. It was still in the master bedroom. Its leg was still down its throat.

Julia knelt over it while the rest of the family gathered at a few steps distance. Julia picked up Cakes' noodly body and held it against her chest and whispered to it. Margaret found this somewhat off-putting but she didn't say anything. Julia's hair had transformed yet again since Margaret had seen her last, though she hadn't said anything yet because it hardly seemed appropriate. Now it was longer, and she had straightened it. She had even highlighted it red just a tad, which looked strange. Margaret was taken aback. She couldn't get used to the idea of her daughter just showing up on her door with new hair. It could have been like this for months for all she knew. Though she supposed it would be strange for Julia to call her up on the phone just to tell her she had straightened and highlighted her hair, but she just didn't like the idea of not knowing before she saw it. Especially since she highlighted it. It would be one thing if it were just cut different.

Julia looked even less like a lesbian now. Margaret wondered if she had a girlfriend. She couldn't imagine a lesbian girlfriend liking the new hair much. Was it possible the lesbian thing was just a fad? Maybe she was over it now. Or maybe she was attracted to both—like a bisexual. Margaret didn't know whether this was better or worse. On one hand it was closer to normal, sort of. Maybe it meant she would bring home a boyfriend. But on the other hand it just seemed kinkier.

"Where should we put it for the night?" Julia asked after she put the cat back down. No one had thought of this yet. All eyes stared blankly at the cat on the floor as if they were round a campfire on a lazy night in October, only instead of a fire was a cat.

"We could put it in the basement," Steve suggested, turning his eyebrows up around the circle.

"How soon will it start to smell?" Margaret asked.

"It shouldn't start to smell this soon, should it?" Julia said.

"I don't know, how long does it take for a cat to rot?" Steve asked. Gloria looked at her dad and raised her eyebrows at the insensitivity of the present discussion.

"I don't even know how long it is before a human starts to smell," Julia said.

"Is it different for a cat?" Margaret asked.

"It seems like it might be shorter. I mean, a cat is smaller," Steve said.

"Does that matter?" Julia asked.

"I don't know," he said. They all looked at each other.

"Maybe we should just put it on the porch for the night," Margaret said.

"The porch?" Julia asked. "No, we can't do that. I'll put her in my room, that way—"


"Mom, it will be fine," Julia said.

"Julia, you'll have nightmares," Margaret said.

"I won't have nightmares. I'm not sticking her on the porch. And not in the basement either."

"It's cooler outside," Steve chimed in. "That might help keep the body fresher."

The cat spent the night on Julia's floor.
"I said they stuck her leg down her throat," Margaret in her loudest, clearest voice, thinking Julia had simply not heard her words.

“What? That’s crazy. Are you sure?”

“Half of her leg is jammed down her throat, Julia, I’m pretty sure.”

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“The porch?” Julia asked. “No, we can’t do that. I’ll put her in my room, that way—”

“Julia—in your room? Honey, that’s morbid,” Margaret said. Steve looked on with a grim face. Gloria frowned.

“Mom, it will be fine,” Julia said.

“Julia, you’ll have nightmares,” Margaret said.

“I won’t have nightmares. I’m not sticking her on the porch. And not in the basement either.”

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