

Let Go

editor's choice

Prose — Lara Rudman

She got another cat for her birthday. After she had lost the last one. The girl had taken it outside for some fresh air, as her father had often instructed her to do for herself. The cat and the girl sat in the yard lounging in the sun until the sound of the garbage truck coming to pick up their trash had scared the cat away. Into the brush it went, and it was gone. The girl had run inside crying, a blubbering mess. The mother had looked for the cat for a couple of hours but eventually gave up. She was sad that her daughter was sad, but it didn't really bug her that much that the cat was gone. It often fell to her to take care of it, including scooping the litter box. She very well couldn't trust her daughter to do it, or even her husband for that matter.

Her daughter had seemed to take on the qualities of her cat, slinking around the house, careful to stay out of sight. Sometimes, the mother would turn the corner and find the girl and her cat crouched just around that corner. One time they scared her so bad she dropped a basket of laundry, socks and T-shirts scattered about. The cat had pounced on the socks, falling over with a little blue sock caught between her little paws stretched up to the air. The girl had giggled endlessly.

Her husband was much more upset than she was about the lost cat. He wouldn't touch his wife, but he liked that cat. It would cuddle up on his lap as he sat down to watch TV at night. Or when he would sleep on the couch. The lost cat was a new thing to fight about. That as before he told her he was leaving. Now that he was, they fought a lot less. The uncertainty had become certain, and that was it. They didn't know when to tell their daughter about it. So they got her another cat, hoping to soften the blow. No dad... new cat. Almost even in the eyes of a four year-old.

One night her husband insisted that he was leaving the next morning. And it suddenly became too real for the mother to handle.

"Please don't leave," she sobbed, clutching at his shirt. She wrapped her arms around his torso, his whole body stiff. "If you love me even a little bit, you would stay... for just a little bit longer. Please stay." She squeezed him harder and harder. Her arms dug into his side.

"Ow," he said. Unconvincingly at first, but his voice became more insistent. "That hurts. Let go." She continued to squeeze. Tighter and tighter. "That's enough," he barked. "Now let go."

And he wrenched her arms off of him, holding her wrists up in

the air by her head. "This won't make me stay. We can't do this anymore."

She stared him down, the tears drying on her cheeks. "And if I told you I was pregnant?"

The man dropped his wife's hands and backed away from her. "That's not --"

"It is," the woman interrupted. "When you 'slipped up' a few months ago."

He didn't say anything for what felt like an eternity. She knew that face he wore though. He was thinking. Calculating. But she had played her hand. The final decision was his.

The man took a short step forward and placed a hand on her belly. His eyes met hers. "Our children deserve better," he whispered, with a sincerity that was uncharacteristic of her husband.

She thought about that for a moment before she answered. "We are all they will ever have. That counts for something. We count for something, more than you and I could ever be separately." The woman brushed her hand against his, pressing his hand flatter against her stomach. "I can't do this alone. I'm not enough." She left him with that thought and turned towards the door.

She walked out of the room to find the girl and her new cat sitting outside the room. Playing aimlessly together. The girl lay on the floor, her hair splayed out around her. The smokey-grey cat pounced on her tendrils of auburn hair, catching strands in her little claws.

Surely, she was too distracted to hear their conversation, the mother thought. Surely.

~~~

The girl quickly grabbed the sock from her kitten and ran into the bedroom, the cat following after her. She waved the sock in the air, keeping it just high enough out of the cat's reach. The girl laughed as she watched it contort and throw its body in the direction of the sock. Eventually, the cat got bored and just stared at the girl as she waved the sock in its face. Quicker than the girl could react, the cat's paw lashed out, claws scraping against the back of the girl's hand. She dropped the sock, surprised. "Ow," the girl said, clutching her hand to her chest and eyeing the cat strangely. It lunged for the sock and went underneath the girl's bed with it. The girl laid her face on the floor, trying to see underneath. All she saw were slits of green, blinking at her. The girl reached toward those eyes, and the cat hissed. The girl sat up quickly and began to cry.

She closed the door of her bedroom and sat leaning against it. She would wait. Eventually, the cat came up to the girl, gingerly, and rubbed up against her knee. The girl took this as an apology. She picked up the

kitten, and the animal clipped out a quick meow before beginning to purr in the girl's arms.

She hugged her cat to her body. Swaying back and forth. The cat tolerated it for a moment until it started to squirm. On instinct, the girl hugged harder. Her cat was not going to leave her. She rocked back and forth. The cat exhaled a ragged cry. I love it, the girl thought. I love it I love it I love it. The cat's back paws broke the skin on the girl's chest as it struggled to break free from the girl's death grip. She grimaced through the pain. Finally, the cat stopped struggling, accepting of its fate. She held the cat like a baby, rocking it back and forth.

~~~

The mother popped open a can of cat food, the distinctive shrill of the metal opening up. Usually, the cat came running towards the kitchen at the sound, but no one came. Confused, the mother went looking for it. She called the cat and made clicking noises. "Baby, have you seen the cat?" she called.

"It's sleeping," the girl answered. Her voice sounded dulled coming from her bedroom.

The mother opened the door and stopped when she saw the girl cradling the cat. The woman crossed her arms and braced herself against the doorframe. "That's nice," the mother said. "But it's time for dinner."

"Okay," the girl said. The girl took the cat, extending it out to her mother on open palms. An offering. The mother gasped at the sight. When the girl moved her arms the mother saw the streaks of blood on the white, cotton shirt she wore. She fell to her knees next to the girl and swatted the limp body from her hands. The ashen cat landed with a soft thud next to the girl. The mother frantically pulled up the girl's shirt. Angry, red cuts stretched across her chest, reaching as far down as her stomach.

"What did you do?"

"I just wanted it to stay," the girl said.

"Where did you think it was gonna go?" The mother asked, desperate to understand.

The girl looked at her, confused. "I'm not sure."

~~~

The woman couldn't tell her husband what had happened. Not when she wasn't even sure herself. So, she quietly took her daughter by the hand, leading her out of her bedroom. The mother checked the hallway to see if her husband was around. He wasn't. The two slinked down the hallway, as quiet as church mice, to the little girl's bathroom. There, the mother wet a towel and wiped away the blood. Tears streaked down the girl's cheeks, but she was quiet. The mother was not sure if she

was crying from the pain or because of what she had done, if she even knew what that was. The mother bandaged her chest and stomach as best she could and put fresh pajamas on her. The mother left the blood-stained pajamas in the bathroom sink to soak, but she knew she was never going to get the blood out. She might as well have thrown them in the trash, but she couldn't bring herself to.

Leaving her daughter in the bathroom, she went back into her daughter's room, gripping the bloody towel tightly in her hands. She picked the dead cat up with it, she carried it carefully out the back door of the house.

Sometime later, the woman walked back into the house, silently, and washed her hands in the kitchen sink, scraping furiously to get the dirt and blood off her hands. Even over the sound of running water, she heard the sound of footsteps coming towards her.

"I'm sorry, Momma," a soft voice said. The woman ignored her and continued to scrub away. She put another dollop of soap in her hands. The footsteps got closer, and the woman felt little arms wrap around her leg. The woman refused to look down. She refused. So she scrubbed furiously, the scalding water almost burning the skin off of her hands. "Momma," the girl repeated. The woman slammed her hand down on the faucet. She paused for a moment and then twisted the faucet to cold. She placed her hands back into the freezing water, cupping them and collecting some water in her hands. The girl's arms seemed to burn around her leg. She let the water run through her hands, let it collect, and then run through again. She did this over and over, until she heard her daughter draw a breath, as if to speak again. The woman's hands were cupped, full of water, and she moved them away from the sink and overtop her daughter's head, where she quickly drew her hands apart. Water splattered atop the girl's head, some of it getting on the woman's dirt-stained jeans. The girl let go of her mother's leg with a gasp. She looked at her daughter, wet hair stuck to her forehead and little drops of water dribbling down her face, so much like the blood that had been on her chest.

"Now, you're clean," the mother said.

~~~

She stared out the window above their kitchen sink. Past the backyard with the swingset. Past the trees standing at the entrance of the woods. She looked deep into the woods and saw only a little mound of dirt over top of a dead kitten.

The woman was still standing at the kitchen sink when she heard her husband call her daughter's name. And then he called her name. She turned around to find him standing in the hallway, holding dripping wet

pajamas stained pink with blood.

Part of her had hoped that if she had left the bloodied clothes in the sink, her husband would find them and she would be able to tell him what happened, explain to him the kind of person their daughter might be. Now that she was faced with the situation, she wasn't sure what to say. How could she tell the father of her child what his little girl had done? But he needed to know.

~~~

"It was an accident," the woman said, trying to convince herself, too. "She didn't know what she was doing."

"How could she not know?" the man demanded. "It was hurting her. It was raking its claws down her chest. Why wouldn't she just let go?"

The woman could only shake her head. She didn't have the words to explain it other than to say, "I think she heard us."

Her husband dropped the soaked clothes on the floor, which made a sickening slap upon impact. With an unreadable expression on his face, he abruptly turned around and walked towards his daughter's room. He opened her bedroom door slowly, the light from the hallway trickling in to reveal his daughter laying down in her bed, turned to face the door. The slightest reflection from the light revealed that her eyes were open.

The woman watched her husband walk into the room. She called after him, "Please, leave her alone. She knows what she did. She's sorry." The woman braced herself in the doorframe, preparing for one of her husband's tirades. Instead, she watched her husband climb into bed behind his daughter. He wrapped his arms around her, as the girl now stared at her mother intently. Like a cat would.

They stayed like that for a moment. The father, with his head buried into his daughter's hair, whispering words that his wife could not hear, words that she was not meant to hear. And the mother and her daughter meeting each other's gaze, neither one knowing what to make of the other.

Finally, the girl turned her back to her mother and scooted herself closer into her father's chest. He tightened his embrace until they were one sleeping organism breathing in unison.

The woman backed out of the room and closed the door behind her, letting the darkness take them both.

~~~

Her husband had stayed. And they had, for all intents and purposes, worked out whatever it is they had been going through. No cat and a new son provided an interesting perspective for both of them.

Her husband had taken to spending time with his son, something that he had been reluctant to do with their first child. It had taken him time to warm up to his daughter. But with this one, he held him all the time and the baby never slept as well as he did when he was laying on his father's chest, rising and falling with each breath.

The girl was fascinated by the baby, and she asked to hold him often. The mother relented, but would never leave the two of them alone. She would always be there, watching as she folded laundry, or did the dishes, or made dinner. The mother assumed the girl had noticed this, her hesitancy. Her lack of trust. But if it bothered her daughter, she didn't show it. Over the years though, the woman became more relaxed with the supervision. The girl had earned her trust back, she would tell herself.

One day, the mother walked in on the girl hugging her son tightly. She froze in the doorway at the sight. "Ouch," he said. The daughter continued to hug him, almost tighter after he said something. He struggled some more and desperation entered his voice as he asked his sister to let go. His tiny frame was enveloped in hers.

From her position in the doorway, the mother took a step forward, about to walk toward them and pull them apart. As soon as the mother's foot touched the ground, she let go. The daughter grinned widely at her brother, who reciprocated in kind. She gave him a kiss on his forehead and the boy laughed. The girl turned to look at her mother, her arms going back to brace herself in her seated position, and met her mother's gaze. Whatever the girl found there made her frown.