

Story in-progress.

The dog hung upside down by its ankles in the garage. Elizabeth saw it when she was looking for a spade to help her mother in the garden. They were planting Lilies of the Valley. The dog was stiff and dead. Its front legs dangled down, reaching for the ground. She couldn't tell if it was swinging ever so slightly or if she was just thinking it was. It wasn't really a dog though; it was a coyote. But she hadn't learned what a coyote was yet, and had only seen black and white drawings of wolves in a fairy tale book where one pretended to be a human grandmother. She always wondered how the town folk couldn't tell she was actually a wolf. Unless the wolf wore the grandmother's skin like some kind of puppet; but this was much smaller than what she thought wolf-size must be and it looked like a dog. A wild dog.

They lived in a two story white farmhouse; more house than farm. The barn was falling apart and the only animals that lived inside were bats and feral cats, which were enough to keep most people away. The pasture was also overgrown so that the grass was taller than Elizabeth. She was afraid of the grass; it was like a dark sea where you couldn't see what was going on underneath. She made up for her fear by exploring the old barn by herself and feeding the feral cats by sprinkling fistfuls of Kitty Kibble on the dirty barn floor. Most of the cats wouldn't get too close to humans. Their crusty heads poked out of hidey holes, or they sneaked down the barn stairs, or out of the tall grass where they lived, ever so slowly, and their eyes glowed neon green right into her heart.

She played with some of them by carrying them around in her oversized shirt like they were baby kangaroos, but her mother would yell at her and tell her not to touch them. *Those cats carry diseases! Wersh your hands.* They were the lost cats of Balleville Township. Maybe they

found their way to the abandoned barn themselves, or maybe they were dropped off by a regretful buyer under the light of the moon. Maybe a kitten wasn't the best valentine's day gift after all. Especially if you were dating a cheating bitch.

Her father had sold some acres of fields across the road to housing developers in order to make ends meet. The farm had belonged to his father's father, and he never had any interest to continue the farming tradition. He thought about fixing up the barn, making it a wedding venue with sunflowers and some hay. In the winter, maybe he could have a Christmas Tree farm with mulled wine and fire pits and hot cocoa. If he sold enough of the fields to his cousin, then he would have plenty of funds to start such a venture. But none of these ideas ever really came into fruition because an idea would leave his head as quickly as it came.

Elizabeth's favorite foods were her mother's spaghetti made with a ketchup and brown sugar sauce, canned potatoes she ate out of the can with her fingers like chop sticks, and mayonnaise and fresh tomato sandwiches. She liked to patrol the new developments and stare at people. These people wore nice clothes, like sweaters that buttoned all the way up and ugly tan pants. One time on a walk by the pond, a woman wearing a bucket hat had let her touch a fish she had just caught. Its eye stared straight up into the sky as its mouth open and closed like it was trying to say something. Maybe it had been saying, *put me back*. She then showed Elizabeth how to unhook it and let it back out into the pond to swim far away as fast as he could all the way home. Some neighbors even offered her snacks and juice cartons. She roamed the neighborhoods and imagined herself to be one of the lost cats sneaking around the chemically green yards.

But then Elizabeth met the Garrison girl, Kimmy. Elizabeth especially didn't like her. She had tried to make Elizabeth eat dog food. She had also told Elizabeth to rub dirt on her elbow when she had fallen off her bike and skinned it. Elizabeth didn't think the girl properly understood the expression of rubbing dirt on your wound. "That's what my dad says," the girl said. The only good thing about Kimmy was that her older brother had a water bed, and sometimes they could sit on it when he wasn't around. They weren't allowed to jump on it because it might pop, Kimmy explained.

When Elizabeth had invited Kimmy over to play, Kimmy hadn't known that Elizabeth lived on a real farm. She said she thought that Elizabeth had been making it up. Kimmy had dolls and her Country fair winning Dutch rabbit, but Elizabeth had acres of land to explore. She had a barn. She had the concrete remnants of an outhouse that she used as a cauldron. She showed Kimmy how to collect the weeds and pick off the sticky ends off pine trees. She showed her how to put them in the cauldron, which was really just an old toilet, and then use a large tree branch to stir the mixture.

"This isn't real food," Kimmy said.

So Elizabeth took her back to the side of a peeling white shed near where the grass grew tall and wild and scary. She showed Kimmy the blackberry and raspberry bushes. Elizabeth picked a few and held them out in the palm of her hand to Kimmy.

Kimmy squinted her eyes. "You can eat these?" Kimmy asked.

"I eat them all the time," Elizabeth said. She popped a raspberry into her mouth.

Kimmy reached out for one. She grabbed a red one and bit the end off. Then she ate the whole thing.

"Just don't eat the green ones," Elizabeth said.

They decided to pick almost all the ripe ones. Elizabeth showed Kimmy how to make her shirt like a pouch by holding it out with one hand. They both filled their shirts and their fingers turned purple from the juice. Their mouths were stained from eating so many. Their shirts got stained and they had scratches up and down their shins from thistles and thorns.

That night, Kimmy's mother, Mrs. Garrison, called their house. She said that Kimmy had returned home filthy, covered in mud and sticky purple juice. And it looked like Kimmy might have *Poison Ivy*. Her shirt had been ruined and she had tracked mud in the house and on the furniture. "Like a dog," she said. Elizabeth could hear her loud voice through the phone. She was on the floor drawing a picture of a dead feral cat she had found the day before rotting in the sun and pretending not to listen. To show that the cat was dead, she put large black exes where its eyes should have been. Her mom rolled her eyes and said, "Yes, I understand." After she hung up the phone she glared at Elizabeth and sent her upstairs to take a shower.

"And use soap this time!"

Sometimes Elizabeth thought her mother hated her.