

*Must Only
Zibarro See
The Beauty in
a Sunset?*

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IT IS ELEVEN AND A HALF YEARS AGO. My classmates don't listen to me anymore. They tire of hearing facts about cats. I have a book that's the size of my thumb in my pocket. Inside, pictures of cats accompany quotes that attempt to capture the essential feline nature. In my backpack is a book bigger than my head. It is titled *The Big Book of Cats*. While I sit at my desk and sketch a picture of a cat onto my notepaper, my teacher calls on me to answer why we have seasons. I tell her that most big cats can't purr because their voice boxes are different than domestic cats. Those voice boxes are meant for powerful roars. The teacher takes my arm and pulls me into the back of the room, to the corner, between two bulletin boards with motivational messages such as "imagine your success" pinned to them. I hate the feeling of her loose, papery skin. I snatch my arm free. She goes to the discipline board and switches my green card to an orange card. I am in time out.

When I get home, Joker crawls into my lap while I sit on the couch and read the *Big Book*. His purr is weak, but I hear it, anyway. I can hear most everything.

It is eleven years ago. My mom can't afford a cat-sized coffin, so Joker is in a trash bag. It is a bright summer day when I take the shovel from the garage and try to dig dirt out from under the maple tree. Mom sits on a bench under the tree, and her cane rests in her lap. She says Joker will flow into the tree's roots and make it big and strong. When I pause from shoveling to squint up into its branches, it looks big enough on its own to me. When I look down at my feet, as I often do, I look too small and weak on my own, without him.

It is ten years and nine months ago. My teacher walks behind me and yanks the book I had been hiding inside our textbook out from my hands. A page rips as I refuse to let go. My mother said that book was out-of-print, and I hate knowing that my teacher's dry, lifeless skin will brush across its fragile surfaces. She throws the maimed hardcover into the wastebin. I watch her in silent confusion until I see her intent and goal, whereupon I know no better course of action except to open my mouth and scream.

It is ten and a half years ago. I tumble from the neighbor's pastel pink plastic playhouse. My arm hits the ground first. The small smack of collision

seems disproportionate to the violent pain that explodes up and down its length. The neighbor kid asks if I'm okay, but I don't meet his eyes when I say yes. The swelling makes my arm look inhuman. Soon, we are back to crawling around in the grass, as we pretend to be cats.

It is ten years ago. I set the Manual of Canine and Feline Cardiology book down on the side table in disgust. My mother looks up from her own book, in her chair across the living room. When I whine that authors are so unoriginal, and that they just say the same things over and over again, my mother stares down her glasses and suggests that it's possible that they didn't expect their readers to already know everything they were going to write about. I laugh, though she frowns. What I don't say is that I don't know what I'll do with myself if she's right.

It is nine and a half years ago. My mother pulls a dusty storage bin out of a musty coat closet. As she hands me a set of gloves and a pair of tongs, she explains that this is the full comic run of Power Pack, starting all the way back in 1984. She cautions me that these plastic-covered issues are collectable, and that she'll be very sad if one of them is damaged. When I pull the lid off of the storage bin, I feel as though I am a pirate uncovering hidden treasure. I tug the gloves over my hands and take the tongs in hand, so I can turn each page of each comic without damaging them. Katie Power, the youngest sister of the four kid team, is blonde haired and chubby faced; she faces life with an awkward enthusiasm her brothers and sister love. We're almost identical. At night, I dream of flinging yellow balls of energy like she does.

It is four years ago. I have met the love of my life. My eyes are glued to the computer screen as this beautiful boy gestures wildly to his camera in an attempt to explain why Hal Jordan is the best Green Lantern. He's wrong, but then, maybe it's okay that he's wrong.

It is three and a half years ago. I stand in the doorway to the kitchen as my father berates me for not telling him we ran out of food. He suggests that I wouldn't ask for help if I fell and broke my arm.

It is three years ago, and it's three in the morning. I don't sleep; I can't often sleep. Then rain slams through my open window, onto my bed. Thunder rolls. I relax. The patter on the roof shingles blots out all other noises that conspire to keep me awake. A cry jolts me awake. I dismiss it as a bird until I realize no birds call so early in the morning. I run out into the rain, and when I return, I hold a shaking black ball of fur. She is small and weak. I can understand that.

It is two years ago. My boyfriend cries on the couch next to me. He is returning to Texas tonight. He says he will miss me. I don't understand. We will have our phones and computers. He wraps his arms around me, asks me to hold him, and I wrap my arms around him, too. He is noisy when he cries. He shakes and whimpers and snuffles. For once, I don't mind.

It is last year. My boyfriend arrives, with the intention to stay in Ohio for good this time. He kisses his mother goodbye and kisses me hello. Later that night, he cries because he misses his mother. I know this time to hold him close.

It is eleven months ago. I stumble into my first university class with my eyes wide and my tablet clutched to my chest. My professor reads his syllabus, and he assures us that each sweet word we write will be

treated with the proper respect. My tablet is heavy with years' worth of my sweet words.

It is ten months ago. A classmate sits beside me at our conference table. She moves her hands, and the size of her smile makes it hard for her to speak as she talks about the piece of writing I submitted for the workshop. She claims that she's in love with one of my characters. A few other students nod in what I have to assume is agreement. Our professor leans back in his chair, folds his hands in his lap, and grins. I look from face to face of each student in the room, and my face tingles. For the first time, I understand how they feel.

It is three weeks ago. A representative of the National Security Agency strides into the classroom with his prepared lecture papers in hand. He cracks a smile and tells the class to take off their shoes and empty their bags. I take my purse, pop it open, and overturn it. Its contents spill all over the desk. A few students around me chuckle at first, then a few more, and then the whole classroom bursts into laughter. The NSA representative grimaces and elaborates: it was a joke. The rest of the class period I spend staring at the mess on my desk.

It is three nights ago. I sit at my desk in my Special Topics in Superheroes course. We are supposed to be talking about Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, but I bring up Superman again. The student sitting next to me slaps his hand on his leg and rolls his eyes as I discuss Grant Morrison's *All Star Superman*, when Lex Luthor gave himself Superman's powers, and he had fallen to his knees. I stop speaking. I tell the class to forget about what I was saying. The professor squints and tilts his head, but I don't know whether that means he's interested or confused. I stare at the ground. The student next to me looks up and smiles. A few other students chuckle. In that issue,

the strength of Lex's five basic senses – smell, taste, touch, sound, and sight – became as strong as Superman's for just a few seconds. It changed Luthor in a way rehabilitative justice never could. There's nothing funny about that. I wasn't cracking a joke.

Two nights ago, the page on the bright screen of my tablet is blank. I stare at it. I've wanted to put words on it all day. I've wrestled with the muse, and he teases me, but he usually grants me what is rightfully mine. Or so I thought. He has not. My fingers do not move across the keyboard.

Yesterday morning, the page is full. The next fifteen pages after it are full, too. I am still unsatisfied, but my boyfriend tells me that if I don't give my imagination a break, I'll only write things I don't like. He claims that the imagination gets tired just like my muscles, and that I'll damage it if I press it too hard. I'm not clear whether that's literal or metaphorical, but after great effort, I can turn off my tablet and get dressed for class. If Daily Planet reporter Clark Kent can wait to write his story, I can, too.

Yesterday night, I search for autism on Google. Quizzes and tests pop up in millions of results on the screen of my computer. There's no going back. I am the most basic of humans; when I hunt prey, I chase it to exhaustion.

Yesterday night, I take a fifth quiz. I know the results will be the same, but I take it anyway.

It is this morning at four am. I jerk awake when Kyora attempts to curl up on my face. Her short black fur fills my nose.

Today, I pick up my phone, and I dial my psychologist's phone number. Δ