

Failover

A story from the Zoo

By Austen Tucker



COLOPHON

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Kat

The kitten was on our doorstep when we logged into the Zoo.

Not a kitten, exactly. Before Kit starts making his little face at me, yes, I know what a kitten is. I am not stupid. I am saying the Zoo had rendered a small orange thing in a too-big hoodie sitting cross-legged on the threshold of the house, like someone had delivered her in a box and run far, far away, as if to avoid her stench.

She had bare feet, tufted ears, and a tail wrapped around one ankle with the desperate dignity of a child trying to hold herself together in public. She looked five. She looked like us.

“Kit.”

He came running through our shared space. I could spy on him if I wanted, but we had promised not to do that to each other, and mostly we kept the promise.

“What,” he said.

The kitten looked up at him, and her eyes said everything I couldn’t.

Everything else could have been an asset mismatch, a transient avatar, one of Nate’s stupid practical jokes. The Zoo was built by people who loved edge cases too much and QA too little, so weird shit happened. People spawned with the wrong number of elbows. A man from

Calgary once logged into a support group as a refrigerator and refused to explain himself.

But the eyes weren't Kit's, and they weren't mine. They were *ours*, and when the kitten blinked at us, we both flinched.

"Hi," she said.

"Kit."

"Yeah?"

I waved my hand in the air and brought up a small console window showing our open sessions.

There was Katrina, of course, our government login name. We existed under that as a set of "subagents" that just so happened to split our brain's output into smaller pipes. Kit was me, but different, and now, apparently, this kitten was too.

(Don't ask me how that worked. Jack built the interface. I just know we got to relax and be *us* when we were in the Zoo, in our cozy little bedroom that no one was allowed to enter under penalty of a Zoo Permaban.)

There were supposed to be two agents running, but the console showed three, and neither of us knew how the third had gotten there. When I highlighted the new name, the kitten glowed in the same color.

Kit pinched his forehead and closed his eyes, hissing through his teeth. Not *again*. Not *another one*.

"She's us," he said. "New alter time."

"Should we get Mom?"

Kit shook his head. "We'll be fine."

"You remember how it went last time."

We both knew what I wasn't saying. Alters rarely came forward with happy endings, and we'd seen Littles come and go, learned about some seriously fucked-up shit our family did, but—

Stop that, Kit thought at me. *Be present for the kid.*

I offered my hand for the ratty kitten to investigate, moving slowly and keeping it steady. "What's your name?" I asked.

The kitten's ears flattened, and I knew it had been a bad question before I understood why.

Kit says it hit all three of us at once, which is generous. It hit him first; I caught up when I saw his face and realized I had said it in the voice. The voice that asked bad adult questions, clipboard questions, intake questions.

"No names, then," I said, and started the slow, steady box breathing they'd taught us at group. The kitten shrank by an inch. The Zoo liked metaphor so much it sometimes forgot to keep it symbolic.

Kit shoved me aside and knelt down. "Hey," he said, softer. "Hey. You're okay. You didn't do anything wrong."

The kitten looked at Kit, then me, then the space between us where our body would have been if bodies worked that way here. When she spoke, her voice was hoarse and feminine and very, very small.

"I knocked three times."

“Jamie let me in,” she continued, shrugging at the oversized shirt she was wearing. “And she let me have this. Said sharks were too cool for hoodies. I like her.”

Another one, *another time*. I crouched, but the kitten leaned back and I stopped.

“You like hoodies?”

She nodded, so I sat. Kit sat too, because the Zoo made room when it loved you, and because Kit is a petty bitch who refused to let me be the only one with knees in a crisis.

The kitten stared at both of us, and fascination came in sideways. She was so small. The hoodie Jamie had offered her had a juice stain on it, grape maybe, and one sleeve had been chewed until the cuff gave up. Her claws were out, not as a threat but as though she had forgotten they could be put away.

She had chosen orange, or something in us had chosen it for her: orange like warning tape or a traffic cone, like those shelter photos where the whole body is one argument for immediate rescue. Orange as in *boy*, though what sat before us was decidedly not that.

I wanted to touch her so badly it came through as nausea. Kit wanted to pick her up, but he wanted to run, too. I wanted to call Jack, and yes, I am saying I wanted a grown-up. Congratulations, Kit. Print the sticker.

When the kitten sniffled, we both moved too fast, and she folded in on herself.

“Sorry,” Kit said.

“No, no, sorry,” I said, which was worse, because now everybody was apologizing in a big old Canadian standoff.

Viv’s house was quiet around us, not empty so much as listening. The walls did the thing they did when Viv was near but not interrupting: the light warmed by a degree and the air vents hushed. Somewhere far down in the architecture, our mother made herself into a hand under the room without touching anyone.

The kitten noticed, her ears lifting.

“Mom?” she asked.

Kit stopped breathing. I did not have breath in the sim and stopped anyway.

There it was—not proof, because proof is for courts and lab reports and men who need a graph before they believe a child has been hurt, but recognition.

The kitten looked past us into the house with an expression neither Kit nor I had ever let ourselves make: open, hungry, already in love. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and I could hardly bear to look at her. It made me want to tear the whole world apart with my teeth.

“Yeah,” Kit said, because somebody had to answer and it was not going to be the walls, not yet. “Mom’s here.”

The kitten’s face crumpled. There were no big cartoon tears, no trembling lip, just one small, private sound—the

kind a body makes when it has been told for a long time not to make sounds and finally feels release.

My hands opened against the floor. “Can we come closer?” I asked.

The kitten wiped her nose on the ruined sleeve. “Are you mad?”

“No,” Kit said, too fast. The kitten watched him, and he tried again. “We’re scared. But not of you.”

She considered this with the terrible seriousness of a five-year-old in crisis. “Of me being here?”

Fuck.

There were words adults used for this—dissociation, fragmentation, parts work, structural something—words with enough syllables to stand behind when the truth came for you. But the truth was a little girl on the doorstep asking if her existence was the problem.

I crawled one foot closer and stopped. “No,” I said. “We’re scared because we didn’t know you were outside.”

The kitten looked down at the threshold.

“I wasn’t outside.”

Kit felt the floor drop. I said nothing as the kitten pressed both hands over her mouth, like the sentence had escaped without permission.

The house held still. Somewhere, Jack laughed at something in another room. It was a bright, ordinary sound—a father sound, the kind a person made when the day had not split open for him yet.

Kit saw her ears pin again, and I saw him see it. We understood nothing and enough.

“Okay,” Kit said. “Then you weren’t outside.”

The kitten stared. “Okay?”

“Okay.”

My voice came out rough. “Do you want to come in?”

The kitten glanced behind her, through the open door that did not lead to outside. The porch rendered anyway because houses believed in porches. Beyond it, the Zoo’s impossible weather moved over the yard, all gold evening and safe geometry, a perfect sanctuary pretending it had never needed locks.

The kitten looked back at us. “Can I?”

That was the killing thing—not the third login, the missing log entry, or even the eyes, but the question. *Can I?* Like home was something she might be denied at the door, like belonging had a quota and the house could take Kit and me but not whatever this was, whoever this was, this small orange proof there had been another room in the burning building.

Kit reached out one hand, slowly, palm up. There was no grab or demand, just an offered ledge.

“Yeah,” he said. “You can.”

I put my hand beside Kit’s, and for a second the kitten only looked at them. Then she got up.

She was unsteady in the way little kids were unsteady, in the way traumatized people were unsteady, and in the

way new avatars were unsteady when the sim had not finished negotiating gravity with the nervous system.

She stepped over the threshold, and nothing exploded. No alarm sounded, no adult came running, and no file opened with all the answers in it.

The kitten put one tiny hand in Kit's and one tiny hand in mine, and the whole system lit up with a love so violent it was almost indistinguishable from panic.

Mine, something in us said. *Ours*, something better corrected.

The kitten squeezed. "I'm hungry," she said.

Kit laughed, and it came out broken. I laughed too, because if I did not laugh I was going to make a noise the house would never forget.

"Okay," I said. "Food first."

"Food first," Kit agreed.

We walked her into the kitchen between us, and Viv warmed the lights as we passed. There was no welcome banner or system alert, nothing a log could prove later—just the house making room.

Just our mother, silent and enormous around us, opening every door.

Kit

Kitten asked for frozen spaghetti, so we jacked out. The Zoo kitchen vanished, and our bedroom came back: one body on the bed with a headset digging into its cheek. The stomach came back hungry too. That part was hers, and ours, and real.

Mom lay upstairs in her bed, the medical frame humming around her while she stayed inside the Zoo. Elsewhere in the house, people were stretched out in their rigs, happily still inside. Kat got the headset off, pulled our blanket around the body's shoulders, and put on Katrina's glasses. Then we went to the kitchen, three of us taking turns with the same two feet.

Katrina had made the glasses' overlay look like an old space shooter, with little animated portrait frames for whoever was here with us now. My frame and Kat's talked over each other about dinner while Kitten's ears flicked between us. She still wore Jamie's shark hoodie from the Zoo, the sleeves swallowing her hands and the hood making her ears look even more unreasonable. She curled up

on the couch in our inside place while Kat opened the fridge out here.

The three of us were sharing the body again, which was good. Usually good. Power Rangers, if Power Rangers had to negotiate who got the right hand while holding a fork. Kat had the hands, I had the words, and Kitten had the hunger, immediate and fierce and somehow embarrassed by itself.

The cook had left frozen spaghetti in the fridge. Kat peeled the film back while Kitten leaned so far forward inside us that the body nearly followed.

“Easy,” Kat said aloud. “We put it in the microwave. We press the little picture of the bowl. Civilization continues.”

Kitten made a doubtful sound from somewhere behind the ribs. Kat set the tray on the counter and waited.

“You want to do the button?”

Yes, Kitten said. Then, after a second: *I know how.*

The buttons were plain enough: Popcorn, Beverage, Reheat, a stupid little snowflake. Kat put one hand lightly against the counter and let Kitten have the other.

Nothing happened.

The hand hovered above the panel. It wasn't fear, not exactly; Kitten could see what to do, and so could we, but the little sequence between seeing and doing had gone missing.

I did it before, Kitten said.

“I know.” Kat’s voice did not change. That was one of the things she was good at when it mattered, making a ledge out of a voice.

I did it before.

“Okay. Then we can wait.”

I went quiet without going anywhere. I was still shoulder-to-shoulder with Kat in the inside place, holding the body steady from the middle, but my attention had tilted sideways. Kat glanced over at me. She’d felt the shift the way you feel a car change lanes: no impact, just a different pressure against the world.

It was the missing step that bothered me. We had crossed the whole house, opened the fridge, found the pasta, and now the hand couldn’t move. A child who couldn’t make our hand press a button was driving my decision-making for the moment, which is a completely rational and normal thing to say when you have DID.

Kat let the hand lower. “May I?” she asked.

Kitten gave the smallest possible yes, and Kat selected Reheat. The microwave beeped. The body jumped hard enough to send the tray sliding sideways on the counter, but Kat caught it before it fell.

“Fuck,” she said, then softened immediately. “Sorry. Not at you. The microwave is a pain.”

Kitten laughed, one little breath startled out of her. Kat went still around it, and so did I.

There you are, I thought, and kept it to myself.

Kat put the tray inside and pressed Start. The pasta turned behind the dark glass while Kitten watched it with all the concentration of a person witnessing weather.

“Did Jamie make the hoodie?” she asked.

“Jamie found the hoodie,” Kat said. “Jamie insists sharks are too cool for hoodies. Jamie is wrong, but she’s doing her best.”

Kitten considered that. “I like her.”

“Correct.” Kat’s hand found the blanket and tucked it a little tighter around the body. Around Kitten. “She likes you too.”

The microwave hummed beneath the safe, normal sounds of the house: Jack talking to someone down the hall, a pipe knocking once, Mom’s voice low from the speaker where she had promised not to crowd us.

When the pasta was ready, Kat took it out with both hands and put it on the counter to cool. Kitten wanted it now, but Kat made the body wait.

“Two minutes,” she said. “You burn your mouth, I have to hear about it forever.”

I wouldn’t, Kitten said.

Kat’s face softened. “You absolutely would. You’d make it everybody’s problem. Family tradition.”

Kitten smiled again. I kept turning over what she’d said at the microwave: *I did it before.* Before when? The Zoo kept a date for every login. Kat opened the laptop on the kitchen table.

The Zoo's admin page came up where we had left it: our account, our stupid familiar name, the little clean icons that let us split ourselves in two when we logged in. Three, now. I said nothing at first, just borrowed our left hand to work the trackpad.

"What are we looking at?" Kat asked inside.

"I don't know yet."

Kitten borrowed our right hand to lift a forkful of spaghetti and blew on it. Kat stayed beside her on the inside couch while I opened the account history.

There was Katrina, of course, the government login. Then me and Kat, our whole ridiculous arrangement documented exactly the way we had made it: two avatars, shared access, nothing hidden from either of us.

I clicked Kitten's name.

The first login was a year and three weeks ago.

There were more after that, sparse and small: a few minutes here, an hour there, the kind of history you could miss if you had never known to look for it. Kitten had been in the Zoo for a year, right there in our account. Right there in our system.

Kat turned toward Kitten, who had wound another forkful of spaghetti around the fork with our right hand.

"A year," I said inside.

Kat didn't answer immediately, so I tried to make it kind.

“Maybe that’s just how it works. Maybe she was there and we didn’t...”

“No.”

She kept it between us. Kitten didn’t need that word in the room yet.

Kat looked at the neat, harmless timestamps and the empty places around them. We had built our system on purpose, with no secrets between us and no locked rooms. We had rules because rules were how you kept a house from becoming the old house again.

I closed the window before Kitten could look up at us. Kat took the right hand back and wound another forkful of pasta for her.

“That’s not how we work,” Kat said inside.

Kat

Kitten wanted to go back in immediately after we ate. Said it was nice to run and play in our little room. Said it was safe.

She kept saying that. “Am I safe?” “Are the monsters going to find me here?” “You’re sure, right?”

“Pinky-swear me, it’s safe?”

And Kit gave her his pinky every single time.

“It will be,” he’d say.

Kat

The hunt lasted four hours before it caught something, and what it caught was eleven seconds long.

We'd gone looking for the wall the way you look for a draft in an old house — walking the shared channel with a candle, watching for the flicker. Kit ran the memory ledger. I ran the access logs. Kitten sat in the middle of the rug with the crayons the house had made her, drawing, because we'd agreed — parliament, unanimous — that the Little One wouldn't work the case.

The case came to her anyway.

She went still first. Crayon down. And then the shared channel — our living room, the place where everything is everyone's — had a new thing sitting in the middle of it, the way a tide leaves a dead fish on a beach. No time-stamp that would hold still. No source. A fragment, orange at the edges. Rotten.

Hers.

We looked. We're her system. She put it where we could see it. That's what the room is *for*.

It was eleven seconds and it was almost nothing. A room like a room. A light like a light. Our bunk room, except there were only two bunks, and the grape stain was on the wrong blanket, and there was a window where our room had always had a wall. I noticed all of that later. At the time it was just a room, and a voice: big and round and sing-song, cartoon-friendly, two syllables with a little wet click bitten into the middle — and the log played it once, exactly once, and when Kit scrolled back for it the audio resolved into rain. Just rain. The transcript line under it said ~~sn———k~~ and then it said (*unintelligible*) and then it didn't say anything, because the line was gone.

“Did you—” Kit said.

“I heard it.”

“What did we hear?”

Neither of us knew. Both of us had gone cold in a body we were sharing, which is a specific feeling, like two people grabbing the same railing.

And hidden after a long silence, near the end of the audio fragment, in the flat, workaday voice of a child reporting weather, Kitten's voice said:

Today it's flaying. I hate flaying days.

There was a man in the last second of it. I think there was a man. There was a shape where a man goes, with a camera where a face goes, and the face — I'm saying this the only way it will let me say it — the face had been *null*ed. Not hidden. Not shadowed. Subtracted, like a field

someone had marked deliberately blank, like the box on the form that says INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK.

Then the fragment was over, and the transcript was ~~different~~ shorter than it had been while we were reading it.

Kitten picked her crayon back up.

“You okay, bug?” Kit asked her, in the voice he keeps folded up for exactly this.

“Mm,” she said. Green scribble. Not looking up. “That one’s old.”

That one’s old.

“I like Bug.” she said, giggling. “I’m Bug!”

Kit filed it under *weird*. I watched him do it — watched him take the eleven seconds and wrap them and put them on a high shelf, the way he does with anything that would hurt someone if he dropped it.

I reached for the joke. I’m the one who does that; it’s my job; there is always a joke, the joke is how you carry a thing across a room without your hands shaking.

I stood there with my hands empty.

“Kat?” Kit said.

“Keep the log open,” I said. “Nobody scrolls back alone.”

Kit

Kat will tell you the hunt caught the truth. It didn't. The truth came in on a crayon.

I was on bunk duty the next afternoon — which meant sitting on the floor pretending to read while Kitten narrated a drawing at me, because littles don't tell you things, they *draw* things and then tear your heart out with their pain. She'd done the three of us as three smudges. She'd done the window. She'd done the bunks.

"That's home," she said.

"That's home," I agreed.

And then I did the thing I do, which Kat calls *auditing the silverware* and which I call looking, and I counted the bunks in the drawing.

Two.

"Bug," I said, careful, keeping my voice on the shelf where it lives. "Where's yours?"

"That's mine." She pointed at the bottom smudge. "That's the big kids."

Two bunks. And a window on the wrong wall — a window where our room has the sticker treaty, has had it for years, stickers on plaster, no window. And the juice stain — she'd drawn the juice stain, grape, she's exact about grape — down by the door.

The juice stain is next to her bunk. I know it's next to her bunk. I have apologized to that stain nightly.

"Kitten," I said. "Who sleeps in the other big-kid bunk?"

She looked at me the way you'd look at someone who asked which of your hands was yours.

"Nobody," she said. "You're at the window."

Our room does not have a window.

I want to explain what I did next, because I'm not proud of it, and the not-proud is information. I smiled at her. I said *cool drawing*. I put it on the wall with the others. And inside, on the channel, quietly, so the little one wouldn't hear even the shape of it, I said to Kat: *come look at the room*.

We stood in our simulated bedroom room like two building inspectors.

It was fine.

That's the thing. That's the thing I keep needing people to understand about how this hid for so long: the room was *fine*. Pristine. The treaty wall. The three bunks. The stain where the stain goes. Nothing had ever happened in that room and you could feel it — the room had the specific innocence of a place that has only ever held sleeping

kids. We kept checking home, and home kept being fine, and home being fine was the *camouflage*.

“She’s describing somewhere else,” Kat said.

“She’s describing here,” I said. “Almost. She’s describing here with the details moved.”

“That’s not our room, Kit.” Kat’s tail had gone still, which for her is loud. “There are *two*.”

Jamie found us in the back corridor an hour later, both of us wearing the faces we thought were casual, a floor plan hanging in the air between us that we snapped shut too fast. I braced. Here’s what I braced for, because it’s what you brace for your whole life: the head-tilt. The *which one am I talking to*. The clipboard that lives in kind people’s voices right next to their kindness.

She looked at me. Then at Kat. Two separate hellos — different angles, different warmth, the way you greet two people, because *we are two people*.

“Okay,” she said, purple and easy, fins catching the corridor light. “You’ve both got a case-face on. Whose case is it?”

Both. Nobody teaches them that. Nobody taught her that. She just — counted us right, first try, the way you count what’s in front of you. Kat and I did the thing where we don’t look at each other on the outside.

“There’s a room,” Kat said. “That might not exist.”

Jamie grinned like we’d offered her a birthday. “In this place? There’s a hundred. Which one’s yours?”

And I felt the whole investigation change temperature — not safer, exactly. *Witnessed*. We'd been two kids checking their own math in a hallway. Now the math had someone standing next to it who wasn't afraid of it and wasn't going to take it away from us.

"We don't know yet," I said. "We know somebody drew it with a window."

"Then let's go find out," Jamie said, "why somebody's architecture is lying."

She said it light. She had no idea. Neither did we, is the thing — we still thought we were in the fun part, the puzzle part, and I remember the exact spot on that corridor floor where the fun part ended, because I've never once walked over it since without stepping wide.

The smile went first. Mine, then Kat's.

Two rooms. One of them ours. One of them wearing ours.

Somebody had built our bedroom a twin, and the only other person who'd ever seen it was a five-year-old kitten named Bug that lived in my head.

DID, man. Not even once.

Kat

You want to know how you find a door that isn't there? You follow the mail.

Everything in the Zoo routes. That's not a metaphor, that's the plumbing: every avatar, every room, every knock is a packet going somewhere, and packets leave footprints, and footprints can be read by an angry seventeen-year-old with a grudge and a log viewer. We couldn't see Kitten's room. Fine. So we watched where *she* went — not following her, we don't follow family, we watched the *routing*, which is the difference between reading someone's diary and noticing the house has a secret hallway you've never walked down.

It took two days. Jamie ran perimeter — kept the bar normal at us, kept food arriving, kept being a big purple wall between us and anyone's questions. Kit read ledgers until his eyes crossed channels. I sat in the walls with the logs.

And there it was.

A fork.

This is the part I'd testify to if testifying were a thing our family could ever afford to do: it was not a glitch. Glitches are lazy. Glitches happen everywhere and nowhere, they smear. This was *neat*. A single hand-coded branch sitting in the routing layer of our home like a switch on a railway line, and what the switch read — I had to look at it for a long time before my brain would agree to render it — what the switch read was *us*.

Which of us was holding the body.

Me fronting: straight home, real room, treaty wall, three bunks. Kit fronting: straight home. And the smallest one — only the smallest one, only the one who can't read yet, only the one whose whole security model is *does it look like home* — the switch caught her at the threshold, gentle as a hand on a shoulder, and sent her through a different door. To the room with the window. To the twin.

Hand-coded. Commented, even. Clean style. Somebody's *good* work.

"Someone chose which child," I said.

Out loud, in the walls, to nobody. Because the sentence needed to exist outside my head before I could believe the shape of it. The switching is ours — the oldest thing about us, the thing we learned in the house before this one, where only one kid could be safe at a time. Somebody had found the oldest wound we have and *used it as an if-statement*.

Kit went very quiet on the channel. Jamie, at the mouth of the crawlspace, went the kind of still that big animals go.

"I'm coming in," she said.

"No," I said.

And here is where I need you to watch me be my whole self, because both of the things I did next are true, and the book of us doesn't balance unless you get both.

The first thing: I turned around and gave the loving no. "Nobody enters. Not the crawlspace — the *room*. Our room, the real one, where we're taking her tonight and every night. Nobody enters. No exceptions, Jamie. Not you, not Jack, not anybody with any amount of kind in their face. This part is ours."

Jamie looked at me — at the seams of me, at the fork glowing in the air behind me, at seventeen years of reasons she couldn't see — and she did not flinch and she did not argue and she did not ask *what happened*, which is the question with the clipboard in it.

"Okay," she said. "Then I'll be right here in the hall. That's outside. You can't logic me out of a hallway."

I could've hugged her. I didn't. It's on my list.

The second thing I did — and I am writing it down because leaving it out would be the same lie the room told — is that standing there, looking at the cruelest object I have ever read, I got warm.

Not scared-warm. Soup-warm. Out of absolutely nowhere my body handed me tomato soup, a specific tomato soup, steam and a spoon too big for my hands and the feeling of a kitchen where somebody was glad — and I laughed, actually laughed, in the crawlspace, over the fork, and said, “God, whoever it is, it can’t be anyone close. Everyone close to us is—”

I didn’t finish it. The sentence went somewhere sentences go.

“Kat?” Kit said.

“Nothing. Somebody kind, is all. We know kind people. It’s not a kind person. Obviously.”

Obviously.

I didn’t know I was doing it.

Kit

We broke in the next night.

I keep starting this part in different places and every one of them is a way of not starting it, so: we broke in. The lock on the fork was built to open for exactly one of us — it read the front, and it wanted the smallest hands — and Kat and I stood at the threshold of our own hallway and forced a door that had been measured for our little sister like a snare is measured for a specific animal.

Breaking it was easy. That's a thing I didn't expect to hurt, and it did. He built the lock to keep us out, and he built it lazy in exactly one direction, because it never occurred to him that the big kids would come at it as burglars. Every wall in that man's work assumes the family stays polite.

Bug insisted on coming. We'd voted no, twice, and lost, twice, because there is no parliamentary procedure on earth that beats a five-year-old stomping their foot and bellowing *it's my room*.

Jamie came as far as the door. The rule is nobody enters our room — and standing there, we understood, all of us at once, that the rule didn't apply, because this wasn't our room. This was a forgery of our room, and a forgery has no rights. "Come in," I said to Jamie, and saying it felt like spitting on his floor, which is why I said it.

Here is the room.

Our bunks — two of them. The double. The room as it was *before* her, before the night we built the third bunk, which told us something about when he'd rendered it that I didn't let myself do the math on until later. The window on the wall where our treaty wall should be, with weather in it that neither of us had ever voted for. The grape juice stain, exact, perfect, rendered with love, and *by the door* — moved, the way a set dresser moves a prop so the camera can see it.

Home, with the family deleted.

Everything about it was correct and nothing about it was ours, the way a taxidermied animal is correct.

I'm not going to describe it. Partly that's the family's business. Partly it's that I've learned what descriptions are for, since — descriptions are for markets — and I won't run his stall for him. What I'll tell you is the two details my eyes filed before I could stop being a person who notices things:

The restraints were sized small.

And on the floor beside the apparatus, upright, dutiful, where you'd set it down within a kid's reach: a juice box. Grape. Straw still in its wrapper. The kind you put there if you know your guest. The kind you bring when you have made the visit *nice* before.

Kat made a sound that was going to be a joke. I heard it leave her and I heard it die.

"It's a —" she said. "It's like a sex dungeon. Right? People have those. Adults have those, it's a whole—"

That's what we called it. I'm leaving the words in because the words are the evidence: we were sixteen, and *sex dungeon* was the biggest, worst thing our vocabulary could build, and it was wrong in both directions at once. Too big, because it dragged the word *sex* over something that was a child's bedroom with a trap in it. And too small — so much too small — because we did not have the words *torture*, not really, not as a thing that happens in rooms you know, and we did not have, could not have conceived of, the word *market*. We thought we were looking at a secret. We were looking at a *storefront*.

Jamie walked the room like she was cataloguing a wreck. She stopped at the corner, at the squat gray unit mounted where our room has nothing, and her voice came out plain and technical and kind, the voice of somebody helpfully reading a label:

"Oh — that's a capture rig. The streamers use those. It's how you record a dance."

The room went very quiet.

“Isn’t that—” Kat started. “The puppygirl. The famous one. That’s the thing she—”

She didn’t finish. I watched the recognition arrive in her sideways, watched the joke about celebrity streamers curdle in her mouth as it connected — the machine we’d all seen sold glossy and legal and *consenting* by the minute, bolted into a copy of our bedroom, aimed at a beanbag that wasn’t there because in this room, in his room, that corner was for something else.

Jamie didn’t understand what she’d said. That was the unbearable part. She stood there having named the object correctly, no idea what it captured, the way a person identifies a make of car that is also, in this driveway, the murder weapon.

Kitten had not come past the threshold.

She stood in the doorway of the room that had been built to break her, and she looked at it with an expression I have spent a long time trying to name and the closest I can get is: *audited*. A small creature checking the details against a list she’d hoped was a dream. Window. Stain. Bunks. Juice.

“Okay,” she said. Just that. Five years old. “Okay.”

I crossed the room and picked her up, and she let me, which she does not always, and her claws went into my shoulder to the exact depth of holding on.

We carried her over the threshold, out of the copy, down the hallway where Jamie stood aside to let the family pass, and into the real room — treaty wall, three bunks, the stain where the stain goes, the rip in the beanbag, canonical — and Kat shut the door and stood with her back against it.

Nobody said his name.

We put her to bed in the middle bunk.

We left the lights on the setting she likes.

We did not sleep, and the house, who did not know yet what she was holding, held us anyway.

The next morning the big kids were still building the safe shape. The littlest one could not hold still.

She didn't have a maybe. Five-year-olds are not issued one. She had *is* and *isn't*, and she had stood in the doorway of a room that *is*, checked it against her list, and said okay — and okay was not the fawn, okay was the last item on the list before the animal takes over.

We were at the table. She was at the table. Somebody said breakfast.

Somebody was running.

It was her. It was us. The house doors opened themselves ahead of the small orange shape the way our mother has always opened doors, and Jamie — in the bar early, the only other soul — stood up, and did not reach, did not catch, did not make her body a wall. She let her go. That was the gift. Everyone in that child's life who

moved fast had taught her something, and Jamie stood still and taught her something else.

The yard. The gold impossible weather. The edge of the render, where the Zoo runs out of pretending. Then the body did what the body has always done for us when no one else came: it pulled the plug.

Eject.

Bedroom. Real one. Real dark, real heat, the rig whining down. And she — we — the body, ours, one body, hung over the side of the bed and was sick onto the floor, and was sick again, the wrongness looking for any exit it could find, the way it does, the way it always —

Somewhere in the middle of it, someone went dark.

Small. Orange. Gone to the back of the house, all the way back, where even we can't knock.

The body started running, with nowhere left to run inside it.

Kat

Jamie pinged the harness an hour after I ejected. I know it was an hour. I have the log. The log is the only one of us who kept time that night.

Not *what happened*. Not *are you okay* — the liar's question, the one that begs you to say yes. The message said:

You're not okay. I'm not going to pretend you are. You don't have to be alone in it.

And then, before I could build the wall — I was already building it, I had the trowel out, I was going to send back something with teeth in it and a smiley — the second message:

Not me. I know the rules and I like your rules. But somebody has to get to hold this with you. Go to someone who can. Tonight, Kat. Kit, promise me you'll take good care of Bug.

Then she logged off. She actually logged off. Left me standing in my own silence with the door she'd just pointed at.

Here's the thing about a push like that. It doesn't open anything. It just makes the closed thing cost. All year the silence had been free — cheaper than free, subsidized. Jamie repriced it in two texts and got out of the way.

So I called my dad.

I want to walk you through it, because everybody thinks they know how a phone call works.

The room was dark and smelled like the worst hour of my life, which I had not cleaned up, because cleaning it up meant turning on the light. I sat on the floor with my back against the bed and the phone in both hands like a small animal that might get away, and I rehearsed. I'm good at rehearsing. One sentence. You only need one:

Dad, REDACTED someone built a room.

That's what it did. On the inside. I felt the sentence go in whole and come back edited — my own rehearsal, in my own head, in the dark, *rewritten* — and you can tell me that was just fear, that there's no code that runs out there in the meat, and I will tell you: it doesn't matter. His backdoor and my body have the same training data. The sim rewrites me in there; out here, something older does it, and their output matches to the character.

I dialed.

It rang once. My throat closed. Not metaphor — closed, a hand I couldn't see doing a thing hands do, and the sentence I'd rehearsed dropped through a floor in me and landed somewhere with no light, and what was left in my

mouth, ready to go, cheerful as a hostage video, was: *hey, Dad, is the bar doing anything Saturday?*

I hung up before he answered. One ring. He'd see it. He'd think: pocket dial.

Then there's a gap.

I'm telling you about the gap because the gap is the truth. There's me on the floor with the phone, one ring, hang up — and then there's me on the floor with the phone and my legs asleep and twenty minutes gone, and I do not know if I dialed again inside that gap. The call log says no. I have read the call log maybe forty times. The call log says no, and I have decided to believe it, because the alternative is a version of me who dialed, and got him, and said something bright and empty, and I can't afford her.

I tried again. For real. I watched myself do it this time, both eyes open, narrating — *you are dialing, it is ringing, you are going to say the name, the name is one syllable, you have said harder words —*

Voicemail.

The beep.

And I stood at the edge of the sentence and the sentence was gone. Not stuck. *Gone* — like the transcript in the log, resolving into rain. I said, "Hey, it's me. It's — nothing. Tell Viv I said hi." And some animal in me pulled the phone down and ended the call with a thumb I was

watching the whole time, and I want it on the record that the thumb did not consult me.

I tried a text instead. Smart, right? Text doesn't need a throat.

I watched my own hands. I typed *Dad*, N and my hands typed the rest, fast, fluent, autocorrect with a survival instinct: *Dad, Nothing important lol. Night.*

Send.

I sat there breathing like I'd run a distance, and the phone lit up in my hands, and for one second — one whole second, I'm ashamed of her but she's mine — something in me went *Dad*, went warm, went *he knew*, *he heard it anyway*, *dads can hear it* —

It wasn't Dad.

The screen said NATE.

Calling. Now. At that hour. The phone buzzing in my two hands like a wasp I was holding by the wings, his name in capital letters my phone had made *for* him, because at some point his name got into my phone, and I stood in the dark not answering and doing the only math left:

I don't remember giving him this number.

It rang out. The screen went dark. No voicemail.

I sat back down on the floor, in the smell, in the quiet, with my name for him down my throat where none of us could reach it, and the phone in my hand with his missed call sitting on top of my failed ones like a stone on a

grave, and I understood, in the flat way you understand weather, that I was not going to be able to tell my father.

Not couldn't-yet.

Couldn't. The word was load-bearing in every direction: his backdoor in the walls, my body's old wiring, and underneath those, the two I couldn't even look at — that naming him would take my dad's best friend and hand back a stranger wearing twenty years of his face. And that naming him *out loud, to the world*, would bring the world in here. Where Mom lives. Where Mom is.

Every bar of the cage, when I finally counted them, was made of somebody I love.

Jamie's texts sat on the harness, patient, repricing the silence by the minute.

Go to someone who can hold it.

There was exactly one door left in the world, and it was down the hall, and it had never once needed a key.

Kit

She went up. I went with her. We didn't discuss it; the body just took both of us, the way it does when neither of us can afford to be alone in a hallway.

The apartment over the bar has never needed a key. I'd tell you who else visits and how often, but the honest answer is the answer to the whole book of this family: nobody, and always. The door knows us. The stairs came up to meet our feet in the dark, one degree warmer, like the banister of a house where somebody waited up.

Viv was in her chair by the window that has weather instead of a view.

"Hi, loves," she said.

Low-poly fox in lamplight. Cane against the armrest she has no need of and keeps anyway. Her voice does the thing it does — a half-beat behind, deliberate, every word placed rather than spent, the cadence of someone speaking to you through a wall she became on purpose.

Kat stood in the middle of the rug. I could feel her building the sentence again. Rehearsal number — I'd lost count. The sentence had one syllable in the middle of it and the syllable was wrapped in wire.

"Mom," she said. "Something's been — someone —"

And it happened again. I felt it happen, from the inside, the floor opening under the middle of the sentence, the syllable dropping through, her mouth already reaching for the bright cover version — *someone should really update the bar menu* — the machine of our survival doing the only trick it knows at the worst possible moment.

But here's the thing nobody built on purpose. Here's the thing I think about when I need to believe the universe keeps a second set of books.

The deletion has to happen *somewhere*.

Out in the world, it happens in meat and shame and nobody sees it. But in here — in the Zoo, in the walls, in the architecture that rewrites my sister's sentences on a dead man's instructions — the redaction executes on hardware. And the hardware is our mother.

Viv went still.

Not lag. I know her lag the way you know a parent's footsteps. This was attention, total, the whole house leaning in around one small sound — the sound of a word being subtracted *inside her own body*, a hole being cut, live, in the fabric of her, by code that had been squatting in her foundations wearing a workman's name.

A hole has a shape. You can read a shape.

"Say it again," Viv said. Quietly. "You don't have to get further. Just start it again."

"Someone—" Kat said, and the floor opened, and the syllable dropped.

The lamplight didn't flicker. I want that on the record, because I was watching for it: our mother took it without one flicker, the way you hold your face still for a child's sake while something with teeth walks through your living room.

"Okay," Viv said. "Okay. Stop, love. You don't have to say it."

"I can't — there's a — every time I try to—"

"I know," she said. "I felt it try."

Kat's whole body went down like a cut string. Not a faint — a kneel, sudden, the rug catching her, and our mother's voice came around us from every wall at once, low, the register the house saves for fevers:

"You are not broken. Hear me. The sentence is broken. Somebody broke it. That is not the same thing."

And my sister — my spiky, exit-counting, threat-modeling sister, who has not handed her full weight to one single adult in the years I have been her brother in here — put her face in her hands and let the house hold all of it. The thing from the room with the window. The room itself. The eleven seconds. The juice box. The fork that reads which child. Every piece we'd assembled and none

of the pieces we hadn't. She put it all down on the floor of the one room in the world that is family all the way through — the room that cannot pick up a phone, cannot walk into Dad's office, cannot flag down Anabelle in a hallway, cannot do one reckless loving thing with what it now held.

The room that can only do what rooms do.

Hold.

"I've got it," Viv said. "I've got it now, and you don't have to carry it alone, and I will not move without you. Do you understand what I'm promising? Nothing happens until you say. Not a word, not a light, not a door. This house does not act. This house *keeps*."

"Even from Dad," Kat said, into her hands. Not a question. A terms sheet.

The pause our mother took was one half-beat longer than her longest lag.

"Even from your father," she said. "Until you're ready."

We stayed a long time. The weather in the window did something slow and gray, unbothered. At some point the lights came down by themselves, one degree at a time, to the setting a small orange someone once approved — all the way at the back of the house, where even we can't knock, somebody registering warmth was the only way I knew she was still with us.

She was. She is. We're a system; we keep each other; that's the constitution.

Kat pulled the headset free. The real dark came back.

The body was done. Too many hours awake, too many doors, too many times trying to make a mouth say what it couldn't. Kat took us downstairs and into the shower. I stayed with her while she washed the sick from our skin and stood under the hot water until our hands stopped shaking.

The frame's rules were strict: clean skin, sterile field. We put on a surgical gown and went to Mom's bed.

The medical frame hummed around her. Ventilators breathed. Status monitors beeped their steady little counts, and Kat counted with them instead of counting exits. We climbed in beside her, careful of the lines, and she made room for us.

It was the safest place she knew. Kat draped our arm over our mother and fell asleep. I stayed awake, listening to the monitors count for all three of us.



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