

FICTION JUNE 14, 2021 ISSUE

# FOSTER

By Bryan Washington

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Photograph by Neil Winokur for The New Yorker



*Audio: Bryan Washington reads.*

He isn't any kind of cat that I've ever seen. The paws look like something out of a storybook. And his fur shines an IKEA-bag blue. Some Googling tells me this means he's a shorthair, maybe—but my older brother's letter just called him a stray.

You have that in common, my brother wrote.

It'll give you two something to talk about, he wrote.

So that's what I think of him as: a fucking stray.

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A woman I can't responsibly call my brother's girlfriend dropped the cat off at my apartment in Montrose. Literally tossed him on the sidewalk. She didn't wait for me to stumble outside before she drove off. There was a crumpled note, along with a food dispenser, and then this cat in his box. I let him stew there while I hauled everything into my place, folding myself into the sofa to squint at my brother's cursive.

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Bryan Washington on the narratives we fear.

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We were born four years apart. Hadn't spoken in six. He'd been in prison for three. He'd killed someone, accidentally, in a hit-and-run. But he'd shot another person before he was caught for that.

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My brother's instructions were simple: feed the cat twice a day, and give him plenty of water. Keep him away from open doors. The cat could be left on his own for an infinite amount of time. The cat had three siblings, apparently, and they'd been given suitable homes elsewhere, but at the very last minute the fourth home had fallen through. Which made me the cat's final resort.

If he had thumbs, my brother wrote, we wouldn't need you.

•

Calling us estranged gives our relationship more formality than I prefer—like most of my family, my brother and I simply don't talk. And then, homicide. Every first of the month, I send some cash from

my shitty assistant's stipend at the university. For months, I didn't know if my brother actually received it.

Then, one time, I sent the money a few days late. My mom called to ask me what the fucking holdup was.

•

The cat looms from the corner of my apartment. He prances on his toes. He arches his back. The cat leaps onto the kitchenette counter, across the dried-up flour and the takeout chopsticks and the loose tea bags, scattering my shit every which way. My brother's cat could be four years old, or four hundred and sixty-seven.

Sometimes he makes a face, as if to smile—except I know that it isn't a smile.

Which makes it something far more sinister.

And then he laughs.

•

Owen reminds me that the cat doesn't have a name. This is after he makes it back to my apartment from the gig at his father's dental practice, but before a bout of fucking in which neither of us manages to come.

It's been happening for a while. Or not happening. We'd cycled through our usual positions, moving from room to room, in and out of socks, on and off appliances. Then, eventually, after we settled onto the couch, Owen sighed loudly, smiling and patting me on the head, and called the cat out from the closet he'd hidden in.

My brother's cat still hasn't said much to me. But he meows and the rest with Owen. They lie together on the couch, while the cat massages Owen's belly. I'd forgotten to give him water, and he punished me with a screech.

Tough crowd, Owen says. But he's a cutie.

You've never called me that, I say.

You're more handsome. Mr. Masc.

I'd rather be cute.

Well, Owen says, squeezing the cat's ears.

It's been a few days since we've seen each other. Between my job at the university and Owen's out in Pearland, we barely manage a routine beyond weekends and the occasional midnight quickie. A few weeks back, Owen broached the subject of his moving in—once, and then once again. I made the appropriate grunt, which he told me wouldn't hold up on a lease.

But I made him a copy of my key anyway.

He lost it a few days later.

Now Owen pedals his legs in the air, with his ass on my ear, and the cat reaches for his thighs, ignoring me entirely.

So you've just been calling him cat, Owen says.

Mr. Cat, I say. Excuse you.

Monsieur Chat, Owen says.

Herr Katze.

Señor Gato.

Cat-san.

Your big brother didn't think to tell you his beloved's title?

He can be a little careless, I say. But it doesn't matter. This is temporary.

These cheeks aren't temporary, Owen says, holding the cat in front of my face.

Don't get attached, I say.

So Owen sighs, and the cat on his belly sighs, too.

•

We met online. That Web site no longer exists. The first thing Owen told me, before he penetrated me, after we'd eaten entirely too much pasta and paid far too much for it, was that we'd never get married. He'd tried that already. The day after he'd graduated from dentistry school, his parents paired him off with another dentist's daughter. They'd stuck it out for a year and change, but it hadn't worked, for the obvious reason.

Owen's ex-wife didn't hold it against him, though. She was queer, too. Their families had been strategic. Both of them needed an heir, preferably with a dick, and Owen swore that he'd never live down the shame of failing to provide one.

This was where I came in.

We'd form our own sort of family.

When Owen asked if I'd be up for that, at first I didn't say much.

Then I said, Fuck it. Why not.

•

But here is the truth: sometimes family doesn't last.

Owen knows this as well as I do.

If he can crash into my life, then he might, eventually, run out.

And I don't need that.

It's one thing to be alone, and another to be thrust back into loneliness.

•

The next morning, before work, Owen and I try fucking again.

I slip myself between him, and he rolls on top of me, nearly flipping us. After rocking back and forth for a minute or two, Owen sighs, and I do, too.

Any luck, he asks.

Maybe next time, I say.

We capsize onto the rug.

Afterward, in the shower, I scrub his back.

You should name him, Owen says.

Who, I say.

Really?

I'm kidding, I say. But it's not my place.

Then ask your brother for his blessing.

We don't really talk.

Is that your fault or his?

Doesn't matter, because there's nothing there anyway. No honesty.

Seems like he trusts you a shit ton, Owen says, spinning around, draping his towel around my neck, sticking a finger inside me until I yelp and pull it out.

My brother's cat paws at the bathroom door beside us. It sounds like knocking, low and insistent.

Determined.

Fine, I say. We'll call him Taku.

That's incredibly specific, Owen says.

I knew a Taku and he was kind to me.

An ex, Owen says.

I squeeze my wet towel above him, soaking his shoulders. He wipes soap from his eyes, flicking it into mine.

Whatever, Owen says. I'd have named him Bean.

Too late, I say.

This is why you aren't cute, Owen says, pinching my nose—and then the two of us jump at a clattering beside us. Taku stands on the other side of the shower glass. He's rammed his way into the bathroom. And now my brother's cat knocks on the shower door, wailing at the two of us.

If I'm honest, it sounds a little bit like a warning.

•

One year, when we were teens, I taught my brother how to drive our mother's stick shift. He'd never bothered to learn, and then his Corolla had been rear-ended. After our mom attempted to instruct him for a solid week, the same way she'd taught me, she called it quits, so I sat with him on a nothing evening to try figuring it out.

We parked in this strip mall in Alief, beside a sex shop and a day care and a bún-bò-Huế restaurant. My brother tensed his fists as the engine spasmed beneath us.

Stop rushing, I said.

Nobody's fucking rushing, my brother said.

Then why are we stalling? This isn't that fucking hard.

Clearly. If *you* know how to do it.

But here we are.

Maybe you and Mom are shit instructors.

Most folks minded their business, but white passersby stared as we inched through the parking lot. I always waved at them. My brother just scowled.

Eventually, we switched places. I took the two of us to a drive-through for dinner. And my brother told me, in between mouthfuls of Whataburger and fries, that he didn't want to learn after all; he would rather be driven.

It's too much, he said. Kids. Cops. These fucking cracker parents that suddenly appear in the street.

I told him that was fine. But knowing was better than not knowing.

My brother cocked his head at me, frowning.

Not always, he said.

Then he split the rest of his burger in half, offering it up.

•

Now I want to tell my brother that he was right: maybe it isn't always better to know.

I spend thirty minutes looking for a pen.

Taku watches me write the letter, snarling from the doorway. I add a few lines about him.

I put the letter in an envelope and stick the envelope in a book under the bed.

Then I stick that book inside another, larger book, and shove it even farther back, against the wall, brushing up against every other letter I've never sent.

•

The university I work at stands a few miles from midtown, in the Third Ward, a neighborhood that has all but refused to be gentrified. Instead of flipping the houses lining its dorms, the college constructed a light rail. It cuts right through the subdivisions. My brother manned the register at a pawnshop in the neighborhood, but for the three years he was employed there we managed not to run into each other.

I work as an assistant, along with Angel, another assistant, for a white woman who never sets foot on campus. She's always touring for a self-help book on how not to be racist that sold like two million copies. As her assistants, we spend most of the day answering her e-mails, declining shit she's been invited to or haggling over her rates.

In the middle of drafting an answer to one of those e-mails, I tell Angel that I've gotten a cat. She looks up at me for the first time that day, wincing.



You look more like a gerbil man, she says.

What the fuck does that mean, I say.

That you're fucking unreliable, Angel says, reaching across me for the stapler.

Angel speaks five languages fluently. She served in the Peace Corps. She worked for a congressman for a while, and then a senator, and then the mayor. I have a degree in Japanese that I extracted from the university. But, after a year abroad when I'd failed to produce any research, my supervisor told me, gently, that this was the only job available if I wanted to keep my insurance.

My husband had a cat for a while, Angel says.

I thought you were done with men, I say.

That hasn't changed.

Most people would say "ex-husband."

There's more mystery in "had."

Did the cat die, I ask.

No, Angel says. Even better. He ran away. Must've seen trouble before I did.

Did it make you sad?

The cat or the sperm donor?

Whichever you mourned the longest, I say.

Barry was a good listening buddy, Angel says. Always knew what to say.

I ask if that's the man or the cat, and Angel simply smiles.

Then I sneeze a bit. Angel gives me a look, before she tosses the tissue box at my face, and, when she asks for my cat's name, I tell her.

Mm, Angel says, squinting. But do me a favor.

Yeah?

Your fucking job, Angel says, turning back to her desk.

•

Taku adjusts quickly to his new arrangement. I live in a one-bedroom, but I can never seem to find him. I look up once and he's smelling some plant. I look up again and he's disappeared.

My biggest worry is Taku's escaping. It was the one thing my brother warned me about.

One night, after I accidentally leave the window open, Taku sleeps directly in front of it.

Another evening, Taku throws himself against the door. I jump up to see if he'll do it again, but he does not.

One day, I trip over Taku, and he yells like a grown fucking man. Then he sighs, shaking his head, turning on his tail and leaping away.

One day, Taku boxes his food bowl across the floor, staring me in the face—and so begin the days of Taku knocking things over. Taku knocks saltshakers across the kitchen counter. He knocks dictionaries off the bookshelf. He knocks phone chargers off my nightstand. Whenever I snatch him up, he hisses, only to launch himself across another surface two minutes later.

One day, I spot him hovering by the toilet, leering, but then never again.

Mostly, he nestles himself in piles of clothes, hiding under Owen's hoodies and socks and boxers.

He suns under the windows in the living room.

He creeps beneath the sink.

Taku tries to make a bed out of my mattress, but after I shoo him off he folds himself under the bed frame.

I can't reach him there. And Taku knows that. My brother's cat watches me straining, flexing my fingers toward his fur.

•

A week later, I ask Owen if pets pick up shitty habits from their owners. We've just finished fucking—or at least trying to—and now he's grinding coffee by the counter while I fill up a bong.

The day before, Owen's father prostrated himself before his son, for the third time in a year, begging him to take a wife. Everything would be forgiven. Owen tells me this as he stirs cream into his cup, sipping from it, squinting.

Too sweet, he says.

You're the one that made it, I say.

Anyway, Owen says. I guess it's like living with a kid, after a while.

But he's a cat.

So you're a cat dad.

He's my brother's, I say. And my brother couldn't stand kids.

People change, Owen says.

I've never seen someone change their mind about that.

I did, Owen says. But maybe we're overthinking it. Maybe you're just a new source of food and shelter.

I don't think Maslow's hierarchy applies to Taku.

You're really never going to tell me why you named him that, Owen says.

I pass him the bong. Owen leans across the kitchen counter, trading me coffee. We're both naked, perched on our toes, and Taku dawdles on the floor by his food bowl, eyeing us.

Then he jumps onto the counter. He glares at me, tilting his head. But Owen scoops him into his arms, taking care to blow the smoke above his head, cradling Taku and cooing his name, like a son he hasn't seen in years.

•

The next morning, the coughing starts.

It wakes me up first, and then Owen. Taku creaks from his corner, slowly, and then loudly. His body shakes every time. We watch him, waiting for it to end.

Is this normal, I ask.

Does that shit sound normal to you, Owen says.

You're a fucking doctor.

For teeth.

The coughing continues. Taku jolts every time. Eventually, Owen steps over and cradles him on the mattress, between the two of us.

When I put my hand on Taku's back, he stiffens. But not before shaking, just as violently, again.

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Owen has an in with a vet in the Heights. We show up to her office, with Taku in his crate, and find ourselves waiting beside a woman and her two parrots, both of whom are whispering, Bitch.

A white dude with a puppy stands in line with his daughter. The man keeps telling his dog to sit, and the daughter keeps saying that their dog doesn't know how to do that. The puppy follows their argument, whipping his head from speaker to speaker.

Eventually, he settles his gaze on us. Taku hisses at him. And the vet, Mia, appears, waving us in.

She massages Taku, checking his heartbeat and his temperature. She opens his mouth. Closes it. Flat on the table, Taku looks less exhausted than annoyed.

What's his birthday again, Mia asks Owen.

Oh, Owen says. I'm not the owner.

I don't know, I say.

Phenomenal, Mia says. Do you have contact with the actual owner?

Not really.

So you're fostering?

Yeah, I say. You could say that.

Well, Mia says, meeting my eyes. Good for you.

It could be something mild, she says, but he's getting up there. So we'll have to keep an eye on it.

She takes out her card, and scribbles a number on the side of it.

They'll set you up with meds out front, Mia says. Call if it gets worse.

We will, Owen says.

I meant him, Mia says, pointing at me.

•

Another memory of my brother: we're on a trip to Kemah. Our mother's driving us, with a friend, and their voices are hushed the entire ride from Houston. No one has a good answer for where our father is. I ask once, and then once again, before my mom asks me to please shut the fuck up.

My brother makes the face he pulls when he's about to punch a hole in the wall. Our mother's friend gives us a look, turning around from the passenger seat. Like she feels sorry for us.

We go to a restaurant hawking five-dollar shrimp sandwiches. My mother leaves my brother and me at a table by the pier, taking her friend inside to order. When they don't come back, I tell my brother that I'm leaving, for just a moment, and he nods, staring out at the bay. But when I step inside I spot them at the bar: they're leaning on each other, drinking and sobbing.

When a waitress asks if I need help, I don't say anything. I just nod.

When I start walking back to the table, my brother's still sitting there. Still staring. I wonder what he sees, and why.

Before I can figure it out, his eyes find mine. He waves.

•

Owen and I rarely go out. And we aren't much for gay bars. We've both, to varying degrees, exhausted the scope of local possibilities. Owen likes to say that it feels like he's fucked every kind of person, and seen every kind of come face, and snorted all of the drugs, so he'd rather just stay home.

I've always wanted to ask him whose home he meant.

But I never do.

Now we're lying on the sofa, covered with a blanket, our feet entangled, eating takeout jjajangmyeon with Taku lying on the rug underneath us. An hour ago, after thirty minutes of pumping and winding on the mattress, the two of us finally managed to climax. Afterward, Owen guffawed, asking if this meant we'd reached a landmark, and I told him to calm down—except, honestly, I wondered, too.

The cat still coughs in spurts, wincing. But he seems less surprised by the tremors. He looks even older, if anything.

He seems a bit better, Owen says.

Maybe, I say. But I'm hardly here during the day. It could ebb and flow.

We'll do the best we can, then, Owen says. I can check in on him, if that makes things easier.

I don't think it's that serious.

Maybe that's the problem.

You say that like we're some kind of family, I say.

Don't do that, Owen says, propping himself up on his shoulder.

I'm just saying. It's not like we're married.

This makes Owen quiet. Then he stands up, launching the blanket, and paces.

What, I say.

You're a dick, Owen says.

And you're being fucking unreasonable, I say. Fucking overreacting.

Right. Says the one who ghosts at the slightest inconvenience.

If you want a family that badly, I say, then maybe you should listen to your dad.

I regret it the moment the words come out of my mouth.

But Owen nods. Then he grins.

He walks to the other end of the apartment, and then down the hallway, dragging a gym bag. As the front door slams behind him, Taku jumps again and glares at me.

•

A joke my brother sent me after his first month upstate: how long did the judge sentence Goldilocks for stealing from the three bears?

I wrote down an answer and put it in an envelope.

Then I tore up that envelope and wrote another answer.

Then I threw away that answer. I put a new answer on a sticky note.

The next week, the sticky note sat on my fridge. It sat there for a year before I threw it away.

•

At work, I tell Angel that Taku's sick. We're sorting through piles of the white woman's invoices.

So that's what has you glum, Angel says.

It's that obvious?

No, Angel says. You never talk about how you're doing.

I watch her fold sheets of paper in front of me, creasing them seamlessly, checking everything twice.

I think I may have fucked something up, I say. A good thing.

Yeah?

Yeah. Someone was only trying to be kind to me. And I hurt them.

Because you were scared of getting hurt yourself, Angel says.

What an innovative observation.

Fuck you, guy.

You're right, I say. Sorry.

It's fine, Angel says. But there are only so many reasons. That sounds like yours.

We sit, crossing our legs. I pass another sheet to Angel, and she logs it in her ledger, sorting the documents into piles.

That's a foolish way to live, though, she says. You might not get hurt. But you'll waste time. That's something I learned the hard way.

From your ex?

Shit, no. God forbid I learn anything from a nigga.

Sorry.

*This* time you should be, Angel says. But I'm not wrong.

I believe you, I say.

You better, Angel says, tossing a set of papers in my face.

•



One night, about a decade ago, I came out to my brother. He'd brought me to a bar by his place that didn't check for I.D.s. We sat on the patio, under an awning, and it drizzled softly enough above us that we could pick out each tiny patter. My brother took a sip from his bottle, and then he looked at the sky.

I don't get it, he said.

What, I said.

That. The gay thing. It's fine, I guess. But I don't understand it.

There's nothing to understand.

But here you are, trying to explain it.

That's not what I'm doing, I said. It's just a thing that is. This is me trusting you.

Well, my brother said. It's your life.

I didn't know what to say after that. So I said nothing. My brother stood up for another beer. When he came back, he started talking about something else entirely.

When I left him that evening, I opened an app, and messaged twenty different boxes across the grid. Four of them responded. I went to their places, and we fucked, and I left them one after another. We didn't use protection. The last guy, in the middle of it, asked why I was crying, and I told him nothing was wrong, that everything was perfectly fine, that him being there was more than good enough.

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Owen doesn't come back the next night.

Or the next one.

A few nights later, Taku starts sleeping on my chest. He creeps up slowly, inching a paw toward me. When I finally lift him, he makes a face. But he doesn't resist, splaying across me and shutting his eyes.

So I tell the cat, with my hand on his back, about where his name came from.

I'd been working in Kyoto as an exchange research assistant. I lived with a host family, or I lived in their home, because the day after I landed in Japan they packed up for Fukuoka. Which left me alone, in a new apartment, in a new country. But they had a neighbor who lived by himself, and we started seeing each other walk home in the evenings.

He'd wave, and I'd wave. Sometimes we stopped to talk. One evening, we spotted each other at the train station, and realized that we took the same route. He asked if I wanted to grab a beer, and I didn't have a reason to say no.

After that, we got dinner together every few days. And then drinks every other night. I spoke to him in my choppy Japanese, and he told jokes in perfect English. He was an office worker, a year older than me, and his big hobby was photography—on weekends, I tagged along on his trips around Kansai, where he took photos of shrines all over the region. He never visited my host family's home, and I never set foot in his. He never asked if I had a wife, or a girlfriend, and I never saw him with a woman. We spoke about the future in vague terms, never quite alluding to our prospects concretely. But it seemed like I could live this way indefinitely. One night, walking back from a convenience store, he said I'd become the person he spent the most time with, and I told him that couldn't be true, and he smiled but he didn't reply.

Another weekend, he asked if I'd ever stayed in a ryokan, and the next afternoon we checked in to a tiny building just across the city. The staff looked at us before shrugging and leading us to our room, which was centuries old. We spent the evening alternating between the bath and a sitting room beside it, eating soba in the empty common area before collapsing on the futon in our room for bed. Taku had, inevitably, drunk too much: half awake, hiccupping, he asked where I'd been all his life. It wasn't long before he began to snore, and I lay beside him while he did that, tracing lines on the mattress between us. The next morning, I woke up to him smiling in my face. He asked if I knew that I snored like a pig.

The very next week, I was informed that my position at the university was being eliminated. My supervisor told me this with a frown, throwing up his hands. There wasn't anything he could do about it. If I wasn't working or studying in the country, then I couldn't stay. The department booked me a ticket back to Texas, and gave me a few days to pack.

I remember the face that Taku made when I told him. We were drinking at our usual bar. It stood just off the tourist route, and it was almost always empty except for the bartender, an older woman who Taku swore made the best fried tofu I'd ever have in my life. Neither of us said anything for a while.

Eventually, Taku shrugged. He said that it was what it was.

Then he asked if I wanted to see something, and he stood up, throwing bills down for the tab.

We walked for what felt like hours, drinking beer after beer from vending machines, until I followed Taku to the roof of a building and he showed me a stash of fireworks.

Boxes sat stacked on boxes. He'd been collecting them for years. I told him it was pretty fucking strange, and Taku agreed, and we laughed all over each other, grabbing at the railing to steady ourselves.

We lit the fireworks one by one, watching them explode above us.

He asked if he could take my picture, and I said that was fine. My eyes were shut in the one he showed me. When I offered to let him take another, he told me he loved this one.

•

Mia calls the next morning. Taku's ears flutter, just a bit, when I answer the phone.

What's new, she asks.

We're both still here, I say.

Good. Then the worst should've passed.

Yeah?

Yeah. An owner knows their pets best, though, so keep an eye on him.

I start to remind her that I'm not the owner. But I just thank her instead.

Please, Mia says. I'm getting paid for this.

And besides, she says, you three look cute together.

•

A while back, my brother was closing up at the pawnshop when a white guy walked in and pulled out a gun. The man was a regular at the business. He was friendly with the staff. The area was no stranger to robberies, but my brother's co-workers usually brushed this guy off, making small talk and sending him home, since he was simply too high.

But this time the white guy was irate. He waved the gun at my brother. My brother raised his hands to calm the mood between them, but then this man pointed his gun. My brother reached in the drawer by the register, for the shop's handgun, and the white guy shot at my brother and he missed but my brother shot back and he did not miss and this white man clutched his chest while he bled out on the floor and he cried a little bit before he died.

The first thing my brother did was call our mother. She told him to call the police from the shop. The next thing my brother did was call his manager, who told him that the shop was the last place he needed to be.

My brother grabbed his keys. He walked to his car, pulling out of the lot. He was only a few blocks from his apartment when he hit a white kid crossing the road on his way home from band practice.

In a letter he sent me later, my brother wrote, You're not just who you think you are, but you're who everyone else sees, too.

You're all of those things, my brother wrote. At the same time. Forever.

•

I wake up on the sofa around five in the morning, and Taku's snoring on the floor beside me. His breath rattles, just a bit, but it's steady. So I take the letters I've written my brother and I walk them to the mailbox a few blocks away.

Traffic's already started up on Westheimer. The construction workers are on the job, and when a few of them nod my way I nod back. There's a mist that settles over Montrose, but I know where I'm walking, even if I can't see. That's hardly true most of the time.

Walking home, a few blocks from the complex, I see my apartment door standing wide open.

I must not have locked it.

And then I'm sprinting, for the first time in years.

I stumble through the doorway, and the first thing I see is Owen, on the sofa. On his bare thigh, Taku nestles his head. The cat's body rises and falls, and Owen wraps his arm around him.

Oh, I say. You found your key.

Seems like I did, Owen says.

You could've called.

Taku doesn't have a cell.

Listen, I say.

You don't need to apologize now, Owen says.

But—

I said "now," Owen says. Don't worry, it'll happen. But the story will be the same after we get some sleep.

I can't fucking imagine sleeping now, I say.

Why not, Owen says, and I look at him, and I think about this.

I really don't have a reason.

Or maybe those reasons were just excuses. And the excuses have changed.

Sometimes they do that.

So I sit beside the two of them. I put my head on Owen's shoulder, looking down at the cat.

Taku peeks at us, before he closes his eyes, snorting.

But then he opens them again.

And he purrs.

•

The last time I saw my brother was the night before I left for Kyoto: he met me at a tiny diner downtown for waffles. He was coming from his job, and I waited for him on the curb. The sky bled purple above me. There weren't many cars on the road.

When my brother finally arrived, he smelled like liquor. I asked what had happened, and he shrugged me off, smiling. He told me that sometimes things just come up. I said that I knew what he meant.

I ordered for the two of us. My brother told me that he was happy to see me, it'd been so long. And when the waiter brought our food my brother suddenly nodded off. Just like that.

I sat there eating while he slept in front of me. Snoring over his plate. And I told my brother about my day. I told him about my fears for the trip. I told my brother that I didn't know why I was going. And I told him I didn't know when I'd be coming back.

Eventually, our waiter dropped by the table. My brother blinked himself awake. He asked how I was doing, and I told him I was fine.

Outside, on the curb, my brother asked if I wanted a cigarette. It'd started to rain. He started laughing, calling our dinner the best meal he'd had in months.

It was the warmest I'd ever seen my brother. But it felt like I was the older one, like I was the oldest person who'd ever lived.

Then my brother asked if I wanted to meet him for dinner again next week.

I blinked at him a few times.

And I told him that was fine. I said I'd see him wherever. I asked him to let me know what day worked best for him. ♦

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*Bryan Washington is the author of the story collection "Lot" and the novel "Memorial."*

Cookies Settings