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Distance

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Abstract

The only way to kill the fleas, Mama said, is to pinch them between your fingers and drown them in soapy water.

"If it's just plain tap, they swim to the rim and escape," she said. "If ther's soap, it gets in their lungs and it's all over."

Keywords

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“If it’s just plain tap, they swim to the rim and escape,” she said. “If there’s soap, it gets in their lungs and it’s all over.”

I love animals. I love animals so much I brought home a pair of cats last year from the shelter. Mama loves animals, too. She grew up hosing dairy cows and picking ticks off her daddy’s hunting hounds. That’s love, if you ask me. We never had any pets because my sister Juniper is allergic. But now, Junie’s at school three states away, and as long as I love my cats, which will be forever, they’ll live here with me and Mama.

The cats make me mad, sometimes. Junie told me we can all learn from the things that hurt us. And I learn so much from those cats. Their lessons are less complicated than the ones Junie teaches me. I’ve learned the armrest of our sofa is made of solid wood; that bleach should never, ever be used to clean up cat pee. The cats are far easier to love than the fleas. I am still trying to learn from the fleas. I am still trying to love them.

Certainly, the fleas love each other. Damned if you can’t hear the female fleas and the male fleas getting to know each other. There’s so much love in this house I ache from it. So every morning before I go to the animal shelter I sit and breathe in front of the Buddha statue Junie gave me last summer from her trip to India. It’s there the fleas greet me. Their bites make me look like I got the pox and I’m glad I’m done with high school because I don’t want to hear what everyone else has to say about it.



Junie's been real nice to me ever since she went away to school. Last summer, she sat with me in front of Buddha and showed me how to close my eyes and breathe.

"It will make you calm," she said. "Return to your breath; you'll find tranquility." I want to be calm like Junie. I want to be tranquil, too, and sometimes I think of her when I sit in front of Buddha. Sometimes I pretend she's attached a secret camera to him, and so I wear lipstick before I sit down, so I look good, and I try not to slap myself when the fleas bite. I can see her: she should be doing homework, but no, she's watching her big sister on a big screen TV in the lobby of her dorm with all her friends to see if I'm breathing right, to see if I deny love to an animal by hitting a flea. Mama and I dropped her off at college ourselves, and I'd never seen such a huge TV. It would embarrass me, personally, to watch someone I knew on TV like that. But in case any of Junie's friends are boys, I sometimes pull a pillowcase over Buddha when I undress. I try to follow Mama's orders and, these days, I give it up for no one. Not even on college TV.

Junie told me once at breakfast that I might as well go on and deep-fry the cats if I did not extend my love for animals to the pig who died for my bacon. Mama fries the bacon hard because I ask her to. There's no need to pick through the pile for the good ones if they're all crispy. To eat bacon, Junie said, is not to love all animals, because the pig died for you.

"Isn't tasting good his job?" I'd said. But I knew even then, before I'd made my full commitment to loving all animals, that I was stalling. I ate the whole plate that day, on account it was Christmas, but I haven't eaten bacon since, at least not when anyone's around, which is hardly ever. Mama keeps a close watch on me. I still think appreciating the pig you eat is a kind of love, too. Like the same way we love Jesus because he died on the cross. But

I keep this thought to myself because I don't think it's one Junie would appreciate. And we don't even go to church anymore. And I still have to figure out how to love all animals. That's why I visit the shelter: these are animals I can love. They're always friendly. Their tails wag. Not like the fleas, whose bodies are built like clamshells, or sesame seeds with legs. Some days, I sit in front of the Buddha, or in front of the bathroom mirror and I'll feel the pinch. My right hand stops the left, mid-stroke, and I think, Stop the killing! You are not a battlefield!

But I am a battlefield. I am. Most days, I think about Junie watching me on TV and I let the fleas eat me up. She says it's karma, some cosmic debt, like maybe in another life I was a dog, and I upturned a pullcart of oranges in Tunisia, and all those oranges came back as fleas. Other days, it's all I can do to not pinch one between my finger and thumb, like Mama said, and drown it in one of the dishes of soapy water she's set about the house. I tried it once, had that bugger in my fingers, but I couldn't put it in the dish. How's that for an animal lover?

I wrote this in a letter to Junie at college, and she called and told me everyone needed to think more like me.

"I love the extent of your love," she said, "but don't let it scare you."

I'm not scared of anything. I just want to learn how to love all animals by finding a way to love the fleas. Sitting in front of Buddha helps. Sitting in this bathtub helps. Mama added a capful of bubbles for me so I'll smell pretty after. And the fleas don't drown, either. I can see them leaping from my hair for dry land. I asked Junie when she'll come home next, and she said she's not sure. She told me sometimes you need distance to be able to love something fully.

