

Cats Have Padded Feet

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When he was seven he used to beat up on his sister. Sure, she was older, but he was bigger, and that was what mattered. He would pin her down on the floor, his knees pressed to her elbows, and would crush her blonde head against the linoleum tiles with the heel of his hand. He got used to her screams.

His dad had just bought a brand new car; it had turbo action. How fast could it go? Zero to seventy in seven seconds was what the salesman had said. What the hell, he'd find out for sure. Which had moved, the car or the tree? All he knew was a fifteen foot pine was in his lap.

He'd barely been able to climb the cold, cement stairs that led to the enormous oak doors. He stumbled into the church. The pews reminded him of the rows of toy soldiers he played with when he was little. He focused on the draped Christ figure above the altar, his blood-stained hands were nailed to the cross. His eyes met the statue's. He thought he saw it move. He blinked.

He could hear his parents' voices inside his head—you have to get good grades so you can get into a good college. B's aren't good enough, you need to get A's. Who cares, anyway? So he gets a B in Marriage and the Family. He's never going to get married anyway. Commitment? Kids? Hell no, then he'd be a parent.

He once convinced his sister to eat an entire bottle of

Flintstone vitamins; he told her they were candy. He brought her a bunch of dandelions when he visited her in the hospital.

The crisp, autumn air filled his lungs, much like the smoke he inhaled when he tried pot in the fifth grade. His feet hit the moist ground and the soil provided resistance to his stride. The leaves had turned colors and the red and yellow landscape was breathtaking. There wasn't any feeling in the world to equal to this high.

They were little rich kids with time on their hands. They had dad's car and a case of Old Milwaukee in the trunk. What more could they ask for? Fucking idiots.

He walked into the small confessional. He bent his knees into the soft cushion and faced the dirty screen in front of him. A dim light filtered through the mesh window. Forgive me father for I have sinned...

On the way to school, he and Jordie drank Bloody Marys out of a thermos bottle jammed between the cushions of the front seat. They even stuck in a stalk of celery from the fridge. The alcohol would still be in effect until fourth period. Then it was time for a lunch date with Jack Daniels.

He was very popular; everyone wanted to be seen with the president of the senior class. Besides, he'd spend money on them, anything they wanted. All he had to do was pull his strings, he was like a puppet. Anne was captain of the cheer-leading squad. They dated three weeks and decided they were bored and should date other people. He went to Marcos Island for Christmas break; the day he left she hopped in the hot tub with another guy.

The party was well under way. Beer bottles littered the yard. A flashing strobe light danced across the picture window. The guys were talking in the front seat about the football game last weekend. They didn't see the guy step off the curb. Jesus Christ, they were going to hit him. The driver caught a glimpse of the guy in the corner of his eye and jerked the steering wheel. But it wasn't fast enough. The tires crushed bones. The car made a quick right and his head hit against the back window, crashing into the glass. He didn't feel it.

The other night he had the strangest dream. Fish swam out of a glass aquarium and flew through the air. Their large, elongated bodies resembled eels.

Anne's birthday was the weekend he got back. Her new boyfriend bought her a \$3 bottle of wine. He would have bought her diamond earrings. He and a friend crashed the party. They stole the bottle of wine and drank it on the way back to the car. It was like drinking water after the bottle of vodka they had just finished.

One time he locked his sister and himself in the trunk of their car while their parents were shopping. It was a hatchback and he thought he could get the divider open. After all, he had done it before. It was dark and the air was heavy as carbon dioxide replaced the oxygen.

He watched the nuns go to vespers. He stared at the white rosaries wound tightly around their clasped hands. He wondered if they wore clothes under their habits. He made it a point to find out someday.

He couldn't understand everyone else's paranoia. The Novacaine, the drill, the shower of fillings, he liked it. His hygienist was in her mid-twenties with long, flowing blonde hair and legs that didn't quit. He could see himself in her tortoise-rimmed glasses when he laid back in the chair. He had eaten a half a bag of Oreo cookies on the way over; this was going to be a nice, long visit.

It's difficult to wake up after a Gin and Tonic nightcap. But without it he couldn't get to sleep. His father pinched his toes to get a reaction. Goosebumps ran up and down his body; his skin looked like a cold dead chicken. A Diet Coke and Benson and Hedges; what a way to start the day.

The car ran into a ditch. He rolled it back and forth to try to jar it loose. It wasn't working. He had an idea. He threw his brand new track letter jacket on the ground behind the rear right wheel. Shreds of blue cloth flew behind the car as he pressed the accelerator. He took it to the dry cleaners the next day to be fixed.

He couldn't understand. Why him? He decided that God hated him... and he hated Him back. Easter was three weeks away; they asked him to do the Sunday reading. He accepted. "And they spat on Him and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head. And after they had mocked Him, they took His robe off and put his garments on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him..."

The cops were close now. The driver turned down a dimly lit street and into a driveway. As they left the car, the most pressing issue on their minds was whether or not to take the cooler of beer with them. They decided to leave it and ran toward a wooded area. Jordie fell face down in

the wet leaves. They tried to move him. It was no use, he had passed out and there lay 145 pounds of dead weight. Sirens screamed. They had to leave him.

He checked his mailbox on the way up to his room. He received what sounded like a death threat from Rolling Stone. They claimed that he hadn't paid his bill. Bruce Springsteen pays his bills, why shouldn't he?

Mary, one of the school's counselors, had taken a special interest in him. He was good looking, after all. Maybe she thought so, maybe she was the same way in high school, maybe she felt sorry for him. It didn't matter. He wondered what she would be like in bed. She had to be better than the sluts he usually slept with. What was the last one's name? He didn't know.

He used to rip the arms off his sister's Barbie dolls. He'd pour ketchup on the joints so it looked like real blood. Once, he left his Spiderman hanging naked on his sister's vanity mirror. She screamed.

He and the guys went camping for spring break their senior year. Mom didn't trust them in Florida. They went to the campground and drove Jordie's truck through the mud, the tires spun on the slick surface. For dinner they cooked two pounds of hamburger, marinated in beer.

He was going to burn in hell, that's what they told him. Jimmy Swaggart cheated on his wife. Who cares?

They made it back to the dorm. Once in the room they crashed on the couch and broke out the Scotch. Christ, they had done it. Just then the cops stormed the room.

College was supposed to make him smarter, right? It did. He found that if he took No-Doze he could stay up longer and drink more. A bright light shone in his eyes and gave the room a harsh glow. The cold table beneath his skin sent chills up and down him. He felt like hell. He could hear the doctor talking to the nurse, "good thing they found him when they did...if we hadn't pumped his stomach..." The lights went out.

When he was six he cut all the whiskers off the right side of his cat's face. The cat walked around in circles for hours. His mom had to cut the other side of whiskers off so the cat would regain stability. He also held the cat above the dining room table, about one foot above the oak surface, and dropped it upside down. It did, in fact, land right side up. He surmised that that was why cats have padded feet.

He took a trip to Chicago. He rode the elevator to the top of the John Hancock Building, fastest elevators in the world. Once there he could see the entire city. The air outside was frigid and the warmer lake water had caused clouds to form over it in a halo. He signed the guest book and looked at the preceding pages. Hassem Hakin-Israel. The next one caught his eye. Harold Washington-I live. It was dated a week after the funeral.

His favorite color was black. Why wasn't it one of the colors of the rainbow? Leprechauns must not like black.

He was at the police station. Should he use his real name or make one up? Who really cares? This guy didn't even look like a cop. Where was Don Johnson? He was alone at the desk; he shuffled through the papers. Nothing

interesting. In the top drawer he found some keys. He picked them up. The metal was cold in his hands. Christ, what was he thinking? As if he wasn't in enough trouble.

On his sister's thirteenth birthday he gave her a very special present. He gathered them from a nearby tree. They were everywhere. He gently placed them in a brown paper sack. Plop! The first one had sounded. They were still a little green, with a soft fuzz covering them. He dumped them down the front of her shirt— thirty caterpillars with little, black suction cups for feet.