

Emily, the Strange

by [Anonymous]

PROMPT #3: Looking through old family photos, multiple generations back, you notice there is a cat in almost every group photo. The same cat — color and pattern: the cat that is currently purring on your lap.

Today I am rummaging through the boxes in the attic. My cat comes up behind me and purrs, rubbing her head and body against my lower back, since I am squatting in front of a box. I reach into the shadowy pit inside the cardboard and pull out picture frames. All sizes, all dusty. Beneath the frames I discover photos, and being much more interesting than their enclosures, I shift my attention to them. I browse the photographs at a steady pace, giving each a few seconds of shallow inspection before moving on to the next. Gradually, however, I begin to notice an eerie similarity, an uncomfortable and icky aspect shared among all pictures: the cat. A cat that looks sickeningly similar to the one rubbing against my calf.

I stand up and pull up a chair that was exiled here due to the purchase of a new set of furniture. I sit, and stare at these confusing images. The same spotted cat in every picture, with achingly light eyes. Eyes that stare into my funky, gunky soul every morning that I wake up. She sleeps next to me, you see, so she witnesses my rise out of bed, religiously. Misty mornings are my favorite, since they darken my room and brighten her face. It is as if those icy, feline eyes captured all the light in the world and reflected it back to me; to my hollow eyes. Almost unreal in her beauty, explaining this cat's allure is beyond words. She takes a cute leap, lands on my lap, and purrs. I believe that I feel the purring; through my legs, the purr travels through my nerves and arrives at my brain, where I make sense of it. This weight on my limbs, however, feels ever so strange. Dead weight restricting the movement of my legs, and a foreign murmur frightening my muscles. I am unsure that this is how being at the receiving end of a purr feels like; for this buzzing feels almost mechanical. I am suddenly unable to recall memories of how this moment is supposed to feel, and simply sit silently. Mute, bewildered.

I look once more at the photographs that I hold with my hands, and they return my gaze, cunningly. I'm not sure what happened to the papers that were just in my hands, just a moment ago. I was holding the pictures with the people and the cats, felt their crusty edges

between my fingers— but these are so blurry. The cat, however, is still sort of similar. There are spots— yes, spots and tails and eyes. No grand similarities between them and this one, though. Just tails and eyes, just some cats. Abruptly, the robotic whirring of the animal stops: I dread it has become aware of my dubious feelings toward it. I tried to hide my skepticism regarding the nature of the being on my lap, but I guess it seeped right through my cracks. Fear not, however, for this mysterious presence is not a threat to me anymore. Furthermore, there is no way that it is the same cat as in the pictures; for there is no cat on my lap, but a rag doll. I let out a profound sigh of relief, and lean back on the chair.

Now, I am afraid that I let my guard down far too soon. The rag doll shifts position, and I am nauseated. I feel the onset of a nightmare thoroughly descend upon me when I am unable to recognize the people in the photos. I see no faces, just humanoid figures. Upon a reluctant closer inspection, to my dismay, I realize that they are all cats; no human in sight. A sick, sick joke.

My stomach caves when I understand that the only way to escape this horrid dream is to destroy the object that started it all. I will now cut through the rag doll's throat, to make sure it is not an impostor who is only taking this deceitful shape to make me doubt my own sanity. I make the fatal cut: on my hands, warm goo. I feel the hot liquid on my thighs, liquifying my pants, making them stick to my skin. So dark, so dark. I feel fear. Why is this ragdoll bleeding all over the floor, over my body? The pictures regain their original qualities; the humans return and the cats that once shared similarities in all of these pictures, I now realize, are no more than stains on the sepia-toned images; proof that the years do pass. No cats there, and no cat here. The soft, wet fur sticks to my murderous hands. How will I ever live? I feel a knot in my throat, all gummed up inside, and a sob escapes my chest. My shaking body can't restrain these guttural howls, big sadness fills my eyes and spills. I didn't want this, didn't mean for this to happen. How will I ever live?