



Life Never Takes What You Want It To

by **Arabella Sarver**

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.

I'd never known quite how heavy the weight of paper was, until the weathered photographs sifted through my inhospitable palms. Each square had weakened over the years, until casual folds had become rifts of white splitting faces and houses into uneven fragments. The rounded edges had yellowed and light splotches of tea had discolored the contrasts of the photos. They'd spent the past six years taped shut in a cardboard shoebox, amused by the dancing shadows of darkness and light that had filled my sister's living room. Perhaps she'd stuffed them under the worn couch my uncle had purchased for her wedding intentionally, or, more likely, the box had floated through our family until some obscure cousin had left them at her home, a stale aftertaste of an unpleasant reunion.

The cat had been the one to alert me to the box. We'd all doled out the hard parts of grief - the cleaning out of the house, the receiving of friends - amongst my mother, my two brothers, and I. It had been my responsibility to enter the house, armed with cleaning sprays and trash bags, and erase the memory that Evie had ever existed in such a pallid space. I'd developed an unpopular habit of being rather antisocial around my family and carried a disdain for the sweaty hugs, the smell of old flesh, and unappetizing meal trains that characterized Southern death; so, the choice was natural. Only Rey, a temperamental Spinx, had protested my retreat spent at Evie's.

A proper guest, I'd respectfully offered one of Evie's organic cat treats to the unsightly lump of flesh and eyes, but he declined. His passions were only satisfied by stomping behind me, all screams and glares, until I would rest for a moment and let him settle into a knot on my lap. Between trips to dig at his litter, Rey had collected himself under the couch and atop the box. To me, it looked much much like he had disappeared, so I sighed out the last of my relief and adopted a clean rag to scrub fingerprints from the living room windows. Creaking beneath me was the couch, which soon began to sing out with disgruntled mews when I'd shift to clean another pain. Of course Rey hadn't disappeared; life never takes what you want it to.

Hostage to the whining of the cat and caked in a thin layer of perspiration, I humored the creature, lifting the box into my hands. No wright emerged as I shook it, so I assumed it was another pair of gaudy heels or cheap cat toys. It was only when Rey's scramble down to my lap displaced the lid that the photographs spilled out onto the stained fabric of the olive couch. There was a thought to how I sorted through them, defined more by the evocative feelings of familiar names and long, worn faces. The oldest one was a frail newspaper clipping that shook against the artificial coldness sweeping through the room. Eyes, dark like Evie's, withdrawn like mine, glimmered as a farmer rested his foot against a staked pitchfork. Beneath his feet, some sort of animal curled, furless, fat. There was an obituary attached, faded under the familiar touch of hands. It was Evie and I's great grandfather, Thomas, who had died in a farming accident.

The whole Nowack family had a habit of taking great cautions to soften tragedies. My grandmother used to extend her voice into a low wail, drawing a thin tissue to her suddenly watering eyes, at even the mention of his name. In her feigned Southern accent, she would describe the incident like this: her father, always such a klutz, had taken a tumble into a bailer. This story had been a facet of her personal tragedies, used to manipulate handouts and psychiatric medicine into her hands. Grandmother was first and foremost "practically an orphan." I appreciated the way that the article stapled to the old photo spared the theatrics: "Thomas Nowack, aged 47, passed away due to a tragic incident with a hay baylor, in the early morning of July 2. Greenwich County Police Department suspect that alcohol was the culprit; no foul play is suspected. Friends recall Nowack celebrating the harvest the night before across the county line at Henry's Bar. At the request of the family, no further investigations will be performed."

Rey had begun to loaf around the couch, making a particular effort to stomp upon as many photos as he could. I couldn't have remembered how Evie had come across him, something about inheriting him from our father, something about him being a gift from our grandmother. Thirst was easiest to blame for the rolls of fog coalescing against my thoughts, so I fished a hand into the minifridge Evie had used as a counter table. Coiling my hands around the slim neck of a cold bottle, I produced a cheap beer and popped the tab open with my keys. When we were still teenagers, she would get cross whenever I'd bum a cigarette from her pack or do shots from her bitter vodka. It was a tragic rush to remember that now, there was no way for her to catch me.

Wriggling a photo from under Rey's bulging stomach, my grandmother had again become a teenager, wrapped in an elegant gown, a crown atop her head. It took a lot to choke down my laughter; no one had known that my father was underneath all that fabric. She'd shrugged off morning sickness as a chain of particularly irritating hangovers for two months, until the bump began to show. Grandma was an insufferable woman, a spoiled child who suckled off the life insurance payments of her dead father. However, at this moment, I damn near pitied her. A gloved hand balanced the crown atop her manicured

dome of hair; her lips and eyes crinkled with genuine happiness. Positioned as though it was kissing her cheek, a bald cat was held up to her side, catching her eyes. I swiveled the picture for Rey to observe. “This one of your grandparents, too? Good to know that you keep the look of a shaved penis securely in the family line.” Unamused, he kicked another photograph at me.

It was a baby picture of my father, a red bundle with thin lips and a stubby nose. Nestled beside him in the patterned crib was the same cat from earlier, making mittens out of a nearby stuffed animal. I’d never pictured him in this way: as a child, with a mother, who had a favorite toy. There was always too much empathy in it, knowing that in twenty years, that child would have one too many and attempt to drag race a car right through an intersection. This strange infant couldn’t have been my father: there was no glass separating him from visitors, no metal phone to talk to him through, no invisible blood needed in his nails. Flicking the photograph towards Ray, I knocked back the beer beside me, fumbling for another one.

The weight of the bottle never pressed into my fingers; there was only the grit of a Polaroid, neglected in the refrigerator. It should have been jarring; but Evie had grown erratic in the last months of her life. Holding it in the dusty beam of sunlight coming in from the scrubbed window, it was the two of us, matching in puffy, pink coats, hunting Easter eggs at the local Methodist church. My father had been a patient at their recovery program, before the relapse, before the speeding car and the shattered body of an elderly woman. No, then it was just Evie and I, brandishing a red egg, giggling at the bald cat curled around her feet. Rey studied me, reclaiming his seat against the box. A demure alibi sparkled in his pale eyes, a feign of innocence.

My hands scoop under his armpits until we are face to face, trying to see who will cower first. “You did this, didn’t you? You killed my great-grandpa and his daughter and my father and now you killed my sister! You made her drink too much at that party, didn’t you! You’re the reason she passed out in an alleyway! You’re the reason no one cared about her body until morning!” It took everything in me not to channel my father’s strength and toss the cat into the stucco wall. Rey was unamused by my plea and merely interested himself in the empty bottle atop the minifridge. “And now you think you’re gonna get me, don’t you?”

It’s all too much, too frustrating, too piteous to argue with a cat. I sigh out all my frustration, until the sound of my breath overtakes his mews. My hand snaked until it yielded a chilled Budweiser, acting by a skill that had been perfected - generation after generation.

Rey looked on; I took a drink.