

The Blue Cat by Brittany Cole

My cat Jane looks like MC Hammer. She's a long-haired beaut, which means she's extra furry all over, including her hind legs, which are especially furry. My brother pointed out to me once that she looks like she's wearing baggy pants, and he remarked that he'd always wanted to get MC Hammer's autograph. Jane doesn't think this is very funny, but I do. I'm sitting on my bed watching Jane clean herself on the floor. She's mostly gray—my brother refers to her as “the blue cat” because she can look a sort of bluish gray—with a white patch on her chest like a bib. When she goes in for a really hearty lick, her breath gets caught in her throat and she sounds like she's growling. She tries so hard to be thorough, but I just don't see how licking her paw and then rubbing it on her cheek makes anything cleaner. I've never understood that about cats.

Jane finishes and jumps up on the end of the bed, looking around with wide eyes. I call to her in encouragement, and she sets down the paw she had raised in mid-step, moving a few paces closer to me. I shift my legs underneath the blankets, which stops her as she surveys where the movement came from, but I keep calling to her.

“Come here baby, it's just my legs.” I stretch my hand out to her and speak in a high-pitched voice. She can be so timid. All I want to do is cuddle with her; I know that would distract me from my anxious thoughts.

Jane's eyes shift to me and, after a moment of consideration, she continues to approach. When she is finally within reach, I stroke her head and back. She keeps walking towards me until she is standing on my thighs, purring.

I'm waiting for a phone call. My cell phone lies next to me. I usually have it set to vibrate, but right now I have it set to a ringer—as if I could possibly miss this call. My eyes keep darting back to the screen—still black.

“I'm waiting for my mom to call,” I explain to Jane. I like to keep my cat informed.

Jane begins to lower her butt to take a seat on my lap. I keep petting her. I think the movement of my hands is good for my nerves.

“I'm waiting on the news about my brother.” I glance at my phone; no call still. My hands are cold yet my palms are sweaty; I feel bad petting Jane, because I'm basically wiping my dirty hands on her “clean” head, but her soft fur is so comforting.

I begin to think about the time when my brother and I got sunglasses for Easter when I was maybe seven and he was maybe four. They were bright plastic sunglasses, mine green and my brother's orange. We wore them around the house pretending we were blind mice, using wooden croquet mallets without the heads as walking sticks. The heads of the croquet mallets were always untwisting from the sticks, and we used the sticks for things like canes and batons and toy guns. But that day, we were blind mice, walking around with our eyes closed bumping

into the wall or the couch and giggling until we collapsed into heaps on the floor. I think that was the day I almost fell down the basement stairs, but Parker yelled at me to open my eyes right before I set my foot down. It landed awkwardly on the first step, and I was able to throw my weight backwards and fall on my butt. I've sometimes wondered if he was cheating and playing with his eyes open or if he had some mystical sense I was in danger, but he says he can't remember, and either way, Mom called the game off right away. From then on we only played it when Dad was home.

I groan. "I wish she would call soon." I pet Jane with both hands now. The weightless feeling of the memory lingers with me, and I long to relive it, to laugh with my brother again, to have bright hopeful eyesight, to not be afraid of the future. I massage Jane's head with my thumbs. She closes her eyes and rocks with the movement of my hands. I long to be as clueless and content as Jane is.

I haven't moved my legs in several minutes, and they grow restless for a new position. I tuck them under me, disturbing Jane's foundation. She stands up and moves to a new spot on the bed beside me.

"She should have called by now," I sigh. I stop petting Jane. Jane settles next to me, curls into a spiral and lays her head down.

I don't want to be using my phone when my mom calls, so that I don't accidentally hang up on her, but I need to review the symptoms again. A site called "blindness.org" was the last site open on my phone's browser, and I scan the information until I'm reading *yellow flecks in the retina... decrease in color perception... 20/200 vision by age 50...* I don't understand any of it specifically, but I know it translates to a dark outlook for Parker. I frown and set my phone aside. Mom said she'd call as soon as she found out the news. I'm trying to slow my heart, but its beat is too frantic; the nerves are more than just a head-game, they're deep within me. No matter how I try to convince myself to be calm, my body won't settle down.

I start staring at the light switch next to my bedroom door, replaying in my head the last time I spoke to Parker. My brother has a way of making light of everything; before my family went in to the doctor's office for the consultation today, he had said to me on the phone, "Don't worry, sis. This might be the first test I pass." I tried to laugh, but I cried. He heard me and said, "Just take deep breaths. I'm still alive, and you're still alive. We're okay."

Suddenly I hear the notes of some wind instrument and my heart knocks the inside of my chest. I pick up my phone and hit the green button a couple times with my clammy thumb before my phone answers the call.

"How is he?" I blurt. "What did the tests say?"

“Oh, sweetie,” my mom says, voice catching, and my dad has to take the phone from her. A lump forms in my throat.

“Hey, Rachel,” Dad says.

“Is it bad?” I mumble, mouth full of saliva, which always happens when I’m about to cry.

“Well it’s not good, but it’s not all bad,” he replies, drawing out what he’s going to say. I urge him on, chanting, “Okay, okay, okay.” I bounce and nod, which makes Jane jump off the bed.

“He does have Stargardt’s disease.”

I close my eyes hard, squeezing my lips between my teeth. I suck in a harsh breath.

“But they don’t think he will completely lose his vision, at least for a while.” Dad recites some statistics to me and gives me a medical overview of the condition. I have no idea how eyeballs operate. The impersonal terminology irritates me; “macular degenerative disease” is just another way of saying “God has decided to drop my brother down a very dark hole.”

I ask Dad to hand me back to Mom.

She only cries some more though, which annoys me because I’m trying really hard not to cry. I ask if I could talk to Parker, but Mom says he’s doing a few more tests in a different room.

“Well I’m gonna get off the phone then,” I say, massaging my face with my palm. This exercise does not help my headache. “Call me if you find out anything else. And have Parker call me as soon as he’s done. And tell him I love him.” My voice drops on those last two words; I feel like I’m going to heave. I hang up before they hear me cry.

I drop the phone to my side, feeling grossly powerless. I recall a time when we were younger—Parker was in middle school, I was in high school, and we still rode the same bus. Some kid who was older than Parker but younger than me punched my brother in the face because Parker had accidentally elbowed him in the nose when he turned around. Blood from Parker’s nose gushed into his gloves while the kid who punched him bellyached about his sore face. He was such a weasel-y looking kid, this jerk who punched my brother. I only recall a silver flash of my vision before I had the kid by the jacket collar and was shouting in his face, slamming him up against the bus window repeatedly, threatening him with all the curses I knew. The weasel stood there, sobbing. “How fucking dare you! How fucking dare you touch him!” I shouted so close to his face that my spit joined with his tears. Some wrestler my age tore me away just as I had started punching the kid in the arm with every ounce of power I could muster, and when I was finally separated from him, I was so hysterical that I was shaking and crying, yelling at other kids on the bus to get some tissues for my brother, who was looking at me with giant, almost-scared eyes. I got suspended for a week. I have never felt such an angry, instinctual

reaction like that in my life. The moment was surreal. Parker was very quiet around me for the next week, he started doing favors for me at home, refilling my glass of water or offering to take out the trash for me.

I cry now because I don't have anyone to punch for him this time.

Jane jumps up on the bed again and marches right up to me, her yellow-green eyes demanding me to pet her. I sit with my arms at my sides. She sits next to me, her paw reaching out towards me, kneading mid-air. I lamely put a hand on her head.

I wonder what Parker would have done that day on the bus if I hadn't stepped in and let loose on that kid. I know Parker wouldn't have punched or cursed at him. He would have probably been better off if I stayed out of it, probably would have said some kind, insightful remark to the kid and they would have been best friends after that. Parker's like that. I should be there with them today. I should be with my parents and my brother. They live three hours away, and I should have made the car ride, said "Screw it" to my midterms—organic chemistry won't make me feel better anyway—called off work for the first time this year. But Parker swore he'd be mad at me if I dropped all that just to hear a couple sentences live in person, but now it feels like so much more than a couple sentences; it feels like I've abandoned them.

As I am sniffing, wiping my nose on my flannel sleeve, Jane lies down on my lap, folding up in what I refer to as "meatloaf" position, legs tucked beneath her. I halfheartedly pet her. She purrs nonetheless, and her eyes work shut. The beat of her purr rocks her tiny body gently back and forth. She looks so content. I close my eyes, a few remaining tears overflowing, and feel her soft fur.

My brother's eyes are pale blue, just like mine. I think about the beautiful way he sees the world, always finding the glint of humor, and I know that he is stronger than I am. He will endure. Perhaps I cry because I still don't know how to be his older sister. I feel unhinged, aimless, erratic. I just want to guide the way for him, but even after all these years, he is still the one guiding me.

The warmth from Jane's body radiates in my lap. Her purr is a steady beat for my heart to match. She turns her head up at me, eyes still closed, body softly lurching with her purr. She feels my hands petting her, purrs faster. Her warmth seeps further into me. Thinking of Parker, I reach for my car keys.