Medicine

by

Chelsea Hunt

The grandmother looked up from her work at the side of the reservoir to watch her granddaughter skip rocks into the water. The young girl’s dark hair was in a braid, one that danced in the wind that swept over the Montana plains. It was all the grandmother could do to keep the herbs from blowing into the reservoir, cupping the piles with her hands as she carefully attempted to scoop them into her medicine bag.

“What are you doing?” Ella asked her grandmother sweetly, kneeling to the ground beside her. It was a more pleasant sound to the grandmother’s ears than her son-in-law’s harsh words the night before.

The old woman wondered for a moment if what she was doing was right, as Ella’s father wanted his daughter to know nothing of her heritage, having denied his own. Yet, Ella deserved to learn about hers. To deny one’s culture, the grandmother knew, was to deny one’s self.

The grandmother smiled. “I am making medicine, Dancing Bear,” she said, using the name Ella’s mother had always used, her Ojibwa name.

“Is somebody sick?” Ella asked, her brow scrunching up.

“Everyone’s just fine,” she said, remembering how Ella had watched her mother grow sick from the cancer within, a sickness no medicine could help. “This is not the kind of medicine your father takes when his head hurts, Dancing Bear,” she added, tapping the girl’s nose with an herb stained finger to emphasize the final three syllables.

“Then what will you use it for?” she asked, reaching down to sift piles of herbs between her fingers. The grandmother’s hands were too occupied with closing her medicine bag to stop her granddaughter from blowing some sage from one pile into the wind.

“You, your father, and I need peace and harmony. This will help.” The grandmother turned away, unable to look into her granddaughter’s warm, brown eyes. Instead, she chose to focus on a particular spot of the reservoir where the water was rippling. She couldn’t bring herself to tell the little girl the truth, couldn’t bring herself to say, “Your father is quite unbalanced.”

The grandmother frowned, looking down at the intermingling piles, her efforts at protecting them failed. She knew Ella obviously did not understand, being only eight. Silence crept through the trees as the grandmother began her work with a second medicine bag.

“Can I help?” Ella asked, proving that, despite whatever Ella’s father had led the old woman to believe, Ella was not completely desensitized to the natural world, the world of her tribal elders. The grandmother nodded, recognizing the eager look in Ella’s eyes.

“Ma would want us to do this, wouldn’t she?” Ella asked as she filled her own bag.

“Your mother would, Dancing Bear,” said the old woman. Gathering the filled medicine bags and helping her granddaughter to a standing position, they heard a splash behind them that made them turn. Three rainbow trout were leaping toward the blue sky.

Walking hand in hand, grandmother and granddaughter headed up the path. “Will you teach me more medicine?” the little girl asked, looking up at the old woman as if she had just opened a door to a whole new world for her.

The grandmother smiled wider than the sun.

Crazy Cat Lady

by

Rachael Jackson

Usually, I would not agree to watch someone’s cat for them, but I needed a new place to sleep after my needy boyfriend tossed me out for being late for “a third date in a row”. He must have been only counting the times my excuses sucked, because I was late more often than that. Since he kicked me out, I had been sleeping on a series of air mattresses, my cousin’s couch, and inside my car. I could not refuse my boss when he offered me a room in his mini mansion in exchange for watching his cat while he was in Hawaii.  
  
 The first morning of the two-week gig was easy, but that night, I was pulled from a dream: the embrace of a hot, rich blondie transformed into the face of a stupid cat with balding patches of orange fur.  
   
 I chased it from the room and locked the door. I could hear the cat running up and down the stairs through the night. If I ignored it long enough, a long black shadow would appear under the crack of the door. Eventually, I opened the door, only to have it lay on my chest again.  
  
 I was able to fall asleep sometime during the night. Though the cat was gone when I woke up, I could tell it stayed awhile from the thick layer of dried saliva under my neck.   
  
 This went on for three nights.  
  
 Desperate for help on the fourth day, I called the only person I knew that ever owned a cat without losing or killing it: my ex-boyfriend   
  
 He got me a fish once. I ended up killing it after a week. He came home and found me watching television while the fish floated belly-up in the bowl next to me, which made him pretty mad considering that I had not taken a moment to flush the fish, but I told him I planned on taking care of it after the *Jersey Shore* marathon.  
  
 After ignoring my call a few times, my ex finally picked up. He told me about his mom’s trick against crazy cats. The two things she found helpful were either being patient with the animal, or putting some catnip in a foil ball for the animal to hit around. The creature would get so tired it would pass out early. He suggested I just be patient, and I told him – with all the sincerity I could muster – that I would consider it.  
  
 Before I could let him know I missed him he said, “Don’t call or text to tell me what happens,” and hung up.  
  
 The next day, I bought a bag of catnip, and filled ten foil balls up with the stuff.   
  
 The catnip balls worked. The rest of the week went great until two days before my boss was supposed to get back. The cat wanted me to play fetch with it. Like a dog. When the cat brought a ball to me in the morning, I figured I may as well entertain the cat, but decided that I would not get out of bed to do it.

On my third throw, the ball went straight out the second-story window, with a flash of orange following close behind. I dragged myself to the window to see what happened. The foil ball had landed safely on the grass, while the cat lay twisted on a woodpile below me. Tufts of orange fur lingered in the air.

I thought about calling my ex for help, but I knew it would just start a fight I wasn’t ready for.  
  
 On my own, I buried the cat between two trees in the back. I tossed in the foil balls as a way to hide the evidence.  
  
 Now, I just have to think of a great excuse before my boss gets back.

Cake Lady  
by  
Heather Sanderson

I make cakes. Miniature cupcakes with delicate, glittering sprinkles, or five tiers high and covered in flowers. I may not be the perfect friend, I might have pushed away my fair share of boyfriends, I've lost a job or two, but cake, cake is the one thing I do right. Every time. Coated in fondant or butter-cream, for your Bar Mitzvah or birthday. It's what I do. If you're having a party, if you need a cake, you call me. I'm The Cake Lady. So when my co-worker asked me to bake a cake for her baby shower--and I can't stand baby showers--I baked a cake for her baby shower. And it was perfect, as usual.

Typically, I bow out of baby showers, I catch the flu, I make conflicting plans. It's not the party itself that's the problem. It's the women. The bloodhounds who attend these parties can always sense that I have three cats at home and a semi-successful, long-term relationship that hasn't produced any offspring yet. They have a nose for these kinds of things. They can hear it, my biological clock, just ticking away. But when somebody asks me for a baby shower cake, I suck it up. I bite my lip, I take a deep breath, and I enter that lion's den carrying a baby blue, strawberry champagne cake with cream cheese filling, and piping so gorgeous it belongs on a magazine cover.

Everything began as expected. There was the appropriate amount of ooh-ing and aah-ing over my delicate gumpaste flowers and the miniature figures that topped the twenty-five pound confection.

"Oh, just look at that tiny stork and baby, are they edible?"

"Oh my god, who did you hire, Martha Stewart!?"

"Can I get your card?"

Anyway, I attempted to leave as soon as I got there, to sneak away before the cake was even cut, I had plans with my husband, or at least the intention of making them, but I got cornered. I couldn't avoid the inquisition, those prodding, snooping women.

"When are you finally going to have your own kids?"

"The clock is ticking dear, you're not getting any younger."

"Do you even *want* kids?"

As if not having children by the age of thirty-seven was a crime, and I seemed to be the only one at the party who was guilty of it. The room was teeming with out of control children whining, screaming, and smearing dirt on everything they touched.

So can you blame me if I was a little defensive by the fourth round of questioning, when I got cornered at the cake table by that little, old lady with the grey-blue wig, who had clearly honed her interrogation technique to sheer perfection? She was the leader of the pack. Don't let the hearing aids fool you. They're just an excuse to ask the questions louder, to draw more attention to the fact that my husband doesn't want kids. That I had, in fact, played the "I don't want to have kids for years, if ever" card, in order to get him to stay.

By the fifth time that I had to say, "Of course I like kids," I may have been a bit snippy. And then that piranha, frosting smeared on the corner of her mouth and a matching frosting coated child yanking on one arm, pinned me against the cake table. Yes, I might have been a little oversensitive when she pestered me about when my ovaries would be doing their job. Can you blame me?

So when she turned to walk away and I saw that perfect, tiny, frosting handprint on the back of her skirt, I really didn't feel the need to tell her. I left the party frosting free and determined that thirty-seven didn't seem all that old after all. Besides, I was already thinking about my next cake. It's a five tiered, butter-cream with chocolate mousse filling, 14K-gold-flecked masterpiece. And it will be flawless. Because I'm the Cake Lady. It's what I do.

Switches  
by  
Matthew Verley

Gathered around the television, the whole family watches with bated breath. The final seconds tick off the scoreboard of the NCAA National Championship, while Cousin Demarcus leaps into the air at the back right corner of the endzone. His muscular arms spread wide, they swiftly come together, his hands forming the shape of a diamond, as the football soars through the air towards him. The defender covering Cousin Demarcus, the opposing teams' 'lockdown'—a term reserved for a defensive player who regularly stops offensive plays—corner, slams into Cousin Demarcus with the velocity of a freight train.  
   
 The football touches the palms of Cousin Demarcus' hands, and then skips off, like a skipping stone off the glassy cool surface of calm water. A large exhale sounds in the room as we watch Cousin Demarcus grab in vain for the football as it tumbles to the earth.   
  
 "Shi—" my voice trails off as I catch the disapproving glance from Granmama as she leans forward. The hushed silence which has fallen over the room, and Granmama’s pursed lips and creased forehead, tells me that my language is close to landing me a meeting with a 'switch'—the sapling branches used to teach young children discipline and manners. And Granmama loves those thick switches too; the ones that don't break after a few hard swats to the backside of a misbehaving child. It doesn't matter that I'm almost eighteen years old—Granmama doesn't tolerate anything which upsets her sensibilities.  
  
 I silently curse myself for my blunder. Granmama was raised a preacher's daughter. Prayer was said upon waking up, before every meal, and before going to sleep in her house. She even referred to it as a 'house of God.' As I sat there, the tension gathering in my shoulders, that oil painting of Jesus that Granmama had purchased from a local flea market stares down disprovingly. I should have known better.  
 My shoulders hunch, my head dips down, and my eyes stare straight at the floor. I know if I don’t do something soon—if I don’t recover and find something else to say, Granmama is going to tell me to head outside and pick out a switch. That’s the worst part of it: Granmama makes us pick out our own switches, and if we don’t pick one out that’s to her liking, she’ll pick out the best one she can find. Well… ‘Best’ is relative. ‘Best’ for teaching a lesson to a child with, not ‘best’ for getting taught the lesson with.  
  
 The silence is deafening, and I can feel all my family members’ eyes on me. It feels like the whole house is closing in on me. What am I going to say? I wonder if Granmama can see the wheels turning in my head, trying to find a way out. Suddenly, it dawns on me!  
  
 "—nanigans!" I quickly switch the ending of my phrase to a new, safer, exclamation. It's bad enough Cousin Demarcus' team just lost; I'm not trying to add my name to the list of family members who got beat today.   
  
 "Mmm hmm." Granmama murmurs as she sits back in the gaudy, flower-print, overstuffed recliner which has been in her living room for as long as I can remember. I hear chuckles from my elder relatives in the room, and I feel the tension, which had instantly appeared in my shoulders, ease. Out of the corner of my eye, I swear I see the slight upturn of a smirk briefly appear on Granmama's face.