

ANGIE MCCULLAGH

SAVING ELIZA

THERE WAS A TIME when dropping my sister Eliza down a manhole seemed like something that would eventually happen no matter how hard I fought it. I had seen, from our parked car at the Chevron station, the dark space where she would fit. I was always looking for crevices and openings large enough to take her. A kitchen cupboard. A fireplace. A toilet.

The manhole day though, was the day my mother stopped letting me hold her. I had scooped Eliza out of the car seat, lifting her face next to mine: soft and warm and smelling like honey and throw up. Her fat arms flailed, grabbing at my collar and hair. She made little bumbling noises, buzzing her lips in my ear.

I wanted to put her in the hole because she was like that: pudgy and sweet. And I hadn't been for at least five years.

My mother came out of the station and saw me holding Eliza like a little hang glider over the black abyss of sewage and pipes. "Marnie!" she screeched and ran toward us, her purse falling open, heels clacking across rain-stained pavement. "Marnie, no! Get back! Jesus, Marnie, get back!"

She grabbed us and we stumbled sideways. A heel snapped off. She yanked Eliza from my grip, pressing warm baby forehead to her lips. She limped in circles, both of them crying. Eliza's face was red, her bottom lip curled under; she clutched the lapels of our mother's jacket as if she knew she had been rescued.

Plucking the red heel from the edge of a puddle, I followed them to the car, the smell of fuel in my nose and hair. I climbed into the backseat next to Eliza. My mother was blowing her nose and shaking her head. She looked at me in the rear view mirror. “No more, Marnie,” she said in her so-help-me-God way. “No more. You are not allowed to pick up Eliza or push her stroller. Do you understand?”

I nodded. I hadn’t started feeling terrible yet, but it would come. I would crawl under my blankets that night, head first and panting, hoping I died there so I wouldn’t try to hurt Eliza again.

My mother wanted to understand. While I lay snarled in the covers, inhaling my damp breath, she came into my room and patted the lump that was my body. “Can you tell me why?” she whispered. I shivered and whimpered because I couldn’t. Eliza was quiet in the next room, so my mother stretched out next to me with her hand on my hip until she thought I was asleep.

My father, though, was sure he knew why I tried to cram my sister into every available cavity. “She’s evil,” I heard him telling her. I was supposed to be in bed, unconscious, but I had heard my name and was standing half way down the hall of our long house.

“David,” my mother sighed, like she’d heard him say it before. “You can’t say that. You can’t even think that.” From my dark spot, I could see her sitting on the living room floor, hunched over a spread of newspapers, gluing her red heel to its shoe.

He sounded equally weary when he said, “But what if it’s true? Even just a little bit true?”

“It’s not true. She plays great with other kids. Everyone says how well behaved she is. She doesn’t stone puppies. It’s something to do with Eliza. She’s just jealous.”

I hadn’t heard the word jealous before. Somehow, though, I thought I knew what it meant. It meant that she was cuter and fatter and better than me.

MYURGES TO HIDE ELIZA never disappeared. But I learned to resist acting on them long enough before my mother died for her to let me push Eliza on the swing and sit opposite her on the teeter-totter. And my father, David, he needed me after my mother was gone to dress Eliza and comb her hair. He needed me to take her, our

hands clamped together, from the preschool to his waiting diesel Mercedes that I could always hear and smell before I could see.

We rumbled back to our long house that seemed even longer now that my mother was gone. David worked from home in the afternoons, typing on his boxy, yellow computer in the den, making calls from the kitchen phone. Because he had no time to monitor me, because I was now a dutiful and harmless girl, and because Eliza always had crusty milk on her chin, hair that had turned red and coarse, and a thick cough percolating from deep in her chest, I stopped trying to put her places.

I BEGAN COUNTING THINGS: kitchen floor tiles, milepost signs, water drops from a leaky faucet. Whatever number I could reach would be the number to which Eliza would live. I tried for eighty-three. I would sit at the table, eyes bugged out, counting tiles. If something interrupted me, I started over. Up to eighty-three. Sometimes it took an hour or more to get there.

She has lived, so far, to nineteen, still in David's house, when she comes in and says, "There are a hundred and seventy- four."

"I know," I say. "I remember."

The first time she caught me at this, she sat on the floor with me and helped me count, thinking that once I knew how many there were, I would stop.

"So you're done," she says now.

"Soon."

She usually laughs at me. This time, though, she coughs her deep, asthmatic cough and says, "Oh, Marn."

I force my gaze upward, to the plaster walls our mother painted the color of cantaloupe. I cannot think of anything but the tiles. I have to count them or Eliza will die. I will die. Someone will die.

I am shaking, trying to keep myself from looking down. Eliza is mixing powdered Lipton tea with water, not wanting to look at me, to have to tell me again that she'll be okay if I don't inventory all the tiles.

I've never believed her. I could fly across the room right now, grab a steak knife from the drawer and sink it into her neck. It would be physically

possible. I am smaller than Eliza, but wouldn't I have the element of surprise on my side?

Pulling in lungfuls of sharp, spring air that drifts through the open window, I count again, trying to pretend I'm not, trying to keep from moving my lips with each number.

Eliza takes her cold tea, ice rattling, and leaves me to my job. I am glad, relieved she is no longer in my presence, vulnerable, and that I can carry on with my counting, my protecting.

I am often here, at this table, tired already at twenty-four years old, because I don't like my apartment very much, or the boyfriend I share it with. Mike. Who I met volunteering for an American Lung Association benefit dinner, who believes everyone is good, who believes that everything bad can be cured by force of will, who also leaves the room, at least in spirit, when I begin counting or complaining that I don't know my true nature. That Mike believed me (and every murky-souled murderer alive) to be good, "deep down," was what helped me see beyond his slight build and wiry, blond beard and motivated me to finally move out of David's and in with him.

But now I am tired of how he turns his back to me at night when I am writhing in bed, slipping farther under the blankets. He won't listen when I share with him my fears that I'll overtake him with the pillow or our heavy, iron skillet. And now he wants to get a cat. I cannot have a cat.

So I am often at this table, counting tiles and thinking of my mother, the only person who seemed willing to try to understand how I tortured myself.

David and I pass in the kitchen doorway. "Have you seen my glasses?" he asks.

"On the counter," I say. "By the coffee maker."

With David I can almost turn it all off and just become the one that knows where to find his glasses and keys. Sometimes I think he doesn't realize I've lived somewhere else the past year.

I find Eliza in the basement watching some terrible talk show on TV. She sits on a square of thin carpeting that designates the space as "family room" and leans against our old corduroy couch. Bathed in blue and covered in a ratty, crocheted afghan, she sips from her glass.

Without looking up, she says, "A hundred and seventy-four?"

"I only got as far as fifty-five." I almost mutter that I'm sorry.

I sit on the end of the couch, wrapping my arms around my knees. Three-hundred-pound women in bikinis prance across a stage before a booing, cackling audience. It smells, down here, like damp earth and fabric softener.

I ask Eliza to turn down the volume. She hits the remote, wiping tea foam from her upper lip. I ask if she remembers how I used to try putting her inside things.

She tips her head back against a couch cushion so she is looking at me upside down. "I don't know if I remember, really, or just think I do from your stories. It seems like there was a pipe. Aluminum walls. When I screamed it sounded like the whole world screamed."

I nod, not sure myself if her pipe experience was real.

This is a talk show with no psychological professionals to counsel the sparsely dressed and unstable, only a lot of screaming and howling and bleeped expletives. I look away. "This is inhumane," I say.

"I know," she says. "But funny."

On my way back to the apartment I grind my teeth to keep from tallying stoplights. I drive south on Twenty-sixth, the radio tuned to smooth jazz. There have been talk shows about people like me, people who think they've hit a dog with their minivan and backtrack twenty times to find out for sure, unconvinced each time, even without a body, that they haven't. People who count and hoard and touch things because, in their minds, the rituals keep them safe.

The sun is still setting early. I lower the window a couple inches, letting in dry, frosty air, liking how it feels on my skin and in my mouth.

Mike is on the phone when I let myself in, talking to his organic gardener friend Vince to whom he always tries to sound cooler than he is.

He waves and sort of smiles. He doesn't like my spending so many evenings and weekend days at David and Eliza's. I can't say I blame him. I've never been able to explain to anyone's satisfaction why I am not quite happy in either place.

I drop my purse on our thrift-store sofa, wash my face, brush my teeth and get into bed. My mind whirls, like a hard-boiled egg spinning across a table, wanting to count the number of times Mike says, "I hear ya, man." Or tick off each shudder of the water pipes.

I am still awake when Mike comes in and kneels on the bed next to me. He pokes my ribs. I pretend I've been asleep. "Guess what," he says. "Vince's cat had kittens."

I cannot, at first, figure out how this affects us.

He waits for me to respond and when I don't, he says, "We can have one."

I notice the ceiling light is on. So inconsiderate, I think. "I doubt they'll let us keep it here."

"They will. I checked with the building manager."

I squint at the metal closet doors. The apartment smells like burn. Burned toast or burned chicken. Burned coffee? Something burned. I pull the blanket to my nose. My voice is muffled when I say, "And that's why you woke me up. To tell me we can have a kitten."

He has sunk farther down on his knees. "Yeah, that's why I woke you up."

"Not good enough," I say and roll away from him. "Turn off the light, Mike." Even before I've finished saying it, I know I sound evil. That I am evil. The boy wants a cat. And I can't bring myself to tell him again the reasons why it's not possible to bring a helpless little thing into my proximity.

He wouldn't believe me anyway. He'd tell me thoughts are far different from actions and that I'm a gentle soul. He'd say he knows because before I got so crazy and afraid to go near kids, he'd seen me play with his nieces. He'd watched me hustle them around a playground, catching them after they shot down aluminum slides, standing under the jungle gym as they scooted up the ladders and swung around the bars.

He doesn't know that I'd watched them and wondered, thought my horrible thoughts, swallowed my horror and the brick in my throat.

Mike lays his face on top of mine and says, "A soft, furry little thing that

nuzzles up to you at night." His beard scratches my cheek, rasping back and forth.

I could hit him right now. I could swing my arm up and over and smash him in the nose. Squeezing my eyes shut, I try not to hear him purring in my ear. God, he's annoying. "Please. Mike," I say. "Turn off the light."

He works his way under the sheet and I realize he is naked. When did he take off his clothes? He paws at my back and hips, still rubbing, still purring.

I groan, "Mike, c'mon. Don't."

"Maybe we could get two," he murmurs. "A brother and a sister."

I pitch sideways and spring up, glaring at him from across the room. He lays on his back, his mouth twitching, his chest visibly palpitating with quick, shallow breaths, his penis withering and pink. He looks at me like he thinks I will hurt him, like he thinks I will pounce with nails and teeth and knees. But only for a second. Then he is up, standing on the other side of the bed. "Christ, Marnie."

"You wouldn't stop," I say.

He holds his hands up, palms out. "All right. No cat. We won't get a cat."

I go into the bathroom. There is only the night-light, casting a shell of yellow-orange over one wall. I sit on the toilet even though I don't have to pee. I rest my face in my hands and breathe through my fingers.

Mike bumps around the bedroom, opening a dresser drawer, probably throwing on some clothes.

Our toiletries sit next to each other on the sink's edge: his razor and contact solution, my vitamins, hairspray and makeup bag. Seeing our stuff that way makes me think of us in general terms: a guy who sees so much to love of the world and a girl who can hardly see beyond her own terrible opinion of herself. He sounds like the better one. But still, he is annoying.

I flush the toilet and return to the bedroom. He is in the dark, under the covers. I sit on the mattress's edge. My legs are cold.

Even after my little outburst, he snakes out a hand and massages the small of my back.

I say, "I'm not as good as you think."

The hum of his old alarm clock is audible. Someone's unauthorized dog barks from another apartment. "I know," he says. "No one is. But I can't help it. Just like you can't help thinking you're born to hurt everyone around you."

I push my toes into the carpet, thinking of my mother and how much she would have liked this skinny, feline-loving guy. "I don't deserve you." I swing my legs into bed and sleep next to him, somehow blocking out the sound of the dog barking and my mind whirling.

We wake up late with hangovers from too much sleep. Sun is already spreading across the bed, cars already zipping in and out of the parking lot.

Mike gets up and makes his shade-grown coffee in our sticky little kitchen. Sweaty and dehydrated, I go to the closet, take out my thirteen-inch black and white TV, Nancy Sinatra records, my black shoes in every heel height. I load my car with it. Mike watches from where he leans against the counter, sipping from his handle-less mug. He makes no move to help me. Or to stop me. He just says, when I come up to him, "Are you sure about this?" After giving him an it-was-good-to-be-in-your-life hug, I drive to David's.

When I get there, the house is empty. The coffeemaker is on. I click it off and carry a few things up to my old room that now holds an erect ironing board, someone's cast-off velour chair and vodka boxes full of my mother's old costume jewelry, letters she'd saved, pictures of us. Eliza and I have never gone through the boxes. Not really. I dug through them one Halloween, looking for a glittery choker I thought would go with my costume. Otherwise, the boxes just sit stacked in a corner.

I walk back downstairs, pour myself a glass of juice and notice the answering machine light blinking. It is David, for me, saying Eliza had an attack, a bad one, and that she's being admitted to Overlake. I take my half glass of juice to my car and start the engine, glad the motor is warmed up.

There have been many attacks. The worst I remember happened in school, during recess when Eliza was in first grade and I was in sixth. She ran

too close to a ragweed patch or got too excited. Her lungs seized almost instantly. The teacher on recess duty knew, luckily, I kept Eliza's inhaler in my backpack. We knelt over her on the playground as she wheezed and thrashed, me pushing my hot, little palms over her forehead until the ambulance came.

While she slept in a white, disinfected room across town, there were long nights of David and me alone in the house. We mostly avoided each other. I did my homework and watched "Lost in Space" and "Brady Bunch" reruns in our dank, underground family room and waited for her to come home.

When she finally left the hospital, she was skinnier and somehow more translucent than before. She could play outside for only a few minutes before staggering in for a nap.

She sleeps in the white room again. David leans against the heat register, reading a newspaper. I pull a plastic chair to the foot of the bed and thank him for the message. "What happened?" I ask.

He lowers the business section. Softly blowing air from the vent behind him ruffles the paper's corner. "I don't know," he says. "I think it's that damn basement of ours. It's too damp. She's always down there watching TV."

It could be anything really. The three of us have spent hours theorizing causes of her asthma attacks.

I stare at her IV, daring myself to imagine how horrible it would be to rip the needle from her arm or squeeze her fluid bag. I close my eyes and count to forty-one before Eliza says, "You think you did this, don't you?" Her voice is weak and hoarse.

"No," I lie.

"Dad, tell Marnie it's not her. Asthma isn't something you inflict." She coughs, her head rising off the pillow. A string of white saliva stretches between her lips.

David stares at his paper.

Faintly, Eliza says, "Dad."

He looks at her and says, "How the hell do I know what caused this? It

could've been the time you spent two hours under the bathroom sink, right? All that mildew. It could've been a hundred things."

I think I should tell David that he's supposed to love both his children the same. I should leave. But I don't. I sit there, gazing out the window at the gray parking lot.

Folding the paper and tossing it onto the window ledge, he mumbles something about getting coffee and is the one to leave the room.

Eliza closes her eyes. She sighs, her chest audibly popping. "You're both sicker than me, you know that?"

I just raise my eyebrows, pretty sure she refers to our incompatibility until she says, "He thinks he killed mom."

"What do you mean?" Our mother died alone in her car.

From the hallway, a doctor is paged. I scoot my chair around to see Eliza better, but she is waving me away, her head slumped back into her pillow. She whispers, "He was the one who sent her out for ice cream or something."

SHE COMES HOME THE NEXT DAY, shaky and pale. "You've always taken such good care of me," she says as I set up my black and white TV on her dresser. I bring her iced tea and peanut-butter toast then go into my own room. I cannot hear what a good caretaker I am.

I move toward the stack of vodka boxes, choose a light one and take it to my bed where I lay all its contents in a horseshoe around me. I touch each photo, each letter, each earring. There, tangled in the other jewelry, is the choker I wanted for my Halloween costume. It's less than I remembered: smaller and blander, its stones opaque now with age. I hook it around my neck. It lays cold on my collarbone.

David's voice rises up the stairway. "Marnie! Have you seen the remote?"

I know that I saw it last on the fireplace mantel but I call, "No, I haven't." Because I can't keep saving him. I can't keep saving everyone.