

Mother (First Place) // Emily Bishop, 2018

Did you know that my son has never cried? Not once in his entire seven years of living has he so much as shed a tear. Not even as a baby. I was worried when he didn't cry as a baby. I thought that he might have some kind of reverse version of colic or something. But the doctors said nothing was wrong with him. He just didn't cry.

I've cried plenty in my life time. I've cried plenty over my son. I cried when I found out I was pregnant with him. I cried when his father left, and I cried when he was born. But I've also been so scared of him that I've cried, or worse, been too scared to cry.

Charlie first started his peculiar behaviors when he was a little younger than three. We had a mice problem in the house and I had set humane traps around the house so that I could release them far away from our tiny abode.

Charlie was in the living room playing with his toys and I was in the kitchen starting dinner. As I was cooking, I heard him gleefully giggling. Charlie never cried, and he rarely laughed. I was amazed to hear his laughter fill the house. A smile broke across my face as I rushed to the living room to see what had been the cause of his joy. But when I made it there, my smile was replaced with shock and horror.

Charlie had somehow managed to get a mouse out of one of the traps I had set. He was holding it underwater in the cat bowl. He laughed and laughed as the mouse's little grey body struggled to break free from his stubby toddler fingers. I rushed over to my son screaming, "Charlie! NO!"

I seized the mouse from his cruel hands, but I was too late. Tears began to fill my eyes and I crouched down so that I was at eye level with my son. I tried to remain calm. I didn't want to yell at him, and I didn't want to scream.

"Charlie, we do not drown mice in water bowls. That's mean and scary. It's not nice."

His face looked down in shame, the same

way a child his age might if they were scolded for drawing on the wall. He knew from the tone of my voice that what he had done was bad, but I don't think he realized why.

I was terrified. I opened a phone book that night as soon as Charlie fell asleep and called the first number for a therapist's office. Of course, it was too late to be receiving phone calls. I was terrified of what my son had done, but I was more terrified of how scared I felt of him.

I called the same number the next morning and made an appointment. They saw us that afternoon, but their words did little to help. The therapist said that Charlie probably thought it was just a game. He was playing with the mouse the same way he might play with an action figure. Disturbing as it was, it was perfectly normal. I lied to the doctor and said that I understood. I lied to myself to feel safe.

There were small aggressions similar to the mouse event, but not as severe. I caught Charlie burning ants with a magnifying glass or throwing rocks at birds or strays. Some of his drawings were disturbing enough to make me sleep with one eye open. Crayon scribbles of him with weapons, or of dead animals, which would have been nightmare fuel for any mother.

I tried to comfort myself by saying that it was normal. He thought it was a game, or he was probably just copying something he saw on TV. Television could be so violent and I didn't always do a good job of turning the channel when he was watching something a little too mature for his age. And besides, wasn't it statistically proven that boys were more violent than girls? I lied to myself to feel safe.

When Charlie was five, the neighbor's cat went missing. It was an old fat cat, and we all figured that it had just wandered slightly too far from home, or gotten into someone's garage before they went out of town for the weekend, or something like that. Everyone figured that the cat would turn up in a week or two at most.

One night I was on the phone with Jeanette Burkens, who lived three doors down. Her son and Charlie sometimes had playdates, and we had gone to high school together. Charlie was sitting at the dinner table drawing, while I yakked away on the phone to Jeanette.

"Really, I feel so bad about Mrs. Gilson's cat going missing. That old woman hardly ever has family visit and I think that cat was her main source of companionship," Jeanette said.

"I wouldn't be too worried," I replied. "We had cats when I was growing up and they would sometimes go missing for weeks at a time and then turn up just fine."

I looked into the dining room at Charlie. He had that grin on his face. That grin that terrified me and made my stomach turn. That malicious grin that made my blood turn to ice.

The ends of his lips curled up and his teeth showed much more than they should have.

"I gotta go. I'll talk to you tomorrow, Jeanette."

I hung up the phone and walked into the dining room. My legs were shaking and my heart was racing. I sat down across from Charlie.

"You've heard about Mrs. Gilson's cat, haven't you Charlie?"

He nodded.

"It's very sad that her cat went missing, isn't it?"

He shrugged.

"Charlie, look at me."

He stopped scribbling with his red crayon and looked up at me with those icy blue eyes that I could never read.

"If you see that cat when you're out playing with your friends, I need you to tell me, okay? Think of how happy Mrs. Gilson would be if she got her cat back."

He nodded and then went back to coloring.

The next day while Charlie was out playing with friends, I tidied the house. I started with the kitchen and living room, then the dining room, then my room, and finally Charlie's room. I made the bed, put away his laundry, and picked up some of the toys that were on the floor. Some-

thing glinted from under the bed and caught my eye. I peered down under the bed and grabbed the shiny object.

It was a little orange bell attached to a thin piece of fabric. My heart raced and I began to sweat as I realized what the object was. Attached to the width of fabric was a small metal disk with the name "Samson" engraved. I dropped the collar and raised both hands to my mouth, trying to stifle a scream. I threw the collar back under the bed and slammed the door on my way out.

I sat at the dinner table, tears falling silently down my face. Was my son a killer? I knew he was prone to violent activities, and I knew that he had trouble telling right from wrong. But killing a cat? My son was no killer. I knew that much. Maybe he just found the collar and thought it was a nice keepsake. I collected rocks and bottle caps I found as a kid, maybe he collected fabrics. It was a ridiculous lie, but I lied to myself to feel safe.

I never mentioned the collar to Charlie, and I don't believe he ever knew that I had found it. Over the years, the occasional stray would go missing, and sometimes their bodies would be found by the river not too far from our house. The general consensus was that it was probably a coyote that got them. The bodies were sometimes mangled and bloody, torn to pieces. I knew my Charlie could never do that.

We went two years without any major acts of violence from Charlie. I sometimes would get a call from the school that Charlie had gotten in a fight with another student and I needed to come pick him up, but all kids got in fights. This wasn't anything special or particularly violent. And if it was, wouldn't the school let me know?

I was beginning to feel safe. I was beginning to think that Charlie had grown out his particularly violent phase and was now no more rough-and-tumble than any other boy his age. I had nearly forgotten about the drowned mouse and the cat's collar, until two weeks ago.

Every day after school, Charlie walked home with Hugo Burkens, who lived three doors down. They would usually come straight home

after school, but sometimes on Fridays, they would go down to the little wooded area nearby to play. Jeanette always worried about them out there, but I told her they were always together and that we lived in a safe town. She was worried about the coyotes that sometimes attacked stray animals, but I assured her that the coyotes would never kill a person. They didn't have it in them.

But two weeks ago, Hugo didn't come home. I had picked up an extra shift at work, and wasn't there when Charlie finished school. It was a Friday, so I figured he would have gone into the woods to play. I didn't arrive home until six thirty, and by then, Charlie was home.

"How was school, kiddo?"

"Fine," he replied, not looking up from his drawing.

"Did you and Hugo go play in the woods after school?"

"No, we didn't play," Charlie replied with the malicious grin creeping over his face.

"Well, why not? Did you two get in a fight?" I asked, trying to ignore that terrifying smile.

"Kinda."

"Well, I'm sorry about that, baby. I'm sure you two will work it out."

I kissed his head and went to go fix dinner. At seven thirty the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Beverly, this is Jeanette." She sounded frantic.

"Hi, Jeanette. What-"

"Is Hugo over at your house?"

"No, he isn't," I replied.

"Did Charlie come home?"

"Yeah, he's in the dining room. Why?"

"Hugo didn't come home after the kids were in the woods today." She sounded like she was crying.

"Charlie said they didn't go to the woods after school."

"What?" Jeanette said, even more emotional than before.

"It's okay Jeanette. He probably just went to another friend's house or is at the park or something. The street lights aren't even on yet."

"Yeah, you're probably right. He's probably fine," Jeanette replied in a voice I knew all



Blossom // Grace Gill, 2019

too well. The voice I used when I told myself that Charles couldn't be a killer.

"Jeanette, if he isn't home by nine, you need to call the cops and report him missing. I don't want to freak you out. He's probably fine. But worst-case scenario..."

"Oh god, what if he's dead!" Jeanette sobbed.

"He's probably fine. Do you want to come over and talk about it? I'll brew some coffee."

"No, I need to be here in case he comes home."

She hung up, but I stood there on the phone a few moments longer. I felt the same fear creep over me that I had felt so many times as Charlie grew up.

Hugo didn't come home that night, the next night, or the next week. He was officially declared missing. There were search parties every night, missing persons flyers everywhere, and he was mentioned every day on the morning and nightly news.

I tried to talk to Charlie about it, but he was quieter than usual. I figured he was just sad about Hugo's disappearance. Maybe he just needed space. Part of me knew better though.

Yesterday, a body was found downstream, further down than most people had considered looking. It was the body of a child, and although it was hard to make out, everyone knew it was Hugo Burken's body. The face was covered in slices and maggots. The limbs were mostly intact, but the torso looked like someone had gone at it with a hatchet. He looked like he had been murdered and like his body had been poorly dumped in the river, and carried downstream until it washed up on shore. He looked like one of the strays that people sometimes found out in the woods.

But this is a small town, and murders don't happen. Hugo probably went out in the woods by himself and slipped and hit his head. Maybe he fell while playing near the river and ended up drowning. Maybe coyotes got to him once his body washed up on shore. That's why he was so gutted. That made more sense than a

murder.

But this story had the same reek of the lies I had told myself for seven years. Everyone knew that Hugo was murdered, but only I knew the murderer. Only I could stop him.

Charlie was in the dining room, coloring. I walked into the dining room. My legs were shaking and my heart was racing. I sat down across from Charlie.

"You've heard about Hugo, haven't you Charlie?"

He nodded.

"It's very sad that he died, isn't it?"

He shrugged.

"Charlie, look at me."

He stopped scribbling with his red crayon and looked up at me with those icy blue eyes that I could never read.

"You and Hugo were friends and it's very sad when someone's friend dies. It's okay to cry if you're sad. It's okay to talk about it."

He nodded and went to pick up his red crayon.

"Charlie, I need to ask you something."

He looked up at me again.

"You said that you and Hugo got in a fight the day that he went missing, didn't you?"

He nodded.

"What was the fight about?"

"It was stupid. Just some kid stuff anyways."

"I don't think it's stupid. It was the last conversation you had with him. What was it?"

"We were fighting about if it would hurt to die."

The blood drained from my face and I curled my hands into fists to stop from shaking too much. I nodded, indicating for him to go on.

"I said that it would hurt lots and lots if someone died. I said that it must be the worst pain imaginable. There's nothing like it. He didn't think so. He thought it would be like going to sleep and never waking up. He thought it would be gentle and kind. Almost nice."

"That's a very mature conversation for you boys to be having."

"I guess. Well, it looks like Hugo knows that answer now." He began to giggle as that terrifying smile that was more like a snarl began to creep across his face.

"Charlie, you know I love you, right? You know I love you more than anything in this world and that everything I do. I do because I love you."

"I know, Mom." He looked up at me and smiled. Not his malicious snarl, but a real smile, like a real boy. "I love you too."

I smiled at him and walked to the hallway. My hands shook as I picked up the phone and dialed the number for the police station. I placed my left hand around the small rectangle in my coat pocket and pressed one of the buttons, stopping the recording. It wasn't much. I

wasn't even sure it would be anything, but it was what I had. I knew that Charlie was responsible for Hugo's death, but even if the police didn't believe me, I knew I could never live with myself if I didn't try to do something.

I was brought out of my trance by the voice of a man on the other end of the phone.

"Hello?" the voice asked.

I looked down the hallway and into the dining room. I looked at my son and took a deep breath. I really did love him. I was his mother. I was supposed to protect him. I would never do anything to hurt him. I told myself that what I was doing was for the best.

"Yes, hello. I have some information regarding the Hugo Burkens case."



Uniroyal // Anna Tracy, 2018