

Schrödinger's Kitten

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Steve checked the dashboard calendar: 1st June. These last two months had passed quickly.

It would have been his weekend to have Tom. They'd be dragging their wakeboards from the river about now or eating cheese fries in Jerry's – extra jalapeños, Tom's favourite. And the grapefruit slushy he always ordered.

Or maybe it was papaya. Since the accident, Steve was having trouble trusting his memories. He kept track of the date, but other things – less definite – were starting to slip. Conversations he'd had, and arrangements he'd agreed to, seemed to fizzle from his mind as if his words were someone else's.

And there were things he kept forgetting to forget. Like his feelings for Shelly. They'd ended on good terms and for that he should be grateful, but it hadn't made the split any easier to live with. Shelly had kept the house; Steve, the barbecue, and the Citroen, with its cracked mirror and sticky brakes, a few weeks before its service.

He glanced at the dashboard again. The date definitely felt familiar. *June-the-first. First-of-June.* Its unknown significance taunted him.

He clicked the indicator and turned. The first-of-June was... Katie's birthday. The indicator snapped back. He was sad that he wouldn't be there to see her open her presents.

His little girl was turning seven. Shelly had also kept the children. He'd have Tom every other Saturday and see Katie when she would let him. This had worked for a few months, but then the accident happened. Without Tom in their lives, Shelly had become even more overprotective.

Steve realised now where he was driving, where muscle memory had brought him. He hoped Shelly wasn't in the living room to see him drive past the window. Her new Honda, paradise blue, was parked at an angle in the driveway. There were balloons tied to the gate. She was throwing Katie a party.

Shelly was a Quantum Physicist. Her work was impressive and demanding, but Steve envied how she still managed to make time for their children. He could picture them in the kitchen, Katie and her mother, vanilla icing and chocolate buttons, sticky fingers and sprinkles.

Whenever Steve dropped the ball, Shelly was there to catch it. And since Tom's accident, he was in awe of how she held it all together. Steve, on the other hand, could feel his sanity unravelling, and no matter how hard he resisted, there was nothing he could do to stop it.

He glanced back in his rear-view mirror. That house now made him nervous. He remembered smoke in his throat, Shelly's shrieks from the hallway.

He'd come running from the living room. Until that moment he hadn't noticed. *Your toast!* She'd yelled, *Steve!* There weren't flames yet – but almost. He'd only been there to pick up Tom, had only planned to be a minute, and was watching TV in the lounge while Tom hunted for his wetsuit.

He'd stood there in the kitchen doorway, muttering apologies to Shelly. To help himself to her food was one thing, but then to cause a fire, it was mortifying.

He still couldn't even remember putting the toast on in the first place. He'd watched her bounce the lever of the toaster, extracting charred slices.

You had no idea you'd put that on, she'd said, more of a statement than a question. *Steve, you don't live here anymore.* He'd nodded. Yes, he knew that.

Since then, things had spiralled. That wasn't the last time it had happened – his going over there, uninvited, making Shelly's home his own again.

It wasn't intentional, though. He'd never wish to be anywhere he wasn't wanted – but he kept finding himself with a memory of Shelly asking him to come over. Then he'd arrive and learn the opposite – that once again, he'd imagined it. A couple of times could be excused, but it was becoming embarrassing.

He'd tried to rationalise his behaviour – perhaps instinct to protect her. That huge house, and without Tom, it must have been lonely.

That was what had made him think to buy her the kitten. He'd said it was for Katie's early birthday, but really it was for Shelly. She had always talked about getting one back when they were married. Steve had never liked them, always ripping up the carpet, and strutting around

the place, knowing something he didn't. Though, these days, everyone seemed to. And besides, Shelly loved them.

She'd had one as a child; Nelson, they'd called him. Then Nelson had turned out to be a female, but by then the name had traction. That story had really tickled him. Steve remembered when he first heard it. It had been that weekend in the Lakes. He could remember every detail.

At least, he thought he could, until Tuesday – when he'd learned it was all fiction. He had a wild imagination; Shelly had eyed him with caution.

She said she'd never had a cat. He must have dreamed it. She even asked if it was a wind up, and stood there, eyes flitting between his face and the basket. She seemed unsure whether to laugh, like there was something she was missing.

Come on, he'd said – *Nelson*. Shelly's smile had slowly faded.

Who's Nelson, Steve? What are you talking about? I don't... I can't... This is madness.

She'd thanked him for the kitten and retreated into the hallway, holding the basket at arms-length, as though Steve's lunacy was catching.

Steve had driven home to try to sleep off his confusion. The Nelson memory was so vivid. What else had he invented?

When he'd awoken, he was surprised to see that Shelly was calling. He'd answered half dazed. *It's the kitten*, she said, *it's limping*. She didn't have time for this; she was working; Steve would have to take it; she'd made an appointment at the vets; they'd fit her in at short notice.

When he'd arrived at Shelly's, she emerged from the house with the basket and strapped it into the back seat. He'd tried to help her fit the seatbelt, but she told him she could manage. He'd expected to find her irritable, but she actually apologised for snapping. She said to let her know how they got on and offered to go-halves on treatment.

And as he drove away, she even smiled. But now, Steve wished she hadn't. It made what had happened next all the more difficult to deal with.

Happened – as though it wasn't his fault, as though it wasn't him who'd caused it. If she'd yelled at him, it would be so much easier now to explain the situation.

The kitten had been “at the flat” for four full days now while it “recovered”. He said the vet had told him it needed calm, that he should keep it away from children. Shelly hadn’t asked any questions, or perhaps she had and he’d just erased them. Either way he’d promised to bring the kitten over when it was better.

In the four days since, he had retraced several hypothetical journeys – from Shelly’s to the vets – but the kitten was nowhere. He tried to think of where he might have stopped, pulled over, been diverted, and how, in whatever time that was, the kitten had escaped him. Perhaps a gas station, but that seemed unlikely – his tank was nearly empty. And he’d searched his flat in case he’d gone there on the way to grab his wallet. Perhaps he’d loosened up the clasps and cranked the window, and it had bolted. But it couldn’t be that, because when he’d realised, all the buckles were still fastened.

He’d watched Shelly strap the basket in, and by the vets, the cat had vanished. There was no denying it; the cat was gone and his sanity along with it.

But he couldn’t tell her, because if she’d asked how it had happened, he’d have no answer. The only option was to find it. He’d check the park again; he should be thorough.

At the end of Shelly’s road he paused and swung out into the traffic. As he straightened up the wheel, his phone pulsed beside him. He glanced down. It was Shelly.

Call me, Steve. Enough now.

His heart began to hammer.

She must have seen him drive past the window. He re-read the message several times until the screen dulled. She knew. She must do. It pulsed again.

Call me, Steve. Enough now.

He took a breath and pulled over.

Cat’s fine. He typed. I’ll bring him later?

Then he deleted that last part, too much like a self-invitation. He dropped the phone into his lap to stop him launching it through the window.

The phone buzzed again.

Steve. Where are you?

His stomach churned; he knew that anger. This wasn't about the kitten.

Steve parked opposite the house. The balloons filled him with sadness. An open door framed Shelly's figure. As he crossed the road, she marched towards him.

He stood mute in the driveway, and for several seconds she was silent, pacing back and forth between him and the doorway. Her sweater hood was inside out, as though she'd thrown it on in a hurry, and every time she turned her back, Steve's eyes were drawn towards it.

A small face appeared behind her.

Happy Birthday baby! Steve's voice was shaking.

Katie smiled, then changed her mind and disappeared back into the hallway. As she turned, for just a moment, he thought he glimpsed a furry bundle nestled in her arms, but he had no time to ask the question.

Right, so you do know what day it is. We could have forgiven you if you'd forgotten. You're over an hour late, Steve. We've been waiting to do the candles.

An hour late. Had they invited him? There was no way he would have missed it.

If it was up to me, I'd say don't bother, but Katie wants to see you. Even Tom's made an effort.

Steve's breath caught in his throat.

Tom?

Yes, even Thomas. Who do you think blew these balloons up? It's only you who isn't bothered. They need their dad, Steve. Not a kitten.

He could hardly think. The ground was spinning. He stared at her blankly.

Shelly, he said, that's not funny.

No, Steve, it isn't. They don't think it's funny either. Tom's upstairs – won't leave his bedroom.

She stood for a few moments longer then turned back towards the doorway. And as she turned, she said, *come inside, I don't have the energy to argue.*

Shelly's words trailed behind her. What was happening? What was she saying? Tom was dead. Nothing could change that. She'd ripped the memory right back open.

Steve could see the flashing lights, cobalt pulsing in the puddles, Shelly's fingers on his forearm, the smell of the waiting room in his nostrils. He could feel the plastic in his fingers, Tom's damp jacket inside the polythene, and Shelly's grip on his arm loosening as she crumpled.

Steve felt sick. He was going to be sick. He dropped into a crouch on the driveway and tried to focus on the pockmarks of the pebbles in the concrete. His knees rolled forwards onto the ground and he stayed there for several moments, forcing each breath, trying to forget and to remember.

The old front door swung inwards. Steve loitered on the precipice, still unsteady on his feet. Then the ache overcame him.

He lurched forwards into the hallway and up the stairs onto the landing, then tore forwards towards Tom's bedroom. He wrenched the handle. The room was empty.

He tried the playroom, still no one.

Katie's bedroom.

And the bathroom.

Then the rooms he'd checked, he checked again. Katie's. Then the playroom.

Back in Tom's, he flung open cupboards, doors swinging on their hinges. And the wardrobe, crammed with boxes that were too painful now to open.

He tried Shelly's bedroom last. He took a breath before he entered, clinging to those final few seconds of Thomas. He pushed the door, but there was no one. The room felt emptier than ever. Steve collapsed onto his old, quilted duvet and grasped the pillow. He pulled it to his face and breathed in Shelly's soft vanilla. He heard her voice down in the kitchen, telling Katie to go and see him.

He heard Katie's footsteps on the stairs. A gentle knock, and then a murmur.

Pushing tears from his eyes, Steve sat upright to face his daughter.

Katie's head dipped a little as she crossed the room towards him. She perched beside him on the bed. Her nails had nibbled pink glitter.

For a minute, she didn't speak. He wondered if she was crying. He let his eyes trace the patterns in the curtains like he used to. The skirting boards were dusty; the room felt stale and neglected. It was only then he saw the kitten, dozing in a strip of sunlight.

Katie's voice was small. *It's Mum, she said. You need to help her.*

But before Steve could ask, she'd already begun to answer.

Since... Tom, she said, Mum's been different. She keeps... She keeps... forgetting. She burns the toast, and she left the oven on, and then she flooded the bathroom. And then the other day, she forgot to put the kitten in the basket. Don't cry though Dad, it's stopped limping. I think it's Mum who needs our help now.

Katie's earlobes reddened, and she scrunched her toes into the carpet.

You need to help her, Dad. Something's wrong. This morning I heard her... talking.

What do you mean you heard her talking? Talking to who? What was she saying?

Don't be cross, Dad. But she said his name. I heard her. She said... Thomas.