

Six Lies

By Bela Seitz

Your first lie is that you are allergic to cats; in actuality, you have just hated them for the past thirteen years. You're nice about it, though, in that you don't discriminate. You hate all of them equally: big, looming cats that make the floor creak as they pad over to their food bowls; skinless cats whose lack of fur make them look like a bald man who has grey skin; and, worst of all, cats with fur as soft as a down pillow who look up at you with large, pleading eyes that beg for belly scratches. Those are the ones whose owners will pick them up and shove them right in your face, droning on about how cute their cat is and don't you want to hold it? No. You want to grab it and throw it out a window, its head bursting as it hits the concrete sidewalk with a sickening crunch.

But instead you would smile and say that sadly, you are allergic. They'll retreat, taking their menace of a pet away and putting it in a separate room so you don't get sick.

Thank god.

Your least favorite living cat used to be Emme, who is your ex-girlfriend's cat. She has black fur and only one working eye. Emme was one of the reasons for your breakup; even now, you can remember your ex telling you that, though she understood that you wanted to keep some things private, how could you not share something as menial as why you hated cats?

Now, your least favorite living cat is the stray who keeps on breaking into your home. You like to keep your windows

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cracked open just enough so that the sounds of the busy city street below you filter into your apartment. When asked, you say that the open window is a source of inspiration and that is your second lie; the truth is that you hate silence. It is a painful reminder that you are alone. Right now, though, the one thing that stops you from spiraling into depression keeps on bringing in a very unwanted visitor.

You've never seen your new nemesis, but you know it is a cat. A few weeks ago, you were woken up by a quiet meow and now this morning you were greeted with muddy paw prints strewn across your apartment. The four-legged creature had scratched at your walls, leaving stains on them, and ran around your living room carpet, into your bathroom, and even on top of your couch. It laid its claim everywhere and, before the prints have even dried, you crank your windows completely shut.

But, the next night, the silence is too much and so you open the windows, burrow yourself under the quilt on your bed that your ex knitted you, and hope that the cat doesn't cause too much chaos.

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Your therapist is a mousy woman who wears her glasses up as far as possible on her nose. Her hair is always in one of those confusing twists behind her neck that you have never been able to perfect. She likes to take really long pauses before speaking and, when she finally does, her words are directed towards the yellow legal pad in her lap; it is as though she isn't confident in her advice for you, which you've always found strange seeing as how you pay her to give you advice. Well, technically your brother is the one who pays her but, still, isn't that her purpose as a therapist?

Today, you are sitting erect on her couch, hating that that her office doesn't have any firmer chairs, when you tell her that nothing has happened to you, which is your third lie. Lots of things have happened to you in your life: you have had your heart broken twice, you once led a climate protest that over a

hundred thousand people attended, and your parents were murdered six days before your seventeenth birthday.

Like always, your therapist lets out an awkward laugh and responds that you must be able to think of something of note from the last week to tell her.

Well, sure.

The cat in your apartment hasn't left a trace of its existence since the paw prints two weeks ago, although you are pretty sure that it still invades nightly. You still wake up every morning hiding under your quilt, fear paralyzing you for a few minutes before you force yourself to peek out and see if it is there. You could also mention work and the exam you just finished writing that your tenth graders will be taking tomorrow. It is unbelievably hard but you won't have time to write another one, so you will have to curve their grades.

But, instead, you tell her that you got invited to a party. This is what she wants to hear because it is something that your brother will like hearing.

Your therapist asks who invited you. She sounds surprised, because she can't figure out if you have friends, and you answer that it was a coworker. You aren't sure if you want to go because your ex-girlfriend will probably attend.

She looks down and gives you her normal kind of advice. You should go. It could be a good step to see your ex in person. Then, she says that she is having dinner with your brother in a couple of days and, if you let her, she would love to tell him this.

She doesn't normally ask you when she tells him things and so you nod. Her eyes light up and you know it is because she is madly infatuated with him. Your brother is the one who convinced you to go to therapy to help mend from your breakup, even offering to foot the bill in an effort to motivate you, but you know better than to believe that motive. He has known how to play women since elementary school and your therapist is no exception; she wants to sleep with him enough

that she will break her client-patient confidentiality so he can keep tabs on his depressed older sister.

Your brother can also play you and that why you have told your therapist you dodge his insistent requests to hang out, which is your fourth lie. The truth is you hate seeing him because he knows everything about you. You told your ex that once so she would understand why she hadn't met your only living family member, but she instead took that as you feeling comfortable around her because she didn't know everything about you which, again, was fair.

You have to go to the party now, though.

When your therapist tells your brother, word will spread. The two of you have accumulated some mutual friends over the years and so enough people will know that you'll be expected to be there. A part of you already knew that when you mentioned the invite to your therapist, because it ensures you will go to the party, but you won't verbalize that.

Instead, you ask your therapist where she is eating with your brother.

And, sure enough, three days later you are standing in a vaguely familiar apartment with your makeup done wearing a sundress that is speckled with white flowers. It is much too bright for your liking, but it is the kind of thing that people will like to see you wearing because they will think it means you are happy.

The room you are in is full of a seemingly endless amount of chairs for visitors and is color coordinated in a sickly combination of lime green and muted pink. You know everyone in the room and they all seem thrilled at your presence, because you have been much more solitary recently. You don't have the heart to tell them that you have always been a solitary person and it is just now that you are single that you aren't trying to pretend to be someone you are not.

The evening improves significantly once you get your hands on a cocktail. It is an otherworldly shade of red and tastes like someone knocked an entire liquor cabinet into it.

There is an orange slice floating on top of the drink and, if you tilt it just right, it starts to accumulate liquid on its surface and sink downwards. This is what you are doing when a familiar voice greets you.

It is your ex. Of course it is your ex.

She says hello like you are old friends and then gestures to her right. There is another woman standing there, her blonde hair pulled back into a painfully tight bun, and she smiles brightly at you and sticks out her hand. You don't register her name but you realize abruptly that they are together; their arms are brushing and your ex's head is leaning slightly downwards so it can rest on the woman's shoulder.

The woman's nails are painted a light lavender color and you smile as you shake her hand with your calloused one. The smile is too wide and hurts your cheeks, but relief rushes onto both of their faces and you realize that they think you are actually happy for them.

You ask the woman what she does. She says she is a lawyer and you actually listen as she explains her most recent case between a divorced couple and the custody of their cat. Your ex intervenes and says that she shouldn't tell that story because you hate cats. She says it like you need protection and all the hurt the alcohol was keeping at bay comes rushing back.

Before you know it, you tell them that you have a cat, which is the fifth lie.

Your ex's eyes widen. The other woman waits for a few seconds before awkwardly saying that it must be a recent purchase.

The cat wasn't a purchase, actually. You find yourself talking about your nemesis who has made every morning a living nightmare and who you have imagined trapping and starving countless times. You tell them a cat climbed through your window one night to escape the cold and you took it in.

The lawyer coos and says you are doing a great deed adopting a stray, to which you flirt back that it is nothing compared to getting paid due to failed marriages. She laughs

and looks over to your ex, who is still staring at you, and her laughter stops instantly.

You are pleased, though, and leave the party shortly after. Maybe your therapist was right and seeing your ex was a good step, although knowing she has moved on is something that will hurt much more when you are sober. You are in such a good mood that when you finally stumble into your apartment, you leave a glass of milk on your kitchen counter in thanks to your fake cat.

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The cat is not massive but it isn't tiny. Its fur is probably white or grey, but right now it is caked in mud and extremely knotted so you can't see any color other than a dirty brown. On its right flank, the fur is matted down and stained in a much darker color that you would guess is blood, given how it doesn't startle when you drop a carton of cranberry juice onto the floor.

You can't move.

A cat is on your counter in a pool of milk.

There is a fallen glass next to it which has cracked almost perfectly in half and must have embedded tiny shards into the cat's paws. The cat didn't jump at the loud sound, but it did move and now your eyes are locked together. Its eyes are blue, which is the only color you were hoping that they wouldn't be, and they are what make you move over to sit on your couch. Even though this should be far enough away from the cat to keep anything awful from happening, your hands still shake wildly as you take out your phone and text the only person who can always fix everything.

A loud meow makes you look up.

There are now only two couch cushions separating you from the cat and, although you tell your body to move and run back to the safety of your bedroom, you are paralyzed with fear and stay still. The cat looks at you for a while before inching towards you and settling down near your thigh, tucking its legs under its torso. A vision of you catapulting it out your open

windows calms you but instantly makes you feel guilty given its injuries and you decide to just stay still and let it rest.

Your door finally opens and your brother rushes into your apartment, but so does your therapist. They must have been together when you texted him because she is wearing one of his hoodies, but you have more important things to care about than her break of your client trust. So, you ignore her and look at your brother. He is looking at the couch in disbelief and asks if you are okay.

You say that you haven't moved since this stray cat crawled into your apartment. Your therapist lets out a laugh, but it breaks off quickly as she realizes you are both treating this cat like a nuclear bomb.

Your brother asks how he can help.

You take a deep breath, which helps to settle your brewing nausea, and then tell him to get Mocha's cage from the closet in your bedroom so you can transport this cat to a vet.

Your brother's eyes soften as your voice shakes when you say the name Mocha, but he disappears from the room. The knowledge behind his reaction is why you avoid him, because he knows everything about you. He returns in a few seconds with a dusty cage. It has some toys in it - a chewed on mouse and a yellow feather that has a bell attached to it - and he takes those out and drops them on the floor.

You tell him he will have to put the cat in the cage himself and he nods and bends down next to you. But, before he grabs it, your therapist speaks up, asking who Mocha is.

Both of you look at her for a few seconds.

You finally say that Mocha is your least favorite dead cat.

Your brother laughs in a way that has no joy and he turns back to the cat in your lap, quickly nudging it into the cage. He walks away from you quickly. Your whole body relaxes but it still takes a minute before you are confident enough to stand and follow them out of your apartment and into a car.

The staff of the animal hospital you end up in take the cage from him quickly and leave the three of you alone in a waiting room.

Your brother paces for a while before sitting next to you. He waits until you look up before telling you he is sorry for bringing your therapist or doing anything with her. He says he was going to tell you, but she thought she was actually making some progress with you and didn't want to ruin that. This confirms the fact that he knows everything you ever talked about with her, which is something you already knew; it still hurts that he knows what you said in therapy sessions that weren't meant for him.

You ask him why he really decided to convince you to go to therapy. You aren't sure what he will say and the amount of time he hesitates before answering means that he isn't sure either. He eventually says therapy helped him move past your parents' deaths and he wanted you to start to do that too.

On the topic of your parents, you would normally be nicer to your brother but there is blood, dried cranberry juice, and cat hairs on your sweatpants and so you tell him that no wonder you are closed off when he is fucking your therapist. There is silence after that, until a short man appears and tells you all to follow him.

You walk into another room and find the cat resting on a table. It has been cleaned and, like you guessed, has bright white fur. The man announces that there were shards of glass embedded in its stomach and it should be on bedrest for the next few weeks.

Your brother explains to the doctor that none of you own this cat as you take a step forward, your eyes still looking into the cat's blue ones. It lifts its head up as you stop next to it and, even though it has been thirteen years since you touched a cat, you gently brush its coarse fur.

You interrupt your brother's explanation and say you can take it. You could lie about this in so many different ways - you feel culpable for its wounds, you told your ex you had a cat -

but instead the truth comes out. This cat is special. It has your mother's blue eyes and, given that it has lived in your apartment for the last month, you consider it yours already.

Then, you find yourself back in your apartment. Alone. With a cat. You grab a stack of unmarked test papers, let it out of Mocha's cage, and go to sit on your couch. It instantly crawls into your lap, falling asleep. It takes you a while before you grow the confidence to touch its fur again but, this time, it rumbles out a low purr that makes you smile.

You decide in that moment to name him Milk.

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Three weeks later, your therapist looks unbelievably guilty when you enter her office. She instantly says she is sorry for telling your brother about your therapy. You don't interrupt her rambling apology, because this exodus of information is more for her than you, but when she is done you smile.

She looks down and asks you why you are smiling and you tell her it is because you want to actually be honest. Her couch is too comfortable and she should have a seating option for people like you with back problems. You never follow her advice because she doesn't look at you when she gives it and therefore you think she doubts it herself. You don't talk to your brother because he sees too much in you - because he once called you drunk and said he had no memories of your mother. You had to take care of him when you were children but now, when he feels like he needs to protect you, he has no idea what to do.

Your therapist pauses when you quiet and then tells you she didn't think you would return.

You say you aren't sure why you came back, but that is your sixth lie and you correct it immediately. You like her. She lets out a surprised laugh at that, but you tell her that even though she is a bit shy and under your brother's spell, she cares about you and you want her to know the truth. She can ask you anything.

You assume she will mention Mocha but she instead asks about your parents, which is really the same question. You have never talked about before with anyone, but your words come out surprisingly pragmatic. You and your brother had spent a weekend with your grandparents as an early celebration of your birthday and, when you came back home, your front door windows were broken. So, you left your brother in the car and ventured into your house alone only to find your parents' bodies in the living room. The police told you later gunshot wounds killed them but all you remember seeing was a hungry cat tearing into your mother's scalp. It was Mocha, your cat since you were four. It is common, apparently, for cats to eat their owners after they die. That is what the first therapist you ever spoke to said, as though statistics would make it okay to see your childhood cat with your mother's hair hanging out of her mouth.

You are silent for a while and your therapist is too. She eventually puts down her pen and looks at you, saying that she truly is sorry. Not just for your brother, but for what you have gone through, and even though you have heard that so many times, you can tell she genuinely means it and reach out to squeeze her hand in thanks.

She then asks you about your ex. You haven't thought about her in weeks. She tried to call you once but you had been out buying window locks so that nothing could come into your apartment and accidentally hurt Milk. You tell your therapist that you didn't even bother calling her back.