

“THE YARD”  
Marlene Augustine

The humidity was heavy that summer day. It hung in the yard like wet sheets on the line. After my mother’s death, I spent most of the days playing in the backyard. It was just my dad and me; my two older siblings had moved on with their lives and their grief. I was young, maybe five. I stood at the chain-link fence that split the backyards like giant scissors. My father’s yard on one side and Lucy’s on the other.

I envied Lucy. She lived with her younger brother, Jake, and their cat, Momma Kitty. It wasn’t Lucy’s looks that I coveted. Her arms were like huge sausages and her legs, thick. The Bermuda shorts she wore that day had a huge, yellow-flowered print that wound around her body. Her lips, made even bigger by her bright pink Peppermint Kisses lipstick, rivaled her large brown eyes. You could tumble around in her laugh. Lucky Lucy had Momma Kitty, who always had kittens for me to cuddle.

I loved to visit each litter and watch them grow in Lucy’s basement. But usually, I stayed in my father’s backyard. It was alive with color—flowers my mother must have planted before she died. A grape arbor could transform into a stone castle, its green walls decorated with bruised-colored clusters of grapes that hung like coats of arms.

As princess of this castle, I dressed in a mantel of roses and lilacs. I oversaw my kingdom and wove fronds of gladioli into swords that knighted the faithful soldiers who knelt before me. Other days, I linked dandelions into a long, yellow boa around my neck. I was a famous actress taking center stage after a fabulous performance. The sold-out theatre patrons on their feet calling, “Bravo! Bravo!” I smiled and blew kisses to the balcony of trees.

I was safe in that yard.

Except for Jake . . .

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I didn't like him. He was thin, and his clothes hung on him like overripe fruit. His brown hair fell into his eyes, but he never seemed to care. The bangs crossed his forehead only allowing a quick glimpse of his eyes, cold and hard as ice cubes. The way he looked at me made me certain he knew it was creepy—like his smile, which only showed a thin, white-thread line of his teeth. He could appear as a sudden thunderstorm and turn my sunny day gray.

Hidden in my grape arbor, watching and waiting, he would whisper my name over and over—his voice growing raspy and louder until the words wrapped around me like rope vines. I felt bound in a knot of fear that would take hours to untie.

That day, I found my doll face down in a shallow grave, her arms torn from her body. As I reached for her, Jake's laughter rained down hard like pine needles in a hurricane. I tried to keep my guard up against his assaults, but it was difficult to do in a world of castles and kittens and curtain calls.

“Hey! You wanna see them?” Lucy called me to the hot, metal links of the fence. “You can see the kittens now if you want. Momma Kitty's cleaned them up, and they're nursing. So go ahead . . . go on down to the basement but don't touch anything.”

I passed her words in midair as I climbed over the fence, hugged her around the thighs, and tore toward her house. She knew I had been waiting days to hear that the kittens had arrived.

If Jake saw me entering his house, I knew that he would hide somewhere and try to scare me. I checked behind the basement door. No Jake. Good. The stairwell was dark, so holding onto the railing, I stepped down the wooden steps. As I reached the last step, a thin stream of sunlight restored my sight.

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I passed old shelves bowed in the middle, heavy with the weight of homemade canned goods in large, glass mason jars. Down into the cool, stale air of wet coal dust, old cement, and the steady, soothing *thewamp pa, thewamp pa, thewamp* sound of the wringer washing machine.

I quietly called to Momma Kitty; I didn’t want to startle her or wake the kittens. She called back with a trill coming from somewhere deep inside her throat, like a French word with a good meaning. She knew me. I was always the first in the neighborhood to greet her newborns, *ooohing* and *ahhhing* over each unique individual, praising her for the fine, fine job! Commenting on who looked like whom. “Oh, she has your white fur, Momma Kitty! And look at the ears on that one! Just like that big gray cat in the alley.”

Momma Kitty always chose a fresh pile of rags that Lucy provided for her. She would twirl herself up in the materials like a gypsy dancer whose veils flowed around her body with each turn.

I had to look closely to see the tiny breathing colors among the cloths. There were five this time—three orange and one a mixture of black and brown. The fifth one was blackboard-slate gray. Chalk mark stripes coiled around a slightly bent tail with one perfect white snowflake on the top of its head. Momma Kitty’s long fur fanned around them like talcum powder spilled on a counter.

I knew not to touch them. I was small, but one slice from a warning claw taught me to pet them with my eyes only until they too could see. They were beautiful! I sat on that cool cement floor, sunlight snaking in through the small coal bin window. Even in the semi-darkness, the kittens’ colors and sizes amazed me.

I watched them breathe to the rhythm of the old wringer washer churning clean Lucy’s floral clothes. Momma Kitty bathed and held each one. She never confused who had been

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bathed. And once she finished grooming them, she began all over again. The kittens—so lucky to be held close by their mother. Were the soft meows she whispered into their ears the same sweet things my mother had whispered to me?

I got up to leave, thrilled to have met the new family. As I stepped outside, the heat from the yard slapped my face, and the sun glued my eyes into newborn squints. I took the fence at a rush and flashed over it. My skin touching metal as little as possible, coming away with tiny waffle crosses woven on my knees and the palms of my hands. I headed straight to the pussy willow bush and picked a big bunch because the small buds were so soft, and I just had to pet something!

I cradled the bouquet, long stems almost to my knees—and the backyard fell away before me. Our sidewalk became the runway at a beauty pageant. And there I was! My arms filled with flowers. My long gown brushed against the stage as I stepped forward. I was a finalist in the Miss America Pageant! The big announcement was moments away. I was breathless, waiting. I had a good chance; I had won the talent portion by twirling my baton while reciting poetry I had written. I was so sweet to the other contestants that the Miss Congeniality Award was mine.

*Ssh . . .* the room hushed as we waited for the final announcements. Oh, and here it came! The name of the second runner-up. It’s wasn’t me! It was down to two of us. The blond from Florida stood next to me . . . I could almost feel her hand clutching mine in fake friendship. I stood stone still. The next name would be the first runner-up, the one crowned if the real Miss America didn’t do her job. I closed my eyes, my heartbeat drummed in my ears. Oh, wow! The first runner-up . . . *wasn’t me! I was the new Miss America!!!*

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The Atlantic City audience filled the yard, standing on their feet, cheering wildly as I walked down the runway. I smiled and waved a Miss America wave—wiping imaginary tears from my phony, surprised, humble face.

“Hey! Whaddaya doin? Wattsa matter with you? You are so goofy! Ya got such a dumb look on your face!”

It was Jake, standing on his side of the fence. I squeezed my eyes tight, hoping he would be gone when I opened them. I just wanted him to go away. He had ruined the whole thing.

“I’m just playing by myself. Go away,” I said.

“Ya wanna see something? It’s really cool. I made it myself. But hey, if you don’t wanna—”

“What is it?”

He stood, hands behind his back, the sun behind his body casting a glow around him so eerie that I shuddered in the heat. I knew it was best to ignore him and refuse to see what he had. But as hard as I tried, I couldn’t look away.

“What is it?”

“Ah, never mind. You’d cry or something. You’re too young to see this anyhow. And goofy. Never mind.”

He turned away.

“No, I’m not! I’m not too young! I am NOT too young! Jake! Let me see!”

He brought his hands from behind his body and slowly held something up.

It was a clear mason canning jar, its lid screwed tight. He held it up for me to see the sun sparks hitting the water making rainbow splashes inside the jar . . . inside the jar . . . where five tiny kittens, eyes shut tight against the light; trying to turn right side up, thrusting, turning, backs

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arched, their lungs urging them upwards for the air that was not there. Small paws slowly moving, blending, blurring—the brown, the black, the orange, and the chalkboard-gray. The clear water jammed with tiny furred bodies wrapped once again in water sacs, this time drowning. Dying. Their mews screaming behind glass walls. The kittens. Drowning in a jar of water.

Then, he was gone. And the kittens—gone too.

I don’t know how long I stood in that spot. I felt like I too had drowning lungs that couldn’t take in air. I wanted to cry but I couldn’t. I wanted to run and grab the jar away from him, but my feet were cemented in the hot summer grass. The terror in that jar stopped me from even blinking.

That yard never again became Broadway or the Boardwalk. I didn’t ask to look at Momma Kitty’s new litter, and I never hopped that fence again. I mostly played on the front steps from that day on, perfecting my game of Jacks. “Bounce the ball, swoop them up. Twosies; threesies; foursies!”

I taught myself to tie my shoes . . . singing that song to myself repeatedly “The bunny runs around the tree. The bunny jumps in a hole! Close it up tight!”

I know it was hard on my father who tried to make me happy and help me get over my mother’s death. He felt I was too young to be on the front steps alone. He couldn’t understand why I didn’t like the backyard any longer. He put up a new swing set and was angry when I wouldn’t play on it. He tried to make me feel safe and protected. But he didn’t know what Jake had known all along.

I was too young to play in the yard.