

Hysteria

by Berit Ellingsen

On the birthday before he started school, he received a pencil case from his paternal grandparents. The violet, oblong pouch contained a pencil and a pencil sharpener in the same color. He didn't remember what had happened with the pencil or the sharpener, but he had kept the case for years. He clearly recalled its rough fabric and the school-smell of pencil graphite inside it.

A small, bipedal black cat with a large head and eyes was printed on the case. The black cat's world was a solemn sky of violet. The cat stood gazing up, holding a lamp with a flexible neck in one paw. Above the cat flew a tiny black submarine with its periscope peeking out.

Beneath the cat, the word "Hysteria" was written in thin, curving letters; the name of the line of children's stationary products the pencil case belonged to.

For a long time he thought that was the cat's name, or the word for the surprise a small black cat feels when it sees a submarine in the sky. Only years later did he learn that hysteria was considered neither cute nor funny.

