

Sharp Was the Blade: chapter from Ari Figue's Cat

by Jacob Russell

A Little Book of Max and Wren

vi. *Sharp Was the Blade*

...that is the freedom of his mind. More noble than life, too noble for it -- that is the devotion of his heart. There, I have rhymed it all together, dreamed a poem of humankind. I will remember it. I will be good.

The Magic Mountain

I see her sitting on a bed in a first floor apartment--two rooms, kitchen and bath. The bed is in the front room. Lisa--the other one--I can not see. A blank. An erasure on the page, but I can make out her voice--distant at first, almost indistinguishable from the sound of traffic on the street, the box fan in the window, but growing more clear, stronger. She is calling from the bathroom. For toilet paper.

Karen? Did you hear me?

Called her Karin , not Wren.

Wren... Karin , opens the bathroom door, tosses a new roll of paper at Lisa.

She runs her fingers over the scars on her arm, turns, closes the door behind her. She is thinking about tattoos. I know this. I see everything as though I were there, see her on the bed, one foot tucked under her, only half hearing Lisa calling her from the bathroom. Her name--calling her name. Like it wasn't her name at all. Like she wasn't there in the room and the figure on the bed is someone else. I know this too--what it is she's thinking?

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A tattoo.

Where on her body? she's asking herself, touching the scars on her arm. Of roses or butterflies, winged horses, unicorns, hearts wrapped in flames. Serpents. Clinging vines. Bracelets of thorn. Interlocking Celtic keys.

They have catalogs, she is saying to Lisa who is standing at the window now, a window with bars. Her hands grip them. Lisa is an actress. Community theater. Philadelphia indy films. Mike Lemon casting parties on 7th Street. She sees her reflection staring back at her, pleading with her. An image in black and white. A 40's movie. Camera running but she can't remember her lines. Doesn't know the script. What did I do? it is asking her--the reflection. What did I do to deserve this? Why did they put me here? If she is guilty--she cannot remember why. A story that makes no sense.

What are you whispering about?

Lisa doesn't answer. Karin is sitting on the bed. She is asking her something now. A question about catalogs.

Catalogs?

Tattoos. Like wallpaper samples, you know. The place on Girard--on the way to the el. The one with that sexy tattooed lady in the window. The walls, the walls are always covered with them. So what do you think? What do you think I should get?

Lisa rolls her eyes.

Whatever, she says, releasing the bars, brushing past, leaving the movie, picking up a jacket from the back of a chair, tossing it over her shoulder, striking a pose. If it doesn't make sense, what's the point?

Point?

I'm going out to eat.

You just ate.

Did not.

Yes you did.

Not!

What were you doing in the kitchen?

Dishes!.

Dishes?

The one's you left last night, darling.

I told you I'd do them!

Telling's not doing.

Wren reflects on this..

I left them on purpose, you know.

You what?

To prove a point.

Being?

That you'd do them--just so you could tell me how responsible and whatever--so you could have the huge pleasure of giving me grief with your guilt tripping *everything has to be like Lisa wants it* whatever!

No, you know what you do? You make a promise and think: Okay! I said it--it's done! A word is good as a deed. You did it on purpose? *Right!* That we can believe, can't we? So I'd do them and you wouldn't have to that's what. I'll see you in the morning.

You were going out to eat.

I'm going out to eat.

An all night diner?

I'm seeing Steven.

Steven! Steven? You gotta be kidding.

What did I say? I'm seeing Steven.

Is Steven seeing you, this is the question?

Good-bye, Karin . Lisa blows her a kiss. The door closes before she can say anything more.

Wren--let it be Wren--reaches down and tries to pick up the cat--the cat that's been rubbing against her ankles, but when she stands up it bolts, scratching her arm. Unintentionally.

Wren looks at the trickle of blood. An accident. Pokes it with a finger nail. Stares at it for a long time. When the blood begins to dry and crust, she goes into the bathroom to wash it off, squeezes a thread of white antibacterial ointment over the scratch. She had lied to Max. When he kissed the scars they had burned more intensely than cigarettes pressed to her skin.

He didn't mean it, she said, kneeling to stroke his ears.

It has been a long time. She's done well. Six months. Six months since she cleaned out the sharps.

Jesus Christ, Lisa had said, spring cleaning in November? She Searched for all the hidden stashes: the razor blades, the kitchen matches, the cigarettes she never smoked. What would she do with the kitchen knives? Wren squinted, gazed into the mirror. Sharp was the blade that pressed at her heart.

What would it be like? It was a form of curiosity as much as anything. As though, to entertain an act in thought were an invitation, to imagine it, a commitment. Lisa was right.

Predestination. Are we compelled, sooner or later, to make real everything the imagination is capable of conceiving? How could we have dreamt of the bomb and denied ourselves that moment in the desert, the delight and wonder and beauty of igniting a living city with a miniature star of our own creating? Are we an animal compelled to dream, and then to make its dreams come true? And who has power to control the dream? The question is, the lion said: who will be the master?

What would the real thing be like? It would feel, she thinks... but can not find a word for it.

You see the problem? How would it feel? What would it really be like? How could she ever know if she didn't act? And this unknowing, like a weight that grows heavier with each passive hour.

Her eyelids grow heavy and dreamy in her thoughts. *You do not open the wound all at once. You do not slice or cut or slash. You stroke, as a lover's finger strokes the skin of her beloved. You slide the blade lightly over the surface. You do not think, I am hurting myself. You do not think, pain. You slide the blade over the surface of the skin. Ever so lightly. You do not think of pressing the blade into flesh. You stroke, as the finger of a lover would stroke, gently sliding the edge of the blade over the surface until, as though it were something in a dream, a trail of blood, razor thin, appears, as though by itself, as though without agent. Dark, crimson, beautiful, hypnotic.*

Draw the blade again and again, weightless. Like a feather stroking the skin, and the fissure opens, opens, and the blood, so bright and fresh and lovely, pools in the widening fissure, pooling and overflowing. Like a lovers heart overflows with love for his beloved.

Above all--you do not think.

This she understands. This much she has known.

But what of the deeper cut? The thrust of the blade, the point of the knife? Through to the hilt, to the heart?

How hard would it be? Thousands have done it before you. It is easy, easy as falling down, as falling on the blade of a sword. In Rome--even the women. Better than the soldiers coming to get you. Remember what's her name That PBS show about Rome. Took her by the hair because she wouldn't by herself.

But Wren is learning to deny her dream. She will be good. To slice the dream from the heart--a blade of spirit not of flesh. She will be good instead.

She makes a face in the mirror. Curls her lips back and growls. Her gums are pink, pale at the roots of her teeth, the crooked lower incisor. Curls her lips back and growls. Examines the pores in her nose. Pulls her lower lip out--the frenulum linguae, that delicate little flap holding the lip to the gum at its center.

Shit! I didn't even think to stop--to put in my diaphragm! Why did I do it? He's so sweet. Why does the thought of him make me shudder? She notes the day of the month--counts forward. A week from tomorrow--no, the day after. Nine days. A bad sign.

All I want, she thinks, is to be good. An idea that comes to her in a kind of vision, an orgasm of an intensity she had not imagined possible, pleasure and pain so intermingled she can not distinguish one from the other.

The idea grows on her.

It's what I *am*--a person who wants to be good. And when I am good, who will I want then? I mean--what? Nothing! How can you want what you already have? And what will I be? But to be good--it must be in secret. The second you tell, it's not good anymore.

She runs her finger over the scars on her left arm, counts the suture marks--sixty eight. White dots. *We counted them together.* She touches the burns, one by one, but doesn't count them.

Just the same, she says to the face in the mirror: You could use a new life.

One of us does, the reflection says. *The question is: who will go first?*

No. The question is... what the fuck am I going to do about Max?

