

Serial Killer

by Tiff Holland

Once Mom finally came to terms with the fact that my brother was gay, she became convinced he was a serial killer.

“He has all the signs,” she told me as she trimmed my hair.

“Signs?” I asked, watching her in the three-way. Snip-snip.

“You know,” she paused, the scissors open-mouthed in her right hand like a beak.

“Played with fire,” she raised the index finger on her left hand.

“Lots of trouble in elementary school,” she raised her middle finger.

“Sexual confusion,” her ring finger went up.

“Tortured small animals...”

“Wait,” I interrupted, “tortured what small animals?”

“The cats,” Mom answered, lowering her fingers and appraising the back of my head. She plugged the electric shaver into the power strip where the ready light of her curling iron glowed like a red eye.

“He loved the cats,” I said after a minute.

“I saw him throw one off the roof,” she pumped the foot pedal of the barber chair, and I rose in small increments. Not gently, she pushed my head forward so she could shave my neck. She flipped on the razor. Bzzz, bzzz. The blade, which she never sharpened, tugged at the skin. I tried to think like Kevin, like Kevin at nine or ten.

“Maybe he just wanted to see if it would land on its feet,” I raised my head slightly. Mom pushed it back down, made another buzzing pass, turned the shaver off. She pressed firmly on the foot pedal and I sunk all the way down. She untied the cape and gave it a fling, brushed the hair away from my collar.

“Check it,” she told me, offering a rat-tail comb.

I moved the part from the left to the right side of my scalp, pushed it through my hair without looking.

“Fine,” I told her.

“What do you think?” she asked, sweeping my trimmings up with a child-size broom.

“It looks good,” I told her, glancing at the mirror.

"No," she said, "about Kevin?"

"Was the cat hurt?" I asked.

"No, I don't think so, there were so many. I don't know which one it was." Kevin had seventeen cats at one time.

"I'll ask Ray," I told her finally. Ray, my boyfriend, was a cop.

So, I asked Ray. I told him mom's suspicions and why. That summer, Jeffrey Dahmer was being tried in the courthouse downtown for the death of his very first victim, a kid who had went to my high school, whose sister I ate lunch with every day.

To my surprise, Ray said Kevin did have a number of the known signs. Ray had taken a class in criminal profiling from the guy who wrote *The Silence of the Lambs*, who, apparently, used to actually be in the FBI.

"Just one problem," Ray said finally.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Kevin likes people. He really cares about people. True sociopaths, and serial killers are sociopaths, they have no sense of right and wrong, not really, and they don't like people."

After Ray left, I read *People* magazine in the tub. That week it featured pictures of Dahmer's fifty gallon drums being wheeled out of his apartment by police in white hazmat suits. Then, I called Mom up. She was already in bed.

"Ray doesn't think Kevin's a serial killer," I told her.

On the other end of the line, I heard her light up a cigarette and inhale deeply, exhale right into the phone. I imagined the smoke seeping into the receiver and felt a tickle in my throat.

"Maybe you could ask him?"

"Ask him what? If he's a serial killer?" Before he came out, Mom had pressured me into asking Kevin if he was gay, which he denied.

"I just wish your father was still alive," she said finally, "he'd know what to do."

I thought of Dahmer's father on TV, wiping tears away with a sleeve,

walking away from the camera, holding an open palm up like a crossing guard, STOP.

"No, Mom, he wouldn't."

