

Velvet

by Tina Barry

Seven days. Dad's not coming back. Seven days of Velvet and mother, folded together, lovers. I open the door to her room, just a crack, dust motes like dirty planets whirl over their bed. They wince, startled. "Go!" she yells at me. I stare. The hair we loved to comb is a nest of snarls, her eyes belong to a sleepwalker. "Go! Go!" She reaches for the blanket, the Chihuahua, as tiny as a bonsai, curled against her stomach. I linger outside her door. "Mom," I say, hoping she'll call me back. There's no answer.

Bloop. Velvet's paws hit the carpet. The new man of the house is on the prowl for food, a walk. Breakfast was Rice-A-Roni; for lunch I'm serving Ring Dings. Perhaps he'd like a bite? Now he's cornered: me on one side, my sister on the other. "Herrrrre's Velvet!" I say. He's a miniature Johnny Carson. "Herrrrre's Velvet!" my sister mimics, her voice sweeter and softer than mine. We laugh. Encouraged, Velvet emits a yelp: Oh! He's forgotten we hate him.

Beneath my arm, he's made himself as heavy as an old stump. Our neighbor waves as we rush past. Two girls and their dog. She can't see him quivering like a divining rod. Neither can the drivers who pass us with benign smiles, their thoughts on chores, dinner. We turn a corner, away from homes where housewives watch, away from traffic. There is a cement bridge no higher than my waist; below it a stream bounces over small rocks. "Look Vel," I taunt, lifting him over the side. He's frozen, then flailing. I wish his brittle nails would tear a hole in the sky, a hole my father could walk through. "Stop!" my sister shouts. "He'll fall." He's safe now, grateful, his silky head nuzzled beneath her neck. Our strokes are calming, gentle. We murmur "ssh," and "now there," and "it's okay." Words we remember and miss.

