

## **this isn't the story you think it is.**

My grandma chooses a ring as her souvenir because gold outlasts everything. It survives the war, like Opa. Unlike the swallows that once nested in the eaves of his apartment. He doesn't mention birds the night they meet. Whiskey makes him brave, but that's a bridge too far.

Later, their daughter steals the heart of the office flirt. They get married somewhere sunny, then move somewhere cold. Her husband isn't sure what to say the night Toe and Zooey are killed in the gorge outside the house. They're her cats, but he'll miss how Toe used to rub against his leg when he was making coffee. At least the girls are too little to understand.

She tells her daughters that cats have the same birthdays as the people who love them most. They celebrate Eliot's in June and Stella's in October. The night she's diagnosed, her daughters wonder how you have a birthday party for someone who isn't there to blow out the candles. She holds her cats and cries because they'll both outlive her.

Two urns occupy a shelf in the front room of my parents' house. Neither of them is my mom's. In the shadow of a miracle, I move to Texas and settle in an apartment she helps me decorate. When she goes home, it feels the same way the house did when Stella died – like floating in an empty sea. I bring home Luna and Sophie, and now at least there's someone out here with me.

The streets empty too, in March. Purina discontinues the cats' food, but they don't know the difference. No one's happier than Sophie when my office closes down. She sits on my chest and purrs while I lay in the dark watching *Gossip Girl*, trying not to think about being underwater. About the world. About my boss, who couldn't be with Cheddar when he died because the virus wouldn't allow it. *They brought his carrier back a few minutes later. Just the carrier. No cat.*

I move to higher ground. Luna likes the new house, but Sophie seems immune. The vet says she has bigger problems. That Thursday night, the blue sturgeon moon rises like a swallowed coin over the gorge, and I beg my guardian angel for help. He tells me to wear my grandma's ring for strength. There's nothing he can do.

The urn they hand me at the vet is too light to be Sophie. I cry in the car instead of the waiting room, so my tears won't drown the nurse. The divots in my grandma's ring fill with salt water, but it doesn't matter. Gold outlasts everything.

I drive home weeping, with a riptide in the empty space beside me.