

## The Death of Freedom

“Oh my God! Stop!” Leslie screeched, flinging her bangle-covered arm in front of my face to point out the car window. I had just begun the turn into our mother’s driveway, coming back from our trip to the grocery store. Our mother’s eightieth birthday had brought our far-flung family together for the weekend, and these runs to restock the kitchen were daily necessities. I shoved my foot hard on the brake pedal, simultaneously marveling that my younger sister, nearing fifty, still sounded like an overwrought teenager. Leslie was a love child of the sixties; I was raised in the fifties, a historical difference that led to conflicting viewpoints on the nature of adulthood, religion, fashion, and nearly everything else.

“What is that?” Leslie said, still pointing out the driver’s window.

There was a dead cat lying on the narrow grass parkway in front of the neighbor’s stucco house. Standing over the body, vigorously jerking on it, was a small, scruffy terrier.

“Eww! That’s disgusting!” Leslie croaked.

I pulled up into the driveway and jumped out of the driver’s seat. Clapping my hands sharply and yelling “Go!” and “Get away!” I attempted to scare off the dog, but it was fixated. Being a wiry sort, the dog’s frantic attempts to lift the cat’s body bore little fruit, but it was bent on finishing what it had started. With each tug the cat’s emaciated orange body animated briefly.

I couldn’t think of how this had happened. The cat appeared to be at least as large as the terrier. Had this dog actually killed the cat? Despite its manic preoccupation with

carrion, the terrier seemed like a pedestrian little yappy thing that I'd seen around the neighborhood, looking diminutive and innocent on the end of a leash. Now, with its mouth full of cat fur and skin, the dog cast an evil, red-eyed glare at me and growled.

“Get off!” I screamed again, fearing that if I laid hands on the dog it would turn and bite me. Gingerly, I placed my New Balance-clad foot under the dog's belly and gave it a little lift, at which the dog released its grip, made a half-hearted attempt to nip my leg, and backed off, barking wildly. I kept up a circling, defensive stance around the cat's dead body, heading off each attempt the terrier made to get at the corpse again.

“Go inside and get a towel or something!” I yelled to Leslie, who was still busy making “Eww!” noises while I intervened in this Animal Rescue scene. Leslie ran into the house about the same time the dog gave up, reverted to innocent lap dog, and sat down, tipped its head to regard me, then trotted jauntily down the sidewalk as if on parade at a dog show. I felt like following it and giving it a little kick in the butt.

I wondered about a possible explanation for this strange incident. Perhaps the cat had been hit and had made it just far enough to collapse on the grass parkway, where the innocent terrier had happened upon it. The cat was a sorry beast. He was the oldest-looking cat I'd ever seen, bony and mangy, and particularly unappealing, even to a cat lover like me. After a few seconds I realized that this body, teeth bared in a death grin, eyes fixed and staring, was actually Freedom, the neighborhood tomcat, once lord of Olive Avenue, this post-WWII suburban street that had hosted a generation of baby boomers and their animals.

Freedom's territory had always been wherever he decided to stroll and spray, a habit that had irritated our mother, a firm believer in neutering animals early. Freedom

had been in aesthetic decline for the last five years, but stayed regally unaware of how unattractive he had become, weaving indiscriminately around any human's legs and inviting total strangers to reach down and scratch his angular, flea-bitten body or his tattered ears. The cursory strokes he received seemed to satisfy him. He lived down the street with Victoria, Mom's neighbor for thirty years, a person similarly blessed with the naïve notion that everyone wanted to spend large quantities of time with her. Victoria's daughter, now grown up moved away, had named the kitten "Freedom" during her turbulent teens. Mom and Victoria were generally friendly, but not friends.

Leslie emerged from the back of the house, stood halfway up the driveway and proffered a raggedy white cloth at the end of her outstretched arm. "Here's a towel. I asked Mom for an old one."

I looked up quickly at the front window of the house. "You didn't tell her what it was for, did you?"

"No." Leslie eyed the lump on the parkway warily. "I don't think we should tell her."

I walked up the driveway to take the towel from Leslie's fingers and returned to place it over Freedom's dead body, briefly entertaining, and then rejecting, the urge to close his eyes like in the movies.

"I agree. Mom doesn't need to know about this. She's got enough to deal with already," I regarded the lump. "I'm pretty sure this is Victoria's daughter's cat."

Leslie edged closer and then shuddered away from the shrouded corpse. "What do you think happened to him?"

“I don’t know, maybe he got hit, but we can’t leave him here. Get a black plastic bag out of the garage.”

Leslie strode purposefully back the driveway to Mom’s garage, undoubtedly glad for a task that didn’t involve direct contact with the body. I glanced at the house again, where a curtain in our mother’s bedroom moved slightly.

All four of us, and our families, were back in Long Beach for this birthday visit to Olive Avenue. “You really never know how many more birthdays she’ll have,” had popped up in our email exchanges. Mom had been getting thinner and smaller each year since our stepdad’s death several years ago. She had voluntarily given up her driver’s license last year after backing out of the driveway one morning and discovering she had no idea which way to turn the wheels, having forgotten why she was in the car. Suddenly we kids found ourselves referring to her with new words to describe her unfamiliar vulnerability -- “out of it,” “lost,” “confused” -- such a far cry from the strong, independent presence she had always been in our lives. Leslie and I clearly had arrived at the same conclusion; that the business of death and body disposal was not going to involve our mother at all. We had reached that point in middle age where the “Mother bear” instincts we had lavished on our children were transferring naturally to our mother.

Leslie returned with the bag, looking braver now that a towel covered the remains. “Do you think we should bury him?”

“No, we’d better wait until we tell Victoria.” I placed the plastic bag over the towel-covered body. “She might want to see his body, and maybe say a prayer, or two, or six,” I said.

We shared a guilty chuckle. Victoria's ardent Catholic evangelism often led to sidewalk encounters that involved her dogged attempts to engage the listener in prayer. Mom had learned to extricate herself within ten minutes by moving off toward home, making placating references to God and His goodness, but woe to those hapless neighbors who lingered and left their hands free in front of their bodies. Victoria had mastered a cat-like move in which she grasped the unwary listener's fingers, bowed her head and demanded, "Let's pray together." Her supplications tended toward the language of television evangelism.

"Lord, we just thank you. Lord, we just want to. Lord, we just come to you today." The prayers were very long, with many references to the blood of Jesus.

Briefly, I wondered how I could get Leslie to deliver the news of Freedom's demise. "Well, I guess someone should go tell Victoria," I began.

"Why don't you go?" Leslie said quickly. "You know her better and everything."

I supposed I was the obvious candidate, being the eldest and having made the most frequent visits to Mom's home on Olive Avenue. Being the only Christian besides our mother in a family of spiritual cynics, I had spent my share of time praying, albeit self-consciously, on the sidewalk with Victoria.

I walked the two doors down and rang Victoria's doorbell. It echoed plaintively inside what sounded like an empty house. There was no answer after several rings. Feeling relieved, I returned to the task of moving the body.

"What'd she say?" Leslie asked from where she stood vigil over Freedom's shrouded remains. "How'd you get away so fast?"

"She's not home, so we'll just have to get started with this little undertaking."

“Ha, ha!” said Leslie, appreciatively.

I rolled Freedom’s nearly weightless body into the black plastic bag. I thought of placing the bag inside the trashcan for safekeeping, dreading the possibility of another animal finding it of interest. It seemed an ignominious end for a long-lived, proud cat though, so, tying a bow in the orange plastic loops of the bag, I gently placed it out of harm’s way on top of the large city trashcan outside Mom’s garage. We both went into the house, Leslie to report to the others, and me to compose a note that I then carried down the street to place on Victoria’s door:

*“Dear Victoria,  
I’m so sorry to tell you that Freedom has died. We found him on the parkway and are keeping his body safe. Please call when you get this note. Love, Susan  
(562) 555-1212”*

Back in the house, the menfolk were launching into their various litanies concerning the proper way to grill meat, a discussion that always involved a protracted clash of egos. Leslie and I pulled our husbands and brothers aside to caution them that, by no means, was the bag on top of the trashcan, standing improvidently near the grill, to be touched. The less sensitive among them showed great interest in examining the contents. I felt a momentary fear that one of them might find the proximity of fire and flesh interesting, but I pushed aside the absurd thought, remembering that we were all grownups now. Our mother seemed oblivious to the whispering, acclimated as she must be to the weirder dynamics of these family gatherings: Spoken and unspoken resentments between the married couples, silly giggling from the hippie holdouts after their unexplained trips “to the garage,” and the more serious diatribes from the heavy drinkers who, at all costs, must be dissuaded from engaging in any form of card play.

Mom's birthday dinner proceeded without incident. The cake was fired up and carried in with a rousing off-key chorus of "Happy Birthday to You," helpful grandchildren added their breath and saliva to Grandma's extinguishing of the candles, and the men assumed their after-dinner recumbent positions on couches, chairs, and floors. There was some talk of rustling up a poker game, at which prospect our mother quickly retired to her bedroom to "stretch out."

"I wonder why Victoria hasn't called?" I said to Leslie as we did the dishes.

Leslie shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe she didn't see the note."

"I guess we'd better go talk to her."

"Okay. Let me know how it goes." Leslie busily rattled the silverware in the bottom of the sink. I sighed, accepting the inevitable.

It was getting late, high time to let Victoria know the details of why Freedom wasn't coming home for dinner. I left Mom's house through the back door, glanced at Freedom's body on its trashcan bier, and then turned to walk down the driveway. To my surprise, there was Victoria, standing on the sidewalk in the waning summer light. She was staring down at the parkway and then up at Mom's house, her body uncharacteristically still, the white note dangling from her fingers.

In the dim glow of sunset it was hard to see her face, but as she raised her gaze to meet mine, there was no denying the uncomprehending look on her face. She looked stricken into silence.

"I'm so sorry, Victoria. I know you've had Freedom for a long time." I approached, offering her my hands.

Victoria crossed herself quickly. “Oh my God, what happened? He’s my daughter’s cat she’s gonna kill me she told me to keep him inside sweet blood of Jesus, what happened?” she positively keened, ignoring my willing hands, and casting her own up to heaven.

“I don’t know,” I responded, shaking my head. “We just found him lying there on the parkway when we drove in from the store.” I had decided to censor out the terrier’s part.

“Are you sure you didn’t hit him? I’m just sayin’ these things happen I wouldn’t be mad God is good he had a long life and what am I gonna tell my daughter maybe you hit him and you didn’t know it?” Victoria continued at breakneck speed, her eyes finally flicking up under lowered brows to meet mine for the first time.

“No! He was already dead when we found him!”

Victoria began pacing and shaking her head emphatically, her voice rising into a slightly higher register. “Well, then what happened to him he’s not supposed to go outside what am I gonna tell my daughter sweet Jesus protect us!”

I was tempted to bring up the terrier: Maybe the dog had been chasing Freedom, and the cat’s old heart had just given out. Maybe a car had hit him. There was just no way to tell, and it was clear that Victoria required a cause of death to pass on to her daughter, preferably one that left her blameless. I searched my brain for something to say that would calm her down.

Blessedly, Leslie joined us, strolling down the driveway. “Isn’t it awful?” she said to Victoria. “He was just lying there when we came back from the store! I wonder what happened to him?”



Leslie's echoing of Victoria's own query strengthened my position that we had had nothing to do with the actual death. Watching Victoria's frantic face, I began to worry what she would make of the casual bagging we had done of Freedom's body.

Still I offered, "Do you want to see him?"

"No, no, I don't want to God is good I'll call my son to dig a hole. Thank you I shoulda kept him inside oh sweet Jesus blood of the martyrs!" Victoria's hands fluttered around her, grasping at the air as though there she might find absolution for her guilt, or at least an excuse to give her daughter. She was clearly not equal to the task of shuttling Freedom's dead body from Mom's house to hers. I offered to bring him over when the hole was ready. Victoria thanked me profusely, reassigning me the role of ally, and charged off down the street, muttering and gesturing, to move forward with the funeral arrangements.

Some time passed before Mom's phone rang and Victoria's voice said, in many, many words that, "The hole is ready."

It was getting darker outside and the wind off the nighttime ocean blew cold, even as far north as Mom's house several miles from the shore. I pulled on a cardigan and left my family behind to their various evening entertainments that, unfortunately, included a poker game. I dreaded what I would find at home when I returned. I almost welcomed this brush with death and its related activities. My role was clear; I was my take-charge self. I picked up Freedom's plastic bag and walked down the street. The bag was so light I had to stop myself from swinging it as I walked.

Victoria met me out in front of her house and led me into her back yard. Standing at the rear of the yard under an avocado tree was a largish young man I had never seen

before. He was sweating over a shovel as he finessed the edges of a very nice-looking hole in the ground, almost two feet by two feet and nearly as deep. That he had accomplished this excavation was remarkable, given the neighborhood's hardened clay soil. I saw a pickax leaning against the tree.

Victoria introduced me quickly and offhandedly to the young man, Hector. As it happened, he was one of the roofers that had been working that day on the house across the street from Victoria's. Coming up short on obtaining a family gravedigger, Victoria had crossed over to the roofing crew, finishing a long day's work in the hot sun. Perhaps her Spanish had served her well; maybe her age and small stature had convinced Hector to add another hour of manual labor to his day. Most likely, she had talked him into it with a stream of references to the goodness of God. Hector's gentle countenance and soft voice indicated a guy who didn't easily say "No" to people.

Hector stood back from his labors as I approached with the bag. We shook hands. "Mucho gusto," he said.

"Igualmente."

"Muy triste," he offered. I nodded. It was sad.

I asked Victoria if she was ready, and Victoria concurred with another stream of invocations. I removed Freedom from the bag and knelt to lower his towel-shrouded body into the hole. His stiff, outstretched legs made him longer than I had imagined and I struggled getting him neatly into the space. Hector moved forward and angled the body up slightly to fit. The towel dropped away from Freedom's unlovely face and Hector shivered a bit in the evening chill. I re-covered Freedom with the towel and stood up to join the other two at the grave's edge.

“Do you want to say a prayer?” I asked Victoria.

“No,” said Victoria. “Cats don’t have souls.”

I was floored! It seemed this was the perfect occasion for a public prayer; maybe gracious thanks for Freedom’s long life, or a fervent wish that he join the other kitties in cat heaven. At the least, I would have thought that it was appropriate to ask God to help Victoria figure out what to tell her daughter.

Hector appeared not to understand what was happening. He stood there, a silent, giving presence, and I simply could not help myself. After all we’d been through together, I felt that Freedom deserved a prayer. So I prayed in my best high school Spanish:

“Nuestra senor, por favor, abre sus brazos para recibir Freedom. Era un gato bueno (*Our Lord, open your arms to receive Freedom. He was a good cat.*) Amen.”

Hector said “Amen” with gusto. His eyes met mine briefly, and a quick smile flashed across his face. He added a short sentence in sweetly accented English, “I layk cats.”

Victoria was silent as Hector filled the hole. I knew I had tread on her doctrinal territory, but I felt strangely satisfied. I thanked Hector and thought about running home to get some money to tip him, since it appeared that Victoria was not going to. Then I considered that he might have a good feeling about what he had done for us, and a monetary offering would only ruin his sense of grace.

I gave Victoria a quick hug and left while Hector was still tamping down the loose earth to prevent a nighttime raid from “*otros animales.*” Humming “All Things

Bright and Beautiful,” I strode back up Mom’s driveway and into the back door, where I was met by argumentative voices and the clink of poker chips.

“You can’t change the rules in the middle of the game!”

“We’re playing house rules!”

“What does that mean? This is Dad’s house and he always played with that rule!”

The teenagers were playing a video game in the next room, seemingly unperturbed by the outbursts of their male elders. The womenfolk were nowhere to be seen.

I heard voices coming from Mom’s bedroom down the hall. As I opened the bedroom door, Leslie was saying, “She’s been gone a long time,”

She, Mom, and my two sisters-in-law were arrayed in repose on Mom’s king-size bed. Leslie looked up sheepishly, obviously caught telling the story of the death of Freedom. Mom’s face looked animated and alert. Apparently she had heard the whole thing. They all looked expectantly at me to relate the final episode. I sat down on the edge of the bed near Mom and told them about the burial -- the forced labor, Victoria’s surprising announcement concerning animal souls, the impromptu Spanish prayer -- leaving out the struggle to fit the body into the grave. Mom just smiled sweetly. The crocheted blanket Leslie had made for her was tucked around her legs as she sat propped up on her pillows, with her daily Bible readings open on the bed.

“Well, we all have to go sometime,” she sighed, lying back on the pillows.

We all sat for a moment, quietly absorbing the marvel of our mother’s grace and equanimity. She closed her eyes.

Abruptly, she sat up again with an odd look on her face. I reached out my hands.

“You know,” my mother said, shaking her head. “I never could stand that cat, or his idiot owner.”

“Amen,” said Leslie.