



2021

A certain way of alone

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Recommended Citation

Calaghan, Carrie (2021) "A certain way of alone," *Floodwall Magazine*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 17.
Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/floodwall-magazine/vol1/iss2/17>

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A Certain Way of Alone

The cats, naturally, were the first ones to discover the body. They congregated outside the side entrance to Mr. Browne's garage as the door swung open and closed in the sharp winter wind. The three felines sat at the door, beyond the range of its squeaky flailing but within view of the garage's interior, and they groomed and preened themselves with detached languor. I called to them, knowing Mr. Browne hated it when the cats meandered into his yard. "If I see any more prints on my goddamn windshield, god help me, I'll start putting that antifreeze out, you hear?" He would yell that or something like it to me from across his brown yard as I climbed my front steps or got the mail from my battered mailbox. I might call back a hollow apology, but usually I just nodded.

That one cold day, the cats sauntered back to my porch after I called them. Later, in retrospect, I realized that they had given me the feline equivalent of a shrug and a cigarette flick. Well, if you don't care, they would have said.

Truth was, maybe we didn't. Or rather, caring was hard to come by. It's the sort of street where we all would be good neighbors, I'm sure, if only we had the time, or weren't working the night shift, or weren't pulling our blinds tight to close out the noise of Terry and Janine screaming at each other. But if all that weren't going on, I know we'd want to be friendly. There was enough, "Hey, how's it going," and "I went ahead and picked up your newspaper for you," to testify to a genuine undercurrent of warmth, like a creek driven belowground, rolling slowly beneath our cracked, weed-sprinkled pavement.

But there wasn't even potential warmth when it came to Wayne Browne. He was old and sour, his fingers colored from years of staining wood in his workshop and his words stained with anger and resentment. So when he stopped haunting his front yard, when he no longer launched criticisms at every passing target, I imagine most folks reacted like I did: At first, I didn't notice the silence, like how you forget a pain in your knee as soon as it passes. Then later, it dawned on me that I hadn't seen him for a while—

maybe that was just after I called the cats away from his door. But still, nothing really registered, not until the cops came about the tiger.

Yes, it was that ridiculous. Some thug somewhere had himself a tiger cub that grew into a full-sized beast, which his dog pen could not contain. When the cops traced the tiger to Mr. Browne's garage I realized what the cats had discovered nearly two weeks earlier. The cats had found his cold, nearly frozen body, felled by a heart attack I suppose, well before the escaped tiger nosed his way into the garage in search of a meal. Well, if you don't care, my cats had shrugged.

After the trembling cops and animal control authorities caught the tiger, they set up a police line around the garage and the body. Our neighbors started gravitating towards it, clustering at the edges of his lawn. Sara Hernandez was the first to shuffle all the way up to the yellow tape that cut across his driveway, with a steaming mug of coffee clutched in her fleshy hands. I used my foot to shove the cats away from my screen door – Back inside, Sumo – and I zipped my jacket up to my chin as I walked across the crisp, winter-dead grass to join her.

"Can you believe it?" she said. "Meal for a tiger before anyone knows he's passed. What a world."

I was about to give a chuckle but stifled it when I saw Sara's mournful stare, her moonpie cheeks sagging as she watched the police circulate through the garage.

"What if that happened to one of us?" She turned to look at me, her eyes wide under her heavy lids.

"Listen Sara, you're too young to just drop dead, and ..."

She waved my denial away. "You never know when it's coming, alright? Who's to say, who's to say."

"Still, someone would notice you were gone. I'd notice." She didn't look at me as I spoke, and I was glad. I might have been lying, I couldn't say for sure, and I didn't want to know.

"We are single women, *querida*." She took a deep sip of her coffee. "Who cares for us?"

A few more neighbors wandered up to the yellow tape, moths flitting towards an uncertain light, and became enough to form a loose crowd. I slipped away, back to my small, old house with its peeling blue paint and three mewing cats.

"No, no," I said as I eased them away from the door and slipped myself through it. "Too much going on out there."

As I boiled some liver for the cats and the rich smell steamed up into my hair while the cats wound around my legs, I teased out the web of relationships woven into my life. How did that web become so fragile, so small, I wondered.

I placed three blue dishes, each piled with dust-colored meat, on the floor where they were quickly overwhelmed by three greedy felines, nosing the small plates across the tile with a gentle, icy sound. I watched the cats, listening to the soft click of their working jaws. If these are my closest ties, I thought, is that alright? These little carnivores who might someday, I admit, see me as a meal, when my flesh has sat around long enough, indistinct and alone.

The water running over my hands took a while to warm up; I had nearly finished washing the liver from beneath my fingernails by the time it ceased being frigid. Flesh upon flesh. I wished that I could scrub those recently-appeared age spots off my hands. No amount of soap could achieve that, though.

With my hands dried and a cup of hot cocoa on a tray, I settled into my tiny, cluttered sitting room. I flicked the remote towards the TV, but nothing flashing back from the screen could hold my attention. My eyes wandered out to the window where people still meandered on the sidewalk in the glow of pulsing lights, and then back inside, to the art deco lamp I bought, long ago, at an antique store, and a small figurine of a young ballerina, her skirt swirled halfway around her knees as she twirled, eternally frozen. Sumo, the skinny cat, jumped into my lap and started purring, his calico throat humming against my leg. I scratched his head.

"Not now, buddy." I eased him off my lap and went to dig through my purse for my cell phone. Time to make a change, I thought, pulling out the black device, a cold weight in my palm. I scrolled through the contacts and selected my sister.

As it rung, I thought about what I would say to her. Maybe invite her out for a burger? No. Maybe offer to go shopping together. If she still enjoyed that sort of thing.

It went to voicemail, her canned cheerful response giving me a moment to breathe. My thumb hovered over the "call end" button, but I resisted the habit. I left a message. "Call me back. It's your sister."

About Carrie Callaghan

Carrie Callaghan lives, reads, and writes in Washington, DC with her husband, toddler, and talkative cat. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Silk Road Review*, *Weave Magazine*, *The MacGuffin*, and the *Northern Virginia Review*. She is also a member of the editorial board of the Washington Independent Review of Books.