

The Dreadful, The Magical
Flash Fiction by Kate F. Eaton

Being kicked out of his own birthday party was a new low for Willie, at least, that was what his mother said as she mopped the chocolate cake out of Jennifer's hair with a dish towel. "These girls came to have a nice time and to celebrate your birthday. Couldn't you for once be civilized?"

It was his mother's idea to invite girls to his party, now that he was turning eleven. No more cakes with army men, no more birthday tug-of-war that always became a food fight. "I'm finished with free-for-all birthday parties, Willie. We'll invite a few girls and you boys can learn some manners."

The problem was that his pals from the neighboring farms saw girls the same way he did, as dreadful creatures who made fun of a guy for things he couldn't help, like farting during his First Communion. When word got out that Willie's mother had invited seven girls to his party, seven boys had sudden urges to help their fathers plow, mow their half-acre lawns by push mower or go shopping with their mothers for school clothes. Not one of them came to his rescue, leaving Willie with seven ferocious beings who stood in the corners, giggling and doing weird things at him with their eyes.

That's why, when the meanest of them, Jennifer Holly, grabbed his chin and said, "Why don't you know any boys? We thought this was going to be a grown-up party," he had no choice but to grab the nearest handful of cake and squish it into her ugly, brown hair.

And now he was sitting in a hedge tree, deep inside the shelter belt that cut across the back of their cornfield. Both knees got skinned on the climb up, but it was worth it not to hear Jennifer

crying and his mother hollering. He was just beginning to think about spending the night up there when a rustle, then a scary growl, caught his focus.

It was Demon, the giant, yellow cat someone had dumped along their road years before and that now survived by stealing chickens and the occasional 4-H rabbit from farms in the neighborhood. Willie's older brothers had told him stories about how Demon had jumped down from a hay mow and knocked a farmer to the ground to drink the warm milk that spilled from his bucket, how he had a hundred cat children just as mean as him living in the trees across the creek and how the worst thing that could happen was to get caught up a tree with Demon right below you.

He sat on the scratchy limb, twenty feet above the hissing, green-eyed cat and wished he'd been nicer to Jennifer Holly. The girls might be dreadful, but even a party with all of them and none of his friends was better than being clawed to shreds by Demon. As he was trying to guess how bad he'd be hurt if he jumped and ran for it, a shot rang out from down the shelter belt. Bark flew next to Demon's head and the snarling cat leapt from the tree trunk he'd been starting to climb and tore off into the underbrush.

Willie's older sister, Eileen, fourteen and what his mother called a 'tomboy', stepped out from behind a big pine and motioned after Demon with her twenty-two squirrel rifle. "Stupid cat. Killed my Andalusian hen I was taking to the state fair. You out here hiding from Momma and those girls?"

He was still shaking from his near-death experience with Demon, but he managed to shrug. "Why'd she have to invite 'em? I just wanted a party with the guys."

His sister smiled and for the first time Willie saw how green her eyes were, eyes that helped her bark a cat from a hundred feet away. It was sort of magical, the way she managed to look pretty and still make a shot most guys he knew would have missed. No wonder Luke Bristol kept pestering her on the bus.

“I hear Jennifer Holly shoots bulls-eyes every time with that new pellet gun of hers. Maybe if you apologize, she’ll let you shoot with her.” Eileen gave him another little smile from beneath the bill of her ball cap and then slipped away into the trees as Willie slid down from his perch.

He nearly tripped over a tree root in the field closest to the house, he was that mixed up, thinking about Jennifer Holly having a pellet gun when all she ever did around him was giggle and flip her hair. He’d have to give her another look, he guessed, but first he was going to have to sound real sorry when he apologized.