

# Suki

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**I want to tell you about a cat** — a sublime creature entrusted to me in my youth — that I allowed to die. There were extenuating circumstances, but there always are. I forgive myself nothing. She loved me, and I let her down. I committed a terrible crime.

I don't remember where this cat, Suki, came from. My boyfriend at the time, a speed freak people called Nicky D., had an inordinate attraction to delicate things, including fine art — he regularly stole expensive art books from the Harvard Coop — and animals. The first time I went to Nick's basement apartment, I discovered a menagerie. Lassie, a feisty but sad-eyed Welsh terrier, could jump from the floor to the couch like a pygmy goat: all four feet took flight simultaneously, and in a single hop he would land on the sofa. We howled with laughter as we got him to do it over and over. Petey was a red and green parrot who could say only, "Foo." Nick said he had tried to teach Petey to say, "Achoo," but "the dumb fuck didn't get it."

Nick usually giggled when he said that. Sometimes, though, he said it with such contempt it was scary. I still can't unravel the tangled strands of Nick's personality, and I don't know how much of his darkness was caused by the drugs he was doing. He was uneducated but bright. I'm sure he named the terrier Lassie for both humorous and sentimental reasons. I imagine Nick in the alcoholic, debt-ridden New Jersey home where he grew up in the 1950s, his tender heart aching while the boy on TV called, "Lassie, come home!" What relief Nick must have felt watching Lassie, stuck on a cliff after having rescued a family of orphaned animals from a landslide, at last find a footing and struggle to safety.

Suki was not named after anyone. A true exotic, a foreigner who was out of her element, she lay stretched luxuriously, like the queen she was, across the most comfortable chair in the apartment, an easy chair with a purple velvet cushion that Nick had made himself during one of his speed-driven, nighttime decorating binges. He had pasted magazine pictures of rock stars on every inch of the walls, and a mobile composed of Janis Joplin photographs floated above Suki's chair. Never once did I see Nick even request that Suki get out of that chair. If people came over and there was no place for him to sit, he would squat on the floor rather than eject Suki from her throne.

One night, after I had been coming by Nick's apartment for a while, Suki got down from the chair and crossed to the couch where I sat. Then she lightly climbed up into my lap and sat down, facing outward and swatting me gently with her tail. Nick observed this incident with a mixture of admiration and skepticism, figuring Suki's gesture would be a one-time event. Suki was not given to sitting on people's laps. Until then, she had witnessed the goings-on in the apartment from her purple seat, watching Nick with cool fascination and thinly veiled displeasure. I believe Nick respected Suki because he hated fools, and he knew that anyone who maintained a wary distance from him was no fool.

But it was to become a regular occurrence. Suki would abdicate her chair in favor of my lap whenever she saw that I was settled and she wouldn't be disturbed. Perhaps Suki loved

me because I was another delicate thing. Her pale green eyes, framed by gorgeous black markings, narrowed at Nick's sudden moves, though the rest of her body never expressed any fear; she knew he would leave her alone. But if he left the room, her eyes closed as if she was finally relaxing, and on my lap her purr began, almost inaudible, but I could feel the vibration with my hand against her white throat.

**When I met Nick, I was eighteen**, a freshman at Boston University, the sheltered eldest child of Midwestern parents: vain, spoiled, ambitious, and, like Nick, yearning. I don't think a girl with my upbringing today would go for Nick, who was practically a street person and clearly trouble. But back then, the streets were a festival. Nick set his sights on me, wooing me with yellow pills. I could compose a twenty-page paper in a single night on one of those pills. They obliterated all my anxieties, so that when I saw Nick knock an ex-girlfriend to the ground, I made no connection between that event and my possible future. He confused me. I had never known a person of such extreme contradictions. Tall, dark, and truly handsome, with a missing right bicuspid, Nick lived off welfare, proud that he was beating the system. He was cold steel walking into drugstores and using stolen prescriptions, yet so deferential to me in the face of the fat novels I read, so careful not to push me too quickly into sex. I felt myself melting almost from the first, even as I felt bemused by our situation.

Throughout that first autumn, I kept an emotional distance from Nick. I saw other boys; my life at school remained at center stage. We both left town in December for Christmas. When I returned, Nick had been back for several days, and his mood at our reunion was buoyant. The candlelit apartment was scented by the spaghetti dinner he had prepared. Suki stared up at me, butted her head against the back of my hand, and took her usual seat on my lap once I'd settled on the couch. Lassie's greeting was uncharacteristically subdued. Then he went slinking over to a corner of the room and lay down, chin on his paws, sad brown eyes rolled up at me.

I asked what was the matter with Lassie. Nick said Lassie had "shit all over the apartment."

"Why?" I asked.

Nick had spread newspapers in the kitchen for Lassie, but he had been gone longer than he'd expected. He'd attempted to visit his mother in New Jersey, but his father had refused to let him in the house, so he'd made a detour to Florida, spending a week there with friends from high school.

"You left them alone here?" I said. My legs tensed, and Suki jumped down.

Nick emerged from the kitchen in a full-length flowered apron and did a goofy little dance.

"You left them in the apartment for a week?" I said. Then I noticed the absent bird cage. "Where's Petey?"

Nick giggled. "Lassie got hungry, ate Petey, yum-yum."

I followed him into the kitchen. "You didn't leave food?"

Disgruntled, stirring the sauce, he repeated blandly, "I was gone longer than I expected."

The room blurred and refocused in sharp, glaring detail:

a prison, a torture room. I went for my coat. Suki was hiding.

Nick came after me, but on the street I stuck out my thumb and jumped in the car that stopped, telling the driver, "That man is following me." We sped away.

Alone in my dorm room, I cried almost to the point of retching, as if I could expel what I had learned. I was a sensitive, dreamy, idealistic girl, and I had loved animals all my life. I'd also developed an early attachment to the escapes of fiction, and I'd long identified with innocents, foreigners, outcasts, and those who'd been wronged. Once I understood what had happened, I knew that Nick had beaten Lassie. The parrot's death felt as if Nick had beaten me.

I fell asleep in my clothes with the light on and awoke to the ringing of the phone. I was told that I had a guest in the lobby and should come down to get him.

That was the instant when I could have said no. But I didn't. I went down and got him. I had never seen a man cry so inconsolably before, and I forgave him. I was no match for his ocean of need. It was as if, at twenty-two, he had already traveled the world — alone, shivering, hungry, and certain that he would never obtain what he sought.

**By summer we were living** together in an apartment in another part of town. Lassie became fearful, sticking close to buildings whenever we took him outside, shrinking away from traffic, as if he just wanted to go back home. It was strange how he dreaded the outside world, considering that the worst thing that had happened to him had occurred inside an apartment.

Two buddies of Nick's traveled down from Canada with crystal meth, a powdered white speed much stronger than our yellow pills, which were prescribed for narcolepsy. The three of them shot up together, beat on bongo drums, hooted and hollered, and turned the stereo up loud enough to blast the roof off. Neighbors banged on our door. We received notices of eviction. The guys took off for days on end without saying when they'd return. I was never invited, and if I protested, Nick laughed derisively; once he slapped me hard across the mouth.

The next night as he lay in bed, I got a carving knife from the kitchen and touched its point to his cheek. He sat up abruptly. I pulled the knife back.

"Hit me again and you're dead," I said. He laughed, but the threat proved effective.

That summer I claimed a small spare room in the apartment as Suki's and mine. I read books and wrote in my journal, fueled by the tiny hits of speed that Nick doled out to me, which I dissolved in water and drank. I sat for hours admiring Suki, drawing her, talking to her. I was enchanted by Suki's uniqueness: her small head and triangular face, like a Siamese; her ears neat and sweetly blunted at their tips; her paws and belly and chest a snowy white, the rest of her striped and gray.

One steamy night, furious at Nick for something, I got into his stash, scooping powder into a glass of lemonade and drinking it before I realized I had taken too much. Terrified, I sat down in the apartment's long hallway. At one end a door

opened out to the fire escape, where Lassie enjoyed sniffing the breeze. Nick rarely took Lassie outside anymore, but Ted, one of Nick's Canadian friends, was kind if slow-witted, and he often walked Lassie patiently. Ted must have taken Lassie wherever the three of them had gone that night.

I looked through the open doorway of the apartment at Suki lying on the cool sheets of the bed in the spare room, and I told her I thought I would die. I considered calling a hospital, but my plight was self-inflicted, so why should anyone help me? And wouldn't I get arrested?

The seconds ticked by. My pulse raced, and I had the sensation of growing larger, my consciousness taking up more and more space. I was still sitting on the painted wood floor, but I was also on the fire escape and then on top of the building. Alarmed, I willed my mind back into my body. I breathed, envisioning air filling my fleshy pink lungs. I pressed the palms of my hands to my cheeks and looked for Suki. She'd vanished.

I heard the front door of the building open. I ran to meet the guys and told Nick what I'd done. He calmly asked me to show him how much I thought I had swallowed.

"You'll be OK," he said. "Try to relax and go with it." His wild black hair floated around his thin face. I opened my mouth and eyes very wide, for control.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I've got prickles everywhere."

"You're rushing. You're overamping. It's fun, isn't it?"

I pondered that skeptically, then felt a shift. "I can be anything, can't I?" I said excitedly. "Look." I hunched down, my knuckles dragging the floor.

"What are you?" he asked.

"Monkey," I said, hopping around.

"Come on, chimp." He took my leathery hand and led me down the hall to the bedroom, which would be my safe room. All night long, Nick and Ted and the other boy took turns sitting with me. I climbed to the top of the bureau; I leaped from the chair; I lay flat on the bed with my arms flung out at my sides, looking with x-ray eyes through the ceiling and up into space. I took off my clothes in front of Ted, and Nick had to come and tell me to put them back on.

Toward dawn, the bright primary colors of my hallucinations grew softer, like watercolors, and I began to feel my own size again. Once more I could focus on a book, and I wrote in my journal until I felt unbearably sad. My bones ached. Light poured into the room. Feeling buffeted by its brightness, I wanted to hide. I knew I was crashing. When Nick crashed, he acted psychotic, or duller and slower than Ted. He would scream at me for the slightest mistake. After having eaten practically nothing for days, he consumed food incessantly. White herringbone stretch marks crisscrossed his stomach and hips from the quick, tremendous weight losses and gains he'd undergone.

Nick put me out with a downer for ten hours. I awoke hurting so badly I couldn't move. Suki came and lay at the foot of the bed. I couldn't eat. I drank water when Nick held a glass to my lips.

I lost ten pounds in forty-eight hours. I developed a heart

murmur that took six years to right itself. And my trip effected in me a deeper change, a sort of surrender, an odd passivity or humility before the size and scope of the experience. What I'd written in my journal was gibberish, but where I'd gone in my mind had been profound, and my connection with Nick became stronger. Besides, he was the one who had saved me.

Ted and his friend left in August, taking Lassie with them back to whatever mysterious existence Ted led in Toronto. They had run out of meth. Nick took to bed, on the downswing. One night he hit me again for having brought him a sandwich without any mustard on it, and this time, instead of threatening him, I quietly bled into the sink.

Not once had Nick paid the rent with the money I'd given him from my waitressing job. All summer I'd planned to leave him and return to school free and clear. But in early September Nick moved again, and I went along with him as if I had never made any other plans. I went back to school, but staying with Nick seemed as if it were absolute fate, no good fighting it.

**We settled into a much smaller,** darker place, with smelly carpeting and buckled wood-veneer paneling on the walls, behind which, we soon discovered, lived innumerable cockroaches. Now Nick's world was my world, the grim little world of our apartment. I commuted on the streetcar to school, a brighter, almost imaginary place. I did my schoolwork, but I kept to myself, hurrying back at the end of the day — like Lassie on TV — to the boy who made me so sad.

That fall I took a course in the Russian novel, and I read *Crime and Punishment* in a single sitting, riveted, spellbound, in our cramped bedroom with its odor of roach spray and mold. I pictured Raskolnikov as Nick, and I could have been living in the Russian murderer's closet at the top of the rotting St. Petersburg house. My life prior to Boston felt eons away. Suki — in her beauty and perfection — appeared before me as a fragment of a lost world. What had I done? I wasn't a drug addict like Nick. After my bad trip, I did drugs very carefully and not too often.

One night that fall, Nick brought home a new dog, a big collie-Doberman mix with long black fur and tan markings.

"Look at this," Nick said. "Pepper, sit." Pepper sat. "Give me five." Pepper placed a paw in Nick's outstretched hand. "Outside I told him to shit, and he did. I had to go in a store, and he waited in the exact spot I left him. Somebody trained him real good." The dog had no collar but appeared well cared for.

"Then we should put up a sign so that whoever he belongs to can claim him," I said.

Nick winced, as if I were nuts. "I want him."

"I don't," I said. I buried my face in my book.

Suki had hidden, but she quickly emerged, because Pepper — named for the Beatles album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* — liked cats and was quiet and gentle. I took to Pepper as well, and soon I more or less commandeered him to protect him from Nick, who was busy dealing bad speed produced by a friend in a lab at Bard College. I often brought

Pepper to school when I had lecture classes. He would quietly lie under my desk and be admired by the students and professors. Gradually I renewed external human contacts through Pepper, who was a safe and easy topic of conversation.

Nick also brought home two kittens that fall, Shimmy and Shake, one white and one black-and-white patchwork. A week later, crashing hard, Nick threw them at the wall in a rage.

Crying, I gathered the dazed kittens, put them in a box, and brought them to a schoolmate's apartment. She and I were able to get them adopted. I did this, but I didn't leave Nick. Instead I gave him the silent treatment for a day. I can't remember, but he may have brought me gifts to placate me, as he often did. I'd wake up in the morning surrounded by giant candy bars, books, and cheap reproductions of fine-art prints, or I'd come home from school to find gorgeous, carefully selected new dresses, pants, and shirts, stolen and laid out artfully by Nick.

But I could not have been bought so easily had I not already been weakened by fear of him, by pity for him, by a mistaken belief that there was nowhere else for me to turn. Like the time I had taken too much crystal meth, being with Nick was something I'd done to myself; therefore, I deserved whatever I got, and I had no recourse. I also believed I loved him, at his best. When his teeth, wrecked from the speed, pained him beyond endurance, I managed to borrow money from my mother for the extraction of his molars. He repaid me by nearly getting me thrown in jail: I went alone to a Pink Floyd concert and was nabbed in my seat by a detective because, I discovered, Nick had written a bad check for the ticket.

I eventually learned about Nick's entire sordid history: the abusive father; the battered mother; Nick's bust in high school for dealing acid; the months he had spent locked up in the Tombs with hardened adult criminals. He had skipped out on probation and could return to see his sainted mother in Jersey only under cover of night. By the end of our year in the cockroach palace, though, I no longer cared much about Nick's history, and by the time Nick, Pepper, Suki, and I moved to our third apartment, I was gathering my strength to break free.

*(end of excerpt)*