

## A Small Taste

By Angela Matthews

Ashley took one agonizing, exhilarating step. Knowing that any second all heads could turn her way only increased the excitement. She walked on anyway, one foot in front of the other, every step increasing the risk of being seen, being caught. But no one noticed. Ashley walked down the tree lined sidewalks drawing no attention, arousing no suspicion. No one gave her a second glance. She might have been invisible.

Across the street, a group of girls who looked about twelve or thirteen all dressed in matching plaid skirts, white button-up blouses, and knee socks walked home from school. Most of these girls wore heavy back packs bulging at the seams and straining the zippers, weighing down their thin backs and pulling at the shoulders.

One girl carried her books in her arms, just two or three books, nothing else. She could have stood taller than the others because her load was so much lighter, but the little girl hunched her shoulders forward anyway. Maybe she did it on purpose, out of sympathy. Maybe it was just out of habit. Whatever the reason, she stood out from the rest of the pack, drawing Ashley's attention.

Long, straight, pale hair fell down Little Girl's back. A dark blue headband kept it off her face and out of her eyes. Maybe her mother explained how pretty her face looked when people could see it. Maybe Mother even brushed it for her, enjoying the touch of her daughter's hair as she helped adjust the headband perfectly. Maybe she even cooked breakfast in the morning and waved goodbye as Little Girl walked off to school. At the very least, Little Girl's mother got out of bed in the morning. Their house probably had big windows kept open to let in the light. Plants in the windows gave the family something green to look at, even at night or in the cold, dead of

winter. The house probably smelled like lemon furniture polish too, and the refrigerator spilled over with food.

Little Girl's life could not be more different from Ashley's. Stale air saturated their small, dingy house, heavy drapes and blinds scared away the sunlight and kept life dark, refrigerator always empty. Ashley's mother used to stumble through the bedroom door in the morning and slur "time to get up for school," then flop back into bed. No one ever made breakfast or checked to make sure she wore clean clothes, brushed her teeth, or left the house in time to catch the bus.

Ashley shook away thoughts of home, pushing them away with memories of her first time instead. The first time she felt good, strong, alive, blood rushing, heart pounding, energized and whole, finally alive.

It happened in the back yard of her mother's house. Whoever would have guessed that a house so full of cold, dark emptiness could ever bring her pleasure? But it finally did.

Ashley vividly remembered being Little Girl's age, sneaking out of bed one night and slipping into the back yard. She just needed to get out of the house, smell fresh air and feel open space. Sitting on the damp grass in her nightgown, leaning against a tree, young Ashley spied a tiny, baby bird lying in the grass. One wing splayed out crookedly, like a broken fan. The poor, little thing must have fallen out of the nest. Or maybe one of its bigger siblings pushed her out. Maybe she thought she could fly and get away from all of the trouble in the nest. However it happened, now it lay twisted and alone on the lawn of a lonely house.

"Poor baby," Ashley scooped the baby bird into her hands. Heat radiated faintly off its soft feathers. Scarcely discernible shaking told her that the bird was still alive, just barely alive. How long had she been out there alone? Could she feel any pain? Did it hurt to draw in those minute fragments of breath? Ashley's hands cradled the helpless baby; her fingers stroked the

small feathers. So tiny and so fragile, the little bird weighed almost nothing.

Pulling her in closer and holding on tightly, Ashley cradled Poor Baby to her heart and rocked her back and forth. “There, there, now. Everything will be alright.” Fragments of the lullaby “Hush, Little Baby” popped into mind, so Ashley tried to sing Poor Baby to sleep. “Hush, Little Baby, don’t say a word,” were the only words she could recall, so she repeated them over and over while holding the bird close, feeling the weight of the tiny body against her fingers.

*This must be what a mother feels like, the kind of mother who cares for her babies, anyway, Ashley thought. Some mothers do that.*

“I hope you’re not in pain, Poor Baby, but I don’t see how you couldn’t be, twisted and broken like you are.” Ashley sat singing and rocking, pausing to lean her back against the tree and hum for a while, mulling over motherhood.

“I can’t leave you in pain, Poor Baby, or maybe get eaten by a cat. It just wouldn’t be right. Mothers don’t do that. They should protect you.

What a terrible death, to be eaten or to lay alone and shivering, in pain. I can’t leave you and let you die alone. No one should die alone.”

Ashley closed her eyes. Without realizing what she was going to do, she squeezed the fingers of her left hand tightly, clamped onto the bird’s head with her right hand and twisted.

Hollow bones cracked, vertebrae and femur crunched, the little bird, Poor Baby, put out of her misery. It only took seconds, quick as snapping a pencil in two. A pencil snapping made more noise.

Ashley sat leaning against the tree and held the broken bird to her heart. The night remained still and quiet, but Ashley’s breath quickened, her senses felt sharp. When she opened

her eyes again to peek at the body, she saw the neck twisted to the side. No movement, no more shallow breaths, no more pain or misery. Adrenaline rushed through Ashley's body like a tidal wave, burning pulses raced from her finger nails to the ends of her hair. She felt electric, on fire, aroused and alive for the first time in her life.

*This is what it feels like to be alive.*

Very quietly, Ashley crept back into bed, carrying the tiny corpse with her. She slept with Poor Baby under her pillow that night. With one hand curled around the bird's lifeless body, deep sleep wrapped the girl contently for the rest of the night.

Caring for the bird sparked new life into Ashley, offered her a small taste of pleasure and control, so she woke up the next morning thirsty for more. It took weeks to take another sip, but she enjoyed the time, noticing people at school and hearing conversations, looking at the trees and the birds when she walked home, excitement and anticipation giving her the strength to wait until the right time, the right opportunity. She enjoyed the next few weeks more than any other time she could remember. There had never been anything to look forward to before.

While Ashley walked home from school one day, a small calico kitten hopped through the grass chasing a butterfly. The kitten's back legs sprung up higher than the front when she moved, like a grasshopper or a cricket. The cat bounced around until the butterfly flew away. Then Ashley knelt down and called to the cat in a soft, low voice. "Hi there, Little Cricket. How are you?" The kitten started purring the second Ashley picked her up. The gold, black, and white fur felt as soft as it looked, irresistible. They walked along together slowly, Ashley burying her face in the kitten's fur every few steps, nuzzling Little Cricket with her nose and petting her on the neck with her free hand.

“Did you know that I’ve always wanted a kitten? We’d better keep walking to make sure your owners don’t find you.” They walked a few blocks more and turned down the alley behind Ashley’s house, her mother’s house, and sat down under a tree. Ashley stroked the kitten’s neck slowly, enjoying the soft fur between her fingers. “You sure are soft.” Cricket purred louder and stretched out all four paws as far as they would go before settling back down full length on her new friend’s lap. “Are you offering me more fur to pet, Little Cricket?” Ashley smiled and continued to stroke the animal’s fur from her neck, through her belly, up and down her back. The cat’s tail twitched and she rolled her head from side to side, saying thank you for the attention by trying to pet Ashley’s legs.

“I’m so glad you like it. I never had a pet before. My mom never wanted one. She said they were too much work. She said I was more than enough of a responsibility.”

Ashley pulled Little Cricket closer and held the cat firmly as she continued to stroke her luxurious fur. Little Cricket’s rib cage rattled and vibrated beneath Ashley’s hands, rising and falling with each breath. Thin, white hands trailed down the cat’s front legs, cradling one of her paws. “Sharp claws, you’re strong too, good for you.” Ashley said, rubbing her face back and forth across the cat’s soft, calico fur, inhaling its scent.

Ashley firmed her grip around Little Cricket’s neck and rolled off to the side, pressing the kitty’s chest with her knee, pressing her backbone into the grass. She picked up a rock, the headstone marking Baby Bird’s grave, and brought it down on Little Cricket’s skull with all her strength.

The force of the strike drained Ashley’s strength, leaving her limp and weak. She flopped down on the grass next to Cricket, panting heavily from her efforts, closing her eyes to keep the ecstasy close as long as possible, never wanting the lovely rapture to end.

The memory of those first times gave Ashley an excited shiver. She kept pace with the pack of schoolgirls across the road, staying back a few steps and gazing at the sidewalk rather than looking straight at them. One by one, they separated and walked into their homes. Finally, Little Girl climbed the front steps of a two story brick colonial with yellow roses growing symmetrically along both sides of the steps.

“What a perfect home.” Ashley smiled, knowing she had made the right choice. The small taste of life had been wonderful, but now she felt ready for a big, long drink.