

**Kathleen Crowley**  
from *Creatures*

## I. Cat

It makes sense to me that the first animal she hallucinated — at least the first that I know about — was a cat. My mother hated cats. To oversimplify her view of human-animal companionship: dogs represented everything good, honest and right in the interactions between living things. Cats, on the other hand were the untrustworthy subconscious, the disloyal, the mysterious. In an unhappy way it's fitting that a cat would be the harbinger of her mind's descent.

I called a couple of her close friends, and my mother's siblings to say that there had been ...odd things, that my brothers and I had begun to worry. My uncle, my mother's younger brother, had recently hosted her for a long weekend. Had he or his wife noticed anything out of the ordinary?

A pause. "No. Nothing. She seemed pretty sharp to me." But that pause had already given him away.

"Well, there was one thing."

"What was it?"

A sigh. My mother was ever the older sister and, since the death of my grandparents years before, the matriarch. Acknowledging what seemed to be happening to her meant opening a door none of us wanted opened. And maybe his own fears too, his experience of the creep of age and the company it kept. "She mentioned seeing a cat on our stairs a couple of times. She knows we don't have a cat. But that was all. Otherwise she seemed fine."

**Kathleen Crowley**

## **II. Children**

The first time you hear someone you have always considered to be sane say something clearly not sane is a bizarre and unsettling moment. It had happened to me years earlier when a good friend who, I realized later, was experiencing a psychotic break. He was clever and witty, but somewhere in the midst of a very funny riff on paranoia, I recognized that this was no riff, no joke.

In fact he was terrified.

I was in medical school then, and far enough along that I should have seen and understood it. Instead I had to stop myself from grabbing him and saying, “Just stop it. Just be you.”

When it happened with my mother I had that same moment of feeling deeply unsettled, of emotional vertigo as my mind lifted out of one deeply rooted way of seeing a person and floated there, waiting to settle back into whatever was next.

It happened on a Sunday in the fall, a few weeks after the conversation with my uncle, and I had just arrived at my mother’s home for a visit.

She opened the door with a sudden sharp movement when I arrived, and turned away from me without a word. “I’m very upset,” she yelled over her shoulder.

“What happened?”

All my life, my mother had been moody. Her view of everything – her life, me, my brothers, her friends – could turn on a dime. It reminded me of what I’ve heard of tornadoes – the sky taking on an ominous color in a matter of minutes, a menace in the quality of the light and the air. The oldest part of our brain sensing the drop in barometric pressure. And then the

## **Kathleen Crowley**

storm appears, ripping through the settled world, tossing trees and houses and cars aside like toys.

My mother's moods could come that way, and my brothers and I learned at a young age to stay clear of that destructive tornadic path. So that's what I thought was happening as she marched angrily down the hall away from me.

"There were these two children here all morning." She rolled her eyes, she reached out her skinny arms and shook them in frustration. "I couldn't get rid of them. I don't know who they were or how they got in."

Yes, there had been my uncle's report of the cat, the odd thing here or there and yes, my brothers and I were concerned. But. My mother lived alone. I knew there had been no children there that morning. A flush of mild panic and dampness in my palms.

"What do you mean? What children?"

"I don't know who they were, but they were sitting right there—" She pointed to the empty couch in her always-neat family room in her always-neat home. "And all they wanted to do was watch television."

My mother had taught grade school when she was young and she spoke now in her firm schoolteacher voice. When she looked back at me, though, I saw something else — I saw that she was afraid.

In the months that followed I got a better sense of how she experienced these hallucinations: in one part of her brain they felt absolutely real and true, but another part recognized they made no sense. She saw the children, who talked and moved and behaved like real children — but at the same time, she knew that strange children should not appear suddenly on her couch.

## **Kathleen Crowley**

I felt her eyes on me, studying, waiting for my reaction. When I thought about it later, I wondered how many episodes like this she had been afraid to mention.

It took me a minute. Really it took me much longer. It took me a long time to learn to treat her as a person with an illness, to treat her with compassion. That day, though, standing with her in the house where I grew up, what I wanted more than anything was for her to unsay what she had just said and let this whole new reality slide back into before.

“Mom, I don’t understand how there could have been children here.”

She met my eyes only for a moment, just long enough to sense my discomfort, and that was answer enough. Her face closed and she turned away. “Well anyway, they were here. And I told them they couldn’t watch television. And I’m just glad they’re gone.”