

Stepping
on the
Blender

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Other Times Life Gets Messy

Katherine Snow Smith

Stepping on the Blender & Other Times Life Gets Messy
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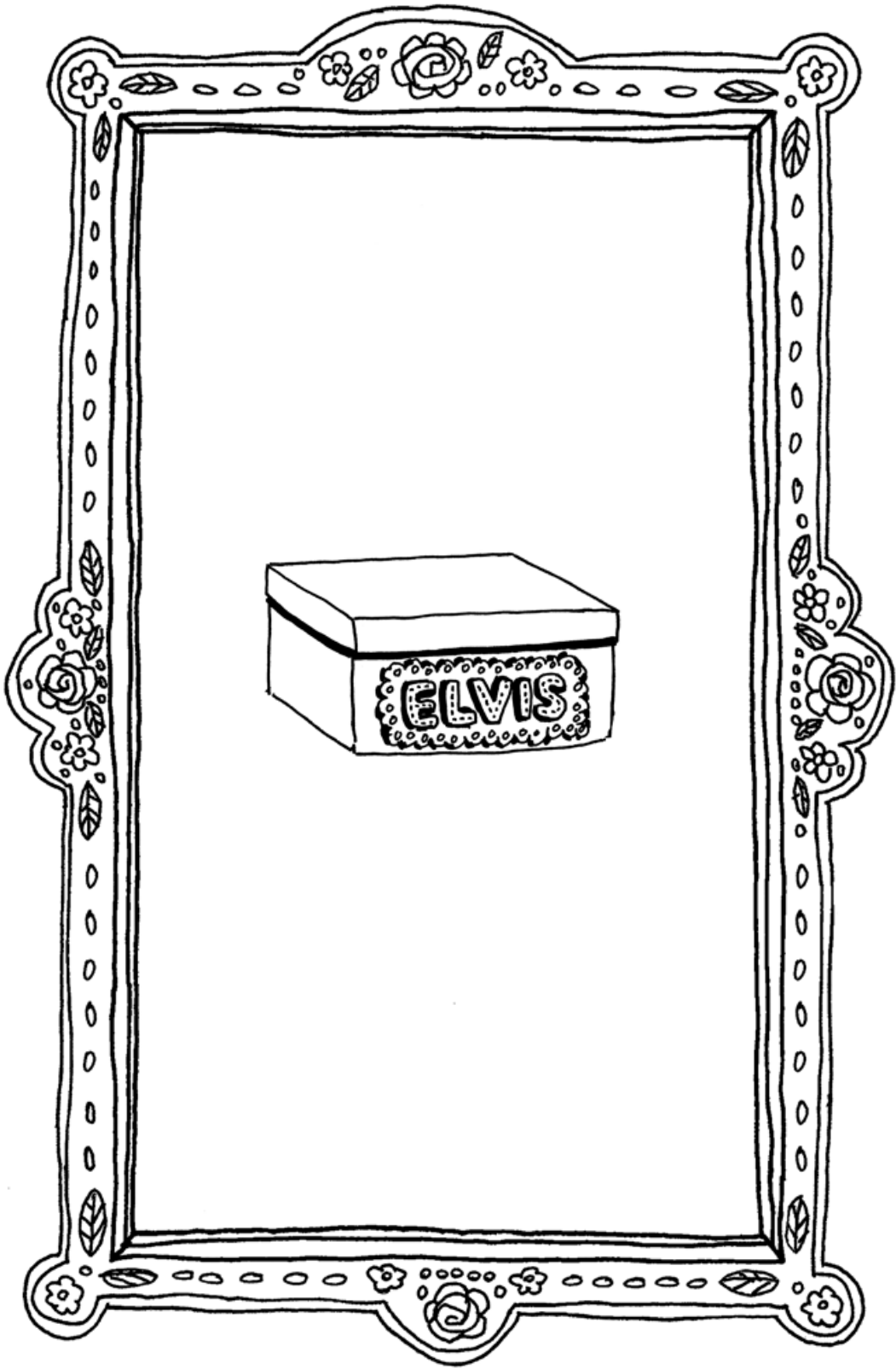
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I Killed Elvis

It all started with a rat.

He spent his days nestled behind the wall in our pantry. I could hear him scratching whenever I fetched the Cheerios or Cheez-Its for the kids. While we slept, he emerged at night and ate holes in bags of rice and sugar. I'd awaken to find the grains and crystals that spilled on the floor along with some droppings the rat himself supplied for his late-night party.

Meanwhile, two houses away, my friend Caroline blamed her children first.

"Gross. Who ate half an avocado then smeared the other half all over the kitchen counter?" she yelled upstairs to Jack, Rose and Ellie when she saw the rat's crime scene one morning.

"I poured about 25 bottles of bleach on every inch of the counter, the floor, the furniture and the appliances," she told me after finding skinny-clawed rat footprints in

the smeared green pool of evidence. “We will never eat guacamole again.”

Our historic neighborhood with back alleys made of brick lined with giant trash dumpsters and picturesque citrus trees was besieged by rats who eagerly replied “yes” to the invite of the smell of rotting garbage and grapefruit. As soon as one was trapped, two more came to his funeral.

Jay, the Terminix technician, became such a regular at my house that our basset hound Delbert welcomed him with a wagging tail instead of the usual bellowing howl. I insisted that Jay hold Delbert in our Christmas card family photo that year.

Worse than finding the rats’ half-eaten food and digestive remnants was finding a dead or half-dead rat in a sticky trap. Worse than that was finding a sticky trap with no rat but lots of rat hair next to the sofa.

“Look right here. See how the sofa is chewed up there?” Jay asked as he pointed to little holes and loose threads in the sofa skirt. “The rat must have dragged himself over here with one free leg, then pulled himself off the trap by biting on the sofa. He’s hiding somewhere in the house. And I bet he’s pretty freaked out.”

So was I.

I immediately picked up my 3-year-old son Wade and stood up on the sofa. Then took a giant step over to the nearby table, which was higher. Jay searched every corner of the house with his flashlight but found nothing.

“Let’s hope he managed to crawl back behind the wall or however else he’s been coming and going,” Jay said as he left.

That night after dinner the girls watched *Lizzie McGuire* and Wade played with blocks on the floor while I reported

the day's events over the phone to my husband, who was out of town.

"Mommy. He got eyes," Wade called over to me. He was lying on his stomach staring under the armoire that held our TV.

"Who has eyes?"

"He do," Wade said, pointing to the darkness under the armoire.

I rushed over and looked down to see the beady eyes of a hideous rat who was possibly dead or half-dead. I swiped Wade up in my arms and screamed for Olivia and Charlotte to run upstairs, slammed the door to my bedroom and crammed at least nine towels in the half-inch space between the door and the floor. We all slept in my room with the TV going all night long in the family room. Jay came early the next morning and removed the almost dead carcass.

Finally, I got the city's pest control department to hang a plastic box full of who-knows-what across our backyard fence. Jay was good enough to also dispose of dead bodies in the yard. Finally, the rats ceased. Then came the fleas. Coincidence? I think not.

It was Hitchcockian. Over the years, when we'd find one or two fleas on Delbert's belly, I'd give him a NexGard chewable pill and the fleas were gone in a day.

This time they were everywhere. All over him. All over us. All over the furniture and the rugs.

"Mrs. Smith, I think we just need to bomb this place," Jay advised.

"Bring it on, Jay," I replied.

I had to get the children, Delbert and Elvis, the class guinea pig we were hosting for the summer, out of the

house for eight hours. We spent a wonderful day at a friend's house out at the beach. Delbert slept on their cold tile floor keeping watch over Elvis in his cage while the humans frolicked in the hot tub that is the Gulf of Mexico in August.

At 4:30 p.m., I loaded up the children and livestock and headed back to our house 25 minutes away. Traffic was bad, so it took longer than expected and we went straight to Wade's swim class at a friend's pool. Alice's husband was out of town too, so we ordered pizza and had dinner over there after the class. That night I was reading a bedtime book to Wade when I remembered Elvis.

I'd taken Delbert inside Alice's yard during swimming and pizza, but totally forgot the guinea pig. Then I drove all of us home for baths and bedtime without the little guy crossing my mind.

"Ellllvissssss," I screamed, making Marlon Brando's "Stella" sound like a sweet whisper.

I raced down the stairs, rushed to the Honda Odyssey and flung open the back.

Elvis didn't move. I nudged his cage. Nothing.

Elvis was dead.

I killed Elvis.

Olivia, Charlotte and Wade were rushing across the yard. I met them a few feet before they reached the car and held them in my arms sobbing: "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I am sooo, soo sorry."

We all cried our way inside and called Adam. He consoled us and calmed us down, telling the children Elvis was really old and about to die anyway. He told me it wasn't my fault. These things just happen. Then he asked me what I'd done with the body.

“It’s still in the car in the cage,” I said. “I just can’t deal with that now. We can have a little funeral in the backyard when you get home.”

“Well the car is going to start smelling pretty bad. I’m not going to be back for three more days. I know it’s brutal, but you’re going to have to get it out of there,” he said.

“I’ll call Kristin,” I said. “She’ll know what to do.”

Kristin was our neighbor and good friend. She was part Harvey Keitel’s The Wolf from *Pulp Fiction* and part Mary Poppins. She helped take care of things on our block of 18th Avenue NE where, at one point, our stretch of 10 houses between Locust and Poplar Streets was home to 21 children under 12.

Kristin cut the toddler boys’ hair outside on the sidewalk then pointed our attention to the birds flying off with little tresses in their mouths to build nests. She could put a batch of strawberry scones in the oven then tear apart your resume and reconstruct it just as the oven timer rang. Kristin’s job as a public relations consultant honed her crisis-control tactics. Her giving and upbeat nature made the crisis seem more like a little bump in the road.

Kristin was available to meet you on the sidewalk for a hug or strategy session as early as 5 a.m. and as late as midnight. (She was usually just coming in from or heading out on a run.)

I left Charlotte, Olivia and Wade in front of *Lizzie McGuire* and called Kristin from another room to tell her what had happened.

“Okay. First of all, Katherine. This was not your fault. You keep so many plates in the air, some are going to fall sometime,” she said. “Your children are safe. Delbert is safe. Class pets die all the time. Nobody else offered to take

Elvis. You did your part. He's in a better place."

She reminded me we'd already taken Elvis to the small animal vet twice that summer because he wasn't eating and had some strange lumps.

"Who knows? He might have had cancer, and this saved him from prolonged months of pain," she added.

And that's why Kristin is a public relations marvel.

"Alright. Now. Do you want to keep Elvis in your house or mine until Adam gets home?"

"This is a lot to ask, but can he stay at yours, please? I'd hate for the children to find him."

"Of course he can. I offered, didn't I?" Mary Poppins said with a reassuring laugh.

Within an hour she knocked on the door with a plate of hot sugar cookies and a sympathy card her two girls made for my children.

"Everything is taken care of and ready for the funeral Saturday," The Wolf whispered in my ear as she gave me a hug.

Elvis was buried in a shoebox covered in purple felt with his name written in gold sequins on the top. Along with making the casket, Kristin also cleaned out his cage and donated it to the local animal shelter in the name of my children's school.

By the time their school was back in session, my kids had accepted his death and went with Kristin's PR spin at school. Elvis died this summer from an illness that was exacerbated by the heat. None of the teachers complained about having one less animal cage to clean.

I think the experience still haunts me twenty years later because it's just one of many times I tried so hard to get everything right and it all went wrong. I suppose that's a

lament of many parents, especially mothers. Even Kristin.

I have an oddly detailed memory for so many moments in my life. It enables me to write descriptively, even if I am unable to find my car in most parking lots these days. But I think all of us tend to remember the times we messed up more than when it all went as planned.

Another parenting debacle haunts me.

Charlotte, my middle child, took longer than expected to enunciate her words as a child. She was in speech therapy as a toddler and attended a preschool in the public school system that was taught by an actual speech therapist. There were only 10 kids in her class, and the fabulous instructor also had two wonderful teacher's aides. Furthermore, a big yellow school bus provided transportation to and from the half-day program.

A friend of a friend enrolled her son in the same program.

Jen was an ob-gyn with a new baby, and I was working part-time from home with a new baby. We also had our toddlers in the neighborhood church's preschool program in the mornings, so getting them to and from the preschool and the speech program in the afternoon was hard. With no family in town to help drive, it made total sense for our little kids to ride the bus.

Our decisions to stick Charlotte and her son Braden on a school bus raised some eyebrows in the era that was breeding the first generation of helicopter moms.

Jen and I still laugh whenever we run into each other at the grocery store or a party.

"You know all the other mothers thought we were the worst?" she says, leaning into a chuckle.

"Oh I know. Totally. Our kids were so little that the

stairs to get on the bus were half as tall as they were,” I say with my voice cracking in laughter. “They could hardly climb up.”

“All the other moms who were picking up their children from the morning preschool had a little snack and sippy cup waiting in the car. Then there’s the grinding of the gears for the big yellow bus to pick up Charlotte and Braden,” Jen recounts as we both double over.

The transportation arrangement, however, gave me one of my favorite stories about my daughter. A little boy in the neighborhood told Charlotte that he was in charge when they played on his swing set because he was three months older.

“Well, do you ride da school bus to school?” Charlotte asked defiantly. She knew she was one up on him with experience in the real world.

Her dual preschool program also led to that regrettable parent debacle. On the day of her Christmas show at the afternoon speech class, instead of having her take the bus, I picked her up from her morning preschool. I brought her freshly ironed red velvet jumper to change into for the afternoon show. Charlotte climbed in the minivan, squeezed her baby brother’s hand, then settled into her own car seat.

“When we get to your other school you can change into your fancy dress for the Christmas show,” I said as I buckled her in.

“I already had my show,” Charlotte said. “Did you see it?”

“No, sweetie. Your show is this afternoon. We’re going there now and Daddy is coming too.” She may have said something after that, but I was racing to get to the next school on time and didn’t listen.

I screeched into the afternoon school's parking lot and helped Charlotte change from the hot-pink Little Mermaid outfit into the velvet frock. Adam got there just in time for her group's song. Charlotte beamed when we cheered from the audience.

That night my friend Hope, whose son went to the morning school, called me.

"Katherine, you didn't know they had their Christmas concert this morning, did you?" she asked.

"Whaaaatttt?"

"Listen, I didn't want to tell you, but they're handing out a group photo tomorrow, so I knew you were going find out," Hope said. "It's okay. It happens to all of us."

"Oh my gosh. I went to all this effort to get her dressed up and be at the afternoon school's show, and then I totally missed the morning show. Poor Charlotte."

"Katherine, Charlotte was fine. I gave her a big hug after, and the kids weren't paying any attention to the parents. They had cookies. That's all they cared about."

"She was wearing a Little Mermaid swimsuit coverup to the Christmas show surrounded by girls in red velvet," I bemoaned.

"That's when I knew you'd forgotten," Hope said, with a little laugh. And I laughed.

"Look, I totally missed my son's teacher conference," she continued. "That's much worse. The teacher was waiting on me."

"Well at least you don't have to have a 5-by-7 photo of it," I said.



Eighteen years later, I was on deck for the very last school event for my three children. Wade was graduating from high school. I was far from grateful for a reprieve and wished we could rewind everybody to ten years earlier. My very last child was done with school and moving out in three months. I had plenty else to keep busy, including a j-o-b and aging parents. But seeing Wade graduate and leave was like closing the door on the childhood of all three of my children. That era of my life was over.

Graduations for St. Petersburg High School, as well as the 16 other public high schools in Pinellas County, take place at Tropicana Field, the indoor stadium where the Tampa Bay Rays play. The two-hour ceremonies are crammed up against each other over the course of two or three days between baseball games.

We were lucky that when Olivia and Charlotte graduated, their ceremonies were in the afternoon or early evening. But when Wade's turn rolled around, St. Pete High drew the short straw and got the first slot of the day: 7:30 a.m. That meant Wade had to leave home at 6 and be in place by 6:30 a.m.

It's a painful wake-up time for any class of high school seniors, but this was the class of 2021. These COVID kids had been dozing through online classes and making their own hours for half of their high school careers.

Wade was up for the challenge. There was some talk of his friends just staying up all night, but we parents somehow convinced them it would be better to try that the night after they graduate, not the night before.

Still, at the last minute, he decided to spend the night at his dad's condo downtown instead of my house because it was walking distance to the beach at the bay where his

friends gathered the night before.

Fine by me. His green graduation gown hung in his room at my bungalow four miles away, and I promised to bring it to him by 5:45 the next morning.

My phone rang at 5:50 a.m.

“Mom! Where are you?” Wade asked in a panicked voice.

“I’m so sorry. I’m on my way,” I said from my bed with my eyes barely open.

Whhaatttt???? How did I mess up my alarm? This day, of all days????

I brushed my teeth. Threw on my dress. Stuffed a hairbrush and makeup in a bag. Grabbed the graduation gown and was out the door in under five minutes. It took another eight minutes to get to Adam’s where he and Wade were waiting by the car at 6:10 a.m.

“Wade, I’m so sorry. I hate myself for messing up my alarm,” I said. “But you’ve got plenty of time. It’s going to be okay.”

“Well, all my friends are already there so I won’t be able to line up with them,” Wade said. “But whatever. You had just one thing to do, Mom.”

He drove his own car so he could leave with friends after the ceremony, and I rode in Adam’s.

I understood Wade’s frustration.

I do have a history of being five or ten minutes late. But never for important things like this. We’ve never missed a flight or even come close. And every child was there for the start of every soccer game, baseball game, lacrosse game, poetry slam, school play, debate team competition and Christmas pageant.

The traffic to Tropicana Field was bumper to bumper, which was good and bad. It meant Wade was going to be

even later, but also that a lot of other students would be late too.

I called Wade.

“Why don’t I jump in your car and wait in line to park, and you go on in?” I suggested.

“Mom. No. What if I can’t find you later and I don’t have my keys,” he said. “I’ll figure it out. I love you. It’s okay,” he said in a calmer tone.

As Adam and I walked into Tropicana Field around 7 a.m., students in green gowns were still racing past us. The Rays’ home turf was barely half full when we found our seats around 7:15.

I caught my breath and ate the apple I’d thrown in my pocketbook as I ran out of the house. Then I looked down at my yellow dress and saw the seams and lining showing.

“I’m wearing my dress inside out,” I said flatly to Adam.

“That’s how you roll,” he said with a smile.

Yes it is. It’s how a lot of mothers roll. And we never have “just one thing to do,” as Wade said. We’re trying to kill the rats that brought the fleas that killed the guinea pig and iron red velvet dresses and sign the permission slips and attend the teacher conferences and get the wisdom teeth out and buy the flashcards for studying state capitals and make the birthday cake shaped like an alligator and race back to the craft store across town before it closes at 9 p.m. for more popsicle sticks for the model of the Japanese internment camps and pick up the Albuterol for the inhaler and find the signed blue cards for the next scouting rank and teach a badge in communications and sew a Caliban costume for *The Tempest* and fill the bathroom with steam at 3:30 a.m. when the barking cough won’t stop and order the old tweed jacket off of Etsy for

the Dr. Who Halloween costume and hound them for that last college essay.

We're the old ladies who swallow the spider to catch the fly, then go full throttle and choke down the bird, the cat, the dog, the goat and the horse. I don't know why we swallowed the fly. Maybe it came in on the rat.

And that's the wild ride we don't expect to board when that little baby is born, but we realize how incredibly lucky we are to have been on the always changing journey when the 18-year-old reaches for that diploma.

I'm at peace with my final score:

Guinea pigs: -1

Good human beings: 3

