

PICKLES

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My first life—the first one that I can remember—was misery, and I might have given up entirely had the next one not been so full of love and carrots. Saniah bought me off Craigslist from a contractor whose hamster, Dorothy, had given birth to a clawing litter of me and my brothers. I was the runt, pushing against the knot of pink backs that stood between my mouth and my mother's nipple, never able to wiggle in far enough to take a drink.

Saniah stood over our cage, her eyes like two fine moons rising above us. She chose me, I later decided, because I was pathetic. She felt she owed it to the world to undo some harm, even a harm as small as this. She reached in and wrapped me in her soft hand, my brothers scrambling over each other into the dark corners of the cage. They looked up at us and bared their small teeth as I ascended to the warmer air above, cushioned between my savior's palms.

Saniah lived humbly. Rust coated her windowsills and water damage spread like veins across the plaster of her walls. But my cage was a haven, and when she first lowered me into that trench of downy paper, flushed with the scent of hand soap and pine, I knew that, at least for me, this life would be good.

She told me things in whispers, kneeling beside me after she'd returned from long days. I could not, of course, understand her language at the time,

but the way she whispered was enough. Each word was a rich, sweet wind, dotted with the click of her tongue against a pearly tooth, or the pop of her lips parting. She may have been twenty-four, she may have waited tables, or delivered groceries and cigarettes to other people's doorsteps. I know she pet my head with a single finger and broke off small pieces of romaine hearts to lay beside me in my cage. I know she was giant and perfect, her face a mountain range of smooth curves melting into dainty ridges. We lived together for fourteen months before I succumbed to melanoma, waiting for my Saniah to leave and lock the door before dying in my warm paper bed.

It was this life, the one marked by Saniah, that led me to wonder more about myself, or whether I was a "self" at all. I had only ever been capable of a few things: burrowing, eating, sucking tepid water from a nozzle. Saniah showed me what it was to close my eyes and see more than just black—to envision a kind of soul shivering within me, something bright, sharp, and exciting. As I tried to make sense of this new sensation, I strained against the boundaries of my own small mind, a mind I assumed could only hold the contents of a single life. After I left Saniah, I gripped fiercely to the memories of her, afraid they would trail away if I did not think of her at every waking moment. My greatest fear was forgetting how it felt to look up and see her eyes flecked with dark lashes, and to hear her soothing whispers that eased my breathing to a shallow lilt.

I began to think of my mind as a cage of its own, one where I could keep whatever I chose to capture. I made the bars into thick metal, the lock unbreakable. Each time I awoke to images of my Saniah still in the cage, safely tucked away, I exhaled a heavy breath. There was another memory in the cage, something I despised but could not get rid of: my name, Pickles, from the first life I remembered, the one before Saniah. I loathed the young girl who'd named me that, and loathed even more the fact that I could not remember what name Saniah had given me, or if she'd given me one at all. Perhaps that young girl, Lovely, had said it just enough and at just the right times for it to crawl into the cage and cement itself there. I later understood that the mind's cage was not something I could rule over at all, that it took in and let out whatever it pleased.

Lovely had thin hair and streaks of dark soda painted around the corners of her lips. She remains my first memory. She smiled at strange moments: a broken glass that she'd thrown to the floor, her smaller brother's breathless, red face when he wailed for milk. Since I had no other memories, I had nothing to compare her to. It was only after I met Saniah that I came to understand something about different kinds of girls, the ones who whispered and the ones who hissed.

Lawless and unkempt, Lovely stomped around her bedroom as I burrowed under the cardstock lining my cage. I was timid in that early life, and it seemed that Lovely and I were unsure what to make of each other. I did not like the way she smelled of burnt crumbs. At times she'd peer curiously through the glass while I ate pellets or chewed on my paw, but she became frustrated when I turned and dug away from her.

Lovely's mother bought her a set of colored pencils, bright and lined up neatly in their own paper box. She did not take to drawing—the accompanying sketchpad remained untouched on the floor. One afternoon, a freshly sharpened pencil appeared in Lovely's sticky hand. She reached in and flattened me against the floor of the cage, my legs twitching but going nowhere. The tip of the pencil grazed through my fur as I squirmed, then *shlck*, the thorny point entered my back. The pain feathered up my spine and down into the tip of my tail. Lovely opened her mouth, revealing foul patches of gum and loose teeth as she moved the tip of the pencil in circles just beneath my skin. She reached for a new color. My back was soon lined with pocks of green and blue, itching and painful, waxy colors bleeding into muscle.

The torture continued for an eternity of what I now believe was a week. I awoke in my cage one morning to the sunrise cresting in the window above me, the roofs of neighboring houses, once still and uniform, glowed from behind with a honeylike light. A sparrow sat calmly on the window box, its feathers moved by a gust I could not feel but could vividly imagine. I hardly flinched as Lovely lifted me from my cage and brought me to a small space I had never seen, a buzzing metal tunnel—what I now know to be a drying unit—in which she sat me atop a pile of damp clothes. I watched the sun rise through the domed window as the air grew hot around me and my world began turning slowly to the left.

I was Pickles from the start, the name an unmovable splinter inside me. After Lovely came Saniah, and after that came everyone else. My next life was spent with another Syrian hamster, a female with a cream-colored coat. Our owners brought small bowls of hay and seeds, cleaned our enclosure, and did little else. This life was serene, but I was in tatters. I used much of my time to carefully form my mind's cage, unable to think about anything other than Saniah's eyes and lips.

The female hamster I lived with was rather dull. She spent her time on the wheel, her breath caught in her throat and her feet a blur as she ran. I would watch her spin as I sat atop the plastic tubes in our enclosure and imagined my Saniah, willing her to reappear before me and make everything smell of pine. I loved her, I decided. I loved her more than a small creature like me should be able to love. She was the clearest thing I saw, blanketing my world with her heavenly projection. At times I felt so helpless, crouched above the spinning wheel, unable to touch her. If I could have cried, I would have wept myself to sleep every night in that life, sinking into dreams that wrapped me in a mist of memory, lifting me above my cage, above the ceiling and the roof, into the air warm as her cheeks.

I feared that with more lives my mind's cage would become cluttered, overrun with things I never meant to lock away. I vowed to remember only Saniah, to leave her enough room to run and breathe in the cage I had carefully built for her. When rain began slamming against the windows outside our enclosure, I tried my best not to commit it to memory, though it was the hardest rain I'd ever heard. The female hamster hid under her wheel and shivered as the windowpanes warped and thunder drummed down from above, but I closed my eyes and thought only of the lashes clumped around my Saniah's eyes, the florid whispers from her lips. The windows shattered and murky water poured in from the gale outside. The room grew colder and damper by the minute as I sat atop the tubes in our enclosure, my paws gripping tightly to fluorescent plastic as the water around us rose. My life with the female hamster was the last of its kind. I awoke in my following life uncaged, a boy born to a kind woman and a quiet man.

The first thing I spoke of, when I learned all my letters, was my previous lives. I'd never had access to words before, and it was a relief to unburden

myself of my past troubles. My mother, Patricia, upon hearing my stories, asked if I had read them in a book, or heard them from one of my classmates. Dad suggested a visit to the pediatric psychiatrist. It was a difficult childhood, straining against the currents of disbelief.

I was alarmed by my own lack of knowledge. There were things I had to attribute, things I had to make up, in order to translate memories made in a pea-sized brain to a much larger vessel. Saniah, for instance, wasn't her real name, but one I found for her as I walked down a street, my hand locked tightly in my mother's, and we passed a bus-stop advertisement for women's cosmetics. "SANIAH DUCASSE," said the poster, the name printed beneath an image of a darkly glowing woman, her face spread large before a white background. I felt my mother's hand tug against mine as I stood in front of that bus stop, enamored of the glow of the model's cheeks, a smile tugging up her mouth as her face loomed over me. "Saniah," I decided, would do just fine. The name fit her well. I later forgot, at times, that it came from a bus stop.

To my greatest joy, the cage seemed to grow along with the size of my head, and I ceased to worry about Saniah being suffocated. I could now allow myself small pearls of new memory, adding them to the cage to keep Saniah company—the glimmer of my mother's hair lit by sunlight, the rich sweetness of a square of dark chocolate.

It was at the lake in the middle of July, as I described Saniah's voice and how her presence blanketed my world for what must have been the hundredth time, that I saw the first and only streak of belief cross my mother's face.

"Alfie," she said, her hand across my shoulder, "you'll worry your father to death. I know you're very smart. Put it to good use. Okay?"

I nodded and looked across the lake, wanting to disappear beneath the cloudy water and its dense blobs of grass. I didn't share Saniah after that. I stopped talking about my previous lives altogether when I entered grade school; it only seemed to make people stiffen and back away.

I thought of my mother, Patricia, at times long after I had left that life. She was a good mother, spreading jelly on crackers and rocking me to sleep in her lap. But I didn't ache for Patricia the way I did for Saniah, an ache that at times was warm and rustling, at other times like the tip of a pencil

puncturing my skin. I saw Saniah's cheeks in our backyard's hills of grass, was startled by her voice in the kitchen sink when the faucet was turned very low. I felt closer to her now that I was one of her kind—I'd take my finger and rub it along the top of my scalp, allowing my eyelids to soften and shut as I reentered memories of that life.

It's not that I didn't enjoy being human. I liked many things about it: diet soda and turkey sandwiches cut in half, traffic cones and crossing guards, legs that could kick soccer balls, opposable thumbs and peanut butter cups.

But the unpleasantness of manhood racked up as my yearning for Saniah grew stronger. Unaccustomed to the unfettered state of the open sky, I developed a crippling fear of it. When I stepped outside into its naked expanse, my heart quickened and would not slow until I stepped back indoors. The sky was too vast. Too free. I feared that it would suck me in and never let me back down. For much of that life I wore baseball caps to avoid the sight of that terrible infinity.

My life as Alfie ended just as I had grown used to its divots and grooves, just as the homesickness I'd felt for Saniah had begun to fade into a tolerable pain. I'd planned to study architecture, to marry and have a family, to clip recipes from magazines and hang them crooked on the fridge door. Death feels similar in the bodies of all creatures. It feels sticky and hot. It descends in a quick sweep. I don't remember exactly what killed me. I may have died on the pavement, as many do, hit by a truck as I crossed the road back home.

Being something small was more forgiving than being something big. In my next life, bubbles drifted like glassy planets through a vast black lake, and I fled from a larger fish trying to consume me. My partner and I spent our days sifting through granules of sand. I'm not sure why she chose me, this other minnow, but she stayed. She left my side only once, when a large bubble enveloped her and swung her upward suddenly, her fins rippling through globules of water and air.

I saw the singularity in a grain of sand. I felt the curve of time stretch like a rubber band. I grew hungry and ate, grew cold and took cover. What I did not realize until I left this life was that my mind's cage had substantially shrunk alongside my body, degrading precious memories. The blanket

of Saniah, the image that had cloaked my vision before, had faded into a curtain, which now rimmed the world instead of cushioning it. My love for her remained, but I felt constantly on edge, grasping at her frayed edges. In the next life, I grew up a frustrated young boy, embittered by my condition. I didn't know why I was the only one who could remember.

My new mother, Rosalyn—when I first confessed to her my true name—claimed that she remembered lives before this one as well. Lives as royal concubines and empresses, as maidens with flushed cheeks. It was little comfort. Even if I had believed her, it would not bring Saniah back. She took me to the set of a reality television show, a segment titled “Odd and Exceptional Children.” The host smiled down at me as they tested different camera angles, his lips lined with marks from his morning shave.

“What do you remember, James? From the other lives?”

I glanced off-camera at my mother's encouraging eyes. I realized that she wanted what I had, and I lost all respect for her. She could not imagine the pain, the thorned hurt, that grew in me day after day, life after life.

I looked back to the host. “I love her,” I told him. “Saniah.” I began to weep, letting the tears run into my mouth. I could not have described her if I tried. All that was left was an imprint of the love I knew I felt. No one in that room could understand. The host prodded me with questions as I cried, my mother whispering cues through her teeth from behind the camera.

“Tell him what you told me, James,” she hissed. “The thing about the pencils.”

I sobbed until they shut the cameras off, my mother giving me a loose hug as she spoke with the host over my shoulder, confirming that the paid contract still held. I wiped my nose and clung to my mother's arm, longing for comfort and finding none.

Once the check from RealStoriesNetwork was cashed and spent on the installation of a marble kitchen island, my mother cared less about my stories. It was on a spring day, watching the sunrise from the window of my bedroom, that I decided to run away. My fear of the sky had subsided to the point where I could walk long distances without a baseball cap, and with this new life I had gained a sore confidence, a sense of strength fueled by grief.

I gathered up what pieces of Saniah remained in my mind's cage, told my parents I was going to play with the neighbor's children, and began to walk.

I found myself searching through windows for rusted frames and water-stained walls. I walked past overgrown gardens of foul-smelling fruit. Sitting among the sweeping trees was a field mouse who saw me before I saw her. Her back was stiff, ears pointing sideways as I knelt before her.

"How can I find her when I keep falling further and further away?" I asked.

The mouse peered at me, her nose twitching. She saw deep into my face and then ran for cover beneath a tuft of lily grass. Perhaps she could smell it, something unsettled scrambling under my surface, begging for air. A pathetic, yearning ball of fur. Maybe I wasn't meant to remember Saniah. If everyone remembered their past lives, the streets would run amok with beings of every kind, clawing for their own Saniahs.

James was the body I had lived in the longest. I graduated from college, grew old, and was generally unhappy. I had a wife, Sally, whom I did not treat well. We had a daughter, Rose. When my wife became sick, I went to visit her in the hospital but couldn't find the room she was in because I couldn't recall her name, or why I had gone to the hospital, or where I had put my coat or my shoes. I was brought to a building lined with green tiles and when I woke there, in a strange bed, a box with all my things sat in the corner.

I did not leave that room for a long time. The force that had always pushed me forward, kept me crawling, running, swimming, had gone still. The mind's cage had been crushed and opened, and almost everything had escaped. Memories seeped from the bars, too slippery to grasp. I slept and woke, never able to hold on to where or who I was.

A young woman walked past the open doorway. Something about her profile, the way her nose flipped up and down along its bridge—one small hill, two moons rising. I stood, though my legs shook, grabbed the edge of my walker and crept forward, a light static covering my vision. I called out and she turned.

"Hello." She smiled. "Are you lost?"

The young woman took me into the neighboring room, where her mother sat in the corner, sunk between cushions larger than her body. She looked

like a sick bird. Thin white hair floated along her scalp. She shivered as a breeze drifted through the window. The name came rushing back to me, an old, painful love blooming back open.

“Saniah.”

The old woman turned toward me, her gaze unfocused. She looked at my shirt, where a yellow soup stain had spread. I could not tell, no matter how deeply I searched her eyes, whether or not it was her. I did not know how many years it had been. I could not remember the kind of animal I had been. And yet something in the young woman, her daughter, had lifted me from my room.

“Do you know me?” I asked. “Please.”

I tried to bare the thing inside me, to bring it to the surface. I pictured fur, clawing bodies, small, sharp teeth crunching through flesh. I struggled to draw a shallow breath.

The old woman finally looked up at my face. Her movements were labored, her hands resting in a soft lap. I begged silently. *Know me.* A nurse entered and handed the woman a bowl of peaches soaked in syrup. She began to eat, and I imagined her breaking off a small corner from one of the peach slices and delicately, sweetly, putting it beside me. A flash of fur returned, a round smile across Saniah’s lips. She finished every peach herself and sucked her fingers clean.

My next life came soon afterward. I perched atop the ledge of an old cathedral, gripping the stone with my claws. Flight was not as freeing as one might think. My companions, the house sparrows, chattered among themselves, their small voices ringing upward. I flew to the edge of town, looping under overpasses, the sky smooth and benign like an empty lake. I dove into a wire fence, slicing my wing on a barb before fluttering, lopsided and grounded, onto a rusted windowsill. Inside stood a young woman with smooth hands and damp lips, carefully washing a spoon in the sink. I tapped once on the glass with my beak and waited to be let in.