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## Animal Planet

Emily O'Hara

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## Animal Planet

### Author Bio

Emily O'Hara is currently a Junior at Gettysburg College. She grew up in several places, never staying in the same state for long. She enjoys writing in a variety of forms, especially songwriting and screenwriting. Her favorite aesthetic is Dark Academia.

## Animal Planet

EMILY C. O'HARA

Sharp words work to trample each other in the next room over. There are two voices. The first, her dad's, is deep like an earthquake. The second, her mom's, is high-pitched and dry.

Meanwhile, small, pudgy fingers reach for the remote, increasing the volume of the animal planet raccoon documentary. Up past sixty, then seventy decibels.

*We almost had lab raccoons instead of lab rats.*

How do you think that makes the rats feel? Almost, almost, almost.

"Maybe I'll leave, huh?" her dad taunts. "What would you do then?"

"Leave and go where?" her mom says, choking back tears.

The sound of glass hitting the floor contaminates the air. An accident maybe, but probably not.

*Raccoons do not mate for life.*

Sometimes her mom's mascara runs and smudges under her eyes like a mask. Usually, when her mom cries it is not because of what is happening but because of what did not happen even when she was certain it would. She never had a vision, because as a devout Catholic her mom was not one to test fate, but she had a feeling.

This man standing in front of her, threatening to leave her with a five year old and a waitress's salary was the same man she used to feel in the air before it rained, the calm before the storm. He was the same man she used to taste in her coffee or think of when she held her breath too long.

And here he was now, proof that following her heart was the worst of all her bad ideas.

Back in the family room, the Discovery Channel exits with the promise of returning soon, and commercials colonize the screen.

On occasion, the girl likes to see how long she can hold her breath during commercials before her body decides to save her.

"Fucking Wendy's, Shelby! You're mad that I got Wendy's?"

"Because I made dinner for the family! I spent money and I spent all afternoon—"

The girl breathes in and does not breathe out.

A heaviness settles in her chest as she adjusts to a world without air. Everything becomes quieter somehow, like tossing under the waves. Flashes of barbecue sauce, then blue cheese. Lasagna so good your parents won't get divorced. Ice cream. Not just any ice cream. This ice cream has eyes and a nose and a mouth. It speaks through the screen.

"Bennington's ice cream is better than the best—"

She gazes up at the television from her place on the polyester carpet, eyes wide.

If she had a talking ice cream cone, she wouldn't eat it. She would keep it safe from anyone who would, fighting them with her bare hands if she had to.

*Raccoons can be aggressive.*

She would keep an icepack in her lunch box and take it to school with her when kindergarten started next week. She would be friends with the talking ice cream cone. Best friends. They could watch Animal Planet together on weekends.

She takes a deep breath, oxygen blooming in her lungs.

"Amanda honey?" Her mom calls from one room away. "Amanda, get in the car, we're leaving."

The girl does not bother asking where they're going. She knows they will not be going far.

They drive through the sunset, past cornfields and collapsing barns. Past couches on the side of the road and dogs tied up on short leashes. Eventually, her mom swerves the car into the 7/11 parking lot. Her manicured nails turn the key in the ignition until the engine's rumbling grinds to a halt, windows down, out of breath as if she ran the whole way here.

"Are you alright?" the girl asks.

"I never thought it'd be me, you know? I never thought it'd be me who ended up here."

"At 7/11?" she asks.

She can tell from her mom's expression that this was the wrong answer. She does not guess again.

"Can I go get some ice cream?" she asks instead.

"Sure, sweetie, sure."

Her mom fumbles with her purse. She hands her a five-dollar bill. She tells her to bring back the change.

Her mom remains in the car as the last remaining specks of sunlight go down the drain, her gaze fixed on some far-off point. If she squints hard enough she can see herself in California wearing a white sundress, lounging by the pool. She can see herself twenty-three and starryeyed, hun-

gry for all the days she had yet to devour. No husband, no kids. No past, no future.

“Where’s your mom, kid?” the teenager at the cash register asks the girl.

“In da car. Outside.”

“Can I help you find something?”

The girl nods. “Ice cream,” she tells the cashier. Not just any ice cream.

Once the ice cream is paid for she steps away from the counter, ripping the Bennington’s wrapper off. She stares down at it. No eyes, no mouth. Sleeping, probably.

“Wake up,” she tells her ice cream cone. “Wakey, wakey.”

The cashier looks deeply concerned.

The ice cream cone does not open its eyes. She was beginning to get the feeling it did not have eyes at all. She could feel the truth creeping up on her, one crack in the glass, then another. Her and the ice cream cone weren’t going to grow up together and go to the movies or the beach. The ice cream cone was not going to be her friend, it was going to be an ice cream cone. Hot tears tumble out of her eyes as she stumbles toward the door, leaving the mini freezer and all its broken promises behind.

Night air stings her damp cheeks as she enters the parking lot, ice cream in hand. She does not want to get back in the car. She doesn’t know what she wants. To be alone, she decides. Or maybe to be seen.

A rustling catches her attention, a noise coming from the dumpster at the edge of the parking lot. She stares straight ahead, transfixed.

A raccoon.

He creeps out from under the dumpster into plain view. His eyes are brown and honey-like. Large and forgiving.

She wipes her tears away with the back of her hand.

“I know all about you,” she tells him.

The raccoon stares back like he knows all about her, too.