

Transcription

Welcome to Easy Stories in English, the podcast that will take your English from OK to Good, and from Good to Great.

I am Ariel Goodbody, your host for this show. Today's story is for intermediate learners. The name of the story is *The Hunt*. You can find a transcript of the episode at EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Hunt. That's EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Hunt. There, you can also download the episode as a PDF.

Just a warning: today's story contains discussion about having sex and certain sexual practices.

OK, I'll just explain some words that are in today's story.

A **baptism** is a ceremony for newly-born babies. When a baby is **baptised**, a priest pours water over their head and gives the baby a name. In Christianity, all children are baptised.

The **womb**, or **uterus**, is a part of the body near the stomach where babies grow before they are born. Babies start to grow in the womb when a sperm cell meets an egg and fertilises it. If this does not happen, then usually about once a month, the lining of the womb, the inside of it, will leave the body in the form of blood. This is called a period.

A **hunter-gatherer** is a person who survives by hunting animals and gathering food. Originally, all humans were hunter-gatherers. We lived in small societies and did not farm food. Nowadays, there are few hunter-gatherer societies left. An example of a hunter-gatherer society is the Hadza people of Tanzania.

When you **hit rock bottom**, you enter the worst part of your life. 'Rock bottom' is when everything is going *very* bad for you. Usually, when someone hits rock bottom it is due to serious problems like addiction, death of a partner or losing a job. I kind of hit rock bottom in 2022 when I lost the ability to speak for three months. I'm *hoping* that will be the deepest rock bottom I ever hit!

An **epiphany** is when you have a sudden and deep realisation. Epiphanies usually happen for religious or spiritual reasons. For example, you might literally have a vision from God as your epiphany. But generally, if you've been living in confusion for a long time and suddenly realise the answer to something, that's an epiphany.

Holy water is special water that has been blessed by a priest. Basically, the priest puts their hands over the holy water, says some special words and then the water is considered holy, or special. Holy water is used for various purposes in religion, such as baptism.

The **recipient** of something is the person who receives it. The **intended recipient** of something is the person who is *supposed* to receive it. For example, if you order a parcel to a house with several people living in it, one of those people will be the intended recipient, but someone else may pick up the parcel. Also, many drugs and medications have intended recipients. For example, the intended recipient of injectable insulin is diabetics, because if non-diabetics use it it is very dangerous.

Cave in means to give up on trying to not do something. You've been trying to resist doing something for a long time, but finally you run out of willpower and cave in. For example, maybe there's a pack of delicious chocolate biscuits in the cupboard, and you're trying to save them for when guests come over, but you know they'll taste so good, so finally you cave in and eat them all before the guests arrive.

When you **crush** something, you squash it, make it completely flat. You usually crush things with your hand or your foot. For example, after you finish drinking a can of Coke, you might crush it for fun. Or if you are very cruel, you might enjoy crushing insects. When cooking, you often need to crush garlic with a knife.

Whiskers are long, thin hairs that some animals have on their cheeks. Rabbits, foxes and cats all have whiskers. Whiskers help animals feel their environment around them.

Curl up means to move into a ball shape. Some people curl up into a ball while they sleep, although this is bad for your back. You might also curl on the sofa with a good book, or curl up on the floor when you are sad. In autumn, the leaves on the trees curl up, turn red and fall to the ground.

Belly is an informal word for your stomach. If you eat a lot of food, your belly will get bigger. If you have a big, round belly, we sometimes call it a beer belly, because you usually get it from drinking lots of beer.

Transition means to change from one state to another, usually as a slow and gradual process. For example, some people undergo gender transition, transition from male to female or female to male. Actually, I transitioned twice, but that's kind of a long story... In the case of today's episode, it's not gender transition, but it's something similar.

'**Curiosity killed the cat**' is an expression that means it is dangerous to be too curious. Since today's episode has cats in it, I couldn't resist using this phrase.

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A big thank-you to my new patrons, as well as patrons who have increased their pledge. I'm recording this episode in advance, and I haven't had time to mention the new patrons here, but I will in the next episode.

And a special thank-you to my Teacher's Pet patrons: Jana Švástová and Vera Kaufmann.

OK, so listen and enjoy!

The Hunt

You step inside the building, except it's not really a building, is it? It's the ghost of a building that never was.

You remember what you learned at school: there is a place called limbo, a space between Heaven and Hell. Babies who die before they can be **baptised** go there, as it could not be judged whether they should enter Heaven or Hell. So mothers whose children die while being born do not even get the relief of knowing that their babies have gone to Heaven. Instead, they wait in limbo until the Final Judgement comes and the world ends. You could carry a child inside you for nine months, not even get to hold it, not even get to know that it went to Heaven.

This building is the same: the concrete shell, the **womb** of construction, was built in probably less than nine months. But still, there is enough concrete and steel to create the baby skin and bones of a building. The project died before it could be completed, before the walls and windows and wood of life could be added to it. Perhaps the person responsible for it stole all the money themselves. Or perhaps they realised, halfway through, that there was no need for such a great building in this part of town, that nobody would want to live or shop here.

You don't really care, but these are the kinds of thoughts that fill your mind whenever you enter a place or situation like this. You're a master of distraction, always finding thoughts to pull you away from the sad reality of life. Usually that's dreaming about being the leader of a **hunter-gatherer** tribe while having unsatisfying sex, not considering baptism and wombs and limbo while going to buy drugs.

You still can't believe you're really doing it. When you left school, you were voted Most Likely to Become a Priest. Well, there's still time for that, you suppose. Maybe the pill will kill Shelly, and you'll hit **rock bottom**. Then you'll have an **epiphany** and dedicate your life to saving the souls of young children. Maybe if pregnant mothers drank enough **holy water**, they could baptise their children in the womb.

And now, your fantasies have turned from epiphanies to bizarre business schemes. If you *dressed* like a priest, surely you could convince one or two desperate mothers...

You spot the dealer, and your thoughts cut short. Now is not the time to be thinking about that. There is actually some danger here, although judging by how many of your friends – when you had them – took drugs, it can't be *that* dangerous. Though none of them have ever used this one in particular. Maybe the thieves wait for gentle idiots such as yourself to rob. Why couldn't the deal take place in a park? Why here?

Shut up, shut up, shut up, you tell yourself. Act natural. Don't walk in such a funny way.

If the dealer finds your obvious nerves amusing, he does a good job of hiding it. He's probably used to shivering teenagers. As long as you have the money...

You come closer, he raises his head and says your name – the code name you gave him. You nod, pull the cash from your pocket and press it into his hand. *That* part goes smoothly, and you have to hide your excitement at successfully doing something you've seen in films and TV shows. You might have watched a few before coming here, just to make sure.

The dealer gives a laugh, his breath frosting in the night air, and hands you a little bag.

It looks so innocent, a tiny square of plastic with a few pills inside. But you know exactly just how powerful those pills can be. You've seen them work. You thank him – is it normal to thank your dealer? – and get the hell out of there.

At home, you consider crushing up a pill and trying a little bit yourself. Just to make sure it's not mixed with anything. But you're not the **intended recipient**. 'Intended recipient...'
Could you sound more like someone who doesn't take drugs?

Shelly brushes up against your leg and you jump a mile in the air. She's surprised that you're awake at this time and actually moving about, not just lying in a pool of tears in bed or zombified in front of a video game. You feel exceptionally guilty, like your cat has just discovered you planning to kill her.

In a way, the idea isn't so different.

Shelly jumps onto the counter, and you hide the drugs on the top shelf of a cupboard you know she can't get into. Even if she *could* get them out, she'd have no way of opening the little plastic bag. But the idea *is* for her to take them...

'What the fuck is wrong with me?' you whisper as you stroke her.

Has it really come to this? You list the series of events in your head again, to remind yourself that your pain is real.

Beth left.

Kai attacked.

Faruq crashed.

You hid.

The worst poem you've ever written, and you wrote a lot of terrible breakup poetry after Beth.

It's hard to remember when Shelly entered. At some point through those months of unending suffering, she crawled into your garden and into your life, begging for food. It was so wonderful to have something to care for, something to distract you from yourself. An epiphany in the form of a ball of fur.

Shelly purrs under your hand, rubbing herself against it: *more, please.*

Isn't this enough for you? It's enough for her.

You cave in a week later, when you're fired from your online job. Mum was already paying half your bills, anyway, so might as well fully rely on her. You had a brief few years of financial independence before your usual failure set in, and you didn't know just how lucky you were until those years suddenly ended.

You convince yourself like this: I'm already at rock bottom, and I basically used Mum's money to buy these drugs. If I don't use them, I'm being a bad child as well as miserable.

You briefly consider running home, but you know that this is the best the relationship with your mother has ever been. She likes things between you to be financial, and even though she occasionally ends her emails with 'There's a place for you here if you need it', you know she really values her privacy over you. Besides, *you* feel like the cat at her place, having to beg for food other than rice crackers and tahini, always walking in on her having sex with some man or another.

So no, you're doing this.

You shower for the first time in a week, get dressed and pull out the drugs. Shelly is already at her food bowl, working through the mountain you poured out last night. You crush one of the pills into a powder and put them on her food. She goes and smells it, and looks up at you with the face of an offended angel.

Without thinking, you pull the bowl away from her, so quickly that she jumps. Your hand shakes. You almost drop the bowl.

This isn't fair. One of you can say yes to this now, but the other can only say it in future. And what if she hates the change? You would be taking a baby from limbo and throwing it into Hell.

You remember something the dealer said when he handed you the plastic bag.

'The pill works both ways, you know. In case you change your mind.'

And before you can regret your decision, you've got your face in the cat food. It doesn't taste as bad as you expected.

ONE YEAR LATER

She saw you walking to the pet shop. You move like a cat now, stretching your legs elegantly and setting the features of your face to look cold and superior. You practically feel your whiskers move when you speak. Not that you have any.

'Hey, it's been forever!'

It must have been, because you cannot remember her name. You know that you were once friends, that you did yoga together. She also holds herself differently to most people – it's like all that stretching has made her spirit taller, given her a long, thin, airy presence, even though she's a short woman with her hair tied up.

'I thought you moved?' you say, using the little knowledge you have about her. At her last class, the teacher had decorated little cakes with goodbye messages, and half the

women pretended they weren't hungry until she explained that they were made with carrots and raisins and no actual sugar.

'I did. But there's no place like home, right?'

'Mmm,' you purr. 'Just a warm place to curl up, nothing to do...'

You realise that you're doing that thing where you stare at her coldly, but your words do not match your expression. You force a smile, and it only seems to make her more uncomfortable.

'So, do you still do yoga? I was so sad to hear Melissa's class stopped.'

You stretch your back, making yourself even taller. This woman has a nice little belly, and soft, hairless hands. She would be very nice to curl up with.

'I don't. I run around a lot, though.'

'Say...' She checks her watch. 'Are you free now? We could go for a tea. Catch up.'

You suddenly remember why she says 'go for a tea' instead of a coffee. One time, while you were chatting after class, she said she thought coffee was poison. Addictive. In the past, that would have bothered you, but now it seems like an entirely human concern.

You do not really want a tea, but you can always get a hot milk, pretend it's a latte, and lick at it. No, not lick. Humans don't lick. You'll have to drink it like a person.

Besides, you really do want to curl up on this woman's belly.

'I know just the place,' you say.

When you arrive there, she's not at all surprised, although some lines of worry do briefly appear on her forehead. It looks like she will not be the kind to let you curl up on her belly, then. In that case, you'll quickly drink your milk and leave.

She's not against cats, though. As you sit down with your drinks, she draws the attention of some of the local inhabitants, stroking them and then turning to her mint tea. You, on the other hand, show respect to them. You are no longer separate; you are an equal, a guest here.

'I've never been to a cat café before. But they're quite popular now, aren't they?'

You can see her approach the topic, ever so gently. You wish humans would be a little more direct.

'There are new ones opening every day. But I have Shelly at home.'

'Oh? You have your own cat?'

A worm of anxiety crawls into your stomach. A very human feeling, one you wish would go away like all the pain had.

But better to get this over with. If there's still even a tiny chance of belly...

'Yes, we've been together for a year and a half now.'

She nods, drinks her tea, thinks about how she's going to say it.

'You... Sorry if this is a rude question.' She looks around, but nobody is close enough to hear. And it's just full-humans today. 'I don't know all the right words. But are you... **transitioning**? To a cat-person, I mean.'

She hides behind her cup of tea. You sit completely still, your whiskers as hard as concrete in your mind, and stare at her with your powerful cat eyes. Then, finally, you answer.

'I'm not on the pills. But Shelly is.'

You turn your hand around and examine it, like a cat checking its claws. Several moments later, the realisation hits her.

'Oh. Is she completely...?'

'She walks like one of you, can talk, in a way... But she's kept the fur, the whiskers and so on.' You give her a cheeky smile. You know she wants to see a picture, but she won't dare ask.

It's illegal, technically. Well, not technically. It just *is* illegal. But it's very hard to prove that someone is a human-transitioned cat – illegal – rather than a cat-transitioned human – perfectly legal. At a certain point, the former learns enough speech to pretend to be the latter, and the latter loses enough humanity to appear as the former. And this is usually the place where both like to stop. Most cats who make the change don't want to be completely human, and most humans who do it want to keep some of their personhood, mainly for practical reasons.

'I tried the drugs at first, actually. I didn't think it was right to give them to her. But the changes were... a bit much for me. I felt amazing for a while, but then it felt like my body was running away from me.'

A cat rubs against your leg, and you realise you're sharing too much. Details that won't get you belly. It's hard to stop, though. You've never told it all to a human before, and now you need her to understand. To prove something.

'Shelly loved my changes, though. And there was something that just clicked. I understood her on a deep level. And I saw that *she* wanted the changes. So I stopped and she started. Most of my features went back, but I will never feel like a weak human again. It's like I'm her mother. I get such joy from watching her grow. For now, I pay the bills, but maybe one day we'll trade places completely. I'm just transitioning in a different way, you know?'

'Right.' She nods quickly. You realise that, whatever you had said, it would have been too much. There is a reason all your friends are cat-people now.

A cat crawls into her lap and rubs itself against her belly. She's so surprised she spills tea down her shirt, revealing her bra underneath. You stare at the cat jealously.

For a long while, she says nothing. She looks down at the animal as if it's a monster. You really ought to have asked her name, because now it's too late. But names are for humans.

Finally, she relaxes and strokes the cat who's been rubbing at her all this time. She scratches it behind the ears, under the chin, and rubs its belly gently but firmly. The cat is very happy.

'Could I... come round to yours later this week? I have some questions I want to ask. And I'd like to meet Shelly. If that's alright.'

You raise an eyebrow. 'Curiosity killed the cat. You'll keep your mouth shut?'

She nods. 'I can tell you a secret in exchange. At least, I think it's a secret. I'm not really sure what I feel. Um, ever since I found out about it, I've always kind of wondered... what it would be like to be with a cat-person. You know, I, uh—'

You **purr loudly** and she stops. You are the cat with the cream. Your eyes quickly go down to her belly, before meeting hers.

'Well, I think there are many possibilities here.'

The hunt is over.

THE END

If you enjoyed the story and thought, 'Hey, I want to write stories like that!' then you should book a class with me. On italki I teach private lessons where we will write stories together and have a *lot* of fun. Go to [EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Classes](https://www.easystoriesinenglish.com/classes) to find out more. Thank you for listening, and see you in two weeks!