

Sweeping Up the Crumbs

Katherine was queen of the grocery store.

She may have been a mite smaller than a crumb, and somewhere around the size of a mite, but she was living the high life on a high shelf spanning a vast world of grimy aisles and sickly yellow fluorescent lights. The naked eye would have to strain to recognize that red speck of a fox luxuriating upon a spongy landscape of cheap burger bun. She had used her little claws to slice the tiniest of perforations in the clear plastic baggy. Now, she was rewarded for her brave trek: enough food to feed her for a lifetime.

She munched on a thick morsel of flavorless bun while leaning back against the hardened curve of a sesame seed. A fleck of red by a dot of black, she was utterly insignificant, yet happy as could be. Simply pleased to carry on her gnat-scale existence for another perilous day.

Her ears perked at the squeak of a shopping cart grinding to a halt. From beyond the darkness at the rear of the shelf, up rose a monstrous shape: a five-headed hydra blindly groping around and creating a cacophony by crumpling plastic baggies queued ahead of Katherine.

It was no hydra, of course—it was a hand. Not as some overgrown human knew it, but as an anthro did. Each trench-like wrinkle and river-wide fleck of cracked red nail polish told her the hand belonged to an older human.

Katherine munched away at her bit of bun while amusing herself with the view of the hand. Mid-chew, she went still as the first bag was swept aside, bunched up with others next to it. Then the bag before hers. Mountains rearranged in single sweeps left her motionless.

Each package included six buns. Now, the one directly in front of Katherine's was being grabbed. The cheap plastic exterior began crumpling. She had to get out of here. Leaping up and looking around, she couldn't find the miniscule entrance she had cut.

Then it was too late.

The entire bag was dragged out and down. Staring up at through the transparent ceiling, Katherine remained paralyzed as she took in the distorted visage of a smiling human woman.

“Freshest are always in the back,” the human whispered to herself, oblivious to the fact that her lofty face was being gawked at by a red speck stranded on an island of burger bun. A stomach-lurching rush followed for Katherine as the bag was hocked into a cart. Momentum flung her upwards, smacking her back-first against the plastic ceiling. Only when the bag landed with the quietest clatter against the cart’s bottom did she plummet and make a facedown landing.

“Grrreeaaat,” Katherine groaned to herself, the word muffled into the bun. The cart squealed forward, joined by a lackadaisical hum bellowing far above. With a grunt, she pushed herself up and gave an unseen, accusing glare beyond the interlocking gaps of the shopping cart. The human woman stated straight ahead with ignorance that mocked Katherine’s stature.

Vague wrinkles had started marking the middle-aged woman’s face. A less polite micro might have said she was over the hill. Katherine would have called her mature. Motherly, even. The sort who might spot some wayward micros, give them a few crumbs, and let them be on their merry way.

That is, if she saw them. Katherine was a micro’s micro, sitting at the bottom of a cart while surrounded by cheap cereal boxes that loomed the way office buildings might over humans.

Shortly after, the cart stopped moving. Katherine let out a relieved sigh. Checkout, and the line was long. Plenty of time for her to claw out and get down from here. She tottered up to her feet and made her way towards a sagging section of the plastic bag. As she brandished her claws, she heard the distant bellow of a human.

“Miss, we just opened over here!” he called in one of those booming, barely parable human voices. Katherine wouldn’t have paid it any mind if not for what came next. The jerk of the shopping cart threw her backwards. Sprawled and groaning with frustration, she pounded her fists against the bun.

“You’re a lifesaver, dear,” the motherly human said, wheeling Katherine to a fresh aisle, picking up the bag she was sealed inside, and putting it down.

An age-worn black conveyor belt rode Katherine forward. She couldn’t risk hopping out here; she was so tiny the belt would easily outrace her, and the crack it terminated at could easily swallow her whole. All the near-microscopic fox could do was flinch through another deafening crinkle of plastic. Then flinch again from the sonorous *beep* of a barcode scanner so bright she had to shield her eyes. Before she could make any other plans, the world shifted again and her container plopped to the dark bottom of a paper bag.

“Guess that’s the end of being queen of the grocery store,” Katherine said with a pout. As more foodstuffs crowded around her, however, she wondered whether a change of scenery might be nice... even if she had just been purchased with some burger buns for \$1.99 plus tax. An old, motherly human plus cooking ingredients probably meant good food.

Maybe this would be an upgrade?

The shopping cart rattled out of the building, taking Katherine to the no micro’s land of the desolate parking lot. She was given a brief, sun-blotting view of her unaware caretaker’s face before being lifted into the backseat of a car cooking in the summer sun. Micros tiny as herself were sensitive to changes in the atmosphere, so she was panting in no time. Her ears perked as she heard the *boom* of a car door slamming shut, followed by the bun-quaking rumble of an engine shuddering to life. The car rolled away from her home while she sat in darkness. No use

getting out of the bag now—better wait until she was forgotten in some pantry rather than sitting in the bottom of an inescapable paper bag.

Some 10 minutes later, the car stopped and the bag was hoisted out. Now *this* was service. Katherine was a little excited to be ferried to her new home. One she couldn't see at the moment. Somewhere inside the air-conditioned house, the bag was put underneath natural light filtered through windows. It was a nice change of pace from sickly yellow ceiling lights.

After being put down somewhere, Katherine remained neglected at the bottom of the bag. Sizzling and popping sounds piqued her interest. Even with the distinct smell of plastic all around, the scent of cooked meat slid through the bag's pores and teased at her sensitive nostrils. She had been munching on another handful of crumb. Now, she wrinkled her nose then tossed the flavorless morsel over her shoulder, her growling stomach assuring her there was a *feast* to be had just beyond these paper walls.

“Hey, lady, come unpack your groceries!” Katherine squeaked through cupped hands. Her voice was imperceptible to a human ear, but she was a superstitious micro—hoping she might upset some mote of dust in the air that somehow produced enough of a butterfly effect to get the mother's attention.

“There you are!” the motherly behemoth bellowed. Lips laden with pink-red gloss were pulled up into such a welcoming smile that Katherine couldn't help smiling back up—as if that sunny expression was somehow intended for her. That delusion lasted two seconds before the bag and its tiny passenger were plopped onto a kitchen counter. The pleasantly lit kitchen had an open, well-stocked pantry. Distant photographs on the great white monolith that was the fridge made it obvious this woman was, in fact, a mother.

More importantly, to the immediate left of Katherine, there loomed a miniature indoor grill. Steam sizzled up from it, and the heavenly scent of cooked meat wafted from a juicy landscape of patties—beef, the little fox’s absolute favorite. Her mouth watered while the mother strolled about the room, still happily humming to herself.

Except, while this was happening, something began to click for Katherine. She had been so focused on getting to the food that she hadn’t thought about what she was on.

Buns.

Patties.

She may have been a micro, but she had been around larger-than-life packages all of her tiny existence. She knew a burger when she saw one.

The second she stood up to extract herself from this dangerous position, that humming monolith of a woman made her return. The transparent veneer of plastic it would take Katherine minutes to gnaw and slice through gave way in an instant, a sky ripping open and ventilating artificial smells, replacing them with the intoxicating aroma of cooked patties.

An aroma that did nothing to stop her heart from pounding.

Katherine shrieked as monstrous hands raced down. Opposable landscapes—thumbs—deformed the sides of the patty she was stranded on and caused its puffy curvature to sag. Wind resistance threw her onto her stomach. Her fluffy coat rustled as she hugged herself against a half-protruding sesame seed for dear life.

A simple trip from that bag to the plate had left Katherine panting. The harrowing experience ended with her top half of the bun separated from its bottom. Both were seated upon a plate. Fresh fries laid in a latticework pile with geometry only someone tiny as herself could appreciate. Movable salt crystals glistened. Closer to the bottom patty laid a pool of ketchup.

Movement in the not-so-distant distance forced her attention from the feast laid out before her and directed it to the mini grill on the left. Before it loomed the mountainous human mother. Apron-clad, spatula in-hand.

“Well, the kids will be back late, guess this can be my cheat day,” she said before unleashing an earsplitting chuckle, unaware that she was conspiring with a speck included in today’s grocery purchases.

The arresting sight of someone so massive made Katherine linger. Survival instincts gave way as she stood upon the bun and watched with sagging shoulders and a limp tail. It didn’t seem possible something—someone—so far was only a casual hand gesture from swatting her out of existence. It was a dangerous illusion. The kind that kept her in place while an apocalyptic meat patty was scraped off the grill. It suddenly moved overhead, sizzling droplets of fat and grease hissing down onto the bun. Katherine shrieked back to her senses, grateful that the runoff struck other parts of the bun. The heat coming off that patty made it obvious that contact with fresh grease would have melted her. The patty itself was carelessly deposited upon the bottom half of the burger; it landed with a slap that sent another spray of grease to wash the edge of her patty.

It was time to get out of here.

But as Katherine turned and started her mad dash off the back of the bun, she could feel it deforming behind her.

“Nonononono,” the fox whimpered as a divot dug by an index finger peeled her back into a sinkhole of bun. The steepening hill reached a point that she fell backwards, landing at the base of a nail in drastic need of a manicure. The hard, curved ridge at her back pulled up to a chipped red cliff that reeked of paint. When the bun was put back down to complete the hamburger, that

finger lifted and almost snagged her from the bun. Instead, with Katherine being just on its precipice, it flicked her with enough force that she went into she skidded across the bun until slamming against the side of a sesame seed. The impact made her yelp, but she was unhurt.

At least, physically unhurt. She was getting frustrated over how easily her attempts at escape were negated. Now in full panicked micro mode, she scrambled to her feet only to be flung to the ground as the plate was picked up. It sailed through the kitchen and out into an idyllic living room before being placed upon a small table next to a couch. The mountainous mother took her seat and looked down at the plate with a lip-licking expression that would make any micro squeal in terror.

But the mother wasn't going for her burger. Instead, she picked up a fry, dipped it in ketchup, then—Katherine didn't need to see the carnage. Micros who lasted as long as herself possessed vivid imaginations. That imagination now urged her to get off the bun.

Why had she hiked to the center of the bun? Key word being: hiked. The topmost part of the hill was a ways off from any of its edges. Utterly impractical for survival. But she had been so smug after getting up on that shelf—of *course* she had to keep showing to no one in particular. Prove that the grocery store was her turf. Now, she was running. *Sprinting*.

And it wasn't enough.

Fingers rose up to the sides of the bun and sank deep inside. She was off the plate. Hurling upwards. Wind resistance forced her down yet she kept scrambling up, trying to stagger forward in her futile struggle for freedom.

Don't turn around, don't turn around, the mantra was on repeat in Katherine's head even as the burger rose ahead of her, its plain becoming a peak. She didn't need to turn around to

recognize the wet smacking sound behind her. It was the act of saliva-glued lips being unwound from one another, followed by a fur-rustling blast of hot breath and a guttural, “*Aaaahhh.*”

As the burger’s angle became too steep, Katherine’s shrill cries came against her will as she was thrown backwards. Plunging down, she seized the only lifeline available to her: a sesame seed. And with it in her trembling gasp, she broke her mantra by peering down her shoulder.

The view filled her with such terror she almost lost control of her limbs and let go. The horizon was on the move, hurtling towards her—an entire world-swallowing mouth yawning wide. Molars decorated with gnashed-up french fries had plenty of room to hold the remains of a little red fox. A lake of spit pooled at the basin threatened to drown her... that is, if the tongue hovering above it didn’t randomly dash her against some other part of the mouth and crush her in an instant.

Again Katherine tried to call out to this leviathan. She received no response as titanic front teeth came down in a horrific display of the difference between herself and a simple human mother. The relief of not being taken with the first bite was eclipsed by the terror of watching an entire section of burger vanish just below her. The “ground” dimpled, cleaved away from the whole by a single clench of that monstrous jaw. Juices spurted upwards where the woman bit. Then, her mouth ripped that segment from the whole with such force that Katherine flinched.

She hung there, watching with awe and terror as the mother’s immense jaw worked. She had looked so *innocent*. She had cooked most of this meal for her kids! But that didn’t mean a thing. A human couldn’t be nice to something it couldn’t see. Something it didn’t even know existed. Something that could be chewed up and swallowed without hesitation, packed with less flavor than a single sprinkle of pepper.

That micro imagination gave Katherine a horrific view of that last thought. She moaned in terror, a direct contrast to the moans of satisfaction as the last remains of the burger were chewed then swallowed.

“*Ah*,” the mother sighed, unleashing a blast of meat-scented breath that further saturated Katherine in the smell of burger. All of this had happened in somewhere around 10 seconds, and it was about to happen again if she didn’t do anything about it.

But what *could* she do? Run up that impossibly steep slope? Scream? No, there was only one option left...

With that open mouth coming forward again, Katherine let go and dropped.

Micros had an easier time falling than norms. That is, an easier time *landing*. The plunge that gave her a full view of the colossal woman’s body was still absolutely harrowing. As was watching the ground come closer with each somersault.

When she realized where she was about to land, Katherine opened her mouth to scream and—

Splat.

There was red everywhere, but not because Katherine had met an untimely end. She pushed herself up and let out a sound of distaste. “Ketchup,” she hissed with immense displeasure, red fur matted in red condiment. This wasn’t the mountain of it that had been heaped upon the plate. No, she had fallen past that. Its ceramic curvature loomed nearby. She stood upon the aged mahogany of the table. The human woman appeared to be a messy eater. Looming by the seat, a few dainty morsels of burger fell from far above. Boulder-sized to Katherine, they landed in the distance.

“What a slob,” she said with a laugh, content to sit amidst some salt crystals and broken-off bits of french fry. With the danger having passed, she picked up a bit of fry and started munching on it, at last safe to watch the human greedily polish off a lifetime’s worth of food in the span of several minutes—sans one fox topping.

Now, the human would get up, put her dishes away, and then Katherine could go check out the new world she had been thrust into.

At least, that’s how it was supposed to go.

Her ears folded down at the grating of ceramic plate on wood; it was being pushed away from Katherine. While she looked over her shoulder at the shifting mass, a *thud* came from her left. She whipped her head around and stared, eyes widening as she saw a vast wall of palm laid on its side—sliding straight towards her.

“Oh, you’ve *got* to be kidding,” Katherine moaned. Direct impact slammed her to the wall of a pinky finger dragged across the table. She and the crumbs around her were plastered there by the constant trajectory. Her eyes were shut against the wind beating down upon her. She managed to open them to a squint just in time to watch herself being flung over the edge of the table.

Another fall, plummeting alongside crumbs she was no better than, rushing towards the tacky, dark green living room carpet. She landed upon the bristly top of a carpet fiber; it didn’t bow against her weight while she rolled sideways and tumbled off, down into the thicket of tree-sized carpet fibers that obscured her view of anything save a distant sky of off-white ceiling.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

A great shape moved overhead, so fast Katherine didn’t get a good look. It was easy to tell the thunderous footsteps belonged to the human, however. She was finally gone. Relief took

the strength right out of Katherine's body; she leaned against a carpet strand for support, wiping her brow.

She had lived. No other micro would believe it—that is, if she ever came across one small enough for her to tell the tale to. Through gargantuan, gnashing teeth and traveling untold miles to this distant household world, she had made it out with her hide intact.

Whiiiiirrrr.

The sound was agony to her ears, but she didn't cover them. Katherine remained completely still, trying to process a sound that filled all micros with a sense of dread:

The vacuum cleaner.

It rolled over the horizon, distant fibers viewed through the thicket bowing towards the colossal machine. It gobbled up the horizon, peeling crud heavier than Katherine from between the carpet fibers. Whenever it rolled towards her, it pulled back a second after. Then it came a little closer the next time. And even closer after that.

The human obviously only meant to give her carpet a thorough cleaning. She couldn't have guessed how unbelievably sadistic the back-and-forth motions were. They mocked Katherine with their effortless, daunting speed. She knew she was too small to retreat. There was nowhere to leap from. No place to hide. All she could do was watch its inevitable trajectory.

It came with all of its roaring fury. This must have been what norms felt like being sucked into a tornado. Carpet fibers bowed towards the underbelly, which eclipsed the ceiling lights while pulling Katherine—and all of the accumulated dust around her—off the carpet and into the abyss.

She was savagely tossed about, screams drowned by a constant drone. The inner workings dragged her deeper and deeper, spitting her out somewhere soft and tight. What was this place? Why did it have so many cottony surroundings?

While shifting about, something tickled her nose. Katherine wrinkled it up, closed her eyes, and, “*Ah-choo!*” A sneeze rocked her body. And another. And another. *Dust*, she realized, covering her nose with her arm. She was surrounded by accumulated detritus. Who knew how many times the floor had been vacuumed, its sealed bag neglected and left to bloat with weeks of accumulated crud?

She had to keep shifting. Wrestling her way up to avoid being buried in whatever else was spewed from the lightless top so far above. When the vacuum at last howled to a stop, Katherine’s ears still rang. She sat there in darkness, dearly missing the grocery store. Scared and a little exasperated over the terrible direction this day had taken.

But this wasn’t her first day as someone so impossibly small. Swimming through a sea of dust, the tiniest micro did the only thing she could: she went to look for whatever miniscule opening there was.

She would be a ketchup-laden, dust-covered wreck by the time she got out—but she *would* get out.