

The Cat's Chair

by Eli James

The cat had not left. It sat on Bill's chair, curled up, studying us, occasionally flicking its tail. It was a big cat. A tom. It had one ravaged ear, and there were patches of fur that looked like it had been torn out sometime in the past.

"Who?" I asked.

My mother pointed at my father, who hurriedly hid behind a newspaper. "Alright," I said, "Who bought it?"

Both of them shook their heads. My mother wrung her hands in exasperation. "It followed us back from the flea market. I don't know how - but when I opened the door I saw was this orange flash of fur and then -"

The cat raised a paw and started washing its face. The four of us looked at it again.

"It's in my chair!" Bill wailed, "Get rid of it!" This was unfortunate. My parents had, just over a month ago, bought the armchair from one of the many flea markets they had visited. My brother was happy to finally have a spot to call his own.

"Do it yourself." I retorted, and I made to turn away.

But the pleading look on my mother's face and my father's bandaged hand made me stop. Bill took a step towards the cat. It looked up at him and hissed. Bill took a step back.

"What fish do you have in the fridge?" I asked mum.

"Salmon."

"Any leftovers?"

We brought it out and waved it in front of her. The cat closed her eyes and waved its tail, as if smelling a banquet of flowers.

"Here, kitty," I said, "Kitty kitty kitty ..."

"Jessica —" my mum warned.

The cat reopened her eyes and turned their full power on me. The effect was unsettling: for a few minutes I found myself swimming in the inky blackness of her dilated pupils.

I retreated.

Cat: 1; Family: 0

In the end, we decided to leave it alone, hoping it would tire and leave. No such luck. My father turned to CNN, hoping to bore it to death, but when I peeked into the family room it was my father who was asleep and not the cat. To tell you the truth the cat seemed very interested in Israel's war with Lebanon.

"Lights out." My mother said. "Jess, go wake up your father - We'll leave the cat overnight."

"What if it poops in my chair?" Bill wailed.

The next morning found the cat at the exact same spot where we left him the night before. We ate breakfast in the family room, in full view of him, hoping to tempt him out of his throne. He watched us, but yawned and looked away, waving his tail irritably. It was as if he was saying: "You can't fool me. The chair's still mine."

We gave up and went to school, with father driving and mother

swearing revenge on the cursed animal - she sat in the front seat with the Yellow Pages in one hand and her Motorola in the other.

"Hello? RSPCA? Yes, I've got a stray ca - what do you mean you're full? Epidemic? Can't you just ... but we need ... oh *damn*."

And it went on like that for the twenty minutes it took to reach school. Apparently some pet sickness - feline influenza or whatis - was making its rounds in the suburbs and holding up every animal related organization within a 10 kilometre radius. Mum was dialing the number of the sixth vet when we reached school, and I left the car with a sliver of my mother's frustration.

Cat: 2; Family: 0.

Now it didn't help that Math was the first class of the day. "Did you know there's going to be a cat show at the Civic Centre next week?" Michelle asked, looking up from her trigonometry.

"Don't talk to me about cats!" I snapped back, mind still preoccupied with the domestic crisis. Michelle looked hurt, and I felt terrible. And so I forced myself to relate the whole story to her from beginning to end.

She chuckled when I finished. "Mind if I follow you back home?" she asked, later, when we had packed our books for the day and were heading out, "It *should* prove interesting to try and get rid of him ..."

When we got back, Michele and my father and I were treated to high pitch yowling, punctuated with several human screams. It seemed like a badly written comedy: a man ran out of our front door, pants in shreds. Our gazes followed him down the driveway, out the gate and into a van - which promptly revved up and shot away.

Mum was at the doorway, "And he was the only vet we could get hold of ..." she sighed. "Jessica, get a broom and follow me in - we've

got quite a mess on our hands."

She wasn't kidding. After removing four cushions, broken pieces of porcelain and the ripped canvas of a painting (all the while under the benevolent gaze of the cat, who by now was cleaning his claws), I had to admit that we were worse off then we were the day before.

Cat: 3; Family: 0.

"You know," Michelle said, as we cleared the room, "You're lucky most of these ornaments are second hand, otherwise your mum might've injured herself attacking the cat."

Michelle was being blunt, but she wasn't being rude. She knew that my parents loved visiting flea markets, where they could buy good furniture at very low prices. Bill's chair, for example, cost a fourth of its original price.

We spent the rest of the afternoon doing homework and only half-heartedly tried to lure the cat away - after seeing him in action with the vet we had no desire to rouse his anger. Our feeble attempts were met for the most part with the occasional flicked tail or a long fanged yawn.

After Michelle left the entire family ate dinner in the family room, though there was little hope of getting the cat to budge. It slept throughout our meal and we followed suit two hours later. We were all quite exhausted.

The next day brought good news. It turned out the evening before father had slipped out and placed an ad about our problem in the Morning Post. A woman had called in the morning and told him that she was coming around 4 to see if the cat was hers.

"Orange markings, wild look, very ferocious?" she had said over the telephone, "Sounds like my Tootsie!"

Our hopes were up. I told Michelle about it during English and we both waited impatiently for school to end. But there were a few things that occupied my mind. For example: how was she going to get the cat out of Bill's chair?

We were soon going to find out. Michelle and I spent the afternoon trying to make a dent in the History homework our teacher had set us, while munching crackers, keeping an eye on the clock and stealing glances at the now very hungry cat. He repeatedly made a sound that sounded like a haughty "mrauf!" every time we took a cracker out of the tin.

At exactly four an old van drove up to our house and the doorbell rang. My mother hurried to the door and opened it to reveal an old woman with greying hair and even, white teeth. She was smiling at us.

"Hello," she said, "Where's Tootsie?"

We led her to the family room, where she gave a cry of delight and launched herself at the cat. We blinked; the cat was on her lap and the old lady was in the chair.

"Do you know this chair belonged to me, once?" the woman said, stroking the armrest with one hand and the cat with the other. "It was Tootsie's favourite. The old boy must've hunted it down after it got stolen a month or two ago."

"You haven't seen her for that long?" My mother asked, awed. "I got the chair at a flea market - I never guessed that it was - "

"Not to worry, not to worry," reassured the old lady. She got to her feet and put Tootsie back in the chair. "I'll pay for it and reimburse you for your trouble. Then let's lug it into my van - oh you poor boy,

I've never seen you so thin ..."

The conclusion to the crisis seemed near, so Michelle left for the toilet at the back and I went to find my father. Both my parents carried it to the back of the van and we stood waving goodbye as the old lady and Tootsie drove off.

"Well." said my mother as we went into the house again, "All's well that ends well, I suppose."

"And to think that the cat traveled all that way just for one chair -" The day was beautiful — white streaks in a sapphire sky and flowers the smell of wine. I hadn't before realized how much we'd suffered in the hands of one cat.

At that precise moment Michelle came in from the toilet. She was pale and shaking, and we all paused to look at her. The smile froze on my face.

She struggled to get the words out: "Do you - by any chance - keep a python in the aquarium at the back?"

