

Dear Feline

by Laura Catherine Brown

Rocky, Arne's elderly cat, was perturbed by invisible phantoms that provoked him to leap up on his hind legs, batting his front paws at the air like Don Quixote attacking windmills. It was hilarious to witness. Arne usually laughed. But this afternoon, he simply said, "Go get 'em," before settling into the sofa with a beer. He had just been fired from his IT job. Information technology, and he had been the last to know. *Unfortunately we're eliminating the position*, they'd said. It didn't fill Arne with rage or grief but rather deposited him in a strange netherworld of nothingness where passion and obligation seemed quite distant. Fifty-two years old, a decade away from social security, and back on the job market. The beer was bitter and bubbly and about all Arne could focus on.

He wasn't in the mood for Rocky to climb into his lap, purring with more zeal than his ancient gaunt body seemed capable of. He tried to push the animal off but Rocky dug his sharp claws through Arne's corduroys into the flesh of his thighs, and purred his refusal so loudly he drowned out the sound of the ceiling fan. Arne couldn't fight that kind of conviction.

He leaned back with the cat nestled in his lap. You wake up in the morning with a job, a paycheck and a certain standing in the world. You come back from lunch and it's gone. The head of human resources escorts you to the elevator. The walk of shame. Arne finished his beer and considered getting up for another but Rocky refused eviction, amplifying his purr, clinging with his talons. His vibrational sounds acquired a desperate quality, a rattle followed by a rasp, a kind of clatter in his throat. Within an hour the cat had rattled himself off this mortal coil into peace.

Arne sat there on the sofa with the cat lifeless and warm on his lap. The silence was spooky. His back ached but he couldn't reach the cushion that would have supported his lower spine. Any movement engendered a decision about what to do with the cat. So he couldn't stir. His foot tingled from blocked blood flow. It was

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probably pooling into his ankles. But Arne sat until his wife, Carolyn, came home from work. As a teacher, being pragmatic and no nonsense, versed in life and death and right and wrong, she plucked the now cold, stiff cat from Arne's lap, and wrapped him in a plastic bag, murmuring, *Bless you dear feline for all the love and happiness you've given us*. She took the plastic bag outside and threw it in the dumpster across the street.

Then Carolyn handed Arne a typed-up list of possible job leads, she'd culled from her fellow teachers and administrators. It made Arne feel quite useless.

A week later, while on vacation planned before he'd been laid off, he and Carolyn traveled out west, where they stayed with Vivian, an artist friend of Carolyn's who lived in Albuquerque. Carolyn had lots of friends from all walks of life all over the world, which meant that, vicariously, Arne did too. At a dinner party at Vivian's, a boisterous, alcohol-fueled affair, conversation shifted to the strange phenomenon of the hospice cat, who'd been in the news because it stretched itself alongside ill people, hours before their deaths. If the door to the room of a dying person was shut, the cat scratched at it, trying to get in. If the person wasn't dying the cat sniffed and walked on. "Cats know things," said Vivian. And everyone agreed. "They just know."

Vivian's diminutive deaf white cat, Timmy, who must have been at least fifteen years old, approached the table with a rather jaunty, if arthritic, sideways strut, as if he wanted to join the conversation. Parking himself at Arne's feet, he wailed with a wide show of his cavernous pink mouth until Arne picked him up. Timmy angled his stiff little body into Arne's lap, began to purr with a reverberating rattle and died within minutes. From an expressive living thing to a husk. Why me? Arne thought. He cleared his throat to announce the death but Vivian and Carolyn and Vivian's artist friends were all laughing uproariously about something. Aligned with the dead cat, wondering about the purpose of his life, Arne felt utterly excluded. What did cats know? Perhaps Carolyn planned to abandon him. He really couldn't blame her.

Back home in Poughkeepsie, at a fundraiser that Carolyn had exhorted him to attend, he perched on the sofa in the crowded living room with a plate full of hummus and carrots and salad balanced precariously in his lap. Above and around him people talked and gesticulated. The noise level reached deafening but no one talked to him. He knew he was supposed to network and impress people with his relevance and knowledge because someone here might be in a position to offer him a job but he simply couldn't do it. Carolyn waved at him from across the room. *Get over here*, the gesture said, and Arne prepared to rouse himself, searching for somewhere to park his plate of food, when a voluptuously furry gray cat materialized behind him. It stepped daintily from the back of the sofa onto Arne's shoulder and down Arne's chest, nudging the plate with its nose until Arne placed it on the floor. The cat settled in his lap.

"Not again," said Arne. "No. This is not my role. I won't do it." He extracted the cat, plucking its claws one by one from his chinos before placing the animal on the floor.

They were singing jazz standards across the room, gathered around the baby grand, his wife crooning, *as time goes by*. She signaled to him again, his tenor much desired for sing-a-longs, and Arne was infused with a resolve to stand up and interact with people. But one of Carolyn's colleagues, a man recently widowed, wedged in next to her and began to harmonize.

The cat rounded its spine, blocking Arne's feet. Long fur matted its underbelly. Then a clog-shoed woman tried to squeeze through between the sofa and the coffee table. She tripped over the cat, righted herself and continued heedlessly onward without checking on the poor beast. Pity convulsed Arne's heart. He and this cat were merely obstacles here at this fundraiser; nothing to contribute, nothing to glean. He imagined his own death. Wouldn't it be easier to depart this life if he was warm and stroked and escorted, as it were, with a little bit love and softness for his journey? A cold refusal might make no difference once he'd already passed away but mightn't it help during those dilated moments just before the end?

He bent down to pull the flat-faced cat back into his lap. It was lighter than it appeared, its frame scrawny and delicate beneath the bushy fur. Its eyes were clouded opal with cataracts. Its purr deepened into the now-familiar rattle. Gently he stroked the soft, silky skull and felt the tiny pulse in the throat, a quick and shallow rhythm, a pause between each weak throb of life. Each pause lengthened. Each throb weakened and he knew it would not be long. But meanwhile, he understood his purpose on this earth, for this moment at least. He offered what was his to give, a lap, some love, and thanks to be of use.

