A fat ginger cat lumbered in through the back door and hissed at the woman standing at the sink scrubbing pots.

Humans are pathetic he thought; radiating disdain. He meowed, calling her a filthy name that should have gotten him a good slap across the ears. Instead, she stopped what she was doing wiped her hands on a tea towel, bent down and stroked his head.

He swiped his claws up her forearm drawing blood.

‘*Stupid bitch*!’ he glared at his bowl. ‘Where’s my dinner? This is third night in a row I’ve had to wait. Don’t be surprised if there is something stinky deposited in a place you can’t quite find tonight.’

Sheila whimpered. Small dark and very catlike herself, she raced to the bathroom to swab the wound with disinfectant. Why was he so nasty? She loved him. She treated him like a king. Fat spongy cushions for him to snooze on and a fresh dirt box every day. The best dry cat food with added vitamins during the week. He had fat fillets of fresh salmon on a Friday night and mounds of minced steak on a Saturday and Sunday.

She looked down at the criss-cross of scratches on her arms with tears in her eyes.

Why?

The cat stood next to his bowl and screamed for his dinner. Damn human, the service in this place sucked.

That other human would be in soon. The big male one with huge calloused hands and the big black heavy boots he had to be especially quick and nimble to avoid. Cat was wary of that human. He was gruff and spoke with a deep loud voice that rumbled through his superior feline hearing and hurt his ears.

Best to be avoided he decided, licking his paws.

Cat heard the cupboard open, the food rain into his bowl, he stuck his nose into the mix to early and sent a few tiny pink star shaped biscuits firing all over the floor. Sheila laughed and patted him finding his antics amusing. He hissed deep in his belly wanting her to bugger off.

…

As twilight fell, in the back yard, a tiny black cat slunk slowly along the thick wooden baton that held the high pickets on the fence. She crouched low and looked into through the kitchen window with yellow eyes filled with yearning

She watched him, that huge ginger Tom, every night, scoffing down gigantic bowls of food getting fatter and meaner.

She was getting too tired for this kind of life. She’d been alone for a long time and survived more by luck than aptitude. She spent most of the time hiding. She was losing her edge. Last night was the worst of her short life. She nursed a sore ear; Torn by that Tom, for a gecko he took, just because he could.

It still stung and she hoped it wouldn’t get septic and lead to the stinking green infection that killed her brothers Thomas and Creech.

He didn’t need to hurt her. He didn’t need the tiny grey mouse she caught either. He only wanted it because he could take it from her. At first she dodged his clumsy punches easily, jumping this way and that, but then she too-ed when she should have fro-ed and he got her catching the delicate edge of her ear with his unsheathed claws.

She hadn’t fought back. She escaped and ran, as fast and as far as she could, stopping only when she was completely sure he wasn’t behind her. She spent the rest of the day and most of the night beneath a dense green hedge licking her wounds.

Now she was back, staring into his world.

She heard him growl at the human and nastily claw her. Then, in disbelief, she watched as the human responded by hurrying to feed him, and trying to pet him again, to which he responded with another horrible squall.

…

Albert didn’t like cats much. He didn’t dislike them either. He just didn’t really think about them. He knew when he met Sheila that she was potty about them and since he was pretty much potty about her he would indulge her anything. But her cat was a nasty little bugger and if she weren’t quite so mental about it he’d quite happily drive it somewhere far, far away and throw it out the car window.

He rounded the corner onto his street, drove too number seventeen, stopped and backed across the road and down number their driveway and parked his Jeep behind Sheila’s hatch. It was as he was climbing out of his car he noticed the dead mouse laying on the front door mat. His stomach turned over. He really didn’t like the dead animals Toby kept presenting Sheila but they were meant to be gifts or something.

Sheila assured him that if they fed him a lot, two or three times daily, Toby should lose his hunting instinct but the great ginger puffball seemed to eat like a horse, get fatter by the minute and still leave the dead animals.

He kicked it into the garden with the toe of his boot.

That’s when he saw the tiny black cat, or was she a kitten, he couldn’t tell, she was so small. She leapt down from the fence and swallowed the stiff little mouse body in one gulp, sucking down the tail as if it was a tendril of spaghetti. She stared up at him for a few moments with her huge incandescent yellow eyes then darted away, quick as a flash. She was gone so quickly he actually wondered if he’d imagined her.

But no, he remembered those eyes, for some reason they reminded him of Sheila’s huge round hazel eyes that he loved so much. A ball of warmth engulfed his heart and he felt all giddy. Gosh, he loved his lady.

With lightness in his step and a song in his heart he burst through the front door.

Toby had just found the most perfect and luxurious position on his human’s large squashy settee. The human woman tried to pet him again. He’d had to claw her.

Couldn’t she tell he wasn’t interested?

Couldn’t she tell he couldn’t stand her?

Was she stupid, or just blind?

If the food weren’t so good here he would just leave.

The hasty arrival of the big male human caught him by surprise and he jumped with fright and tumbled to the floor yowling. He leapt to his feet and shot between the big human’s legs, narrowly missing being kicked in the head as Albert, who received a sudden shock from the cat’s growl lost his footing and almost fell into the fireplace. Then when he reached out blindly to try and stop his fall he swiped two of Sheila’s favourite china ornaments from the mantelpiece. They shattered on the hearth.

The sound of the crash bought Sheila skidding into the room from the kitchen as Toby reached the connecting door. The rest was a bit of a blur as woman, man, and cat caught in a terrible collision.

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The vet shook his head sadly and his nurse fought back tears as she saw the distressed response of the woman who was being gently embraced by the big strong man in the waiting room.

‘Will, will he be all right?’ Sheila asked

It was clearly a terrible shock for them.

They had obviously loved that cat. It wasn’t their fault even though she could tell they were both guilt ridden. It was just one of those appalling accidents that could have happened to anyone.

…

Sheila insisted that they take Toby home and bury him under his favourite tree wrapped in his cuddly blanket with his clockwork mouse and squeaky toy.

She stood at the kitchen sink for the next few weeks staring at the mound of freshly turned soil, crying. Her heart ached and she felt a cold emptiness in her stomach. She tried to keep herself together but it was just too much. She had always owned a pet of some kind, all of her life, cats, dogs, birds, mice and even insects when she was very, very small and desperate for something to take care of.

Even Albert felt something akin to loss apart from the pain of having to witness his wife’s desolation. He didn’t really know why. He had never liked that animal but there was a hole in the fabric of their lives the hairy ginger butterball had filled since their kids left home, first their son too Europe and their daughter, to a University at the other end of the country.

Now they just had each other, and a great big silent house in which to potter about in.

…

Sheila caught sight of the tiny black cat one afternoon when she was hanging out the washing. At first she didn’t know it was a cat she just saw huge yellow eyes staring passively at her from the top of the fence. She didn’t move, even when Shelia stepped closer. The bedraggled little thing just sat there with a strange pensive expression on it’s face.

That evening Shelia left out a bowl of minced beef and saucer of kitten milk. In the morning it was gone. So she left another and another, not really knowing if the strange little creature was the animal devouring the food. Then one afternoon she saw it cautiously make its way to the bowls at the back door. So she moved the bowls a little closer to the house, then closer until it was just inside the cat door that was now propped open by a tin of baked beans.

Now the little cat was spending more time inside, she even allowed Sheila to put a few drops of flea treatment on her and give her a wash. One day Albert came home to find the little animal curled up in a ball in front of the fire fast asleep.

Sheila heard him come in and came through from the kitchen, ‘Hello darling, how was your day?’

‘Not bad … not bad!’ he smiled. He kissed her cheek tenderly, ‘Well it looks like that cats made it self at home!’

Shelia smiled back happily, ‘She sure has!’

The tiny black cat pretended to sleep while she listened to her new humans mewling and gruffly mumbling. She had no idea what they were saying but it sounded very nice.

She was glad she left all those gifts hoping that one day she would be invited in to lay here, in the warmth, where she was, right now.