

Following Moses

Gretchen Shirm

'Where's Moses?' Richard asks from the kitchen.

'No idea,' I say, trying to focus on the television.

I have a glass of wine balanced between my fingers. My feet are crossed on the coffee table in front of me, covered by woollen bed-socks. Sirens sound from the box in front of me, the screen flashes blue and red. At night, I only have the energy to watch crime shows. When I sit down to watch current affairs my mind wanders, floating off like a helium balloon before I have the chance to catch the string.



Image oceanebelle

Moses I found with three other kittens in a garbage bin on our street, when I was walking home from work one night last year. I heard their cries and the sound of rustling plastic. I stopped and stood in the middle of the road, trying to decipher the noise and its source. When I opened the bin, a plastic bag squirmed around on top of the garbage. I tore through the plastic and found a writhing mass of fur inside. I tucked the three wriggling kittens inside my coat pockets. Moses I held in my hand.

He was the only one of the kittens whose eyes were still shut. He cried like a hungry baby, stretching his mouth wide to release the tortured plea. Poor Moses, one moment he was curled together with his siblings, warm in his plastic womb, the next he was dangling by the scruff of his neck as I carried him home with me. He clawed at my wrist and drew a line of blood on the soft skin on the inside of my arm; there's still a raised white scratch there now.

Moses was the smallest of the kittens. I'd put them down on the couch in our loungeroom and, with his eyes shut tight, Moses had strayed from the other three. He was moving towards the edge of the chair; a few more steps and he could have tumbled off it, but I caught him just in time. We couldn't keep all the kittens. It wouldn't be fair, that's what I agreed with my husband. We both have demanding jobs and not enough time to devote to four kittens. So I chose Moses. The others we took to the local vet.

Plates clatter in the kitchen. I could ignore it, but I rise and walk to him. My glass of wine clicks against the bench as I put it down and I wrap my arms around his shoulders. I look at Richard's thick neck and see a few stray black hairs there. I take in a breath of his aftershave; it's sweet but prickles at the back of my throat. He is still in his work shirt. I picked this shirt for him, I think to myself, and straighten it across his shoulders and then brush it down his back. It's a blue gingham print.

No reaction. I sigh. Once our fights were vocal and urgent, now our fights are silent and smothered. The blade of the knife thuds against the board as he chops a carrot. I watch the movement of the knife as it slices and the carrot circles as they roll and settle on the chopping board. The peeled carrots are dense and moist, like bones I think.

'He's your cat,' Richard tells me in between carrots.

'I know, that's why he'll come back for dinner,' I reply.

'I've already put his food out,' he snaps and wriggles out of my grasp.

This man who lies beside me in bed at night and whose breath is as regular as a metronome, while I stare at the ceiling and hear the wail of a siren thrown against the buildings on our street and the snigger of an engine that won't turn over; my partner, with whom I've not had more than a two-minute conversation in over a month now.

Last weekend, we both sat on either side of the dining room table, with the inky mass of the newspaper spread out before us. Richard had his head bent over the business section, while I riffled through the magazine. We were there for hours and by the end our fingers were stained grey from the print. Our only exchange in that time was when I asked him if he'd like another coffee. He dragged his eyes from the newspaper and slowly shook his head.

I look at Richard now, working methodically away at the recipe that's laid out on the bench. It's Tuesday night, his turn to cook.

'He'll come home eventually,' I say.

'In the middle of the night—pawing at the door, while you are sleeping soundly.' Richard has never really taken to Moses.

The frying pan starts to hiss as he drops the vegetables into the oil. I slip off my socks and, still in my pyjamas, open the door and walk outside.

'Put some shoes on,' he shouts behind me, but it's shut off by the bang of the front door.

The road is cold under my feet.

'Mo-ses!' I call and feel a hot rush of tears down my cheeks.

Richard hates it when I get weepy, and mostly I've learnt to control the tears, so they only come now when I don't expect them.

Wind snaps through the trees and jostles the neighbour's wind chime. I look up at the towering apartments behind our house and watch for a moment through the windows as people motion silently through their lives. They're all new apartments behind our house, all framed by glass. I feel as if I am watching a series of screens. One figure stands at the

kitchen bench, washing dishes. Another person bobs up and down on a cross trainer. I watch, until the cold tar road begins to jab at my feet.

'Mo-ses?' I cry.

I listen for his bell, but hear nothing.

Sometimes Moses hides in the enclave near the garbage bins. I look over and see that Greg and Julie are there now, taking out the garbage together—Greg has the garbage bag and Julie is carrying a wad of spent newspaper. Greg and Julie live next door to us, in the other side of our semi. They seem to do most things together. On their way back inside they smile and wave to me. Last weekend, when Richard was out, I sat on our bottom step and put my ear to the dividing wall. I wanted to hear the sounds they made together, as if that might help me understand what Richard and I are doing wrong. But the wall was cold, like the ceramic feeling you get when you put an empty shell to your ear; it was the same sound too, an echoing emptiness.

I turn off our street and walk along beside the drain that runs past our house, out to the harbour. I've found Moses there before, watching the water from the drain's edge, staring at something that's invisible to me. I picked him up and he didn't stop meowing until I took him home and fed him some milk. The earth squelches under my feet and lodges between my toes. A bus drives past the street behind me, lit up inside. It roars up the hill, carrying its few passengers towards the city. Then I hear Moses wail. I move towards the sound. I hear hushed voices.

The three of them are crouched in a circle, on the side of the drain. They wear black. One wears an oily coat that hangs on the ground around him. Their faces shine blue in the night sky. I move closer and crouch behind a tree, barely five metres from them. The bark of the tree is rough and dry against my hands. My teeth chatter, but I clench my jaw and try to hold them together.

I see Moses. They are squatted around him. He is wriggling, and whining at a distressing pitch. There is a bottle of spirits next to the man in the coat and his face is unnaturally pale.

'Have we got a knife?' the coated man says.

'My pocket knife, but I can't see a fucking thing here.'

I could run home and get Richard, but if I move they'd see me; what-

ever they are going to do to Moses now, I will witness.

'I've got a lighter.' The voice is a girl's. I can see her long black hair. I see sparks scatter as she flicks the lighter twice, and then a wavering orange light casts their features in a shadowy light. Moses' screams are shriller.

'He's squirming too much, hold him.'

The girl screams. 'Little shit, he scratched me.'

The man in the coat grabs the knife. 'Useless,' he says. 'You hold the cat. I'll do it.' He takes a swig from his bottle. There is one final cry from Moses. Then I hear the tinkle of his bell. The man in the coat runs after him and picks him up.

'No! Moses,' I scream.

They all turn around and look at me. The man in the coat is stroking Moses around the ears. He looks at his paw. 'Poor thing,' he says. 'He's lost a claw'

I stand up.

'He's yours?' the girl asks, smiling. Her face is white and dusty and her eyes are framed by thick black lines.

'Yes,' I say.

'We found him stuck over there,' says the one holding him. 'He was wrapped in fishing line and he had a hook through his paw.'

'Some bastard obviously left it there. I can't believe it, this drain leads to the harbour,' says the girl. She looks down, noticing my bare feet and pink pyjamas for the first time. The man holding Moses walks over to me.

'Moses? Is that his name?' he asks. I nod. 'Hey, cool,' he laughs and pats him on the head and hands him to me. I can hear Moses' deep winding purr.

'Well, Moses, we'll see you later.' The girl walks over to me and gives Moses a pat. 'Bye Moses,' she says softly. 'I hope your paw heals'.

She has some blood on her finger, but seems not to mind. The man in the coat picks up his bottle.

'See you later,' he waves to me. He puts his arm around the girl and they walk off. I stand there briefly, patting Moses.

'Thank you!' I call out, but the wind must have carried away my

voice, because they don't turn back towards me. I look down at Moses. I can feel his purr in the palm of my hand, through his chest. I pat him between the ears and he pushes his head against my fingers.

I pass Greg and Julie's front window on the way back and they're standing together, over the dishes. The yellow kitchen light spills out onto the footpath in front of me. Julie is washing and Greg is wiping. Julie is talking about something as she works on a dish, she takes her hands from the water and starts gesturing and her hands are covered in pink washing-up gloves and the bubbles slide from the gloves back into the water. Greg is nodding. I don't want them to see me, so I duck down and pass under their window to our front door.

When I walk back inside, Richard is already sitting in front of the television, eating dinner. A steaming bowl sits on the coffee table waiting for me. I walk upstairs to the bathroom with Moses still tucked under my arm.

'Dinner's ready,' Richard calls when I'm at the top of the stairs, in the monotone he uses when he's annoyed at something.

I run warm water into the bathroom sink and tip some Dettol in and the water turns milky. I hold Moses' injured paw firmly and dip it into the water. He wriggles and claws at first, but then he goes limp and I dip his paw into the water. Then I wipe his foot dry with a tissue. The tissue comes away pink, but most of the blood is gone.

I drop Moses down and walk back down the stairs. I hear his bell behind me as he jumps the stairs in twos after me. When I sit down on the lounge, I put my bowl in my lap: all of the vegetables have started to sweat. I can hear Richard crunching as he chews, but he stops for a moment to watch Moses. Moses is walking up and down the lounge opposite us, rubbing his body against it. He tilts his head and presses it into the lounge as if he's trying to scratch himself, but all the while, he's watching us. Richard shakes his head and then focuses back on the television.

Moses moves around the coffee table, the tip of his tail flicking from side to side. Then he stops at the couch next to Richard and he reaches out with his two front paws towards the lounge, sharpening his claws. I can hear his claws pulling at the fabric on the chair; our lounges once

belonged to Richard's parents.

Richard never moves quickly. He does everything very carefully. He puts down his bowl, making the glass on the coffee table ring. Then he pushes his hand into Moses' chest and sends Moses skidding across the loungeroom. He doesn't care whether Moses' claws are stuck to the fabric. Moses tumbles three times in a ball and when he stops he lets out a yowl and races out of the loungeroom and back up the stairs. Richard picks up the remote and changes the station to SBS, where the late news has just started. And as I sit there, sifting through my cold stir-fry with a fork, wishing Richard would learn to add some flavour to the food he cooks, I realise I've been holding my breath.

During the day Gretchen Shirm works in Sydney as a lawyer. The rest of the time she is writing a collection of interwoven short stories called *Having cried wolf*. She has had a lifelong love affair with books, writing and sleep.
