

THE HUMAN IS LATE TO FEED THE CAT

A waiting game.

BY BETH CATO

Sassafras was most displeased. The woman was late to return home. Sassafras positioned herself in the hallway with a clear vantage point of both the front door and the laundry room that contained her barren wet-food dish.

Her anxiety increased as the hours passed. She fully groomed herself five times over, and even lapsed her guard duties long enough to eat some dry kibble; that dish was despairingly low as well. Her snack done, she resumed her watch.

If Sassafras had to rise again, it would be for the curtains to know her wrath.

The front doorknob jostled. The cat hopped to her feet, fur like a puffy white cloud. The woman lurched inside and slammed the door behind her. Without sparing a glance at Sassafras — the nerve! — the woman dived through another doorway. With a dismayed glance towards the laundry room, the cat followed her.

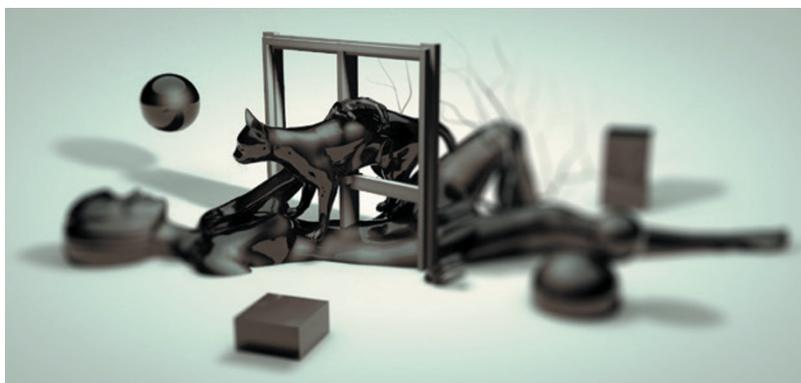
The woman was ill. She radiated sourness, and the potency of it worsened as she leaned over the toilet. But Sassafras was the very model of support and patience. She purred and marched back and forth in the gap between woman and toilet, with brief pauses to groom the woman's elbows.

"No, Sassy." The woman pushed her away. Confused, the cat scrambled backwards. The woman fell back on her haunches, groaning.

"People are coming down sick everywhere. Some virus. I heard the hospitals are full. I couldn't take the train. On the bridge, I saw someone..." She wiped her wrist against her mouth and shuddered. Sassafras smelled blood. "I'm afraid... I don't know... I tried calling my mom, but..." The electricity flickered like a pulse but stayed on.

Sassafras rubbed against the woman's knees and prodded her towards the doorway. The woman did move, but only to hover over the toilet again. The cat retreated a few steps with a despondent yowl.

"I know, Sass." The woman coughed and hacked. She pulled a towel from the rack and dragged it with her as she crawled down the hallway. Sassafras was unsure what to make of this sort of progression, but at least the human was going the right way. The cat trotted ahead to act as a guide, her tail like an exclamation point as they entered the laundry room.



The woman knocked the food box from the shelf and, after more delays, managed to rip open a pouch. The glorious perfume of savoury tuna in gravy filled the room. Sassafras purred like a motor and she settled in at her food bowl.

The lights flickered again. Outside, car horns blared, followed by pop, pop, pop, and a prolonged scream.

"Oh God. The world's gone to hell. What's going to happen, Sass?"

The cat felt the weight of the question and glanced up. She had just resumed eating when the sound of the jostled dry-food bag made her freeze. The woman had dragged the large bag from between the washer and dryer. She undid the clip at the top, then tipped the whole thing on its side. An avalanche of kibble tumbled across the floor.

Sassafras stopped eating her beloved tuna. Why was her crunchy food all over the floor? The woman knew Sassafras only ate dry kibble if it was in the appropriate bowl. The woman smelled increasingly wrong,

too. Her body was too hot. It was rank. Sour. Unfamiliar. The cocoa butter lotion that the cat liked to

lick from the woman's calves couldn't even be smelled now.

The woman used the supply shelf to pry her body upright. The effort left her wheezing and coughing. "At least it'll be fast for me, Sass. That's what the news was saying." Her laugh made her cough more. "To think, this morning... I thought it would be an awful day because I ran out of coffee."

The woman edged her way to the window. It took her several minutes of effort to crank open the pane of glass. Fresh night air flowed through the room. Sassafras's whiskers flared out as she breathed in the fragrance of trees and strange cats and city. She started forward but the woman wobbled and collapsed to her knees, forcing the cat back towards the doorway.

"I used to hate it when you hunted birds at our old place, remember? I would get so mad. But now..." She rolled to her side. Her shoulders racked as she coughed and choked. It took her a minute to speak again. "The tree branch goes right to the window. Good thing... landlord never had the landscapers come. You can go in and out, Sass. If I can get to the sink, I'll..."

More sickness, more coughing. Unsure of the strange assault of smells, Sass stayed back, ears flicking at the contrast of the woman's noises with the sounds from outside. The loudness there had frightened away the birds.

The woman's racket faded to weak sobs. That sound, the cat knew from nights when she shared her bed with the woman. Sass took mincing steps around the foulness on the floor and stopped at the woman's hands. The fingers twitched and managed to rest on Sassafras's sloped spine.

The cat lowered and folded her body into a bread-loaf form. The woman's hand grew heavier on Sass's back, and the cat purred. ■

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ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY