

The prod

for Gillian Bennett

Every now and then when Musa was sitting on Dora's lap, her tail curled comfortably around one but not the other nostril, she would straighten out suddenly and glare at Dora as if electrified, her ears up, her pupils enormous, the hair on her back just slightly bristling. Then she would either shake herself, begin to lick the back of her paw, and work her way back to comfortable roundness, or she would leap off the lap and run from the room. Dora called these Musa's inspiration moments, since she looked as if a large and troubling idea had just struck her. Richard disagreed. He was often cooking nearby at these times, or surfing the internet. According to Richard Musa had been lying in one position too long and needed to work the lactic acid out of her muscles. And Richard should know, being a qualified vet, even if he worked from home now as a consultant expert on mammalian physiology, mostly for animal feed companies.

It had been snowing for days. Unusual there, even in December, but it felt right for the season, even for Dora and Richard, who had no special holiday at mid-winter, or for that matter at any other time. Musa spent even more time than usual indoors, a lot of it on Dora's lap. "Not surprising" said Richard "they're tropical animals". "And hunters" added Dora "not much to catch at the moment."

There was the occasional catch. Musa would bring in mice, almost always alive, and release them in front of the wood-burning stove. The mouse would sit still, as if hoping that if it kept its eyes closed long enough the whole horrible incident might not have happened. No such luck: Musa would reach out a paw and prod, gently but with the force of reality. The mouse would

run. Musa would catch it again, and the whole procedure would repeat, until either the mouse was dead or Dora managed to rescue it. Rescuing a mouse was almost as unpleasant as seeing Musa kill it, since the mouse was now trying to evade two hunters, doubly desperate. It was not until a mouse was dead that Musa would throw it in the air or bat it across the floor. Up till that point everything was formal, scientific.

Musa on Dora's lap again, on a chair near the stove at the end of a cold afternoon when Dora had walked to the store through snow a couple of inches deep because the car wouldn't start. Dora had been reading, but she was tired and it is not easy to read in the flickering light of the stove's glass door with a cat on your lap. She dozed. She almost dreamed, a confused assimilation of her novel into a story about mice. Something pushed through her reverie, a prod like an alarm clock. Musa was staring at her, paw extended. Dora closed her eyes again and Musa prodded her again. Dora woke completely and stared at Musa. She blinked at her, the slow deliberate blink she had seen cats use to one another and which she thought Musa found comforting. Musa was not comforted. She had an inspiration moment. She stared back unblinkingly, her ears up, her tail thrashing. She prodded Dora again, and Dora blinked slowly again, not moving. Musa leapt, almost levitated, off Dora's lap and out of the room. Half a minute later there was the click of the cat flap closing behind her.

They went to bed early. Musa was neither guarding the head of the bed nor weighing down the foot. She was still not there in the morning. Dora always rose early, well before Richard. This morning too she went down to the kitchen at about seven and sat quietly with a cup of tea in front of her, waiting for her thoughts to clear and the kitchen to warm up. The click of the cat flap, the pad of four feet across the floor, rather more slowly and deliberately than usual. Musa landed on the table, shaking a dusting of snow off her shoulders. She looked at Dora, directly, probingly, and opened her

mouth. She tipped her head and poured out onto the tablecloth a mouse. A baby mouse, hairless, eyes closed. Dora snatched it away, while Musa just watched, and prodded it with her finger. It did not run. It was alive and warm, but its eyes were newborn-closed.

The stove burned steadily for the next weeks, day and night. The mouse in its wool-lined creche nearby, an eyedropper beside it, in hope that it might become large enough and the weather warm enough to release it outside. Musa was often nearby, on the table or on the rug before the stove. Watching the box, alert, a wide stare broken by the occasional slow blink.