



Anya

Written by Angela Glindemann

It was just like you to do this.

As I stagger dripping into the foyer, I can already smell the remnants of upstairs' weekend roast and my stomach churns at the brown sameness. You've brought me back.

"Ah, you're drenched, you poor thing!"

Alina appears. I barely lock eyes on her before she squeezes me against her beads and skirts. One of my ear piercings catches on her hair. I leave wet patches on her clothes. I'm left in rose-scented discomfort. I think of turning back out into the sleet.

"Come on up, I'm making hot tea," she says, oblivious. "Mind the step, it's still the same."

I take the first step – the one that squeaks – and I shiver as I feel you and me thundering down here that very first time, bursting to be out of earshot of the rental agent so we could laugh at the ridiculous emphasis on the north-facing toilet and your mumbled comments about the health benefits of a well-lit shit, and then the step squeaked and you tripped the rest of the way but we still signed the lease.

"... Joey has a new girlfriend again, would you believe?" Alina continues as we reach the third floor. Our floor. I can already hear her kettle whistling. "And Richard is moving out – got a job interstate."

Alina jingles her million keys and lets me in and I'm engulfed in the gingery smell of her baking and some anonymous potted flowering plant that you must have asked her about one time that you stood there chatting with her as all the warm air left our apartment. And now the name completely escapes me, if I ever knew it at all.

"Sit, sit, get warm," she orders. Her kettle's whistling, but she first goes for her mismatching oven gloves, leaving the kettle to squeal on and on as she assesses her baking.

"I'd love some tea," I say, when I can no longer take it.

She brings warm gingerbread, earl grey tea, and a bottle of sugar cubes with an inexplicable violin sticker peeling off it.

And then she looks at me over her glasses in that way that everyone's been looking at me, as though they're just waiting for me to collapse into spasms of grief. "So, how have you been holding up?"

I bite into the gingerbread. It's too hot. "Actually, Alina, I came to tell you that I can't," I begin.

Something flickers across her face, tightening her jowls and bringing her thin lips closer together. "A shame, a shame."

Her eyes drift to the new tattoo on my finger, the little cloud and the raindrops with their raised edges, and I instinctively cross my arms on the table.

"Well," she says. "You can't just leave in this weather. How is your work, then?" She leans across the table like an investigative journalist.

"It's not that I don't want to," I burst out. "It's just that, you know..."

It's just that it was just like you to get a cat after I left, to really stick it to me with the saliva and skin cells and fur. Like you wanted me to cry for you.

A bell strikes and there's a hoot and I jump. The cursed cuckoo clock. I'd forgotten.

"I see. Well, I will be in Austria for a long time. Six months, maybe more. I'm thinking I'll rent this place out actually, on that travelling website."

I nod, taking in the chaos of this place with its crooked paintings, its boxes of old antique magazines and classical sheet music, the uneven doilies, the different rugs in every room. Some wannabe artist blogger will call it eclectic.

"I didn't have any other numbers, friends or any such things," she continues, taking a single piece of gingerbread and eating it like a bird, each tiny piece pressed between her fingers.

I watch the bleak sky outside, hoping for a break in the weather. "I could give you some, maybe," I say before I can stop myself.

"No time for that," she says, collecting our cups and ambling back to the kitchen. I breathe out. "I guess I'm just surprised, is all. I've had her here so long, I thought you would have been sneezing or some such thing already. But no matter."

I look down. And I see it. The fine little hairs over everything: the table, the tea cup, the biscuit tray, my raincoat, my brand new linen shirt. My throat tightens.

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It's a big, heavy black cat and I'm trying hard not to bump its head on the cage with every step we take. And so I forget the dodgy step and bump its head and it yowls.

Alina walks behind me, carrying another box – some random things the landlord gave her when they cleared out your place. I guess your family forgot about your records and ticket stubs and things, or they thought they weren't worth posting back across to Perth. But somehow Alina thinks they're all sacred just because you're not here to assure her that it's all just your old crap with no value at all to anyone else.

The wind and rain makes us hurry across the street, and for once I'm super glad we moved to a place that's so volatile. Alina loads up the cat stuff and your box into my car, says something vague about grief being natural, and sees me off with a ridiculous promise to stay in touch from Austria.

I lean back in the driver's seat and I breathe. The peppermint car air freshener does battle with the rank wet cat smell and my thoughts clamour against the yowling for a moment's clarity. My eyes are already watering. I wonder why I took the damn cat.

Starting the engine makes the cat worse. The pitch goes up. It sends a shiver down my spine.

Before we've even left South Yarra, I almost run a red light, blinded by the rain and the cat hair. I steady myself. I turn on the radio. The cat drowns it out.

I pull over, defeated, and scramble in the back seat for a tissue. An angry car honks at us as it passes. The fur flies. Wiping my nose and eyes, I stare at the cat. It stares back through wild yellow eyes, pauses for one second, and then squeezes its ears back and screams at me. The urge to sneeze rises up and so I press my tongue into the roof of my mouth and count backwards from twenty.

And then I see the name on the collar.

Of course you called it Anya. It sounded like a literary reference for a second, until I remembered that the thing I know it from is actually just a kids' cartoon.

I feel crazy talking to a cat but I'd try anything. "Anya?"

The cat pauses, looks at me, licks itself.

“Anya, hi.”

Another beat of recognition. Its whiskers seem to move forward towards me. Are we understanding each other?

I ride the wave, turn the car back on. It yowls again, ears flattened, claws out. We both have no choice but to turn the music up and speed home in a dangerous, ill-advised blur.

~

Anya springs out of the cage the moment I open it and dives under my couch.

I take out the cat supplies, laughing at the food cans with the bold claim of tasting like clam chowder. I pour some dry pellets into the little cat bowl. It's pretty sweet, with the little pictures of fish on the side, and I can imagine you picking it out in the Japanese homeware shop. But Anya ignores it.

So then I hover around the apartment with the heavy bag of cat litter as it dries out my hands and begins leaking dust everywhere before I even find a place in the bathroom I'm prepared to set it up. My hand hovers over the vacuum cleaner, but I decide not to freak the cat out any further.

So I go back downstairs to the car and grab your box of sentimental crap. I think about sticking it straight into the bin but that seems wrong, so I take it upstairs and leave it sitting by the door.

The wind howls again outside and I'm restless. I go to the kitchen and take an antihistamine and wonder, again, why people like cats so much. But I'm not a monster. If I can give it to someone who will take good care of it, maybe I've cleared up some kind of imbalance in the universe.

I start going through names and faces of ex-friends in my mind. Lin, who works at the animal shelter and is a vegan, she seems like the right choice, but she was one of those ones you were driving to meet that day, so I heard, and I really don't want to hear about it again from her, and I'm not quite sure what vegans do about cat food.

Glen, with the weird hair and the great bass guitar, he's still on my Facebook, always sharing cat memes, he might be interested, but I am sure I overheard one time at a party that he once went on a holiday and forgot to

organise anything to keep his goldfish alive. Even if that's not true, it's reasonable to question someone who has that kind of rumour flying around.

So I take out my phone and scroll through more and more of our mutual friends, just like that day I was still wearing my work clothes and the pasta was sitting there congealing in the cold and the text was still unread and I rehearsed in my mind all the flippant, cool comments you were making to your new friends at VCA and I did this, diving into your friends list, looking for someone who might be your type. And I wonder if either of us knew anyone who had even a shred of responsibility this whole time.

And then Anya comes out and starts sniffing around. It's only then that I think of all those cat videos about how funny it is that cats love to knock things over and break things. I leap up and take a sheet to cover the bookcase with all my nice plates and vases. The keyboard in the corner – I hadn't thought about that for a while, either, until I saw Alina. I take another sheet and I cover that too.

But she's already poking around in your box of old things. She curls up in the strangest position, her furry body folded over the bumps of your old records and art books. She dozes, impossibly.

I need something else to think about. Tomorrow is the monthly birthday morning tea at work, and I want to bring my famous almond slices. I can lose myself in this, in the controlled reactions, in the buttery sugar and the high-end kitchen appliances I bought myself after I moved out, after I didn't have to worry if you'd burn it out or twist it the wrong way or leave it covered in something grimy for weeks or eat the whole batch and leave me nothing but the washing up.

I leave the slice to bake and walk back out to turn the TV on. I see Anya first, now balled up in the middle of the couch, sleeping. She looks peaceful now, and she's holding her back feet with one of her front paws. I hold my breath, not wanting to wake her.

And then I step on the cat litter, grinding it instantly into the sole of my foot – and into the carpet. I wince, easing myself onto the couch as I brush the worst of it off.

And then I see the claw marks running right down my very first street-salvaged brand-name piece of furniture: four deep, even tears in the leather that can never be undone.

"How could you?" I cry out to no one.

And now Anya hears me. She jumps up, arches her back. Her fur spikes up and she claws her way back under the ruined couch like she's possessed.

And now her back is to me. And her food is still untouched. I can't shake the thought that some cats disappear under houses and wait to die there. So I pull on my puffy jacket.

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Victoria Street fills with loitering couples arguing about whether they'd rather eat Hong Kong chicken or Vietnamese pancakes. They spill out their conflicts all over the sidewalk in a sea of swinging elbows and pointing fingers and cigarette smoke.

So I pull my beanie down over my ears and cross to the quieter side of the street with all the closed shops filled with antiques and random decorative art you would have called superficial or derivative, depending on your mood. And then I remember that you always said Richmond was too rough around the edges for you, and I feel a surprisingly strong sense of relief that this is my place and I'm perfectly within my rights not to think of you here.

At the deli I settle on a chicken wing for Anya. But I feel stupid just buying one, so I buy a bunch, figuring I can cook whatever's left after I've rehomed her.

When I get back outside, the couples have all but disappeared beneath their umbrellas and the cold wind is already damp. So I run through the freezing dark and my cheeks are burning but the solitude is making my heart beat faster and I somehow feel alive.

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Anya starts crying out for the chicken wing before I've even finished unwrapping it. She runs around my legs, almost tripping me over, her back legs skidding and sliding on the lino.

I sigh with relief. She's OK and I guess I am too, so I take a beer out of the fridge, then put it back and make a cup of tea instead, take it to the bedroom and close the door.

The aloe vera baby wipes cool down my burning eyes and nose so I use four of them, sitting on the side of the bed. Then I move the tissue box to the pillow beside me, peel off my cold clothes and climb into bed.

I wonder if Anya is still sleeping on top of your records. Most of them probably don't even smell like you, since we didn't own a record player, and after we had that fight when you bought a heap of them, I secretly racked my brain and couldn't even think of a single time I'd noticed you listening to Pink Floyd anyway. But you did like to take them out when we had guests. So maybe they did smell like you after all.

But then I hear the strangest hacking noise. And I imagine I've choked her with the bones and she's dying. So I dash out of the bedroom and I'm just in time to see the vomit explode out of her in a violent gush all over the couch – and Edward, my old teddy bear that I have literally taken everywhere with me. And she sits among the carnage bearing her teeth, daring me to make my next move.

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The whir of the washing machine keeps her away from me and I still stink like rotten meat and it's so late and my eyes are aching instead of itching so I slump against the washing machine and feel the lump rising in my throat.

But then I smell the goddamn almond slice burning and I throw the blackened clumps into the sink and run to take the batteries out of the smoke alarm and, would you look at this, I'm still here cleaning up your mess.

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I'm home from work a bit early because the sales department quietly cancelled drinks when they realised there'd been an error in the sales figures, so before dark I'm already taking an extra dose of eye drops, pulling on my nice new flannel pyjamas, and scrolling through pet ads on a few different tabs. Before long, I'm frowning over phrases like "was my best friend" and "the sweetest ever" and "adoreable" with an e.

Every time I read one of these posts, I look over at Anya who is spreading black hairs all over the linen cushion covers I bought from Abode and the damp and shrunken Edward. She is not adoreable.

What would it say about me if I was honest in the ad?

I stop to get a photo of her but her eyes don't look big and round, her fur looks messy rather than soft, and now she won't stop licking her ass.

None of this is working.

Like last Christmas, when we still flew back to visit my family, and then yours, and how I smiled at your sister and your brother and your mother while you told them about how you aspired to open your own gallery back here in Melbourne within five years, while I processed the fact that you'd definitely decided to stay, while I'd definitely decided I wouldn't, and that the gap between us had grown so wide that neither of us had thought to tell the other that we'd made the call.



“Was my best friend.”

I slam my laptop shut and go do the washing up. When the last glass is back in place, I sneak back to the living room. Anya has curled up asleep and she’s snoring. I take the opportunity to kick the box of your things under the desk where she can’t sit on it so easily.

She responds to the sound. She sits bolt upright and yawns widely. And then she strides over to me, looks me in the eye, and paws at my face, making the tiniest eeeee sound. She touches my face with her nose. It’s wet, and I notice a little dot in the middle. I smooth the fur down under her collar and she leans into my hand, and then she springs away and starts licking herself again.

I spend the rest of the night with my nose running and my phone unlocked on my lap, scrolling Netflix and waiting for Anya to do that cute thing again, but it’s like she’s realised, so she does everything but. She sits on the coffee table and knocks over my tea mug, she meows for another chicken wing, she crawls and wiggles her way back into your box of crap.

So finally I settle on a photo of her using her little paw to shield her eyes from the light as she naps on your records. I compare it to the other listings. I’d choose her.

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Raj confirms with me over text that he’ll definitely take Anya because she’s obviously such a big character and big cats are so cute because they’re always so clumsy, and then he says a whole bunch of other things about how much he loves cats and it makes me wish I could find joy in life so easily.

Then he calls me and gets serious and interviews me about why I’m not keeping her, and I mumble something about my allergies, and then I think to add in about the no-pets policy at my apartment building. He says his landlord has one too, but that he’ll just sneak her in and he’s confident the neighbours will cover for him, and I wonder again if I’m the only person who never actually got to know my neighbours.

So then he admits that he’ll probably change her name because he’s always wanted a cat called Sookie for no real reason, and on the phone he confesses that he’s worrying he hasn’t been sensitive enough and that I’ll feel upset, but of course I’m not, so we agree to meet up at 6, and I text him my address as soon as I get back to my desk.

It’s decided, then. Like in the aftermath of the end, like when I’d sat you down and said everything I planned to say and you’d looked at me with dry eyes and just nodded, and then we’d still gone to the rooftop bar to watch

the fireworks anyway and how I'd secretly started feeling on top of the world, basking in the glitter of the opportunities I was now free to find.

So I take the tram home from the city to give me time to straighten up the apartment before Raj arrives. You were always the one bringing guests home, so guess what, I haven't had a guest in the apartment for at least a few months.

I've already tidied off the coffee table and thrown out the trash before I realise how quiet it is. There's still an imprint where Anya must have been sleeping on my blanket earlier. But she's not in the bedroom. She's not under the couch, either, and when I take the chicken wing out of the fridge she doesn't come. I wander around the apartment and feel the freezing air drift in from the wide open bedroom window.

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At first I think she's probably just hiding somewhere around the unit complex. I wrap the chicken wing back in its paper and start poking around. I look over the fences, into the yards of the people living on the ground floor. I check flower pots, vegetable gardens, outdoor furniture. I look under everyone's cars.

Under the stairwell, a cold feeling starts to settle in my stomach. The graffiti on this wall still says 'go away' in rough marker pen. And I imagine Anya turning her back on this rejection and walking off into the night.

I text Raj and lie about being kept back late at work. He's really disappointed, saying he'd already gotten all his housemates to prepare and that they'd all been to Pet Warehouse and gotten a whole bunch of useless things that I've never really heard of like cat igloos.

So then I think maybe she's gone further afield. I'm always seeing other people's stray cats in the streets behind Victoria Gardens, where there are lots of parks and possums and not all that many people or cars, especially at night when the schools are empty. And so I wander the streets. I stop short of calling for her, but I ask a couple of strangers if they've seen her. The first suggests a missing poster. The second swears at me. The third says to check the vet.

The idea fills me with a bit of hope. So I half-walk, half-run over to where I know there's a big vet and there's always people coming and going, but of course it's closed til tomorrow and the message on their answering machine says to call some expensive animal hospital for late-night care, so I just stand outside for a minute and feel how big and impersonal Melbourne is and of course it takes that moment for me to feel homesick again too.

I felt the same when I heard about you. I'd gotten a call from an unknown number and stepped outside the office, thinking maybe it was the eBay parcel, and how odd the news sounded because there's no way that you could really be gone when you'd just posted on Instagram about getting your first real exhibition and how, besides, that park was too sunny and green and the trams were too persistent in barrelling past and my colleagues were inside still typing and drinking their tea and talking about afternoon teas and babies and engagements.

By the time I wake up from this personal crisis, I've wandered over to the dog park. I'm still carrying the damn chicken wing, so the dogs keep running over to me, and their eager wagging tails remind me that all animals love is a person who will give them things. And then I think people are the same and the thought weighs me down so I sit on the cold metal park bench.

Then I see a little black cat. It's not Anya, of course, but I go up to it, and take a look at its collar. It's from Hawthorn! How far can a cat walk in a night? I remember seeing something about it on YouTube. And I think about how many dark crevasses and scraggy trees and warm cars there are between here and Hawthorn and feel light-headed.

And then I think of the box of your stupid things, and I am back in the car that still smells like the rain and I'm driving back to Alina's.

~

I follow an arguing couple into our old complex and breathe a sigh of relief that I didn't have to call Alina and tell her what happened. The grass in the courtyards here is fake, and I have a hunch that cats might prefer the real thing, so I start by looking in the stairwell, where it still smells like stewing meat and potatoes. This place is too neat, though, so I run out of ideas pretty fast and sit on the steps to google cat hiding places.

"Oh, hello, is everything alright?" It's Alina. She rests her hand on my shoulder.

The gesture makes me feel good and I realise she's the only person who's offered me any kind of physical contact for a long time. I disguise an involuntary shiver, mumbling something about one of your records being missing, holding in hope that she responds by saying that, by the way, Anya's been inside her place sleeping all afternoon.

But her face is blank. "Haven't seen any, but I am very much nearly packed up now, you know. I could call you and let you know if I find any. Which is it?"

"Pink Floyd." I look past her and upstairs to our old door. I wonder if she could be there, waiting outside.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Alina narrows her eyes at me. “I would have felt strange, if I were you, coming back here yesterday.”

I nod, studying the lines under her eyes and beside her mouth, wondering about the times in her life that came to mind, unwanted, when she heard about you.

“We weren’t made to recover from these things overnight, you know,” she’s saying. “Could I at least invite you up for another cup of tea?”

The warm spot on my shoulder makes me think of the warm cat print on my blanket. I nod again.

~

I arrive home extremely late, feeling a strange combination of heavy and light. Alina was the first person I spoke to about you, after everything. She told me how the funeral went. I told her about the fireworks, about the records, about the trip home last Christmas, about how it felt to stand in the doorway with the last box and wish you the best.

I even told her about that very first day, when I’d gone to that dumb murder mystery themed party of some friend of a friend at some terrible hotel and how I’d gone outside for some air and how the line of your jacket had given you a dramatic silhouette that made me want to go over and talk to you, even though you were smoking, and how I had somehow decided to impress you by pretending to confess to a different murder, and how we’d sat there by the roadside and concocted our own tacky murder mystery until the sky started going pink with dawn and how, in that light of a new day, even the swaying drunks leaving the hotel looked like they were dancing.

So now I trudge into the bedroom and flop down on the bed. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do about Raj, or about your box of things, or about the new, silent feeling in this place.

But then I see her beside me.

Curled up beneath the open window, dirt dragged everywhere over the windowsill and around the spare pillow, muddy paw over her eyes. She wakes up, yawning with a squeak, and stretches out her little paw toes towards me.

I reach out for her right back, bury my face into her fur, and let my eyes overflow.