

Have You Seen Gus?

Joshua Venn

JIM ANSWERED HIS phone after the first ring. He'd been sitting anxiously by the phone for the better part of the last five days.

'Hello?'

His voice sounded tired, strained, cautiously optimistic. Despite the hundreds of posters he'd placed around town, no one had called. Every power pole, every park bench, every public telephone: **HAVE YOU SEEN GUS?**

Silence on the other end of the line.

'Is anyone there?' Jim asked.

He'd made the posters the day after Gus had gone missing. Below the header, which had been bolded and capitalised, was a picture of Gus taken when he was just a kitten: a dark grey with a lighter belly and a distinctive white patch of fur just below his left eye. In the photograph, the same one Jim had stuck up on the fridge years ago, Gus was lying on his back in the grass, paws in the air. The bottom third of the poster read: 'MISSING—Gus, beloved American Shorthair, missing since Friday. If found, please call Jim' with his phone number underneath.

The line went dead, and all Jim could hear was the dial tone.

He put the phone back down on the table and began pacing around the kitchen. It was getting late. Soon it would be dark, and Gus would spend his sixth night alone on the streets of Carlton North. It wasn't like him to disappear: three years and not a single night away from home. Once night had fallen on Friday and he still hadn't shown up, Jim had left a bowl of his favourite dinner out on the balcony but by

morning Gus had still yet to return and the birds had made short work of the tuna and vegetables.

With a stack of freshly printed posters ready to cover the far end of Rathdowne Street, Jim made his way into the loungeroom to fetch his keys when his phone rang again.

He let it ring once.

Twice.

On the third ring, he pressed 'answer' but said nothing. Clenching the phone tightly, sweaty palm threatening to send the phone flying across the room like a bar of soap, Jim shut his eyes and listened as hard as he could.

Breathing. Short breaths, quick but not panicked, on the other end. And in between breaths, unmistakable purring.

'Gus?'

No answer.

'Is someone there? Have you found Gus?'

'Hello, Jim.'

A man's voice. British accent, somewhere between David Thewlis and Malcolm McDowell.

'Who's this?'

'It's me, Jim. It's Gus.'

'Very funny, arsehole,' Jim snapped. 'Where's my cat?'

'Really, Jim. It's me.'

Jim moved the phone away from his ear and tilted his head back, breathing in deeply and exhaling loudly. He counted five breaths and then put the phone back to his ear.

'Listen. If you've got Gus, please don't hurt him. You want a reward? Money? I haven't got much.'

Nothing on the other end except the unbroken, almost inaudible purring.

'Jim, do you remember what happened when you first brought me home?' the voice asked calmly. 'The cardboard box you were carrying me in. It broke open at the bottom and I fell out and tumbled down the stairs.'

'Not possible . . .' Jim whispered.

'You were so worried. That first night, you came and checked on me every hour. At 3AM you moved my bed from the laundry into your room.'

Jim sat down, hard. No one could have known that. Not even his girlfriend, to whom he'd never admitted the mishap on the stairs. He

tried to resume his deep breathing but it wasn't working. His heart thumped loudly in his chest, threatening to burst out of his ribcage and land with a splatter on the kitchen table.

After an eternity, the voice on the other end of the line spoke once more.

'Jim,' it said softly. 'Are you still there?'

'Gus?' Jim stammered. 'Is it really you?'

'It's really me, Jim.'

'Gus, I . . . I don't underst—'

Jim's mind raced and he gripped the table tightly. *Sure, I've been under a lot of stress lately, he thought, and I've barely eaten or slept in almost a week. But it's not possible that I'm talking to my cat on the phone right now.*

'Gus, where are you?'

'I'm safe,' said Gus. 'Really, I'm fine. I'm at a payphone.'

'Jesus,' Jim muttered. 'My cat's calling me from a payphone.'

'Believe me,' Gus replied. 'I've done things a sight more impressive in my life than operate a keypad.'

My cat talks AND he's arrogant, Jim thought.

'What's going on?' he asked. 'Where are you? You've been missing for almost a week. I've been going out of my mind.'

'I'm not missing, Jim,' said Gus. 'I know perfectly well where I am.'

'Ok, so where—'

'Look. This is hard, okay? There's no easy way to say it. I left.'

'You left?'

'It wasn't working.'

'It wasn't working?'

'Jim, you're doing a fantastic job of echoing everything I'm saying, but listen. You and me, it wasn't working. I needed a change. Something different.'

Jim couldn't believe what he was hearing. *This creature he'd rescued from the shelter when it was a kitten no bigger than a block of butter, for whom he'd cared and provided and loved unconditionally, whom he'd put before all else. He needed a change?*

'What are you talking about?' Jim demanded. 'You have everything you need here. I've never mistreated you.'

'I need outdoors, Jim. I need sunshine on my fur and grass under my paws.'

'I let you out every day,' Jim insisted. 'Every day, unless it's raining.'

‘For a few hours, yes. But I need more than that. That tiny apartment, I couldn’t stand it anymore.’

‘But you’re an indoor cat,’ said Jim.

‘I am no such thing,’ Gus retorted. ‘I am a cat. You just kept me indoors.’

‘But . . . but . . .’

Jim stood up and began pacing once more, walking an invisible line around the kitchen table, the bench, the fridge. He tripped on something small and metallic: Gus’ food bowl. Dried flakes of cat food flew across the tiles.

‘How are you going to make it out there? How will you survive on your own?’

‘Please,’ Gus purred. ‘I’ll have you know that all members of the feline family are excellent hunters. You may have evolved from an ape, dear Jim, but my lineage is that of the panther, the tiger, the lion.’

‘Gus, you’ve never eaten anything that didn’t come out of a can.’

‘That’s simply not true,’ said Gus. ‘Who do you think kept all the mice out of your apartment? It wasn’t easy with all the crumbs you leave everywhere.’

‘Be that as it may—’

‘Why, this morning,’ Gus went on. ‘This morning I killed and ate a bird. It was an Indian Myna, I believe. My third this week.’

‘Oh Gus, you shouldn’t have done that,’ said Jim.

‘And why on earth not?’

‘You just can’t. Cats cause real problems with the native fauna if they’re not properly controlled.’

‘Nonsense. Absolute nonsense. The Indian Myna isn’t even native, for one. And I think you’ll find it’s more of a pest than any cat. They’re worse for your agriculture than we are.’

‘Maybe so, but you can’t go killing all the local wildlife.’

‘Of course I can. It’s instinct. I’m a coldblooded predator. A natural born killer.’

‘You just can’t. I mean, the effects that feral cats have on the—’

‘Feral?’ Gus interjected. ‘Who are you calling “feral”? You leave dishes in the sink for days on end. You don’t even own a vacuum.’

‘Well, okay but—’

‘And you only clean out my litter tray a few times a week. It’s disgusting.’

‘You’re welcome,’ said Jim. ‘More than happy for you to have a shot at it.’

‘No opposable thumbs,’ said Gus. ‘You try scooping up shit without opposable thumbs.’

‘You managed to dial the phone just fine.’

Jim stopped pacing and stared at the photo of Gus on the fridge. He could still remember the day it was taken; not long after he’d rescued Gus from the shelter, he’d taken him to the park with his girlfriend, Jenna, where they had a picnic while Gus had honed those killer instincts unsuccessfully chasing butterflies.

‘Jenna misses you,’ Jim said quietly.

‘She does not,’ said Gus.

‘She told me.’

‘Jim, she calls me hairball when you’re not around.’

‘It’s endearing.’

‘It’s insulting. And whenever I go over to her for a scratch, she tells me to fuck off.’

‘I’ll admit she can be a little short sometimes.’

‘She steals from you, Jim.’

‘What?’

‘It’s remarkable the things people will do in front of pets when no one else is around. She takes change out of your coin jar once you’ve left for work.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘I’m not.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘Check.’

Jim walked over to his desk and peered into the jar. He didn’t want to believe it, and maybe he was imagining it, but the jar did never seem to get any fuller despite a healthy influx of coins left over from daily coffees.

‘See?’ Gus asked.

‘Nope,’ Jim lied.

‘Suit yourself.’

Great, Jim thought. My girlfriend is a petty thief, and my cat is a smug, unappreciative bastard.

‘Gus, come on,’ Jim pleaded. ‘Come home.’

‘There’s another thing,’ said Gus. ‘I hate that name. I always have. It’s an old man’s name. An old, fat Italian man’s name. *Gus*.’

‘It’s short for Angus,’ Jim insisted. ‘After my grandfather, you know that.’

‘Jim, your grandfather used to step on my tail whenever he came over.’

‘He was half blind.’

‘And he smelt like piss.’

‘He was incontinent!’

‘Regardless, I’m done with ‘Gus’. I don’t go by that name anymore. I prefer Leo.’

‘Leo?’ Jim snorted. ‘What, like Leo the Lion?’

‘No, it’s short for Leopold. After Leopold Bloom.’

‘What?’

‘Ulysses. James Joyce?’

‘Yes, I’ve read it.’

‘Ha! You have not. It’s been sitting on your bookshelf gathering dust ever since you bought it two years ago. I see everything that goes on in this place, remember?’

‘Listen, Gus . . .’

‘Leo.’

‘Leo. Listen . . .’

Jim paused. *Did he even want Gus or Leopold or Leo or whatever his name was back in his life?* Leo seemed quite certain he didn’t want to live here anymore. Despite the comfortable home and regular meals, he’d rather take his chances on the street, living off birds and trying to avoid capture, or worse, death by car accident.

It was one thing to want a break or a holiday. Jim understood that. But for Leo to call after almost a week and insult him over the phone, to insinuate that Jim was messy and lazy and dating a pickpocket, to fail to see that he had been worried sick and gone to the effort of plastering half the northern suburbs in posters?

But he knew that they still had some good years left together. He knew that deep down, Leo must feel the same way.

‘Come home.’

‘I can’t do that, Jim.’

‘Things will be different, Leo.’

‘It’s not that easy,’ Leo sighed.

‘I can change. Really, I can.’

‘Jim . . .’

‘I’ll clean your litter every day. I’ll go buy a vacuum first thing tomorrow!’

‘Jim . . .’

‘I’ll buy the freshest fish! Straight from the market, whenever you want.’

JIM!

Silence except for the ticking of the clock on the kitchen wall and Leo’s unending purr on the other end of the line. Night had fallen.

‘Do you want to know why I can’t come back?’ Leo asked calmly. ‘Do you really want to know?’

‘Tell me!’ Jim pleaded.

‘Jim,’ he began, giving a sigh of resignation. ‘Jim . . . you never close your bedroom door when you’re in there jerking o-’

‘Hey whoa! Alright, alright.’

‘It’s . . . it’s disturbing. I told you, it’s remarkable the things people . . . do in front of their pets.’

Jim mumbled incoherently, and although he was alone in the room his face had turned a brilliant shade of crimson.

‘Sometimes you don’t even leave the lounge room . . .’

‘Got it, Leo.’

‘I’m sitting right there when you reach for the tissues and I just know . . .’

‘Christ, okay!’

Tick-tock.

‘Leo?’

‘Yes, Jim?’

‘I think you deserve a holiday.’

‘Agreed.’

‘I think we should take some time apart,’ Jim continued. ‘Re-evaluate some things.’

‘I think that’s a good idea.’

‘Leo, promise me one thing?’

‘What’s that, Jim?’

‘Promise me you’ll come visit?’