

## Safety Yellow

In a sea of chartreuse, you learn the difference between mono and stereo.

Mononucleosis was the secret smuggled in on my arteries. This was not the day to tell cats of either species that my autoimmune archnemesis had been “reactivated.” This was the day to summon the cavalries of grit and affection. This was the day to pat the pale body on the head and promise, “tomorrow.”

This was the twentieth anniversary of the cat sanctuary, a thin place where the numbers weave figure eights between love’s ankles. We had survived for two decades. We had rescued four thousand disabled, abandoned, and psychiatrically festive cats. We had used seven hundred twenty thousand pounds of kitty litter.

Today, we expected five hundred donors and curious citizens. We had called ten television stations. We had hand-crocheted eighty cats. We had assembled three hundred volunteers, dressed for success in neon T-shirts and incautious affection.

I had received a test result of “over six hundred.” My antibodies were so arrogant, they baffled the machine. It could not count this high. It could account for the weariness I had worn under my puffer vest for weeks leading up to the Anniversary Celebration.

My blood shrugged. “You’re on your own, kitty.” But labs don’t know cats, much less their bodyguards.

Laundry Tony was the first person I saw as I pulled into the parking lot. A shaggy silver cat, as cheerful as ravioli, he had been pulled from his usual ministry of bleaching blankets to direct traffic. He wore the blinding lemon-lime T-shirt of every event volunteer.

He leaned into my window. I did not tell him that I was more infectious than the distemper-spattered kittens in quarantine.

“You’re in luck, young lady.” Laundry Tony is capable of making all creatures feel young. When Laundry Tony isn’t scrubbing fleece, he is cross-legged on the floor with fading calicos. “I’ve selected a spot just for you.” He wiggled his prizeworthy eyebrows. “Right next to me.”

It took two circles around the parking lot and two additional citrus-shirted assistants to get me to the right spot. I am spatially challenged on my best day, and this was not my best day. I scuffed my Subaru wheel and whispered a stern prayer that this would be a splendid day. Barring that, I would accept this being a day on which I remained upright.

“There’s the Duchess of Development!” Lana flew in my direction, purple curls in potent yellow. Neon was Lana’s natural habitat, but today our loudest volunteer crashed the color wheel. “My Daisy, my goddess, you’re here!”

Lana had volunteered at Cat Haven for all of my sixteen years as Development Director. Lana had called me “her goddess” from the first month of our acquaintance. If there was anyone safe enough to tell that I was tottering, it would be the volunteer who read my fundraising appeals like sacred writ.

“Daisy is a poet queen,” she would inform her 600 Facebook friends, posting the Cat Haven newsletter.

“Lana, that masterpiece was about litter box maintenance,” I would scold her.

“I know, but you write with your whole heart!”

Lana’s heart tackled me now. It took all my concentration to follow her pouncing paragraphs. “The thing doesn’t start for an hour, and I already sold ten crochet cats! The Mayor is going to speak at noon! I hid Diet Cokes in your office! I think we might have a thousand people! Are you ready to give your speech? Are you going to make me cry like you always do?”

I simply squeezed her arms. “It looks like the weather is holding up.”

Katherine, our astringently agnostic Director of Operations, had been ready to summon shamans on behalf of the sunshine. “And Daisy talks to saints,” she’d informed the Event Subcommittee.

“They’re less cooperative than donors,” I’d warned her. People who love cats had given us twenty tender and ridiculous years. People who influence the weather do not respond to fundraising appeals.

But the sun was shining, and Katherine was assembling 7’ effigies of cats. Scowling mustached tabbies named Mr. Mustache and Rawhide would tower over the day like cherubim.

“Hey, lady!” Harriet’s hands were full, but she still found a way to hide me in a hug. “Daisy, look what I found!”

My knees were contemplating an early departure, but I braced myself against the Feline Behavior Tent. “Harriet, what are those?”

She ran her fingers over faux pearls and tiny cat heads. “They’re the earrings from the Horrible Woman!” Harriet was nearly as tall as Mr. Mustache and Rawhide, perpetually clad in a peace-sign baseball cap. She cried in my office when Jimmy Buffett died and rescued caterpillars from the cat solariums. She had been a Vice President at Merck but preferred her reputation as the only one who could touch Butter Muffin.

“Oh...” I remembered. Years earlier, a donor had sent us fifty unsolicited pairs of handmade earrings, only to turn feral all over the internet when we declined to promote her

multilevel marketing business. She had become even angrier when we offered to return them, so they'd sat between bags of kitty litter in the storage closet.

“We’re gonna charge three dollars a pair,” Harriet snickered. “They’re hideous.”

They were my first purchase of the day. “This is an artifact I can’t live without.”

“Neil wouldn’t let me put up a sign I made for them. It reads: ‘Horrible Woman Earrings,’” Harriet lamented.

“Where is Neil?”

“Not here yet.”

I was seventeen minutes into the day, and the crime syndicate in my capillaries was making demands. If I didn’t find a chair, we would have a Development Director Down situation. I had to give a speech about outrageous love. I had to ensure Neil felt the weight of his own glory. I had to choreograph meaningful moments with every donor.

I had to wonder why the chartreuse nebula was hurtling towards the Donation Tent. A millipede of volunteers ran at top speed before I could make sense of what I saw. One tent collapsed, then another, dominoes under a suddenly sickly sky. Volunteers threw their bodies over crocheted cats and donation bins and smaller volunteers.

“It’s a tornado!” Lyle bellowed. Our oldest volunteer, Elvis disguised as a drowsy grandfather, grabbed my shoulder. Lyle hadn’t had the strength to carry the stainless-steel litter boxes for ten years now, but he supplied me with fascinating fundraising ideas and sociological observations, as well as Post-it drawings of his favorite cats.

The golden horde caught the tents and each other, and the windstorm thinned into wisps and whiskers. Lyle and I watched as volunteers remade the world before our eyes. Gray yielded to yellow.

Inside my chest, a wave of dizziness performed a dance of distemper. I held onto Lyle's arm, seated but somehow wishing I could sit down. I had written press releases while feeling this pastel. I had Zoomed and made merry and made a magnificent tortoiseshell mirage of feeling fine. But now the parking lot was filling, and soon Laundry Tony would be diverting overflow crowds to the grit yard, and someone had spotted Neil.

I closed my eyes, realized that doing so was a terrible idea, and threw all the windows open. My own volume surprised me. "Congratulations!"

Chartreuse cats spun around. They were used to exclamation points in my writing, but only angora in my in-person voice.

"Congratulations!" Perhaps my infection had reactivated some feral child. "We have just experienced the worst moment of the day. Now it's officially behind us."

"Yes! That is a fact!" Harriet was helping three teenagers turn the Trap-Neuter-Return Tent back on its feet.

"We are used to being rebels!" I was still talking. "We love the cats nobody else wants! We remind the world what it's supposed to be! We do not fall when the wind blows!"

"Speech!" Neil was wearing a suit. He may as well have grown two tails.

Our Founder and Executive Director was a man of scrubs and Captain Beef Heart T-shirts. He had been top dog at a top dotcom at the crest of the internet boom. He had slid off that bubble in frayed jeans in order to start a sanctuary for cats considered “unlovable.”

Now he paged a staff of ten, directing them to the lobby. “Because I need to play with kittens, and this is an activity best conducted under supervision.” He soaked his bandanna with tears when an ungrateful feral passed away. He lay on the floor with the feline leukemia positive cats and hid from the donors who called him their hero.

He said, “we take the ones no one else will take,” and the layers of this were lost on no one.

He called me his consigliere, and he called me his “defrocked priest,” and he called me when he and the cats were daydreaming of disemboweling the Board. He was crass and brilliant and one of my favorite people in the world.

I found my feet. They ran for the exits. I thought of the paraplegic cats in our lobby, all upper body strength and anarchy. I could ferry myself through this day. I could row through this crowd of radioactive T-shirts to my surly second father, the man who’d taken a chance on my complete absence of fundraising skills.

“You’re making a terrible mistake,” I’d informed him when he offered me the job in 2007. “I am a kitten. I know nothing about fundraising.”

“You’re not doing this alone. This is my first cat sanctuary. We’ll learn together.”

I made my way towards Neil, attempting to declare independence from my body. I spoke in monotone to the thunderstorms inside. “Come back tomorrow.”

I walked through a cacophony of mercy. I felt hands and arms and paws and promises. Harriet put her head on my shoulder. Lyle yelled "I love you, lady!" for no particular reason. Lana pressed a Diet Coke into my hand. Irene rode by in a laundry cart of crocheted cats, tossing me a fat rainbow kitten. Laundry Tony warned me, "if you smell the stink of corruption, that's 'cause the Mayor just arrived." Teenage Tyler, with peace signs and red kittens painted on his cheeks, shouted, "Butter Muffin let me touch her!"

They had no idea how sick I was. I had no idea how surrounded I was. I had written a speech about how these twenty technicolor years were embroidered with heroes. I burned to bear witness to the retirees who emptied the dryer and the accountants who changed cat diapers and the yellow-green eyes that saw the sacred in the ragged. I was ready to tell three hundred volunteers and ten television stations and Neil that love is littleness upon littleness. I had resolved to tell no one how scared I was.

"I'm so proud of you, Signore," I told Neil. "Twenty years. Love is victorious."

"All because I'm glorious." Neil rolled his eyes, then stopped them short. "Hey, you OK?"

"Of course, why?"

"No reason. You gonna make 'em cry today?"

"Of course. You?"

"Even if I have to bite them," he promised.

"We had a tornado!" Lyle announced. "You missed it!"

“Neil misses nothing,” I corrected him. I felt my legs begin to buckle, and I heard someone yell “I love Daisy!” Donors were streaming in now, forming tabby stripes in the plush lawn of chartreuse. I had never witnessed so many hugs simultaneously, a polyphonic protest before my eyes.

“Just look at our people,” I whispered to Neil. “Look at all that wild love.”

“And they all say they hate people,” he commented. This was true. Nearly every volunteer in Cat Haven history juiced a personal spiel about how humans had let them down. They said they were here for their real love, the animals. Nobody let them in on their own secrets. I realized I was going to make it through the day. I was surrounded by safety yellow.

### **Author Bio**

Angela Townsend is a Pushcart Prize nominee, seven-time Best of the Net nominee, and the 2024 winner of West Trade Review’s 704 prize for Flash Fiction. Her work appears or is forthcoming in Arts & Letters, Chautauqua, CutBank, The Normal School, Pleiades, and SmokeLong, among others. She graduated from Princeton Seminary and Vassar College.