

GRUBBY LOVE

RICHARD LAWSON

She lives in Searle Street in Newtown, in the inner-city of Sydney. From the outside, her home is just another terrace, one more blistered façade the yuppies haven't got around to doing up yet. Inside, however, are clues that she's different: the Gay Pride flag draped above the door, the lamp-lit hallway festooned with photos. The hall is a floor to ceiling clutter of connections—her two boys, two girls, their partners, her grandkids, the rels, the strays. The strays—mainly dogs, but some humans too—steal most of the space. At the end, quietly framed, apart, is the photo of her Dad, decked in khaki, wearing his crooked smile under a Captain's cap. She's told he was a rascal, whatever that means. The scratched floorboards are mined with mauled pig ears, splintered bones, saliva-drenched cuddlies. The living room rug is lost under dog and cat hair. It's everywhere, under furniture, on top of the dining room table, in between her sheets. Even the walls are hairy. When she airs the place, matted wisps drift from room to room, like furry ghosts. Love, she likes to say, is a wondrous, grubby thing.

Her four-legged children, two dogs, two cats, are all poundlings, the results of rigorous, unnatural selection, chosen for the flaws that guaranteed they'd be chosen by nobody else.

Her first cat, Popeye, is jelly bean shaped, with a patch of black fur over his left eye, the blind one, which makes him look like a pirate. His heart is too big, his urinary tract plays up, and he shouldn't be alive. The fact, if he knows it, doesn't fuss him. He picks fights with flies and always loses. When he bounces home for his evening feed, there are scratches if he's lucky, an abscess if he's not. He's her baby and knows it. When he

starts to beat up Karl, though, she draws the line—his cue to flop on his back, wiggle his shoulders lewdly, like he's doing a shoot for *Penthouse* (her cue to forget about drawing lines and tickle his tum.)

Her other cat, Mitsy, thinks she's the Queen of Sheba. Now her leg's mended, she occasionally leaves her throne on the kitchen benchtop and treats the bedrooms to a royal tour. When her mistress isn't looking, she forgets her blue blood and beats up Karl.

Gretel, the younger German shepherd, is a love-hungry destroyer. Physically she'd be perfect, but for the tooth she broke in a joust with the Hills Hoist out back. She lives for simple pleasures: food, vacuumed up before the spoon's out of her bowl, her afternoon howl-off with Rhonda the ridgeback next door, beating up Karl, the weekly trips to the dog run. She's calmed down a bit in the two months since her rescue. Obedience School is helping. Sort of. Only sometimes does furniture go crashing, or does she knock herself out while ramming the wall.

Last, but always first, is Karl. She'll deny he's the favourite, insisting she loves each animal differently but always equally. No one's fooled. He looks like a wolf but has the heart of a lamb. From behind the front window's curtain, his Cerberus bark knocks over passers by, but he's under the bed as soon as visitors cross the threshold. It's the same when thunder grumbles, or drug-happy yells ripple down from King Street, the centre of Newtown. Once, when fireworks were going off in the local park, he pushed out a rotting plank in the back fence and bolted all the way to Croydon, eight kilometres away, stopping only when his paw pads were raw. All her pets are high maintenance, but none have reached this altitude. He's a fixture bolted to her life, all the same.

(end of excerpt)