

# Things at the CENTRE of Unfulfillment

By Jan Sims

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We had six animal story submissions for this issue. Four were quietly euthanized and two, respectfully flea-bitten, were adopted. The plot lines in both cases were simple. In this one, a walking hairball named Gus becomes the poster puddy for a popular brand of gourmet cat food. When his fame as an influencer goes viral owner Posey's lust for moolah puts her clearly in the sites of her Sugar Kitty. The author writes with a light touch, the fritto misto of comic and bittersweet is **purr**-fect and a discrete note of pathos adds unexpected dimension. So put down Love in the Time of Cholera for a moment, Kitten, and treat yourself to this antic romp. It'll be all over you.*

## **QUALITY QUOTABLE** *(for the love of language):*

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"Well, how do I look my lovely people?" Posey preened for the camera in her Little Bo Peep costume. "And I've got a surprise for you. Here kitty, kitty..." Posey reached behind the sofa, almost knocking the phone off coffee table. "Look, Little Bo Peep has found her sheep!" In reality, it was Gus with a piece of sheepskin rug tied haphazardly around him.

## Things at the Centre of Unfulfillment

*Just be quiet and make yourself small. Hide in the corner. She can't hurt you if she doesn't notice you. She only gets this way when she's very mad.*

Posey was seriously pissed off. "What kind of an idiot mistakes a bathrobe for a pair of overalls?" she muttered.

Despite the packaging mix up, Posey was convinced choosing overalls for her internet tutorial was a stroke of genius. Sure, she thought, they really only suited house painters and children under the age of six. But Posey believed she could make a name for herself as the go-to source for advice on accessorizing overalls.

The more she thought about it, the angrier she became, and flung the bathrobe across the bedroom.

“Deep breaths, Posey, deep breaths,” she repeated. When her hands stopped shaking, she picked up her phone and hit record. “Greetings my people, Posey here. Now I know I promised you an ‘overall look at overalls’ today, get it? But some moron in the fulfillment centre screwed up my order. Instead of overalls, they sent me a bathrobe. Can you stand it? Here take a look.”

Posey swung the phone around so the camera could focus on the offending bathrobe.

*I know what will make her happy. I'll put on a show for her. She has such a beautiful smile.*

“I promise you, my lovely people, that I will get this sorted out for next week. Toodles!” Posey posted the video online, and looked down at the phone. She was going to tear a strip off someone in customer service. But first she needed to tweet about her experience with the people she frequently called “the brain dead idiots who work at fulfillment centres.”

Posey grabbed her cigarettes and headed to the front porch. The landlord insisted no one could smoke inside the house. She swore he had installed hidden cameras about the place, so it was just easier to step outside.

“Okay” Posey muttered when she returned to her bedroom and picked up the phone. “Let’s see what my followers think.”

Her hands started to tremble.

“Get over yourself,” several comments read. “They’re just trying to do their job,” other people remarked. The internet had spoken: Fulfillment centre workers 10 - Posey 0. Everyone thought she was a bitch.

To add insult to injury, someone reacted to her tutorial with the comment: “Wrong order? First world problem sweetheart. But hey check out the cat.”

“Huh?”

Posey looked at her video again, this time noticing that when she panned over to the bathrobe, Gus had a sleeve in his mouth and he was shaking his head back and forth.

“What the fu...” Gus jumped on her lap. “Get off you stupid cat,” she hissed, shoving Gus to the floor.

*I'm sorry...I'm so, so sorry.*

Posey needed something stronger than a cigarette to calm her nerves, so she cracked open a bottle of bourbon that her roommate had left. She thought it hardly made up for the rent money Tabitha owed, but it was something.

Posey didn’t pick up her phone again until she was feeling pleasantly pissed from three stiff glasses of bourbon. “Pissed...and pissed off” she chuckled.

The pissed part required sobering up. But she was no longer pissed off when she checked social media and realized the implications of what she had found.

Someone had edited and reposted part of her overalls video.

“Cat versus bathrobe” was going viral.

In short order, Gus became an internet sensation. (Eventually it would be said, he was the Orson Welles of cat videos.) And while Posey may be many things, she wasn't stupid; especially when it involved money. Trouble was, Gus was her roommate's cat. No biggie she thought, Tabitha's gone to New Brunswick to “find herself”. “Who goes to New Brunswick to find themselves?” she'd asked when Tabitha announced her plans. But Tabitha had just shrugged and refused to say when she'd be back.

*These lights are very hot, but if it makes her happy I'll be quiet. I'll be a good boy.*

“And we're back!” the morning TV show host chirped. Gus sat quietly in Posey's lap as she smiled for the camera.

“He is just the cutest cat I've ever seen,” the host gushed, pulling Gus's ear.

*Ouch.*

“He's my baby,” Posey stroked Gus.

*Prrrrrr.*

“I mean his face...” The host struggled to find the appropriate superlative.

*Please no more ear tugging.*

“Yes isn't it amazing?” Posey sighed.

Gus never knew his parents, but certainly one of them was responsible for his distinctive markings. Darned if it didn't look like he was smiling.

The ear-tugging TV host scratched Gus's chin, dragging manicured nails along the tawny band of fur that created the illusion of a smile.

*What I wouldn't give, to give her a playful nip....*

“That's a wrap,” the producer yelled and the lights dimmed.

*Thank you. Those lights were very hot.*

“Thank you, that was amazing. You know a lot of people tell me that I should be on TV” Posey smiled at the producer while stuffing Gus, backside first, into his cat carrier. “I could do the weather or something else where you don't have to keep up with current events. How about hosting about a morning show like this?” The producer tapped his pencil on the clipboard. “Um, yeah...sure. Just send in your resume when you see a job posting on our website.”

On the drive home from the TV studio, Posey thought about what to post on Gus's

Instagram and Twitter accounts. She even entertained the thought of giving him some catnip as a reward for sitting quietly during the interview. But she nixed the idea, figuring it would make him groggy in the videos.

Truth be told, Posey didn't like cats very much. Make that not at all. In fact, the night that Tabitha brought Gus to the house, Posey kicked him out to see if he'd find another home. "So there was a snowstorm, cats have fur don't they?" she'd asked rhetorically. But the next morning there he was, huddled under the porch and Posey caved. Much to everyone's surprise, Gus bonded with Posey. Actually Gus was obsessed with pleasing Posey.

That came in handy. To her delight, Posey discovered there was serious money for feline celebrities from pet food endorsements, and having a docile cat was important. "Grinning Gus" became the brand ambassador for Grrrmet Dish Delish. And it seemed that not a day went by when a meme or a GIF of Grinning Gus came up on somebody's Facebook page. That, in turn, fueled the demand for calendars, tee shirts and baseball caps with Gus's likeness.

Fortune had found Posey, but not fame. It seemed people only wanted to look at videos of Gus, playing, sleeping, and doing all the other cat things that Posey considered extremely boring. She had tried to insert herself in the videos in the role of devoted cat owner, but those videos got only a small fraction of the shares of videos that featured Gus by himself. She had badgered the TV station for a job on air, but so far nothing had come up. She knew it was time to focus on her first love; internet tutorials.

There could not have been a more unfortunate title for a tutorial than "Posey's Pussy"; or perhaps there was. "Posey's Pussy: Sleeping With Your Cat" was the title of episode one. It featured Posey in a skimpy nightgown on her bed with Gus.

*Oh heaven, she's finally going to allow me to sleep with her.*

"Now I know, my people, that sleeping with a cat can be a nuisance. But we love our pussies don't we?" Posey jerked Gus's head so that he was facing the camera. "But here's my secret. Just make sure they only get used to sleeping at the foot of the bed." Posey gave Gus a swift shove so he would crawl to her feet.

*Aww, I thought we were going to cuddle.*

"Posey's Pussy" was shut down after one episode at the insistence of the folks at Grrrmet Dish Delish. But not before a flurry of pornographic suggestions made their way to Posey via the internet. "What a bunch of sickos," she muttered to Gus. "I'm too good for that." She swore it looked like Gus was nodding in agreement.

Fate soon intervened in the form of another unwanted package from the fulfillment centre. "What the hell am I going to do with a pirate costume?" Posey shrieked into the phone. The customer service representative at the other end of the line had a very good idea of what he wanted her to do with the costume, but he politely informed her to send it back.

Inspiration struck as Posey was repackaging the pirate costume. She ordered another costume, and this time the right order arrived.

“Well, how do I look my lovely people?” Posey preened for the camera in her Little Bo Peep costume. “And I’ve got a surprise for you. Here kitty, kitty....” Posey reached behind the sofa, almost knocking the phone off coffee table. “Look, Little Bo Peep has found her sheep!” In reality, it was Gus with a piece of sheepskin rug tied haphazardly around him.

*This is humiliating, but if it makes her happy.....*

“Now, for the next couple of weeks, I’m going to show you how to make costumes for both you and your pet. It’ll be purrrfect for Halloween. Get it? Purrrfect. Well toodles my people.” Posey admired herself in the mirror wearing the sexy Bo Peep costume.

Public reaction was swift and certain. Viewers hated Posey and felt embarrassed for Gus. Reluctantly, she decided to can the tutorials after another stern email arrived from Grrrmet Dish Delish. The company warned her of a contractual obligation not to harm Gus’s “brand”. And it urged her refrain from posting any more videos of what the company called “questionable content” or face the consequences.

Despite the money she was pulling in from Gus’s endorsements, Posey knew there was no way she could afford the contents of the next package that mistakenly arrived at her doorstep. It was an exquisite silk dress. Posey recognized the designer label, and figured it cost at least \$5,000. “I’m sure as hell not sending this one back,” she muttered stroking the delicate lace bodice.

Posey wore the dress to her favorite nightclub, and the results were exactly what she had hoped for. She caught the eye of a cute guy on the dance floor, named Dustin. Later that night, Posey was thrilled to discover that he was the trifecta; smart, attractive and genuinely nice.

Posey had been dating Dustin for a couple of weeks when she decided to invite him over to her house for dinner. Gus would not stop rubbing against her legs as she tried to pay attention to the video tutorial on making spaghetti bolognese. “Now that’s what I should be getting into...cooking videos,” she remarked simultaneously stirring the pot and kicking Gus away.

Dustin arrived at the house with flowers, but left half an hour later. His dinner sat untouched on the kitchen table.

“Stupid, stupid cat”

*Please, please stop. I’ll do better.*

Posey gave Gus’ tail another smack. “Well you should feel guilty,” she yelled as the cat slunk away. Posey poured herself a glass of wine. It was an expensive bottle that she knew Dustin would enjoy, because he admitted to being something of a wine snob. Posey had told him she was a wine snob too, figuring it made her look sophisticated.

Unfortunately there was something Dustin hadn't told her in all the time that they had been dating. He was very allergic to cats.

After an awkward phone conversation with Dustin about the future of their relationship, Posey knew she had to make a tough decision: cat or true love. She went for the bank account. Sorry Dustin.

The money continued to roll in. But as the saying goes; all good things must come to an end. For Posey, that coincided with Tabitha's homecoming. Turns out they get Grrrmet Dish Delish cat food in Fredericton. Once Tabitha finished finding herself in New Brunswick, she found herself back at the house she had shared with Posey. Almost immediately they were engaged in a screaming match.

"He's my cat. If anyone should make money off him, it's me," Tabitha yelled. She pointed to Gus who was cowering in a corner. "Oh really, and who do you think has been looking after him all these months, huh? Who's been taking him to television stations for interviews, and making sure he doesn't get ripped off by merchandisers wanting his image?" Posey fired back. The argument could be heard halfway down the block, and a couple of people out walking their dogs crossed the street to avoid the porch where the yelling was coming from. But Posey and Tabitha continued to lay into each other, unconcerned about their behaviour, as they puffed on cigarettes.

Three days later there was a knock at the door. "Package for you," the deliveryman announced. Tabitha took the box and threw it on the hall table for Posey. "Man that's heavy," she complained. Tabitha was only mildly curious about the contents. She knew that Posey was obsessed with online videos and she figured it was just something else to flog in a tutorial.

Posey opened the package when she got home. "It's a gun!" Posey carefully lifted the revolver from the box. "God knows they screw things up at the fulfillment centre, but a gun? I didn't even know you could send those through the mail," she remarked to Tabitha. Posey checked to see if the gun was loaded.

It was.

*What was that?*

Pop.

*No..no..no...*

Gus saw something seeping towards his paws. He was hiding under the bed. He knew that was the safest place to be when they were screaming at each other.

The ambulance and police cars arrived first, and later the hearse. After a couple of hours the body came out on a stretcher, zipped up in a long, opaque, plastic bag. Posey emerged from the house in handcuffs. She was stuffed into a police cruiser; backside first.

Gus crawled out tentatively from under the bed.

"You poor little fella," the voice said softly.

*Someone has noticed me.*

“Here, here there’s nothing to be scared of,” the police officer stroked Gus’s chin.

*This lady smells nice, and she has kind eyes.*

Gus was cradled in the officer’s arms as she left the house. Her partner was removing police tape and looked up. “Did you want me to drop him off at animal control?” he asked.

“Naw, I think I might see if I can keep him.”

*I think I’ve found my forever home.*

Gus tilted his head, giving the kindly police officer a good view of his “smile”.

*Maybe there really is a cat god.*

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *This story was inspired by the obsession with finding fame through social media. How does true talent get recognized and rewarded anymore? Is novelty replacing thoughtful creativity in works that capture public attention? By taking these questions to extremes in my story, I hope we can question the merit of what we consume on social media. This is not to put a damper on popular culture. A good cat video always brings a smile to my face. But what concerns me is how manufactured the social media experience has become.*

*If I look to the writing that’s inspired me, I’m drawn to novelists and short story writers who can turn a phrase into poetry. Will Ferguson comes to mind. His recent book *The Finder*, walks that fine line between writing that’s accessible and challenging. As a playwright, I’m a big fan of great dialogue. Among the best playwrights for that, in my opinion, are Sam Shepard, Tracy Letts, and David Mamet.*

**AUTHOR’S BIO:** Jan Sims is a writer and broadcaster. Her full length plays, “Gracious Living” and “Weight” were performed at The Arts Project in London, Ontario in 2019 and 2020. Her one act plays, “The Lost Treasure of Jesse James” and “Bed & Breakfast” were performed at the McManus Theatre at London’s Grand Theatre through the Playwrights Cabaret. Jan’s play “A Day at the Beach” was performed at the Newmarket National 10 Minute Play Festival. Jan’s career in television news includes being a reporter and anchor in cities across Ontario including CTV London, Toronto, Barrie & Sudbury. Jan is currently a contributor to the Middlesex Banner newspaper, and has had articles published in Today’s Parent Magazine. Jan has an M.A. in Journalism from Western University and a B.A. in Drama & Sociology from Queen’s University. She is married with two sons; a writer and a graduate student in physics. Jan also has a cat named Moses.

