

Excerpt from

MILO, THE CAT WHO COULDN'T JUMP

by

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It was a stormy night on the streets of Milan, and a little kitten was left without his mother to protect him...

... But now mama wasn't there, and the little kitty was crying. It was cold in the flowerbed, the bushes were tossing in the wind, and the ground had turned to mud. The kitten was soaking wet. The leaves weren't enough to cover him and they were drenched too.

He knew he needed help. And he remembered something his mother had told him. That humans kill each other and kill animals, but an ancestral bond among living species makes them sometimes ("Only sometimes, my son, be careful!") help each other. So the kitty plucked up his courage, thinking he had no other choice.

"Help, help!" he cried with all the breath in his tiny little lungs. *Meooow, meoooww!* he wailed, again and again. But no one came.

Out of the blue, when he couldn't stand it anymore, he heard a quick step. "If I stay here, I'll drown or freeze," he thought, his teeth chattering in the cold. He made a

decision, and said the words out loud to convince himself: “I’m going to run out now. Let’s hope they don’t squash me...”

Then he got into position, made a dash for it, and sprang out of the flowerbed, nearly tumbling over the shoes of a young man who was passing by.

“Help, help!” the kitten wailed desperately, cold, drenched and scared.

“And what are you doing here?” asked the young man. He bent down and picked the kitten up: he was sopping wet. Instinctively, the man slipped him into the inside pocket of his jacket.

“Ah, so nice and warm, so cozy,” the exhausted kitty thought. “At last.”

“And now let’s find your mommy.”

The young man looked everywhere for her, for an hour, heedless of the downpour and the wind. But there was no trace of the mama cat. By now it was dark, you couldn’t see a thing. There was nothing else he could do: he would take the kitty home with him.

“Ah, how good it feels in this pocket,” the kitten thought, as he slowly revived.

“Snug as a bug and protected, almost like...” he yawned, he was so tired, “almost like in mama’s arms.” Then, worn out, he fell asleep.

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I’ll call you Milo

He woke up and it seemed like a nightmare. Two monsters, an enormous striped cat and a smaller, white one, were watching him, hissing, on the other side of some bars. And he was actually trapped, confined in a cage where there was nothing to hide behind, just a rolled up sock and some newspapers.

“Help, Mama, help!” he wailed, as the bigger cat tried to open the little gate that separated them. In reality Ciccio, that’s the fatty cat’s name, was a very gentle soul, just curious – he had a good heart, though he was a bit of a dummy.

But the kitten trembled, and for the first time he had a seizure. His teeth chattered, his little body was shaken by spasms, and even the two cats were frightened. Fortunately it only lasted a few seconds.

“What’s happening to me? What’s happening to me?” the kitty cried. “Mama, mama!” He hoped it was a nightmare, that soon he would open his eyes and find himself back in the flowerbed. Better some worms and a rude pigeon as neighbors than being in that cage with monsters outside. Little did he know that meanwhile, in a very big city far, far away, his destiny was unfolding.

Brring-brring, the phone rang. No answer. *Brring-brring*. At the fifth ring, his sister answered.

“Hi, it’s me,” he said. “I have something to tell you. On my way home tonight, I found a little kitten. He looks like he’s about three weeks old. Maybe a month. I’m taking him to see my vet Giovanna now, but... He’s all black, it’s funny, he reminded me of Pietro. Would you like him?”

“Pietro?” she repeated, thinking of the baby crow she had lost. It had fallen from the nest a few weeks earlier before being able to fly, and was stuck in the courtyard of the building where she lived. She had been the one to find Pietro, whom Mr. Luigi, the custodian, had mistaken for an older bird that had come there to die. That’s because the elderly, human and animal, are similar to babies, and maybe Mr. Luigi, close to eighty, had seen himself in him.

But she had taken an instant liking to him, and had poured all the love she didn’t know she had onto the poor little bird. She had made him a nest in a plant, bought some minced seed mix. Miraculously, he had recovered. By now the young woman realized that he wasn’t old at all, but instead very young, and she hoped his parents would find him. Instead, they did not come. How could they find him there, in that cloistered place? On the other hand, taking him to her terrace was out of the question. Not being able to fly, Pietro would have been too easy a prey for the seagulls in the area.

So the young woman took care of him for three days, and in that short time he became so attached to her that in the evenings he hopped up the steps to the second floor to visit her at her door. She could already see herself moving to the country with Pietro: a dream – that of living among animals – that she had had since she was a child.

Until the neighbors spoke up.

“It’s disgusting, he poops everywhere,” said one. And the malicious woman upstairs warned “If you don’t get rid of him, we’ll take a stick to him.” Then the husband, with his arrogant, threatening manner, added: “No, we’ll put poison out for him....” The young woman realized that she could not keep the crow there with her. He wasn’t safe in the courtyard, and in the house he wouldn’t have room to learn to fly. Animals are all equal, they should be loved and respected equally, but not all of them can stay with us.

Anguished, she took Pietro in her hands, his little heart pounding, and put him in a box with holes in it. She took him to Villa Borghese, where LIPU, the Italian League for Bird Protection, had a bird rescue sanctuary.

“Ciao, Pietro,” she told him, crying. “Have a good life.”

The next day she heard *caw caw* coming from the stairs, and hoped that Pietro had found his way back, that he had returned to her.

“Oh Pietro, if you’ve come back I won’t let you go again!” she exclaimed, running to the door. But the crow she found there was not her Pietro. It was a bigger crow that had made its way up the steps while two others stood below waiting. It was Pietro’s family, his mom, dad, and older brother, who only too late had realized where he was. They looked at her, puzzled, stayed a while, then flew away. The young woman felt stricken, heartsick. Deep down the pain of losing Pietro was added to that of having separated him forever from his parents. Of making him an orphan.

Because love makes people do exceptional things, like Pietro’s father who had ventured into a building and climbed two flights of stairs to look for him. Yet so often out of too much love we end up harming someone.

“Hey, are you still there?” her brother was saying into the phone.

She started and pulled herself together. “Yes, I’m here, sorry.”

“If Giovanna says he’s okay, would you want him? Can you take care of him?”

She was a little hesitant, but then when she saw him in the photo, so tiny in the carrier her brother used for one of his cats, too small for the rolled up green sock he had given him to comfort him, something inside her was moved. She felt as if Pietro himself had sent her that kitten. She knew that he was already hers.

“So shall I bring him to you?” her brother asked when he called again a couple of hours later.

“Yes,” she replied, simply.

She decided that she would name the kitten Milo, after the little boy in the movie she loved so much, who seemed the most fragile but was actually the strongest. Milo, after the son that for so many reasons she had not had.

And so little Milo was about to begin a new life. In a city that was very different from Milan, a difficult, noisy, yet beautiful city. The city of Rome.

They were days of anticipation, and trepidation. The little kitty was getting acquainted with his temporary surroundings, and almost beginning to like the striped cat. Not the white one though, a female cat named Coco, who he decided was obnoxious and mean, and they hissed at one another in turn. Meanwhile the young woman looked for a vet, purchased a cat bed and some toys, and bought a huge supply of the recommended brand of pet food, *Royal Canin*.

“But can you give a cat a brand that has a dog’s name?” she said to herself, laughing. “I’m going to call it *Royal Gattin*.”

She was so ecstatic about the kitten’s arrival that she announced it to everyone, even posting pictures her brother sent her on Facebook.

“Isn’t he beautiful?” she asked. And she answered herself.

Until one day a friend, who had also had a black kitten when he was a student away in a southern city, told her about the time someone, out of superstition, had broken into his home and set the animal on fire. She had never thought about the superstition toward black cats, thinking it had long since been debunked, and didn’t sleep for many nights.

“How can such unkindness, such ignorance be possible?” she wondered. Black cats bring good luck. Indeed, as her friend Astrid had told her, in Northern Europe, where their birth heralds a good harvest, they are a sign of prosperity.

“The black cat is a symbol of the forces of good,” she told herself. “Only a backward culture can believe it brings bad luck.”

Then she remembered the old witch upstairs, the one who was always doing spiteful things to her, and imagined how she would lash out at the kitten. “Cruella de Vil,” the condo residents called her – and with good reason. She was tempted to call her brother back and say, “I can’t take him. I wouldn’t be able to protect him.” But she didn’t, and decided it would all work out for the best.

“*Petit chat noir, petit chat noir,*” she sang softly to herself.

That first night together something incredible happened. When the young woman brought the kitten into the bed with her, he climbed up on her chest and began sucking her neck. They weren’t kisses, the kitty clung to her neck as if it were his mama’s breast, and purred contentedly. She had never experienced anything more delightful.

“My baby,” she said simply. They looked at each other. He had always been hers.

The days went by. The young woman was enchanted with the tiny, fearful kitten who would scramble up on the big bed with his little claws, hissing and snarling at imaginary creatures, at the fish oil she gave him with a little spoon to make his mangy fur fuller and shinier. He would also stumble when running, and go sprawling. He was falling a little too much, actually, but she thought it was because he was still very little, that cats learn to jump, like humans learn the abc. Sometimes, jokingly, she would say to him: “In September I’ll send you to kindergarten!”

The little kitty also had a feisty spirit. At night, if she stopped petting him he would get angry, even in his sleep. Grrrr, grrrr, he rumbled. A miniature panther. And she would continue petting him.

But it was by charming her, mostly, that he would make her do whatever he wanted. And though she knew this, she willingly indulged him. “You are really a special kitty,” she would tell him, laughing.

Until the day for his vaccination came.

Milo jumped off the examining table, his hair standing on end like those cats in comic books, and ran to hide under a cabinet. *Eeeooww, eeeoowww*, he yowled, not snarled, and when they finally managed to catch him he went into convulsions.

“Where did you find this cat?” the vet asked as the young woman tried to calm the kitten down, holding him tight. “Does he always do that?” And when she tried to explain he immediately shook his head. “I’m not an expert, but he undoubtedly has a neurological disorder. See what he does with his head, you see?” He said that kittens like that were usually put down. “It’s amazing that he survived.” He asked her if she was sure she wanted to keep him.

“Put down? What do you mean, put down? *Me*, put him down???”

Shhh. Hush now, Milo. The young woman, already nearly in tears, became a tiger. Of course she would keep him, she snapped. If you have a disabled child, do you toss him in the trash?

Meanwhile the kitten wondered what that word he had never heard before meant. Disabled, dis-a-bled. Were those the words that defined him, disabled and black? It felt like a condemnation. “Why does everyone talk about me as if I were different?” he wept to himself. “I don’t feel different.” He thought of his mother who always told him how special he was, of the young woman who never stopped telling him “How delightful you are. Such a pretty kitty!”

He hoped that was just what disabled meant: beautiful and special.

The vet and the young woman, meanwhile, continued to argue. She was going to keep him all right, she said angrily, and she was going to do everything possible to have him get well, or at least get better. To begin with, she would find a serious vet. A real cat neurologist, not that ignorant quack who recommended that kittens be put down. And slamming the door behind her, she stormed out.