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Lost and Found

by Connie Langhorst

My sister, Lora, has a propensity for finding things: four-leaf clovers, seashells, heart-shaped rocks. She keeps her collection of touchstones and lucky charms in a shoebox. Lora put the orphaned kittens in a box, too—a larger one, lined with one of her husband's shirts. The orange tabbies stumbled and shuddered like windup toys. Their mouths opened and closed, but no sound came out. The motherless kittens brought to mind Lora's own suffering, the silent kind that only a mother experiencing the loss of a child could know.

"You sweet little foundlings," Lora cooed. "I'm sorry you lost your mama. It's not fair to lose someone you love. My daughter, Julie, is going to fall crazy in love with you."

Lora looked at her husband. On the other side of the shop, he was setting up a machine for a parts run. "They have healthy lungs," she offered.

Max turned to face her. "Don't get any ideas." He tried to sound upset.

Lora picked up the smaller of the two kittens. Its eyes were newborn blue. Using its claws and teeth, it attached itself to her finger. She turned the tabby over and held it, on its back, in her hand. The infant cat responded with a spasm of displeasure. It was a male, likely the runt of the litter. Dots scurried over the terrain of his belly.

Lora frowned. "This one has fleas," she told Max. "And, a full tummy. Looks like they had a last supper at mom's milk bar." She hoped the mother would appear and attend to her kittens, but the cat was lost—or worse. Raising the kitten to her lips, Lora kissed its head. "Hey little fella, your mama will always love you. All mothers love their babies, especially when they're sick or the runt of the litter."

Max raised his hands in desperation. "I get it," he said. "Your instincts are jacked up. Find them a home or take them to a shelter." Max softened his tone. "Between running the shop and taking care of Julie, there aren't enough hours in the day for vet appointments and litter box training."

Lora played with the kittens for a while and then carried them, in their cardboard nursery, door-to-door to neighboring businesses. "I found a home for one of them," she announced upon returning to the shop.

"Just one?" Max shrugged and rolled his eyes.

Lora, holding the box, looked at the remaining kitten. The male runt was sitting in the nest of Max's shirt. His gaze was focused. Lora locked eyes with him. He had lost his mother and his sibling. Lora was overwhelmed by her desire to care for him.

"I'm keeping this one," she told Max. "For Julie."

Days before the kitten found its way into Lora's home, something else found its way there: a hospital bed. Prescribed by the nurse who was providing palliative care, the bed did not warm Lora's heart. It shattered it.

Unfazed by its arrival, Julie viewed the bed as nothing more than a new piece of furniture. "Mom, can we put it in front of the sliding doors?" she pleaded. The brightness of her toothy smile illuminated her pale face.

She contemplated her daughter's request. "In the middle of the living room?"

"Yes, Mom . . . Why not?" Julie begged. She pointed at the space between the couch and side chair. "If we move the chair over there and that table and ottoman here, the bed will fit perfectly. I'll be able to watch TV. There's lots of light. Besides, it's closer to your room. I'll be able to see the water and watch dolphins and birds and sunsets . . . Pretty please?"

Lora looked at the bed. Twin-sized, metal-framed and mounted on wheels, it was in the place where it had been delivered: the foyer. Taller than a regular bed, it robbed the space of light.

The nurse appeared. After outfitting the bed in white sheets, she lowered one of its side rails. Lora was startled by the sound of metal against metal, the lowered rail scraping against the protruding frame. "In the middle of the living room," she said again.

"It's not like it's going to be there forever." Julie followed her stinging remark with a bout of cackling laughter. Her mother mustered an uneasy smile.

Lora replaced the white sheets with a set of brightly-colored ones featuring cartoon characters. With the bed in her living room, Lora imposed a "no crying" rule. Anyone who displayed a quivering lip or became teary-eyed in Julie's presence was banished with a stern look. Repeat offenders, without fanfare or feigned politeness, were asked to leave and told not to return.

Lora took the kitten to Medicine River Animal Hospital for a checkup and flea dip. She went to a pet store to buy a litter box, a cat carrier, and supplies: food, treats, catnip, toys, and a collar with a bell and a locket.

At 38, Lora wore her short auburn hair in a pixie cut and shopped for clothes at stores that offered a girl's department. At 20, Julie stood taller than her mother and was big-boned like her father. She wore her long blond hair straight and without bangs until chemotherapy robbed her of it. Her easy smile and smooth skin juxtaposed the worry that lined the corners of her mother's mouth and eyes made it difficult to know, at times, who was the mother and who was the daughter. Sometimes it was hard to tell who was dying.

With the kitten in the carrier and the bag of supplies, Lora hurried up the steps and paused at the front door all that was in front of her: Max's asthma and allergies. Julie's immune system. The behavior of cats, from marking their territory to scratching and climbing. She raised the carrier and looked inside. The kitten was alert. His eyes were wide.

Lora took a deep breath and opened the door. Julie was on the couch, watching TV. Lora placed the kitten in her daughter's lap.

Julie picked up the orange tabby and squealed with delight. "Mom, thank you!" Her laughter filled the room. "Look, it has a capital M in the fur above its eyes."

Lora smiled and peered over the couch to inspect the chestnut-colored letter.

"He's sweet," Julie continued.

Lora gave Julie a kiss on the head. "Indeed, he's sweet . . . and he needs a name."

The blue-eyed girl studied the blue-eyed tabby.

"Charlie," Julie said. "I'm going to name him after the boy in the movie about the chocolate factory. He hoped to find a golden ticket and got his wish."

When Julie was a toddler, she took her first steps with the aid of a walker. With relatives on hand to commemorate the occasion, Lora carried Julie outside, to the sidewalk. Julie's biological father, Calvin, barely able to watch, stood with the relatives. Lora placed the walker in the middle of the sidewalk and lowered Julie into position behind it. At first, the toddler wobbled in her patent leather, ankle-strap shoes. She looked adorable in a denim romper over a white turtleneck and leggings; appliqued apples, red with green stems and leaves, adorned the pockets of her dress.

First one leg, then the other, sprung out in front of her. From the waist down, her movements were herky jerky. Aspiring to take their first step, she bit her lip, seemingly for motivation, and gripped the handlebars, festooned with glittering streamers. Her baby-fine hair glowed like a halo, magnifying the ugly surgery scar that ran from the back of her neck to the top of her scalp. Smiling and laughing, Julie was taking her first steps.

Each time surgeons extracted a piece of the tumor attached to Julie's brain stem, she lost something else. When Julie lost her hair, Lora bought her a collection of cute hats. A bright red felt one with a long-stemmed yellow flower sticking out of the top. A Cat-In-The-Hat stovetop hat. A Tampa Bay Rays baseball cap. When Julie's balance faltered, Lora bought her a cane and bedazzled it with white rhinestones. When she lost her vision in one eye, her mother sewed patches for her to wear, and decorated them with lace and ruffles. When one side of Julie's body shut down, organ by organ, she lost the use of her left arm. This required her to wear a sling and go to physical therapy. Lora bedazzled the sling to match the cane and followed each therapy session with a "just because" adventure: trips to the salon for manicures and visits to their favorite confectioner for red velvet cupcakes and ice cream sundaes.

Julie's doctors tell Lora to prepare for the end. You have six months, they tell her.

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Charlie, a true friend, lives by Julie's side. He sleeps when she sleeps, plays when she feels like playing, and eats when she has an appetite for food. Julie spends hours brushing the orange tabby. If she stops, Charlie rubs his head against the bristles in an attempt to brush himself.

Max removed the hook and bobber from one of his fishing poles. He replaced them with a feathered cat toy and used the pole to go "cat fishing." Max would cast the line across the living room. As soon as the bait touched the floor, Charlie would pounce, ensnaring the toy in his paws. Each time, Julie howled with laughter. The sound of it made Lora smile with the knowledge that she had found a four-legged lifeline.

In these moments their home did not feel like a sterile vacuum. Oxygen found its way into the space, allowing everyone in it to breathe and, sometimes, laugh. The cat's antics eased everyone's discomfort, mostly Julie's, until self-administered morphine, with the push of a button, would render her lost for a while. Charlie, her unfailing sentinel, waited for her to return.

After multiple brain surgeries, Julie tired easily. She dropped things and fell a lot. With the aid of her bedazzled cane and medicinal marijuana, she walked at her high school graduation.

Two years later a fire truck, its siren wailing and lights flashing, arrived in front of Lora and Max's house. Over the past few months its presence had become a regular occurrence. This time the van that followed from the coroner's office signaled this visit would be the last. Neighbors, weeping openly, gathered in the street. A young and burly EMT, who had been there many times he had become friends with Julie entered the house.

Julie always found ways to make the firefighters laugh. Now, the house was void of any sound. The EMT, unable to restrain his tears, asked for permission to carry Julie, in his arms, to the waiting ambulance. Smiling through her tears, Lora nodded in consent.

Charlie roamed the house in search of Julie. He cried, pitifully, and did not warm up to others the way he once did. A year did not increase his appetite, he grew thin. Active at night, he prowled the enclosed deck, killing geckos and the wormlike snakes that found their way into the swimming pool. Charlie's napped on a chair, not far from where he napped in the hospital bed with Julie.

The machine shop Lora and Max co-owned was busy. They worked long hours and developed a fondness for happy hour. It was not about happiness for them. It was about the numbing effect of alcohol. They lavished their unrequited love for Julie onto Charlie. Max, struggling with his asthma, continued to get allergy shots and use an inhaler. Then, one day, when unable to breathe, he ended up in the hospital. The emergency room physician suggested that they find a new home for the cat.

Friends of Lora and Max lost their cat to old age and were looking to adopt. Lora, torn, offered the pair with a list of stipulations to see if Charlie might fit in with them: He would be restricted to prowling the couple's screen-enclosed pool deck. He would continue to receive care from the same veterinarian, to be paid for by Lora. She would supply his food and toys. Lora offered the couple a basketful of his toys, but kept a few mementos: The cat-fishing pole and a beaver hand puppet that he had loved to tussle with and pounce on. The cat was being offered with a trust fund. It was the least Lora could do.

Lora did not visit Charlie during the first week of his adoption. She hoped her absence would help him acclimate to his surroundings. She made a photo album that featured pictures of the cat and displayed it, like a coffee table book, in their living room.

The friends reported that Charlie was a wonderful addition to their family. A month went by. The couple invited Lora and Max to visit. Lora declined. It was too soon, too painful. Then the couples crossed paths at a holiday party hosted at a local yacht and country club. Lora approached the husband at the bar.

"How's Charlie?" she asked.

The man took a sip of his scotch. Holding the glass his hand shook, causing the ice cubes to jiggle. Lora leaned over and placed her hand on the bar. Her face was inches from his face.

"How's Charlie?" she repeated.

The man recoiled. His wife, observing their exchange from a distance, swooped in and assumed a defensive position between her husband and Lora.

"Look," the woman said, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but Charlie is missing."

Lora stumbled backward and found Max there for support. The woman kept talking.

"We don't know how it happened," she continued. "He got out. A week ago. We've been looking for him ever since. We're so sorry." Her fingers and hands moved as if signing with a deaf person.

Of the words that spilled from the woman's mouth, Lora heard two. *Charlie. Missing.* She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Max led Lora outside. Without knowing what to say or do, he drove to the neighborhood where the couple lived. It was dark. An occasional circle of light from a streetlamp illuminated the roadway, but little else. Lora opened the window and allowed the night air to dry her tears. She called the cat's name. *Charlie. Charlie. Charlie.*

He did not respond.

It was Christmas Day and Sunday, the one day of the week when I took delivery of a newspaper. I opened the classifieds section and scanned the lost-and-found pet ads:

1. *White. Cockatoo. At Ft. De Soto Park.*
2. *Calico. Near Historic Kenwood.*

The next ad made me gasp and spill my coffee.

8. *Orange tabby. Found 12/18. Near Downtown St. Pete.*

I wanted to call my sister, but resisted. It was, after all, Christmas Day. *What if the cat was not Charlie?* I called Lora the next day and recited the ad. She hung up and called back a few minutes later. "It's him," she told me.

"Isn't downtown miles from where your friends live?" I queried.

Lora responded to my doubt by speaking deliberately.

"*Male cat. Declawed in the front. Orange tabby.*"

"Really," I said. "It's a Christmas miracle."

"Well, there's a problem," Lora answered.

"What can be wrong?" I asked.

"A homeless woman has him," Lora sighed. "And, now she's lost."

In the spirit of the holidays, the woman who placed the found cat ad invited the homeless woman and the cat into her home to escape the unseasonably cold weather. The woman's cat, an alpha male, fought bitterly with the orange tabby. Given the strain of the arrangement, the woman sent the homeless woman (along with the orange tabby) out onto the streets. As if to atone for her actions, she offered the homeless woman a cat carrier and a small supply of cat food.

"You might find them in the park near the Vinoy," the woman told Lora.

The park is at a crossroads where the wealthy hurry by on their way to waterfront venues and the disenfranchised gather to sleep and panhandle.

Lora grabbed her purse and cellphone, and, with Max driving, rushed to the park. Right turn after right turn, they negotiated the two-block parameter. Looking for a woman with a cat carrier, all they saw were grocery carts filled with black trash bags of possessions. The carts lined the sidewalk. A monument, honoring a hero, was stained with urine and vomit. After hours of driving, they returned home, defeated and depressed. The next day, Lora's cell phone rang. A male caller asked if she was looking for a cat.

"Yes," Lora told him.

"OK," the caller answered.

"Who is this?" Lora asked.

"Do you want to see the cat or not?" the man demanded.

"Yes, please," Lora begged.

"OK. Meet us in front of the tennis courts by the Vinoy."

"We'll be there in ten minutes," Lora responded.

Max pulled into a parking spot. From the curb they could see them. The woman, beside the giant of a man, was barely noticeable. Lora saw the one thing she hoped to see—the cat carrier—and rushed toward it. Max, keeping the motor running, waited in the car.

"This is Miss Evelyn," the man said, as Lora approached. "I think she has what you want."

The women smiled tersely at each other. Lora could not get a read on the woman's age. The sun and salty sea air had not been kind to the woman's skin. It was as weathered as driftwood. Her hair resembled an abandoned nest and the retro-style dress she wore appeared to be a thrift-shop find that was several sizes too big for her small frame.

Lora noticed that the woman was wearing a pair of dingy white tennis shoes, the tops of which had been cut across the toe bed, exposing her soiled feet and black toenails. Seeing this gave her pause to consider the condition of the cat. "May I look inside?"

Lora pointed at the carrier. The woman nodded.

At first, in the play of afternoon light, Lora could not see anything. When a sunbeam cut across the cat's eyes, casting them in an amber glow, she started to cry.

"How do you know it's your cat?" the woman asked.

Lora reached into her purse and pulled out the coffee table photo album. After looking at a few pictures, the woman relinquished the carrier.

"I'd like to pay you for your trouble," Lora said. She held out a hundred dollar bill.

"No, thank you," the woman said. "It's enough to know he's found his home."

My husband and I found Lora and Max on their pool deck.

"He won't come out," Lora said.

"He will," I told her.

"There's a sweater in there," she said, staring at the carrier. "It belongs to the homeless woman. She used it to keep Charlie warm at night."

I offered a sympathetic smile.

"The woman said it was dangerous to sleep in the park, so they slept on the beach, under trees and low strands of sea oats."

After a while, Charlie came out. He was thin and skittish. His coat was lackluster. He had a gash over one of his eyes, which were dark and wild. Lora placed a blanket on a chair, Charlie's favorite vantage point for stalking geckos and snakes, and brought out the toys she held in reserve. The cat had lost his playfulness.

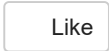
Lora looked at the cat. He reminded her of the shuddering, stumbling kitten she had found so many years ago. His eyes were unfocused. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. Those heart-wrenching silent mews.

"Hey, you sweet little foundling," Lora cooed as tears streamed down her cheeks. She spoke directly to the orange cat. "I'm sorry you lost your best friend. It's not fair to lose someone you love."

About Connie Langhorst

Connie Langhorst holds a BA in Creative Writing from Eckerd College and recently graduated from the Red Earth Low-Residency MFA Creative Writing Program at Oklahoma City University. A substitute teacher at St. Petersburg Collegiate High School, Connie has published her work in *Aspiring to Inspire*, *Eckerd Review*, and *The Scarab*.

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