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Intha Slammer

Andrew Miller

Periwinkle, a black and white short-haired cat with a dark smudge on his nose squeezed under the couch. He was searching for Blueberry, the Maine Coon cat. “Prrrtt?” he called, “Prrrtt-prrrtt?” No answer. He slipped behind the bookcase where Blueberry liked to sleep and chirped again. “Prrrtt, Prrrtt-prrrtt?”

Still no Blueberry. The black and white cat pad-padded down the hall, weaving through a long line of old folks heading for the activities room. The line moved slowly; some of the people rode in wheelchairs, others used canes or walkers. It was exercise time at Oak Grove Senior Living, and the Activities Director had just turned on the rock ‘n’ roll music. Soon the old people would be swinging their arms from side to side, walking back and forth, moving their heads in circles—all in time to thump-thumping drums and bloink-bloinking guitars.

Periwinkle scooted into the activities room. Blueberry was curled into a tight circle on a maroon couch by the windows, snoozing. Periwinkle hopped up next to her.

“Hey,” said Periwinkle, “Wake up.”

Blueberry opened one eye. “What’s going on?” She stood up and stretched. Blueberry had long silky gray fur and a fat, busy tail. A thick ruff of ash-white fur wrapped partway around her neck. She was born in Maine, where it is very cold during the winter.

“Big news,” said Periwinkle. “A girl kitty just arrived.”

Blueberry frowned. “Aren’t there enough of us here already?”

Periwinkle jumped off the couch. “Come on,” he said, “let’s meet her.”

The cats sprinted into the foyer: tails high. Two men stood next to the coat rack. They were dressed in dark uniforms, wore shiny black boots, and had radios clipped to their belts. They were talking to Mrs. Hutchinson, the Administrative Assistant. One of the men held a gray kitten. It had a white chest and four white paws.

Mrs. Hutchinson touched the kitten’s head. “Poor baby—don’t be frightened.”

“They told us you liked cats,” one man said. He scratched under the kitten’s chin. “We’re from Allegheny Correctional Institution. A mother cat showed up in the yard a while back and gave birth to three kittens.” He handed the kitten to Mrs. Hutchinson. “The Warden took the mother, and one of the volunteers took the other two. This one needs a home.”

“Eeeuuu,” cried the kitten, “Eeeuuu.”

“There now,” said Mrs. Hutchinson, “it’s all right.”

The other man spotted Periwinkle and Blueberry. “This kitty will have plenty of company.”

“These felines give our residents love and comfort.” Mrs. Hutchinson ran one hand under the kitten’s belly. “She’s had plenty to eat.”

The first man nodded. “The men fed them table scraps. And milk. Lots of milk.”

Mrs. Hutchinson rubbed the kitten’s head. “She seems well-behaved.”

The man laughed. “That’s why she’s getting out. On account of her good behavior.” He gently tugged the kitten’s tail. “You might say she was in the slammer.”

After the men left, Mrs. Hutchinson set the kitten on the rug. “Welcome to Oak Grove Senior Living.” The kitten’s ears flattened back on her head. “Eeeuuu,” she cried again, “Eeeuuu.” Aside from her mother and brothers, the kitten had never seen other cats. And she had never been inside a building. She had spent her entire life under a pile of lumber beside a chain link fence at the Correctional Institution.

Blueberry touched noses with the kitten. “What’s your name?”

The kitten crouched low and tucked all four paws under her body. The gray fur on her neck stood up, and her dark tail snapped back and forth.

The men called me 'Hey Kitty,' or 'Here Kitty-Kitty.'"

"That's not a name," said Blueberry.

"No—definitely not," said Periwinkle.

The kitten's pupils were large and round as black olives. "I want to go back home," she said. "I miss my mother and brothers. And I miss the men. They brought us food."

"Grrrrr, grrrr," she said, "I don't like it here."

"Your name is Intha," said Periwinkle. "That's what the man said."

"Intha?" said the kitten. "Nobody called me that."

Periwinkle shook his head. "The man said you were 'Intha Slammer.'"

The kitten shrugged. "Whatever."

"Don't be afraid," said Blueberry. "These folks are friendly."

"And there's plenty to eat," said Periwinkle. "Come on. We'll show you around."

The gray kitten followed the cats into the activities room. Blueberry introduced her to Uncle Bob, who used to live in a Quaker barn near Philadelphia. Periwinkle introduced gray kitty to Gabriella, an orange-colored cat with a white tail. Intha Slammer followed them to a screened-off corner at the back of the room. Blueberry pointed to the feeding area and the litter tubs. Intha Slammer sniffed the food dish.

"What are these?" She touched a pile of brown and yellow lumps with her right paw.

"Chicken and turkey flavored kibbles," said Blueberry.

She took one more sniff, then sat back on her haunches. "Where are we—what is this place?"

This is a house for old folks," said Periwinkle. "They live here."

"We give them love and comfort," said Blueberry. "Didn't you hear Mrs. Hutchinson?"

The kitten began to wash her face. "What's 'Love and Comfort?'"

"It's being friendly," said Periwinkle. "We purr, sit on laps, rub against ankles, and play with catnip toys."

"And sleep on beds," said Blueberry. "That's very important."

“Sounds like Easy Street.” She pointed at a door that led to the porch. “Can folks go outside?”

“Any time they want,” said Periwinkle. “As long as it’s not raining.”

The kitten yawned. “Where are the Correctional Officers?”

Blueberry and Periwinkle looked at each other. Periwinkle sat back and began to scratch under his chin.

Finally, Blueberry said, “I guess we don’t have any.”

“Won’t the folks run away?”

Periwinkle yawned. “They never do.”

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Intha Slammer crawled under the couch. She slept there for the rest of the day, only coming out once to drink water and sniff the kibbles. She spent the rest of the night under the couch, nose buried under her front paws. The kitten wondered what her mother and brothers were doing. She remembered the food they used to eat—bits of bologna, crusts of bread soaked in milk, lumps of cold baked beans, globs of stew, soggy pieces of pancake, dollops of scrambled egg. Later that night, a barred owl called, “Hoot-hoot hoot-hooooo.” Intha Slammer crawled farther under the couch. Her mother had warned them about big birds that swooped through the night air. Sometimes they snatched up little animals and ate them.

Next morning when the sun peaked in the windows and the blue jays and blackbirds began to screech, the new kitten slipped out from under the couch. She buried her head in a kibble bowl and took huge bites. She ate so fast that sometimes she gagged on a kibble. “Glerk-glerk-blatt,” she said, “Glerk-glerk-blatt.”

“Not as good as cold sausage, potato skins, and limp cabbage,” she said, “but very tasty.”

After eating, she raced into the activities room. Blueberry and Periwinkle were asleep on the couch; their noses pointed at the ceiling. Gabriella sat on the bookshelf, watching blue jays at the feeder. Intha Slammer crouched low when Mr. Bouchard, who walked with a cane, approached.

“Well, who is this?” he asked.

The kitten backed up until she bumped into the wall.

“Don’t be afraid.” Mr. Bouchard bent low and extended a hand to the kitten.

“Grrrrr, grrrr,” she said, “Grrrrr, grrrr,”

“Don’t be like that,” he said. “I have something for you.”

Mr. Bouchard dug a handful of tiny brown pillow-shaped treats out of a plastic bag. “Here,” he said, “roast beef flavored.”

The kitten stopped growling. Mr. Bouchard set a treat on the carpet. She ate it, then sat back on her haunches. Mr. Bouchard moved back two steps and dropped another. The kitten jumped to her paws and sniffed. She ate the treat in one gulp. They slowly worked their way across the room; Mr. Bouchard dropped a treat, backed up, and dropped another. Intha Slammer ran and ate it, then waited for another. Finally, Mr. Bouchard sat on the couch. He poured the remaining treats into a little pile and made a “scritch-scratch” noise on the fabric with his fingernails.

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One of the volunteer aids, a young woman with red hair, tapped on Mrs. Hutchinson’s office. Her forehead was wrinkled into a frown. Mrs. Hutchinson opened the door and beckoned her inside.

“It’s that new kitten,” said the red-haired woman. “She’s biting Mr. Bouchard and growling.”

“Really?” said Mrs. Hutchinson. “She was well-behaved yesterday.” They walked down the hall toward the activities room. “We named her ‘Ashes’ and the other cats seem to like her.”

“I heard she was born in the Allegheny Correctional Institution and lived with a bunch of prisoners,” the red-haired woman said. “They might have mistreated her.”

The kitten sat on the couch next to Mr. Bouchard. “Grrrrr, grrrr,” she said, “Grrrrr, grrrr.” Her teeth were deep in a catnip mouse. The mouse had a deep gash on its skin and was bleeding catnip. Mr. Bouchard held the mouse by its tail.

“They’re just playing,” said Mrs. Hutchinson. “Ashes isn’t hurting him.”

Periwinkle woke up when he heard Mrs. Hutchinson. He watched the kitten fight with the catnip mouse, then jumped to his paws. He sat up straight and puffed out his chest. The new kitten was taking her job seriously. Periwinkle nudged Blueberry.

“Wake up,” he said.

Blueberry yawned. “What’s going on?”

“Look,” he said, “Intha Slammer is already giving love and comfort. And she’s just been here one day.”

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Andrew Miller retired in 2013 from a career that included research in aquatic systems and university teaching. Recent fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Front Porch Review*, *Blue Lake Review*, *The Meadow*, *The River*, *Arkansas Review*, *Northern New England Review*, *Short Kids Stories*, *Literary Yard*, and *Fatherly*. He lives in Florida, does volunteer work in prisons, restores stained glass windows, and writes. Andrew is the Creative Nonfiction Editor at Mud Season Review. His website is <https://andrewcmiller.com/home>.