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Standing in the schoolyard, Catamaran looked around and thought to himself, "Tomorrow at exactly this hour the yard will be filled with the yowls of the new students." As with every new year, he felt that he was about to have an exciting adventure. His years didn't show. He looked young for his age and was still considered to be a brave cat who had no problem displaying his claws for all to see. No one had managed to beat him in the annual Get the Mouse competition, and year after year his friends and fellow teachers applauded as he accepted the grey mouse statuette.

This year looked as promising as the previous years, but even now, when he was alone, he had a hard time dealing with the thoughts that had been bothering him recently. He wasn't ready to admit it, oh no, but a strange feeling was beginning to enter his heart. His body felt tired, and his sight wasn't as sharp as it used to be. He had found that out after a short struggle with a dark chunk of wool that he had mistaken for a cockroach. Lucky for him, no one was around, so he could spare the embarrassment . . . until the next time. Maybe he should start thinking about retirement, he thought while touring the yard. But what would he do?

"Free time," said his friends.

"Free time is for lazy ones," he would answer angrily. One of the sights that most angered him was when he saw his students laying about on the big lawn at the end of the school day.

"What happened?" he used to ask them. "Do you know everything already? You have no more questions to ask? No more answers to look for? Hurry up and find a better thing to do with your time!" He hauled them over the coals and sparked at them while warning, "chop, chop!"

No one dared to stand in front of his gray-yellow eyes. They used to call him "Awful Catamaran" behind his back, but he didn't care. He was even proud of that. All he thought about was how he would manage to leave.

"You must be Catamaran," he heard a voice from behind.

Catamaran turned around, surprised. There was something refreshing in the foreign voice.

"And you ...?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"Katy, the new teacher," a graceful female cat smiled and reached her paws out in a greeting.

Catamaran couldn't ignore the shine of her fur. "An educated cat," he thought while shaking her paws. "Welcome!"

Katy smiled politely and went toward the teachers' room, where a staff preparation day was about to begin. She thought that it would be a great opportunity to get to know everyone, to learn about the school environment, and to discover all that mattered to her: the drinking corner, the lockers, the teaching materials, and more.

Katy didn't like to depend on others. She thought there was nothing worse than having to ask for instructions about the most basic things, even though it was clear to her, and to everybody else, that this was only temporary, and that the first days were for getting organized and learning about the school. She had learned during her life so far to trust only herself and to need others only when absolutely necessary.



"I must roll up my sleeves and keep on going," she repeated in her mind. Even now, when she entered the long corridor, she forced her mouth to shape into a sort of smile, which added a shy grace to her. No cat knew, not even those in her previous town, why she had relocated here. Katy was quiet when it came to her relationships and always preferred to listen, not to tell. Her friends liked this quality in her, but, without even noticing, it came that they knew almost nothing about her. Her friends had never even visited her home. Her life was simple and modest. Her routine was pleasant, and she dedicated her time to her students. This was how she chose to live, and she felt good about it.

For years, she had lived without knowing much about the circumstances of her birth. Her grandma, who raised her in a carton box behind the market, didn't feel the need to discuss the past and used to tell her, "Why, do you have bad times with me?" When she said this, Katy felt bad and would bestow her grandma with calming hugs and kisses.

The questions emerged in her head in waves and during different periods. Sometimes they were stormy and frothy; sometimes they appeared as light

ripples. Sometimes it was months or years until a wave of questions attacked her again. Her grandma recognized the signs, but Katy became cautious of her grandma's dignity and became more introverted. When she was attacked suddenly by restlessness, or when she sat for hours in front of the empty parking lot during the evenings, staring afar, a choked sigh coming out of her thin body, her grandma knew what was bothering her.

The leavings behind the market provided them with higher-quality food than most cats had, and connections, which were of no less importance in the world of two lonely cats. Sometimes grandma would examine their lives and burst out with laughter – who would've believed that she, a cat of good ancestry, would find herself in such a crowd? However, her neighbors and friends, who might have seemed dubious to the eye of a stranger, had proven themselves time after time. "The wisdom in this life is to manage with what you have and not sinking in 'what if' and 'maybe'," grandma used to tell her, "life is what's happening now, and I feel sorry for those who miss it. There's no need to dwell in the past because it's already gone, it's not waiting for us even for a minute, and we should do exactly the same."



Katy struggled with this message; maybe because she believed that her life would take a surprising turn if only she knew something about her past, her parents. Some touch from another, distant world, far from the filthy market's streets. She tried to ignore that nameless thing that was eating her up inside and causing conflict with her grandma, even though Katy knew she owed her everything. She knew she was lucky. She saw it daily at school, to which her grandma insisted on sending her so she wouldn't spend her days walking around the streets. At school, she had met cats from difficult backgrounds and unsupportive families, or who lived in very hard conditions that enabled nothing but survival. However, the past had no intention of letting go of her.

Grandma looked on the faces of the cats sitting around her table. Their faces showed they had lived hard lives. Many were scratched and beaten, carrying scars in body and soul, but they thanked her for her warm attitude. At grandma's place, cats were always welcomed without being questioned and investigated; a wounded cat who needed a place to stay at night knew he would be welcome. She looked at her granddaughter, who wasn't afraid of any cat and always found the good in everyone, and served

her guests a dish of Nile perch in spicy sauce. She thought about the years when she was a young kitten in need of a warm house. She wished she had gotten the same treatment as she was giving to the cats in her home. "We support each other naturally, without waiting for someone to ask for help or say thank you," she said to herself, hoping that Katy would carry that message with her forever, wherever she would go.