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TICKLE THOUGHTS

“Please!” Mya cried. “Please let me keep him.” She held a tiny white kitten against her cheek. It had an orange fur cap and a floofy orange-ringed tail. Her tears splashed the kitten’s ears, making them twitch.

He looked up at the girl he called Princess Mya. She had never made sad sounds before. She laughed! She sang. She whispered soft, silly words that made him purr.

Grandma said, “Remember what I told you? That meeting the orphan kittens and loving them didn’t mean they belonged to you. You helped me teach them not to be afraid when they were picked up. To feel calm around noises or sudden movement. You helped me take care of them until they were ready to be adopted. Now, Mrs. Popple wants to give Monkey Boy a home.”

The kitten looked at Mrs. Popple. She held a small box with holes. He thought her tiny eyes and pointy, beak-like nose reminded him of a bird he saw in the window that morning. But she smelled like a dog. He met a dog once when he was a little kid...just last week. After it licked him from head to tail, he had decided he did not like the smell of dog spit.

Mya hugged him so tight, he squeaked. “Herman is mine.”

“You weren’t supposed to give them real names,” said Grandma. “Real names make it hard to say goodbye.”

“I don’t want to say goodbye. I love Herman.”

“Your summer vacation is over, Mya. School starts Monday. And you have cats at home.”

“But I share them with my parents. Herman said he will be only my kitty.” As she kissed his ears, her golden hair brushed his face. He loved the smell of her minty-sweet breath.

“The kitty didn’t talk,” said Grandma. “Cats meow and purr. They don’t speak words like people do.”

“Herman thinks to me, and I think back to him,” Mya explained.

“That’s make believe, like in fairytales. Cats and people can’t read each other’s minds, Mya.”

Mrs. Popple said, “Put Monkey Boy into the box.”

“His name is Herman,” Mya told her.

As Grandma lifted him, Herman clung to Mya’s shirt with his claws. “I’m sorry, honey. He has to go.”

“No!” she cried. “We want to live Happily Ever After together!”

Grandma put Herman inside the box with holes. “Let’s give him a blessing so he’ll have a happy life.”

“I can’t. He won’t have a happy life without me.”

Herman peeked through a hole to see Mya run to her bedroom. He stuck a paw out to follow, just as the box jerked off the ground. With nothing to hold onto, he slid from side to side.

He smelled grass and earth, heard birds chip, and chill breezes seeped through the holes. He saw a gray house with a blue door, and in the window he saw Princess Mya, crying. *It’s not fair. We’re supposed to be together!* Her thoughts vibrated inside his head, tickling his brain.

He tickle-thought back. *What’s wrong?*

She’s taking you away.

Mrs. Popple placed the box in the back of her car, and slammed the door. BANG! Herman jumped with fright. *When will she bring me back?*

Never!

He didn’t know that word. *Is Never like Wait between breakfast noms and dinner noms?*

Never isn't Wait, Herman. It means we won't see each other again!

As fear shivered through him, he curled his floofy tail around his body for warmth. *No more Cuddle? No more Play?*

Mrs. Popple's car roared to life. Then it rolled down the street, away from Grandma's house. Through a hole Herman saw trees zoom past the window. *I don't want to go!* he hissed.

I can't stop her, Mya wept. *Oh Herman. I love you so much. My heart is breaking!*

Herman rubbed a paw over his own heart. It didn't feel too good either. *I'll escape.* He clawed a hole to make it bigger. *I will run back here.*

I don't live here. My home is on Turtle Island.

Mya drew lots of cats and castles. He pictured her living in a castle on the back of a turtle. *Where is Turtle Island?*

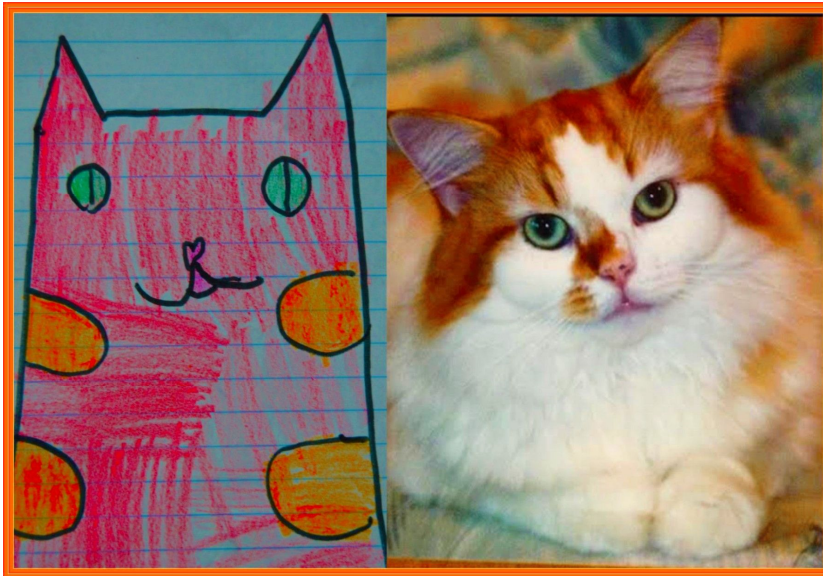
It's in the middle of the Big Cold Lake. Mya's thoughts felt weepy. *How will you find me if you don't have a map?*

What's a map?

The outside world had so many confusing things to learn.

It's a drawing with pictures and words to show you where to go. Mya gasped. *That's it! I will draw picture-maps for you to find me. Remember how I like to draw your picture?*

He did. When he was little...just last week...she had held him in front of a mirror. Then she held up the picture she had drawn. It looked just like him. Kinda.



I'll leave my picture-maps along the road to my house, Mya told him. *I'll draw you in the maps so you will know they're from me. Just follow the maps, and when you find me, we will live Happily Ever After, just like in my storybook.*

Herman loved stories. Not just the ones Grandma read at bedtime. He loved the ones Mya told under the covers when they were supposed to be asleep. Stories about the adventures Princess Mya had with her cat, Herman, when the grownups were asleep.

I'll follow your picture-maps, Herman said. *I'll find you.*

As Mrs. Popple's car zoomed far from Grandma's house, Mya's thoughts tickled softer inside his head. *Please find me, Herman. We're supposed to be together.* And softer still. *I will always love you.* And then they tickled no more.