

Story – “Open” Topic

First Place – Amber

This Story also won the Award for Best Entry in Competition
By Coryn O’Nians – Computer Pals for Seniors - Epping Inc.

I really wasn’t ready for a cat.

I’d always said to myself that when I moved into a house I’d get a cat. Though I’d recently relocated from a unit to a house I hadn’t unpacked everything and I wasn’t properly organised – not the right time for coping with my first cat.

But my vet friend kept trying to persuade me to adopt a stray kitten who’d been dumped at the veterinary surgery where he worked. He even offered to bring her to my place, to give me a few weeks’ trial period with her and, if things didn’t work out, to take her back.

I gave in. And so I accepted sight unseen into my home a small stranger from a different species.

She was an amber-toned brown tabby with a few patches of white, and the name ‘Amber’ came easily on our first night together. She was a timid little thing, and I was eager to do my best for her, while at the same time not being confident of my ability to do so. But after a day I knew I would never send her away.

Things did not get off to a good start. One night after about a week, when I opened the back door to go outside, Amber shot past me into the darkness. I couldn’t catch her or entice her back in; the next day she was nowhere to be seen. I wore myself out traipsing around the neighbourhood putting leaflets about my missing cat in letterboxes – to no avail. A week later she turned up in my next-door neighbour’s garage.

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Cat Amber had only one life, but she had several personae. There was Sleeping Cat, in which she spent a lot of time; Grooming Cat, to which she applied herself most diligently; Affectionate Cat, which I greatly appreciated; and Crazy Cat, when she would crouch on the ground, head at an angle, ears back, eyes wide, front paws stretched out and tense – then suddenly race around at breakneck speed.

Amber’s postures in repose ranged from unselfconsciously elegant to just plain cute. Simply to look at her when she was lying relaxed

instilled a degree of relaxation. In movement (when not in Crazy Cat mode) she would walk gracefully, or trot purposefully, or flow effortlessly up or down or over an object.

Her purring machine emitted a loud, rich, calming sound, and her vocabulary was quite diverse, including a variety of mews, chirrups, burbles and squeaks, and sometimes more complicated utterances, such as 'Ma-ra-ra-rah-wah?' Yowling was reserved for warning off feline intruders or giving notice of an impending attack of vomiting.

Whenever she saw me sitting down she would make a bee-line for my lap and settle down there; she would often go into grooming mode and clean my hands with her rough tongue – a service I came to cherish. I loved the feel of her soft, warm, silky fur; the touch of her cold, wet nose; the weight of her little body in my arms as we enjoyed a cuddle together.

I was so thankful that Amber was not a hunter. Oh, she would go through the motions. If a bird landed on the grass near where she was resting, her interest would be sparked, and she would crouch down, ears back, bottom wriggling, and advance slowly towards the unsuspecting (?) bird. But the bird always saw her before she got too close, and flew a bit further away – and eventually took off. When this scenario happened time after time, I became really torn between being glad for the bird's sake but sorry for, and concerned about, Amber. Would she feel a failure? After a while it was apparent to me that Amber was suffering no long-term psychological damage from these incidents, so I was able to be more relaxed about them.

At night the denizens of the backyard had nothing to fear from this feline, as Amber was safely ensconced in her luxury three-storey apartment (in the laundry, courtesy of a children's table and two plastic cubes). The ground floor provided her toilet facilities, the middle level was her dining area, and the upper storey constituted her sleeping quarters. In winter the upper plastic cube was replaced with a soft, warm, padded cube– luxury indeed!

Amber had a gentle, placid, patient, loving nature. This is not to say that she was perfect; for example, she used to take it upon herself to meddle with the bottom of the vertical drapes – and they have not been the same since. She did make a contribution to the household chores, however. If I was in the kitchen preparing food and happened to drop a morsel on the floor, I had only to call out in an urgent tone 'Amber Amber! Come quickly!' and she would leave her important cat business and put her head around the door. I would then point to the spot on the floor and reiterate my earnest

cry. She would straight away trot up to the offending morsel and, instantly ascertaining its edibility, polish it off forthwith.

* * *

Then the dark times came.

Amber developed diabetes, and I had to give her daily injections. She was diagnosed with a brain tumour; radiotherapy helped for a while, but eventually the vets said there was nothing more they could do for her.

I'll never forget her last day.

It was Anzac Day. My vet friend had offered to come to my place after he finished work, to give Amber her final injection. Little Ambi and I waited together. I was sobbing my heart out, and she – the one who was in pain, the one who was dying – was purring as loudly as she was able, trying to comfort me.

My dearest Amber Puss, brave and loving to the end, rest in peace.