

ALL THE CATS IN THE WORLD

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Down by the seaside, among the rugged rocks and cliffs and in the shadow of an old lighthouse, lived many, many cats of different kinds and different colors. All were wild. They howled in the night.

Two old women, noticing the cats, began to feed them. Soon they came every morning, just after dawn, with sacks full of food—liver scraps, fish heads, and bread crusts. The two women, Nella and Mikila, were good friends. They would clamber down among the rocks, calling, making certain that every cat got its share.

After each cat had eaten, up the rocky path the women climbed, slower now, and hot from the morning sun, talking as good friends do.

One day Nella died, and Mikila was left all alone. She wept bitterly. She went to the church to pray.

Late in the afternoon she remembered the cats. She had not fed the cats!

Weary and sad as she was, Mikila hurried to the fishmonger, the butcher, and the grocer, and for a few pennies she gathered the scraps for her cats.

She arrived at the cliffs, panting and out of breath. When the cats saw Mikila, they emerged from behind the rocks meowing, their tails held high. “Where were you?” they seemed to say reproachfully. “We were hungry. Why did you fail us?”

Suddenly Mikila heard gruff laughter. She looked about, startled. Partway up the slope, on a long, flat rock, a bearded old man sat looking down at her.

“Woman!” he called. “What are you doing with that sack of food?”

“I’m feeding the cats,” shouted Mikila. “What does it look like to you?”

“It looks like a foolish woman,” replied the man rudely, “meddling where she doesn’t belong.”

“I belong here as well as you!” retorted Mikila.

“I belong here well enough,” called the man, “for I am keeper of the lighthouse.”

“Then keep your lighthouse,” shouted Mikila, “and leave me alone.”

Still the old man watched. By and by he called again, “Woman, pray tell me, are you so rich that you can afford to feed these filthy creatures?”

Mikila retorted, “I buy leftovers from the shops. Is it any business of yours?” She left angrily, determined to bring even more scraps tomorrow. She would show that old man—what did she care that he thought her foolish?

The next day Mikila waited until afternoon. Her sack was heavy as she went down to the sea, calling, “Tina! Bennie and Spots!”

Again she heard harsh laughter from up on the ledge.

“Old woman!” the man called down. “Aren’t you afraid, at your age, to climb those rocks? You could fall and break your legs!”

“I’m not afraid!” She laughed and thumbed her nose at him.

It rained the next day, and Mikila yearned to stay home. But the old man might think she was afraid, so she covered her head with a kerchief and went as usual to feed the cats.

The man wasn’t there. But Mikila heard the deep bellow of the foghorn, and she saw the broad beam of light coming from the lighthouse. She knew he was tending to his job.

Just as Mikila finished feeding the cats, the old man appeared at the top of the ridge, followed by a goat. He called out, “Old woman! How stubborn you are to come out even in this bitter weather! I have never seen such a one as you!”

“I am not stubborn, I am faithful,” Mikila shouted.

The old man shook his head, laughing, and disappeared inside the lighthouse.

Mikila walked away slowly, her feet sinking into the wet sand. Her clothes clung to her body, and she shivered. At home, a hot bath and a cup of tea did much to restore her spirits, but she felt very tired, and the next morning she began to sneeze.

Surely the cats could manage without her for just one day, she thought, but then she remembered the old man’s rude laughter and her talk about being faithful.

“One who is faithful,” she said to herself, “does not give up so easily.” She grunted and groaned all the way down to the shore.

As before, the old man sat upon the rock shelf, and when he saw Mikila, he called down, “Old woman, tell me one thing. *Why* do you feed these cats?”

“BECAUSE THEY ARE HUNGRY!” Mikila shouted.

“Hungry!” The man held his sides with laughter. “Hungry! Ha-ha-ha, That’s a good one! Don’t you know there are millions of hungry cats in the world? Can you feed all the cats in the world?”

Mikila did not answer. Wearily she gathered up her empty sack and went home,

weeping.

That night Mikila's bones ached. Even hot tea did not help. For three days and nights she lay sick with fever. The old man's words echoed in her head, and she thought. It is true. I can never feed all the hungry cats in the world, I am tired and sick. Most of all, I am sick and tired of being taunted by that terrible old man. I will go no more to feed the cats. She lay in her bed, grieving.

At last Mikila slept deeply, and on the fourth morning she woke up feeling strong—not only strong but determined; not only determined but angry!

She got up in haste, pulled on her clothes, snatched up her sack, and hurried to gather food for the cats.

As she hustled, Mikila planned what she would tell that rude old man. *He* was the foolish one, the stubborn one, the stupid one. Couldn't he see that what *he* did every day in his lighthouse was exactly the same as feeding the cats?

She could hardly wait to catch him on the ledge and shout up, "Why do you bother to send a beam from your lighthouse? You can't save every ship in the ocean. You can't guide them all safely to shore. Why do you even try?"

As Mikila picked her way down the rocky path, she expected to see the cats shivering, half dead from hunger. But instead they leaped nimbly out, playfully rubbing against Mikila's legs.

"Ah, my dear ones," Mikila exclaimed, "how I have missed you! But—you look well-fed. How can it be?"

Now Mikila saw the old man's goat licking salt from the rocks, and in the next moment there was the old man himself. He stood bent toward the shyest of the cats, feeding it from a sack of scraps.

"What are you doing?" cried Mikila in surprise.

He turned and stammered, "I—why—I—what does it look like to you, old woman?"

Mikila stared at him until his face grew very red and he looked away out to sea.

"Are you so rich." she taunted, "that you have money to waste on these filthy creatures? Aren't you afraid you will fall and break your legs on the rocks? Why do you come out in this bitter weather? What a foolish man you are!"

The old man smiled slyly while the cats milled about his feet. "Actually," he said, "it was not my idea. My goat Ulysses dragged me down here. What else could I do?"

"You could have stayed in your lighthouse," said Mikila.

"But Ulysses is very stubborn," replied the man. "He is also strong and

clever. In fact,” said the man with a grin, “he is in many ways like you.”

“Like me?” Mikila tossed her head. “Many thanks for comparing me to a goat!”

“But this goat,” said the man earnestly, “is my good friend.” He patted the goat’s head with its stubby horns and stiff hair. “We have many conversations, Ulysses and I.”

“Then Ulysses must have told you,” said Mikila dryly, “that you cannot possibly feed all the cats in the world.”

The old man grinned broadly, and his face creased into a thousand wrinkles. “Of course,” he replied. “We all know that. But I can at least feed these close at hand. It is much the same,” he added, “as tending the lighthouse.”

Mikila was silent for a long moment. Then she smiled. “Since Ulysses cares so much about the cats,” she said, “send him to me tomorrow. I will show him which shops sell the very best scraps.”

“A fine idea,” exclaimed the old man. “But Ulysses goes nowhere without me. We shall come together.” He turned and, imitating Mikila’s own high voice, said, “Good-bye now, Roscoe, Tiger, and Puff. See you tomorrow!”

And so each day after that the man and the woman and the goat went together to buy the scraps and feed the cats—not all the cats in the world, but the ones that lived among the rocks in the shadow of the old lighthouse. You can see them walking up the rocky path together, talking and laughing as good friends do.