

## 1. A Better Ending

“Oh, Mom! Can we get one? Please!” Caleb and his two younger sisters crowded around Mom as she typed out the program for the Sunday school program. “They’re the cutest kittens, and they’re *free!*”

Mom sighed and pushed back her chair. “Honey,” she said, “you know I’m allergic to cats. I’m sorry, but you know we can’t get one.” And she turned back to the computer.

“No cat—no dog,” Caleb grumbled as he turned away.

“That’s ’cause Mom’s allergic to cats and Dad says dogs belong on a farm—not in the city,” Miriam piped up.

“I know, I know,” Caleb said irritably. He had known the answer would be no, but still, somehow, he had hoped.

“Oh well,” Naomi said sensibly. “There’s nothing we can do about it. Let’s set up your dollhouse, Miriam.”

But Miriam wasn’t finished. “How come Mom didn’t change her mind?” she asked Naomi as they headed upstairs. “You said to pray about it, and maybe God would hear our prayer.”

Caleb didn’t hear Naomi’s answer as the two girls disappeared into their bedroom to



play make-believe with their dolls. Lonely, he dropped down on the couch and sighed. *How could you make-believe a cat? A cat would be so cool in the house.*

Caleb loved wild animals and would come home from school each week with several new library books on Africa and the animals of its plains or jungles. Name any animal, and he could tell you its family, habitat, eating habits—everything! And cats—well, they were the closest he would ever come to owning a lion or lynx or bobcat, Caleb was sure.



*Rrr-iow!* Caleb had finished his homework and gone out to bring the recycling bin to the road. *Rrr-iow!* In a bid for attention, the cat wound its orange body around his leg. Caleb's eyes brightened. *Now this was an awesome tiger-looking cat.* As he bent to stroke its striped fur, it crouched for the leap to the fence top. There it stared at him, at last winking one eye. Caleb winked back and swallowed down his longing. "Go home, Cat," he said. "You already have a master."

*That was what was so cool about cats,* he thought as the cat ran effortlessly along the fence. *Cats could prowl the neighborhood as though they owned it, slipping in and out of yards unseen. No fence would keep them out. But still, when the night became too cold and their stomachs were empty and their backs were longing for a human touch, like a needle drawn north in its compass, cats would set their course for home and comfort—each one seeking out a lap to curl up on.*

When Caleb stepped out the front door for school the next morning, he glanced at the porch and was surprised to see the light dusting of snow crisscrossed in cat paw prints. And coming home from school, he was even more surprised when the cat leaped down the porch steps to greet him. Scooping it up in his arms, Caleb burst into the house. "Look, Mom! It must be hungry! It's so skinny and probably has no home! Can we keep it?"

Mom sighed. "You may feed it," she said at last.

The children fed the cat. For two days it disappeared during the daytime but always came back for a meal and a place to sleep. When Mom said little as she rubbed her itchy eyes and reached for the tissue box, the children's hopes began to rise.

On the third night, Dad had just finished the Bible reading after supper when Miriam spoke up. "Dad," she asked, "does God always answer prayer?"



Dad placed the bookmark in the Bible and set it on the shelf. "Yes," he said at last. "God does answer all true prayers, but we need to be patient. His time is not our time." Mom sneezed. "And," Dad continued while looking at the cat, "the Lord sometimes answers in a different way than we expect."

Caleb thought about that. He wasn't sure he liked Dad's answer. He had wanted Dad to say, "Yes, God always answers prayer, immediately, just the way we want Him to." But Caleb knew that this was his sinful, selfish nature speaking.

*Ding-dong!* The doorbell interrupted the washing of the supper dishes. When his sisters didn't respond to the bell, Caleb ran to the door. A boy about his own age was handing out home-made "Lost!" notices.

"You did see my cat?" he asked in halting English. "My family gone and back and cat gone. Lost, maybe. No food!" His voice trembled.

Caleb's heart sank. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure the cat wasn't in view.

“Uh, that’s too bad,” he stuttered out and reached for a “Lost!” paper. “We’ll, uh, let you know if we see it.”

As the evening wore on, Caleb couldn’t concentrate on his homework. He felt such guilt that at last he showed Dad the paper. The description matched that of their “borrowed” cat. “I’m, uh, almost done my homework, so I thought I’d bring the cat over now,” Caleb said.

Dad nodded and looked Caleb in the eye. “I think that’s a very good idea,” he said.

The address was for a home on the other side of the block, and Caleb was soon climbing the crumbling porch steps. Raising a hand, he knocked loudly against the peeling painted door. The boy’s mother opened the door. She spoke even less English than her son, apparently. But as the boy also appeared in the doorway, the cat leaped from Caleb’s arms onto the boy’s chest, where it curled over his shoulder. *Rrr-iow!*

“Oh! You found!” the boy exclaimed. “You like cat?”

Looking away, Caleb nodded.

“You come play with cat,” the boy continued.

“Yes!” his mother nodded eagerly. “Come,” she said, and pointed to their home and then to her son. “Miguel friend! Yes?”

Now Caleb looked carefully at the other boy. With his poor English, he probably didn’t have many friends. And then there was the cat...” Tomorrow,” he promised. “I’ll come tomorrow.”

And Caleb did. Right after school he arrived, and Miguel was there to welcome him. Night came early at this time of the year, and it didn’t seem long before Caleb had to leave. Bursting back into his own home, he could hardly stop talking. “And they have hardly any furniture in their house!” he told Mom, “and their dad is always working, and the mom cleans people’s houses, and there’s an old grandfather who lives there too, and Miguel’s little sister...”



Caleb went on and on to his parents about the poor immigrant family that lived just on the other side of the block.



The smell of turkey in gravy, buttery mashed potatoes, and sugared carrots filled the house. *Ah-choo!* Mom sneezed, and Miguel's mother laughed. "Cat?" she asked. And Mom nodded as she grabbed another tissue. Dad was sitting at the kitchen table with Miguel's father. Because of his work, the man knew more English than his wife. Empty coffee cups rested between them, and Dad was talking earnestly about God's care and guiding in their own family life.

Miriam and Naomi had brought down their dolls and were playing house with Miguel's sister. Her eyes shone as she brushed a doll's long, silky hair. Caleb and Miguel were entertaining themselves with the cat's antics. It had been a good idea to invite Miguel and his family to join them for the Christmas program and sing-along.

Miguel's parents had accepted the invitation eagerly. It seemed that they had as few friends in this new country as their son. The old grandfather had not come with them to the church service, but the thought of a good meal had drawn him over for dinner, and he sat in a corner of the living room now, watching the children play with the cat and listening to the progress of the meal preparation.

*Pounce!* The cat swiped at the shoelace Caleb slithered across the floor. Here it was, a cat welcomed by Mom in his own living room. Caleb paused in his play to glance at Dad. Dad looked up and caught his gaze. He smiled at Caleb. *See?* he seemed to say as he took in the cat and the new neighbor family that had joined them. *You need patience, my boy. God does answer prayer, in His own time and in His own way.*

## **SMALL STEPS**

Drip by drip, too slow to see,  
An icicle grows as big as me!  
Creeping high but moving slow,  
I cannot see the pole bean grow.  
I stretch as tall as tall can be—  
Can't wait to see the grown-up me!

With small, small steps a mountain's climbed...  
The upward hike takes so much time!  
Yet since from God comes each new day,  
I will not rush the hours away  
But use them well and one day see  
What drips and steps will come to be!