

BREAKING AWAY

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The night was dark and cool, and everybody was sound asleep. Well, almost everybody. Cats who were lucky enough to be allowed outside at night were roaming around, looking for little rodents to chase or garbage to explore—cats like Mystic, a well-groomed, gray tabby with white and black stripes and piercing blue eyes. But unlike the other cats, Mystic wasn't looking to chase anyone or spill garbage all over the place. He was sitting and looking up at the stars with his friend, an elephant named Bumpa.

Nights like tonight were their favorite. It was August, and the new moon made the sky as clear as crystal. It seemed millions of stars covered the world like a blanket.

A shooting star flickered across the sky.

"Wow!" Bumpa said, bouncing heavily on the wooden platform he loved to sit on with Mystic beside him. "Did you see that? How long the tail was?"

"Yes, yes, yes, I saw it," said Mystic. "But stop jumping like that. You're going to break your board again, and your caretaker might not repair it this time. Then we'll have nothing to relax on."

"I know, but did you see the size of its tail?" said Bumpa happily, completely undeterred by Mystic's irritation.

"Yes," Mystic replied, "It was impressive. Did you make

a wish?”

“You bet I did!” Bumpa swished his tail from side to side. “I was saving my best wish for this one, and I made it!” He bounced on the platform again, and Mystic looked at him disapprovingly.

“Oops, sorry,” laughed Bumpa, sitting still.

Mystic smiled. Bumpa wasn’t trying to annoy him on purpose; he was just full of joyful energy and needed to express it, like a child at Christmas. It was actually what he loved most about Bumpa. His personality was contagious.

But even still, from time to time, Bumpa said something that annoyed Mystic. Right now, he was fixated on what Bumpa had said about his wish.

“Why haven’t you ever told me about your special wish?” Mystic asked. “It feels strange that you didn’t share it with me. You know everything about me, and I *thought* I knew everything about you, too. Apparently I’m—”

But he didn’t get a chance to finish. Bumpa burst out laughing again. “This is so typical of you,” Bumpa said. “You take everything so personally, as if I like you less because I didn’t tell you about *one* of my many wishes.”

Even though it was the truth, Mystic was still upset by Bumpa’s remark. But it wasn’t just the remark. It was that Mystic knew he was too thin-skinned but didn’t know how to be anything else, and that hurt. Then his hurt turned into anger.

“Why are you hurting my feelings?” he said with frustration. “You know it stings me when you say things like that.”

“Mystic, please,” said Bumpa with a kind smile. “You

know I would never do anything to hurt you. Never. You get hurt, that's all."

Mystic pouted. He had hoped Bumpa would at least admit what he had done, but instead he kept going.

"It's the way *you* interpret things that causes you pain," Bumpa said, "not what *I* did or said."

"So why didn't you tell me about this dream of yours then?" whined Mystic. "Am I not special enough for you to share it with?"

"It has nothing to do with your worthiness, Mystic," Bumpa said tenderly. "I didn't tell you, because for a wish to come true it needs to stay in your head. It's a secret thing. I promise, though, when it comes true, I'll tell you all about it. Which I cannot wait to do!" He became animated again, dancing around on the bench.

"Do you promise that I'll be the first one you tell?" Mystic asked.

"I promise," Bumpa said and held out his foot for a high-five.

Mystic, reassured by Bumpa's promise, lifted his tiny paw and slapped it against Bumpa's. "High-five!" they shouted.

Mystic looked back up at the sky, the unpleasantness melting slowly out of him, as another shooting star etched its way across the night like a fast-moving lightning bug. He tried to think of a wish he could attach to the star and send out into the universe with it. But nothing came to him. That didn't matter much, though. He doubted that wishing on a star would result in anything real.

Bumpa is happy and free and has no trouble thinking of

wishes. He just looks at the stars with complete delight, and they come to him easily. Mystic admired Bumpa so much for his free spirit. A small part of him wished he could be the same. Even if Mystic received Bumpa's energy, felt freer and happier than usual when they were together, it seemed unfair that he couldn't be more joyful on his own.

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Mystic had his ritual. He visited Bumpa both at night and at lunchtime. At around noon, he traveled from his home to the park where Bumpa lived. Over the months, the caretakers had come to expect Mystic, and when word got out that a house cat was coming to see an elephant every day, the children started coming in droves to see them.

Bumpa's beaming face would show how the smiling faces crowded around the edge of his enclosure gave him tremendous joy and energy. Of course, Mystic was always very excited, but again, he felt he wasn't as joyful and enthusiastic as Bumpa was. He really wished he could be as happy as Bumpa seemed to always be.

Each time he arrived, Mystic rubbed against Bumpa's huge gray feet to say hello. Bumpa then sat, enveloped Mystic in his trunk, lifted him in the air, and deposited him on his shoulder. It was always that moment at which the children bounced on their feet and let out cries of surprise, which made Bumpa smile. But to Mystic, the cries were often too piercing causing him to cringe.

It was the morning after they had watched the stars together, and Bumpa had just put Mystic on his shoulder. All

the children were jumping and screaming with excitement.

“They make me so happy,” said Bumpa. “I love it!”

“There must be a thousand of them today!” Mystic shouted over the din. He couldn’t believe the number of small faces staring down at them—he’d never seen so many at one time, and for once he felt as excited as Bumpa looked. It was a new experience, this level of joy. He liked it. “So what do you want to do today?” he asked when the overwhelming feeling had eased a little.

“Play!” Bumpa exclaimed, jumping up and down in place.

“Of course play,” Mystic laughed. “We always play, don’t we?” It was exactly what he loved to share with Bumpa—the crazy excitement and enthusiasm that made him almost forget that anything else in the world mattered. Without warning, Mystic jumped off Bumpa’s shoulder and shouted, “Try to catch me!”

Bumpa turned instinctively to snatch Mystic out of the air with his trunk but missed, and Mystic landed lightly on his feet before him. He ran, and Bumpa chased him until Mystic darted between his legs. Bumpa rounded his back, pushed his head through his legs and stretched his trunk back toward Mystic. It was a pose both funny and perilous. The children screamed with fear, clearly thinking Bumpa might fall on himself or on Mystic, but he never did. It was all a trick, and he was able to control his motion much more easily than it seemed. They also screamed whenever Bumpa was close to catching Mystic in his trunk, but that was part of their play, too. Mystic and Bumpa would exchange a conspiratorial wink and keep going.

When both were finally exhausted, Mystic allowed Bumpa to catch him and toss him in the air. The kids shrieked at the top of their lungs as Mystic spun and twirled, but Bumpa always caught him and set him down gently at his feet.

Then they sat side-by-side, Mystic's head resting comfortably against Bumpa's warm, welcoming body. In that moment, life was perfection, and Mystic felt as though he could stay that way forever. On one side of him were the squealing, adoring children, on the other his friend. Life was good.

Too bad this cannot last for me like it does for Bumpa, Mystic thought with regret. He already felt his state of great happiness dissipating. *I wish I were as lucky as he is.*

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When Mystic wasn't in the park with Bumpa, he was at home with his loving family: Jean, Pete, and their daughter Sarah. Mystic loved them all, but he loved Sarah the most.

She was not yet six years old and already looked strikingly similar to her mother: both had dense yet smooth black hair, intense brown eyes, and skin pale like cream. Also, like her mother, Sarah was sweet and kind with a gentle disposition. Whenever she played with Mystic, she was careful not to play too roughly.

The love he shared with Sarah wasn't the same as the love he shared with Bumpa, but it was equally strong. With Bumpa he could communicate directly; with Sarah it was more instinctual. She always seemed to know what Mystic

was trying to say through his body language, and Mystic could *almost* always tell what Sarah was trying to say with hers. For a human and a cat, they were well-connected. Mystic knew other cats who didn't share *any* bond with their humans or even the other animals they interacted with daily, so he knew what they had was special.

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In the early morning, Mystic slipped in through the cat door in the bottom of the kitchen door as he always did after spending his night with Bumpa. He made sure to make more noise than necessary so Sarah would hear him. Her ears were well attuned to the sounds of the cat door, and one of Mystic's greatest pleasures in life, aside from spending time with Bumpa, was when Sarah clutched him to her chest and covered his head with kisses when he came home in the morning. He felt welcome and accepted.

Sarah was sitting at the breakfast table as Mystic came in, and the second she saw him, she abandoned her cereal and ran for the door.

"You're back!" she screamed with joy, picking him up off the floor and holding him to her. Jean and Pete, who were still at the table, smiled from ear to ear and continued their breakfast. After kisses and petting, Sarah set Mystic back on the floor, and he twined himself around her legs, purring as loudly as he could. It always made Sarah giggle.

"He sounds like a motorboat," she said.

"Sarah, come finish your breakfast," Jean said, smiling. "You're going to be late for school. And besides, Mystic has

some sleep to catch up on.”

“Okay,” Sarah said, reaching down to pet Mystic one final time. This too was part of the ritual. She reluctantly marched over to the table, sat, and finished eating, while Mystic made his way upstairs to her bed.

As he walked, he thought about how lucky he was that he had both Sarah and Bumpa to share with. That’s why he always tried to show how appreciative he was. When Sarah got home from school in the afternoon, Mystic would be asleep at the foot of her bed, recuperating from entertaining the kids with Bumpa. Sarah always anticipated it, and even before going to play with her friends next-door, she ran upstairs to play with Mystic. He also made sure he was there in the evening to spend the time between dinner and bedtime with her. When Sarah was in bed, he lay at her feet, but his favorite was when he fell asleep on her pillow beside her. Sarah would let go of her teddy bear and pull Mystic to her instead.

Once in Sarah’s arms, he felt like the world had stopped turning and this moment of peace and perfection could last forever. But Bumpa would be waiting for him to star-gaze, so once she was sound asleep, Mystic snuck out again, this time taking great pains to make sure the cat door made no sound.

But all of that was for later. Now, curled up like a comma on the end of Sarah’s unmade bed, Mystic drifted off to sleep, thinking about the kids he would soon entertain with Bumpa. He dreamed of being as happy as his friend, again.

“Bumpa! Hey, Bumpa!” Mystic was walking through the tunnel that connected the path to Bumpa’s enclosure, calling out to him as he did every day at lunchtime. The tunnel was dark and cool, just the right size for him. Sometimes, when it was too warm outside or he hadn’t gotten enough sleep in the morning, Mystic would lie down and take a nap in the cool damp beneath the rocks that made up its roof. But today he was rested and energized.

Bumpa didn’t answer. From time to time, when the kids were really riled up, their screams covered Mystic’s voice and Bumpa wouldn’t hear him, but today everything was silent. Much more silent than it should be. Mystic had a strange sinking feeling in his stomach and started to move more quickly.

Maybe he’s asleep, Mystic thought, but something about that didn’t seem right either. Bumpa was *never* asleep when Mystic was due to arrive. His heart fluttered like a sparrow trapped in a chimney. He didn’t know why, but something deep inside was telling him that something horrible had happened. No matter how hard he tried to push that thought away, it remained. Mystic started to run.

He shot out of the end of the tunnel much faster than usual, and instead of seeing the enclosure he was used to—a place he had come to know as well as his own home—he emerged into a foreign landscape. The toys were gone and so were the blankets and Bumpa’s bedding. His food area was empty, too. Normally, it was scattered with the remainder of Bumpa’s hay and the leftover fruit he didn’t

enjoy, but now it had been scrubbed clean. It smelled the way the house did when Jean or Pete tidied up.

He looked up to the rim of the enclosure, expecting to see the smiling faces of the children staring down, but that was empty, too. It was strange not seeing anyone there. Mystic had never seen it totally empty during the day.

Why did they clean his pen? he wondered. It didn't make any sense at all. In all the months he had been visiting Bumpa, they'd never scrubbed it as clean as this. The sinking feeling in his stomach worsened.

Then an idea struck him: *Maybe they moved him to another pen!* It made a certain kind of sense. If they were going to clean his enclosure as thoroughly as this, they wouldn't be able to do it with Bumpa inside. They *must* have moved him.

"I just have to find where!" His shout echoed in the emptiness and came back to his ears. He heard the hope in his voice and felt comforted by it. *That has to be it*, he thought. "I'll go around the park and look in every single pen. I bet I'll find him in no time!"

Excited, he ran back through the tunnel, leaving the large empty enclosure behind. It would take a while to search the entire park, and he wanted to start as soon as possible. He ran the length of the tunnel faster than he ever had before, came out the other side, and immediately froze.

There were people everywhere. He had forgotten it was the middle of the day and the park was full of people walking around, not watching where they were going. Not to mention all the children running around, stuffed full of excitement and sugar. It could be dangerous for a little cat like him. His

hope began to fade. He couldn't search now, not easily, but he didn't want to wait. Every moment he didn't know where Bumpa was, negative thoughts grew more and more vibrant, the feeling of hopelessness in his stomach more unbearable.

His chest was tense, and he was having trouble breathing. It was too much all at once—the fear of the unknown, anticipation of what would come next, and perhaps worst of all, his increasing anxiety that he would never see Bumpa again.

This isn't getting me anywhere, he thought. He was still frozen on the path, people all around. Sooner or later someone would notice him. *But where should I check first?*

And then it came to him. The largest empty enclosure was the one where the polar bears used to live. It had been empty for a year, and the rumor was that they had been relocated to a place where they could be freer. He'd heard that they were happy now. He hadn't known the bears personally, but he knew the way, and it wasn't far.

He started moving, slowly at first, trying to avoid the forest of legs around him, but before long he started to run. As he ran, he became more and more certain that Bumpa would be there, that he *had* to be there. Soon he would be laughing at how worried he had been. He could see no other option.

But even before he could look into the polar bear enclosure, his hope was dashed. The Plexiglas surrounding it was cloudy.

Maybe they just haven't had time to clean it yet, he thought, grasping at whatever hope he could, but when he ran up to the dirty Plexiglas and looked down, his hope

vanished. The blue paint on the bottom of the empty pool was cracked and peeling. It was obvious that no one had lived there for a long time.

The pain hit him all at once, and it was like being struck by lightning. *He's gone*, Mystic thought. *Gone forever, like the bears*. In that moment, he was certain he would never see his friend again, and along with the pain came anger.

“No!” he shouted. “No, no, no! Please come back, Bumpa! I don't care if the polar bears are happier where they are now, I don't want you there! I want you here! Come back!”

His voice echoed off the empty walls of the enclosure, but there was no other sound. Bumpa didn't call back.

He felt alone, as if his world were collapsing around him.

He sat, sad and angry, for a while before deciding to move on and check the other large enclosures. He no longer had hope that he would find Bumpa in any of them—they were all being lived in by the elk, giraffes, moose, and all the other gigantic animals—but he had to go anyway. He had to be sure.

More and more people were arriving every minute, and everything felt more dangerous. He had to check, though, and so started off, moving quickly and quietly, sticking to the shadows as much as possible.

Bumpa was nowhere to be found.

Sad, dejected, and angry, Mystic decided to go home. There was nothing else for him here now.

Mystic returned home without even being aware of where he was walking. He was lost deep in his thoughts, and they were all about Bumpa. He usually enjoyed his walk home. In the stretch between the park and his house, birds were all over the place, happily flitting from branch to branch, and it normally gave him such joy to watch them. They were free, healthy, and fast—not the sort of bird he would dare chase. Today, he felt more like the birds he would sometimes catch—old and sick. It was seeing the healthy birds that made him feel this way; watching them fly so freely, chattering to one another without a care in the world, made him even more aware of Bumpa’s absence and how lonely he felt. He wished he could be up there with them, all his cares and worries left far below.

But that would never happen, *especially* not this morning. He walked robotically, head down, staring at the ground instead of the birds, just creeping along, dragging his lifeless tail behind him. Before he knew it, he was pulling himself through the cat door, grateful that Sarah wasn’t home to see him like this. It was impossible for him to fake being happy as Pete and Jean could.

He remembered once seeing Pete come home yelling at someone on his phone in the front yard, but by the time he entered the house he was acting happy again and even laughing. Mystic had figured out that Pete had hidden his feelings to protect Sarah, but it wasn’t something Mystic could do. He felt the way he felt, and there was no hiding it.

He slunk through the kitchen and upstairs to Sarah’s room. He wanted nothing else in life at that moment other than to curl up at the end of Sarah’s bed, and when he entered

her room, he felt immediately comforted. The presence of Sarah's scent was almost as good as her hugging him. It couldn't fill the emptiness he felt inside, but it did lessen it. Maybe more than that. Mystic felt the calmest he had since discovering Bumpa was gone. He jumped up onto the bed, pressed his nose into Sarah's blanket, and curled his paw around his face. The smell of home was wonderful. He lay that way, enjoying the feeling of his sadness and pain seeping out of him. Before he knew it, he had fallen asleep.

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The bang of the kitchen door closing woke him a little later. He stretched, yawned, and jumped down off the bed, his morning momentarily forgotten. Voices came up from below. It was Pete and Sarah. He ran downstairs to greet them. When he entered, they were unloading groceries onto the kitchen counter. He immediately spied a can of his favorite food. Pete was talking to Sarah, but Mystic ignored it. He could rarely tell what the humans were saying anyway. All his attention was focused on the can of food on the counter. He stretched up against the cupboard door and meowed lightly.

"He's going to need extra cuddling now, Sarah," Pete said as he took a dish from the cupboard and emptied the food into it.

"Yes, Dad, I know." said Sarah.

Mystic stared intensely at the dish of food in Pete's hand. It was almost to the floor, and he decided that it was close enough. He ran over and started to eat, taking large bites and

gulping them down.

“Well, at least he’s not too sad to eat.” Pete smiled as he set Mystic’s dish on the floor.

“He loves it!” Sarah said, jumping up and down. She bent over and petted him for a few moments until Pete called her away.

“Let him eat in peace for now,” Pete said. “Why don’t you go clean up your room?”

They left and Mystic was alone. As he licked the last few drops of juice from the bottom of the dish, his stomach full and his mind at ease, he thought, *I should tell Bumpa about my treat!*

Then he remembered.

It hit him with the force of a truck, and the pain returned, driving out the good feelings he’d gotten from his food. He sat heavily in front of his empty plate and stared at it. Nothing remained now but the few greasy swirls left by his tongue and the vague smell of fish. He never would have thought it possible to feel such sadness sitting in front of a plate that smelled so wonderful, but then he never would have thought that Bumpa would leave him, either.

It’s not fair, he thought, sullenly licking his paw. *Being with Sarah is supposed to be fun, but without Bumpa in my life too, it’s not. I want both of them, and then I’ll be happy.* He went to his water dish but, before even taking a sip, decided he didn’t really want it. All he wanted right now was the only thing that could give him relief.

He heard Sarah moving around in her room, and he ran upstairs to be with her.

She was sitting on the floor in the middle of her room,

playing with her hairdresser set. She waved to him with her hairbrush.

Normally, he would hop up on the bed and watch her as she played, creating an elaborate imaginary world that she immersed herself in totally. He loved her imagination and felt closer to her when he watched her play. She had the same capacity for creation he had; when she was in her world of haircuts, perms, and hair-dyeing, it was as real to her as it was when Mystic pretended a ball of paper was a mouse or a piece of dust floating through the air was a bird. Mystic had realized early on that this was a special thing they shared. He had never seen Jean and Pete imagine anything, and the few times he had tried to get them involved in Sarah's world by rubbing against their legs or meowing, they just thought he wanted food.

Today was different. Today he needed attention and didn't feel like joining Sarah in her imaginary world. He walked across the floor, rubbed against her back, and let out a little whimper.

Sarah turned at once, grabbed Mystic under his belly, and put him across her lap. "I know, Mystic," she said, her voice full of compassion. "Daddy told me about your friend—that he was taken away. I'm so sorry."

Mystic was shocked. He had never been able to translate what humans were saying—there were so many words, and none of them made sense to him—though he could read their emotions and body language quite well. But now he understood. Not her words, necessarily, but he knew Sarah understood he had lost his friend.

He faced her. "Where is Bumpa? What happened to him?"

Is he coming back?” The questions were out of his mouth before he realized it, and after they were, he felt a little foolish. He knew Sarah couldn’t understand him, that all she would hear was meowing.

“I know you’re sad, Mystic,” she said. “But I love you, and I’ll always be here for you. You’re not alone, you know?” She hugged him to her tightly, more tightly than usual, and planted a kiss on his head. She held him that way for a little while, until she became antsy to dive back into her imaginary world and set him on the bed.

Soon after, Sarah was so lost inside her play, talking to her imaginary clients about what color they were looking to dye their hair and how much they wanted cut off, that she didn’t even notice when Mystic hopped down off the bed, went down the stairs, and out the cat door.

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Mystic sauntered down the street until he was in front of the biggest house in the neighborhood where his friend Ulysses lived. Ulysses was a pure white cat with delicate features and silky fur. He looked so refined and distinguished that you wouldn’t know his home life was chaotic. He lived with three boys between the ages of two to ten and their parents, and something was always happening in their home.

Ulysses had once told Mystic that, when everyone in the house was a little tense or on edge, he only had to rub himself against them for the mood to settle. Sometimes, though, not even that was enough and someone would kick him away in

irritation. He never minded, because whenever that happened, someone would immediately come to his defense, screaming at whoever had kicked him, and scoop him into their arms to protect him.

It never stayed like that for long, though, and the calm would always return. Mystic knew that calm for Ulysses' family would be chaotic for Jean, Pete, Sarah, but Ulysses seemed to enjoy his life very much despite that. More than that, he seemed to thrive in it.

Mystic had often thought he was very lucky not to have Ulysses' life; he could not have stood such a high level of energy all the time—he was far too peaceful for that. Now, he felt differently. If he had been too busy at home with his family, he wouldn't have had time to go to the park and meet Bumpa in the first place, and he wouldn't be feeling this horrible now.

“Hey, Mystic,” Ulysses called from along the sidewalk as Mystic approached. “What's up?”

“Nothing good,” Mystic replied with a voice as heavy and full of pain as he felt inside.

“Uh-oh,” Ulysses said lightly. Mystic had known Ulysses for more than a year now, and Ulysses had accused him in the past of being overly sensitive. His light attitude got on Mystic's nerves sometimes, but he couldn't tell Ulysses that, or he would level the same accusation at him again.

He remembered the last time he had been depressed and had come across Ulysses.

“What's wrong, Mystic?” Ulysses had asked.

“My human, Sarah, has been ignoring me lately,” Mystic

had replied. “She’s spending so much more time with her friends than she is with me. She hasn’t even picked me up today.”

Ulysses had laughed. “I’ve never seen a cat who acts so much like a human. Normally, cats are just happy with themselves and don’t need anything or anyone else to feel good. They love interacting with others, but it’s not *necessary* to make them happy. But you seem so dependent on attention to feel good!”

Mystic had said nothing but started to pout.

“Just because Sarah is spending time with other people doesn’t mean she doesn’t love you anymore,” had said Ulysses, but Mystic hadn’t been convinced.

That had been the same day he’d met Bumpa for the first time, and that evening when he had passed by Ulysses’ house on the way home, walking lightly and happily, Ulysses had asked him what had changed. Mystic had told him about Bumpa and the incredible day they had spent together in the park.

“You see!” Ulysses had exclaimed. “If Sarah was around as much as she used to be, you never would have gone to the park, had an amazing day, and made a new friend!” Mystic had agreed that the day had gone perfectly.

“And do you love Sarah any less now that you’ve made a new friend?” Ulysses had asked a little sarcastically, but it was playful not mean.

“No, of course not,” Mystic had replied. “I can love more than one friend at a time.”

“So can Sarah,” had said Ulysses.

Mystic had recognized that Ulysses was right, but it

didn't make it easy to accept. The next time Sarah had spent more time with her friends and had played with him less, he'd still felt abandoned. He had also been hurt when Bumpa had told him about playing with his caretakers and receiving treats for doing so. Mystic didn't like feeling excluded.

And now, watching Ulysses as he spoke, Mystic could tell that the white cat assumed it was the same old thing bothering him and wasn't taking him seriously. Mystic grew more disheartened. If he couldn't even talk to Ulysses about it, who could he talk to?

"So, what is it this time, Mystic?" Ulysses asked.

"Not that you care, but Bumpa is gone," Mystic said, sinking to the ground under the weight of his words.

"Mystic, of course I care!" Ulysses said with a look of surprise. "That's awful! What happened to him? Was he sick, or did he have an accident?"

"He's not gone *that* way," Mystic sighed. "He's just gone... He's not in his pen."

"Oh! Is that all?" Ulysses said, and Mystic heard the relief in his voice.

"What do you mean is that all? Isn't it enough? Do you think I should be relieved that I can't find my best friend?"

"No," Ulysses said, "but it's better than if something had happened to him, isn't it? He's still alive, isn't he?"

"Yes, yes, of course." Logically, Mystic knew Ulysses was right, but logic and emotion were two different things. Emotionally, Mystic couldn't help the way he felt, even though he knew it was selfish. "But if something like that *had* happened, at least I'd know where he was."

"You don't mean that." Ulysses was suddenly sterner

than Mystic had ever heard him, and it shocked him a little. “You’re just angry, and it’s okay to be angry, but I know you would never wish anything bad to happen to one of your friends, even if it made you feel better in some way. Would you?”

“No, I don’t wish anything bad had happened,” Mystic said, his voice soft and deflated. “But I don’t know what to do.”

“Have you tried asking the other animals at the park?”

“It was too busy when I was there, too many people,” Mystic said. “It was too dangerous to be running around.”

“Then why don’t you stay here with me until the sun reaches the other side of the trees?” Ulysses asked. “That’s when the park closes to the children and you can talk to the animals without being afraid. I’ll even come with you if you want.”

Mystic didn’t want to wait—he wanted his answer now—but Ulysses was right. It was smarter to go a little later when they would have an easier time. He realized that he was lucky to have a friend like Ulysses, even if he didn’t always seem to care about Mystic’s problems. He cared now, and Mystic was no longer alone in his search.

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By the time the sun had traveled to the other side of the trees in Ulysses’ yard, Mystic and Ulysses had formed a plan and divided up the animals they would talk to, cutting their work in half.

Ulysses would speak to the exotic birds, farm animals,

lions, and the pigeons who hung around the park eating the other animal's leftovers. Mystic, on the other hand, would talk to the tigers, zebras, seals, and then finish with the giraffes.

It took just over an hour to speak to everyone except the giraffes, and with every animal he walked away from without an answer, Mystic became more and more dismayed. He noticed that, the more upset he became, the more compassionate the other animals became, until he wasn't really feeling upset anymore. He continued to act upset because the attention was nice... more than that—he loved it.

By the time he reached Lili and Lulu's, he no longer even hoped the giraffes would know where Bumpa was. But at least he would get more compassion and attention, and that was enough to keep him going.

When he approached their enclosure, Lulu and Lili raised their heads from their dish of pellets and acacia branches. The railing surrounding the pit they lived in was the same height as their heads, and Mystic crawled up under it close to them.

"Hi, Lulu and Lili," Mystic said, his voice low and sad. "I'm here because—"

"Because you're looking for Bumpa," Lili said.

Mystic froze for a moment, not expecting to hear Bumpa's name, and in that instant all the hope he had set out with suddenly returned. "Yes!" he exclaimed, unable to help it, a thousand questions at the tip of his tongue. But before he could ask, Lili cut him off.

"We're sorry, Mystic," she said, shaking her head,

staring at him with her big blue eyes. “We don’t know where Bumpa is. We saw his caretaker come first thing this morning and take him away in the big truck.”

“And I know the truck,” Lulu interrupted. “It’s the same one that took Snowy and Icy away.”

“The polar bears,” Lili added.

“The humans said they were going somewhere called a bear sanctuary, but I doubt they took Bumpa there,” said Lulu.

Mystic’s face crumpled, all the hope that had returned for such a brief moment already scattered to the wind. Snowy and Icy had been taken away and had never come back. *Bumpa’s never coming back*, Mystic thought. Flashes of happy moments shared with Bumpa crossed his mind and intensified his sense of loss. But suddenly, the memory of the other night lashed his heart. Bumpa had sent his greatest wish to the sky, and now he was gone.

Was that his secret wish? To leave? But he promised me that he would tell me!

Betrayal and hurt bubbled up within him, replacing hope. He felt more alone than ever. Negative thoughts swirled through his mind like a cloud of flies, blotting out everything else. Mystic wanted to open his mouth and just scream. It felt like the whole world was against him.

This is unfair! How could Bumpa leave me behind like this? How could he be so selfish??

He might have gone on thinking those negative, hurtful thoughts for a long time, if he hadn’t been interrupted by Ulysses running up and stopping beside him out of breath.

“Why did you come running up like that?” Mystic asked,

but he wasn't really interested in the answer. His hope of finding Bumpa was completely gone, and nothing else really mattered.

"I talked with the pigeons," Ulysses said. "They told me all about a big truck and the elephant going inside, and I thought you'd want to know."

Mystic's ears perked up. "They said Bumpa *went* into the truck?" he asked, curious again. "Like *going* in on his own?"

"Yes," Ulysses said. "They even said he looked happy and jumped up and down inside."

Mystic thought back to when Bumpa jumped up and down on his platform. He could easily picture Bumpa doing that in the back of the truck, and if he hadn't been so sad and hurt, it would have been funny.

"So that *was* his wish," Mystic said under his breath. He was looking at Lulu and Lili, but he wasn't really seeing them. Stuck in his own mind, all Mystic could see was Bumpa staring up at the stars and making the wish that would take him away forever.

"But why?" Mystic asked finally. "Why did he want to leave me? Why did he want to hurt me like that?" No one answered. "Well, at least now I know why he didn't tell me his wish," Mystic said. "He knew I would have begged him to stay here with me."

All was silent for a few minutes but for the crickets and the faraway roar of traffic. Finally, Ulysses spoke up, his voice measured and cautious.

"Mystic, why do you say that Bumpa wanted to leave *you*? Don't you think he wanted to leave this place, his pen, and not you?"

“Maybe, but I live here, don’t I?” Mystic shouted. “I belong here, and he belongs here with me! But he left, and that means he wanted to leave me, too! He didn’t even tell me about it, he kept it a secret. I feel so betrayed!”

“Or maybe he kept it a secret so you two could enjoy every single moment together right up to the end,” Lulu said softly.

“If you had known he was leaving, you wouldn’t have enjoyed any of your time together, would you?” Lili added. “Instead, you would have been sad and depressed. You wouldn’t even have the great memories you do.”

Lulu was behind her, nodding as she spoke.

“Are you all on Bumpa’s side?” Mystic shouted angrily.

“There are no sides, Mystic,” Ulysses said.

Mystic didn’t even hear him. Blood was rushing through his ears, and he felt the anger as heat in his face. Instead, of trying to talk sense into the giraffes or Ulysses, Mystic turned and stomped toward home. He wanted to be alone now.

Mystic heard Ulysses’ fast steps chasing after him.

“Go away, Ulysses. I’ll be fine,” Mystic said before the white cat got too close. “I’m going home, and you should, too. There’s nothing more we can do.”

“I’m with you, Mystic,” Ulysses said a little out of breath. “I just think you’re not seeing things straight. Bumpa would never do anything to hurt you, and you know that. He just needed to take care of himself, to do what was best for him.”

Mystic kept walking, keeping up a brisk pace but not quite running, and pretended not to hear anything Ulysses

was saying.

“Besides, I’m sure Bumpa had a good reason to keep it a secret,” Ulysses continued. “Bumpa always did what he could to protect you, not hurt you, and I know you know that too.”

Mystic stopped and faced Ulysses. “I know,” he said finally, letting his anger melt away a little. “I know everything you’re saying is true, but I can’t help the way I feel. I’m upset right now, and I don’t know how to feel anything else.”

2



Freedom

A NEW FRIEND

-1-

Ulysses returned home, and Mystic continued walking...