

Tara Finds Her Purr

by JaneA Kelley

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Grammie didn't get out of bed when she was supposed to. I walked back and forth across her tummy, like I always do to help her wake up. Usually that made her get up as fast as she could and run to the human litter box room, but not today. Next, I went to her head and tried licking her nose. That always made her laugh and gently push me away. But not today.

"Grammie?" I chirped.

I could feel her chest rising and falling beneath my feet, so I knew she hadn't caught a dead. My cat mom told me that you *really* have to worry if your human catches a dead; that's how she ended up in The Shelter, she told me, so I was really glad Grammie was still moving.

The phone on her nightstand started making annoying noises. It did that every morning, but Grammie knew how to make the annoying noises stop. "Why don't you make the annoying noises stop today, Grammie?" I asked. My ears twitched every time the phone made its shrill *boobledy-boobledy-boobledy* noise.

Finally the phone stopped yelling—but my stomach had started rumbling! I didn't want to leave Grammie alone because she still hadn't told me why this day was so weird and why she didn't do her

Usual Things, as she called them. I hopped off the bed and padded across the apartment to the kitchen. Grammie hadn't put out any wet food yet, but there was some kibble in my Snack Dish. I picked up a few mouthfuls and swallowed them down, catching a quick taste of salt and vaguely rancid oil and rendered meat as the morsels passed over my tongue. (What? You think we actually *chew* kibble? Nah! Our teeth aren't made for that! Mostly we swallow it whole.)

I made my way back to Grammie's room to see if she was awake yet. Come to think of it, she hadn't been feeling very well last night and she'd been holding onto or leaning against things whenever she moved, so she wouldn't tip over. I thought it was odd that she hadn't called The Children about it. She and The Children didn't talk very often, but when they did, Grammie just lit up with joy! I'm sure The Children would have helped her not tip over.

What's going to happen if Grammie never gets out of bed again? I trembled at the thought. Am I going to end up in The Shelter, even though she hasn't caught a dead? Is anybody going to feed me? Is anyone going to clean my litter box? And most of all, is anybody ever going to love me like Grammie does?

The love. That was really the most important part for me. I could live with any food anyone put in front of me and any litter that was in my box—I'm not picky like some cats are—but it was the love that made me feel so safe and secure. I remembered the way Grammie held me in her arms with my tummy up while we watched TV together. That always made her laugh; she'd say most cats would never permit that and then give me exactly two gentle strokes from chest to just below my belly button. She gave me three strokes once, and I gave her a gentle swat with my paw to let her know that was too many. Some mornings, when the sun was just right and my fur would get warm in its light, I'd sit on the table and watch her as she had her morning coffee or cuddle up in her lap as she read a book. I usually slept on the bed with Grammie, on a pillow right next to hers, and every night Grammie would reach

one hand out from under the blankets and pet me just where I loved it the most: behind my ears, and under my chin, just on the inside of my jaw. And I like my petties *firm!* If Grammie didn't pet me quite firmly enough, I'd push my head against her fingers until she dug in deeper. And oh, how I purred! Grammie told me I was going to rattle the house down if I purred much louder!

"Grammie?" I patted her nose with my paw. "Grammie, wake up!" I said.

She lay still, except for the up, down, up, down movement of her chest.

I took a step back. My eyes burned with tears.

"Grammie, what's happening?" I cried.

Suddenly people started pounding on the front door, and I could hear their muffled voices calling Grammie's name. All my fur stood on end. I jumped off the bed and ran to the closet, where I burrowed into the deepest, darkest space I could find.

The pounding continued until a high-pitched voice said something about a key.

Sure enough, I heard that familiar metallic rattling at the door, followed by heavy footsteps and the voices of a man and a woman calling "Mrs. Grimes? Mrs. Grimes? It's the paramedics, we're here to help you." I heard a squawking, static-like noise coming from the people, too, but I couldn't understand what it said.

The footsteps clomped into the bedroom. "Mrs. Grimes? I'm Lisa, I'm a paramedic," said the woman's voice.

"Mrs. Grimes, can you smile for me?" A pause. "Mrs. Grimes, can you repeat 'my cat is fat'?"

Well, I never! I thought. *I'm not fat, I'm pleasantly plump. That's what Grammie says!*

As Lisa the paramedic continued trying to talk to Grammie, the other person clomped out and quickly came clomping back in, this time pulling a metal contraption with a squeaky wheel. I could hear the rustling of fabric and shuffling bodies, and finally a tiny metallic squeak and whisper of sheets. The paramedics must have put Grammie on the metal thing—and now they were wheeling it out?

“Wait! Bring back my Grammie! What’s going to happen to me? I’m hungry!” I cried as the front door closed behind the paramedics and their wheely bed. *And they took my Grammie away!* Tears streamed down my face as I remembered the pretty sounds she made when her favorite songs came on the radio and the smell of her special Grammie perfume. Sandalwood, she called it.

A couple of days later, my Snack Dish was empty even though I’d been oh, so careful to ration my kibble. My stomach grumbled. *I wonder if Grammie left anything tasty on the counter,* I thought. Maybe a half-finished sandwich or the remains of a bowl of cold cereal and milk? A lick of butter?

Grammie would always tell me NO if I got on the counter. But I knew if I sat down on the other side of the sink and gazed at her, my eyes sparkling with loving admiration, she’d eventually say, “Well, okay then. But you stay over there and I’ll stay over here.”

I was just about to start crying again—I was so lonely, and the Grammie smell had started to fade from her bed sheets—when I heard two voices outside the front door and the rattling of the key in the lock. The door opened, and in the blazing afternoon sunlight I could see the shapes of a man and a woman.

I was saved! They both smelled a little like Grammie! Someone was going to love me again! My heart fluttered with joy and I trotted up to them as they closed the door behind them. “Are you The Children?” I chirped as I rubbed myself around their legs. “Grammie loves you. She’s so happy when you

call, and then she tells her neighbors about how proud she is of The Children and the great things they're doing!"

"Goddammit, it reeks of cat piss in here!" the man said. "I knew we should have put Mom in a home earlier! She clearly wasn't taking care of the damn cat."

"Michael, Tuxie has been here alone in the house for three days. Of course it's going to smell in here," the woman replied.

She knows what Grammie called me! I thought. I'm sure she's going to help me!

The woman set her purse on the coffee table and reached down toward me. "Hi there, sweetie," she said. Her voice was just like Grammie's. I rubbed my cheek against her outstretched fingers and let her give me a scratch on the top of my head. It was so overwhelmingly wonderful to have a pleasant touch again that I just flopped on my side at her feet!

She chuckled and stroked my neck and shoulders—but not my belly. She knew better. I could smell the faintest whiff of cat pheromones on her clothing, so I figured she must live with a cat, too.

"Come on, Lisa, we've got to find those papers. We're going to have to sell the house, of course, to pay for Mom's care," Michael the man said.

"Could we maybe not go 90 miles an hour for a while?" Lisa said. "It's not an emergency. Mom's condition isn't going to change. And she's going to need some things. And what about Tuxie? We've got to make sure she's safe."

I stood next to her, purring as she spoke.

"Look, I've got a couple of developers interested in the property and we can't sit on this place too long. They're willing to pay seven figures. In cash."

“Welcome to Seattle, where some jackass will pay a million dollars just to tear a house down so they can build condos on the land where it stood,” Lisa said. “I remember when Mom bought this place. She’d worked at Boeing all her life to fund her dream of having a little cottage with a beautiful flower garden. And then when Tuxie came along, it was like it was meant to be: Mom found her one morning, curled up and zonked out in a bed of catnip in the back yard.”

“You and Mom always were kind of sentimental,” Michael said. The tone of his voice was unpleasant. I decided I didn’t like him.

And then I had to pee. I wandered off to Grammie’s bedroom, where I’d found a nice, soft folded thing under the bed. I knew I was only supposed to pee in the litter box, but it was full, and I hoped Grammie would forgive me for using this nice, folded thing. I took the position and let loose.

“Where did that damn cat go?” Michael asked. “I bet she’s pissing on something!”

He clomped into Grammie’s room, knelt down, and looked under the bed. “Goddammit, I told you so! She’s pissing under the bed! No wonder it stinks in here!”

“Why should you care, if you’re just going to sell this place to developers?” Lisa snapped.

“Well, what else should I do?” Michael jerked the soft thing out from under the bed, sending me rolling away in the process, and then made a disgusted noise as he saw that he was right and I had been using it as a safe and hidden place to pee.

“That cat is *disgusting!*” Michael barked.

“Michael, Tuxie is *not* disgusting! She is having a normal reaction to not having a clean litter box and the stress of Mom being gone. The two of them love each other so much...”

“Could you at least help me find the deed instead of fawning over that stupid cat?”

“Mom is ... was pretty organized about stuff like that. Look in the bedroom closet for a fireproof box.”

Michael quickly found the box, but not the keys. He muttered an occasional curse word as he shuffled through the drawers in the kitchen and looked through her key ring. Finally he found a key that looked like it would work. “Success!” he cried as the key turned in the fireproof box’s lock.

Lisa sat down on the sofa and I hopped up next to her. She petted me gently and told me, “I’m sorry, sweetie, your grammie had a severe stroke and she’s not going to be coming back here.”

“Wait. What’s a stroke? What do you mean Grammie isn’t coming back?” I asked.

“Oh, you’re such a sweet little chatterbox, Miss Tuxie. I’ll do the best I can to help you find a good home. And if we can’t find anyone around here, I’ll take you back to live with me in Marysville. In fact,” Lisa said, “I think I may just do that. I think you’d love it out there. I have some other cats and a few dogs. I even have a couple of goats!”

“Well, I found the deed, so now I’m going to go downtown for my meetings,”

“I’ll stay here with Tuxie and try to get some things together for Mom.”

As soon as Michael left, Lisa got to work cleaning my litter box and replacing the litter with new, fresh stuff. *There’s nothing quite like a fresh litter box*, I thought, as I dug around with my front paws to create just the perfect place for my deposits. The smell of Grammie’s favorite incense wafted through the apartment. I joined Lisa wherever she was, and she petted me and stroked me and told me what a wonderful kitty I am. I was just so happy to be purring again! I love to purr! Grammie used to tell me she was surprised I ever stopped purring—and sometimes I even purred in my sleep, she told me! I’m not

surprised, really. Purring just feels so good. It warms the heart and relaxes the muscles, and that deep, rumbling vibration reminds me of being in my cat-mom's womb.

"Well, Tuxie, I've got you set up with fresh litter and dinner. I'll be back tomorrow, don't worry. You're not going anywhere except back to my place in Marysville!" Lisa said.

Lisa picked up her purse, dug out the house keys, and looked at me. "You be good, sweetie. I'll be back, I promise," she said, then pulled the door shut from the outside.

I took a couple of bites of my wet food—that stuff gets nasty if you don't eat it right away!—and then curled up on my pillow on Grammie's bed. As I drifted off, I purred with delight thinking about living at Lisa's home in the country.

I was jolted out of sleep by the deep growls and frantic barks of a very large dog. In my house! *It's going to eat me!* my mind screamed. *Run!*

I took just the briefest look behind me and I saw a brown dog with black spots, at least 10 times as big as me. Drool was dripping from between his teeth. And behind the dog ... was Michael!

Michael released the dog and he jumped toward me, his claws skittering and sliding on the hardwood floors.

And I ran.

I barely noticed as I fled through the back door. *Why was the back door open?* I thought for a nanosecond before the dog ran out into the yard behind me. I climbed the fence, scrambling over a tilted scarecrow with a jack o'lantern face, and ran. And ran. And ran.

Gasping for breath, I dove under a bush and lay there, trembling. Finally, I recovered enough to look around.

Nothing looked familiar.

Nothing sounded familiar.

Nothing *smelled* familiar.

I don't know where I am, I thought as tears leaked from my eyes. I'm never going to see Grammie again. I'm never going to see Lisa again, and I'm never going to live in the country with her!

I still couldn't believe it. Why would Michael let the dog chase me?

Raindrops dripped on my fur as they cascaded over the leaves of the bush above me. It only added to the misery of this cold, windy night. I needed to find a new cover; this one didn't have enough shelter from the wind or the rain. I tried to work up a purr to comfort myself, but ... I just couldn't.

Oh no! I've lost my purr! my mind cried. But I loved my purr! Did the dog steal my purr when he chased me away? Am I ever going to purr again?

A tear rolled down my cheek. Not that anyone would notice, given how wet my fur was!

I looked around the yard to see what hiding places were available. In the corner across from me stood a rattan chair and a side table made from a wooden crate. It was big enough, but it had one whole side open to the wind and the rain. There were a few other small furniture items that I judged to be poor shelters for one reason or another. But then I saw it: Rising far into the sky, painted an amazing electric blue, was what Grammie would call a garden shed. I looked closer and saw that the shed was on blocks, so there was space underneath. *That looks perfect!* I thought. *I can get out of the rain and figure out what to do!*

I ran across the yard as fast as I could, and as the grass changed to gravel, I lost my footing and found myself tumbling and skidding until I came to a stop under the shed. I heard several growls and hisses, and soon a large orange tom stuck his face right in mine and hissed, “What are you doing in my bed?”

“I ... I didn’t know, I ...”

“Listen girl, this space is mine!” the orange cat said.

“And this space is mine!” came another voice in the dark

“I ... I ... I’m sorry,” I said, my voice quivering. “I ... I got chased out of my house by a dog and he chased me out of the yard and I ran and ran and ran and now I’m lost and I ...”

“Hey there, what’s yer name?” a brown tabby to my left asked me, in a much friendlier voice than all the other cats I’d met!

“My ... my grammie used to call me Tuxie.”

“Come over here, little Tuxie,” the tabby said as he beckoned me toward him. “Name’s Ferrol. I’m one of the founders of this colony. You’re smart—you’re not an Outdoor Cat, but it didn’t take you long to figure out that this shed was the best shelter—but you really don’t look like you belong on the streets.”

“I loved my home. Now I don’t know if I’ll ever have a home again,” I said as I approached him.

“Just take one more step this way, if you don’t mind,” Ferrol said.

“Why?”

“It’s a street cat society thing. You just need to be inside my space.”

“Oh, okay,” I said as I walked closer to him.

“Now, listen,” Ferrol said to me, his face serious. “Don’t ask any questions or act startled as I address the colony. What I’m about to say will keep you safe in the street cat community. If I don’t do this, you’ll have to fight constantly to establish your position in the colony.”

“Okay.” I sat down and wrapped my tail around my paws as Ferrol stood and let loose with a howl sure to wake every cat in the colony.

Sure enough, grumbling and grumping, all the cats came to attention. I could see a couple dozen cats staring at Ferrol and me, and some had expressions that were not entirely friendly.

“Citizens of the North Broadview Colony, hear me now,” Ferrol said. He put a forepaw on my shoulder. “This cat, Tuxie, is under my protection. She is not to be harmed. She is to be protected by the colony if she encounters trouble. If anyone hurts her, they will have to answer to me. Are we clear?”

I heard a chorus of yeses ranging in tone from enthusiastic to “I would actively disobey this if I didn’t think it would get me kicked out of the colony.”

“Thank you for your attention,” Ferrol said.

I was a complete failure at hunting.

Every time I saw a bird, I’d start chattering and it would fly away before I could catch it. Mice, too: they’d learn about me because my tail just wouldn’t sit still as I lay in wait. Ferrol was right that I didn’t belong in the streets. After a few days of scratching out a living by rummaging in the dumpsters behind the shopping center, I was getting really tired of street cat life. And I’d even gotten fleas! I scratched behind my ear as one of those little munchers bit me again.

Finally, I got so sad and overwhelmed and hopeless that I just crawled under one of those dumpsters and cried and cried and cried. I missed Grammie and Lisa and soft pillows and clean blankets and canned food and incense and the mail carrier giving me a wave when she saw me sitting on my cat tree by the window. And I missed my purr.

“Psst,” I heard. I looked up to see Ferrol looking in at me. When he saw that my fur was wet with tears, he slunk in and gave me a comforting lick on the ear before sitting next to me in the Sphinx Pose. “What’s the matter, little one?” he asked.

“I miss my family and I’m never going to see them again! And I’m so bad at living out here with you all. I don’t know how to be an Outdoor Cat!”

He groomed a flea off my fur with his little nibbly teeth and sat back for a moment.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got yer back on this one,” he said. “Ya see, we and the Indoor Cats do talk, and I told them we got an Indoor Cat who needs a home. The leader of the North Broadview Guild of Indoor Cats told me about a place. He said it would be a stop along the way, whatever that means.”

An hour later, Ferrol and I were seated on the concrete patio of a basement apartment. “You might want to clean the dust off yourself before they see you,” he said.

I groomed myself from tip to tail, and I even got a few of the fleas that had been plaguing me. I have to say, being clean did make me feel better about myself and more comfortable in my own fur.

“The female human here will be home from work in a little while,” Ferrol told me. “Remember, don’t lose hope if she doesn’t let you in right away. Like the Indoor Cat Guild tom said, this is a stop along the way. Oh, here she comes!” Ferrol fled like his tail was on fire.

I heard the clop, clop, clop of feet coming down the wooden walkway to my right, and soon a white woman wearing a raincoat and a hat like the men used to wear in movies Grammie liked to watch emerged from around the corner. An arctic gust lifted my fur and shoved rain past my guard hairs. I shivered.

“Well, hello, little one,” the woman said. She squatted and extended her pointer finger in an invitation to rub against it if I wish. *She has very good cat manners!* I thought.

I wanted to rub my cheek against her finger so badly, but I had to fight the part of my mind that was frozen in the panic of escaping from the dog. But all the terror would let me do was offer her a beseeching gaze. I wanted to purr *so badly!*

“Oh, I know what might help,” the woman said. “Stay right there; I’ve got some treats for you.”

Treats? My stomach rumbled. I hated being so bad at hunting, and I hated that Ferrol felt like he had to catch food for both of us.

“Yeah, I see that look,” she said. “Come on over here, out of the rain.”

I took a couple of tentative steps forward, shook the rain out of my fur, and sat down. *Thank you, kind human,* I thought as she walked in the apartment door and closed it behind her.

A couple of minutes later, the woman emerged, this time with two dishes in hand. She set them down on the patio, close to the building but with plenty of visibility around them so I’d feel safe. The heavenly smell of wet cat food drifted past me and my hunger overcame my fear. I ate the food—salmon and turkey flavor, as I recall—as quickly as I could. And fresh, pure water! It was so lovely! I drank all that water up, too. I’d been drinking out of puddles, and that was gross.

Then I sat back and realized I was practically too full to move. *Well, if I have to be stuck somewhere, it might as well be near someone who loves cats and has cat food!* I thought. I curled up in the corner, under a bench, and went to sleep.

When I woke up, there was a fleece blanket wrapped around me and more food and water in the dishes under the window.

And sitting just outside the patio was Ferrol. I got up, stretched, and approached him. “This lady is really nice!” I told him. “And she has really good wet food. There’s some in the dish over there; please have some.”

“That’s really kind of you. It’s been so long since I’ve had wet food!”

“Eat as much as you want. She gave me a big meal last night and I ate the whole thing.” I gave him a lick on the ear. I wished I could purr for him and tell him how much I loved him.

Days and days went by and the woman didn’t let me into her home, and that made me a little sadder every time the sun rose. But she always kept leaving food and water out for me, and one of her friends, the Dark-Haired Lady, brought over a special little house that got warm on the inside, and I took to spending my nights there as a way to get out of the horrid, splashy, cold rain and howling wind. At least my fur dried off each night, though. Sometimes Ferrol joined me, but as soon as he heard the sound of the woman opening the door in the morning, he fled.

One day, the lady and her boyfriend put me in a box and took me to the vet, where she found out that I didn’t have a microchip so they couldn’t contact my “owner.” I also found out that they’d been calling me Willamina. I liked that name! *New name, new life—I hope*, I thought.

Grammie never thought she owned me; I was her sweet baby girl! I could feel my eyes water as I thought about the life I'd lost. I climbed into the lady's lap and burrowed my head between her arm and her body; as she started to pet me I could feel the purr wanting to happen, but my voice and my purr were still trapped deep inside me.

The vet put his cold metal listening thing on my lungs and my heart, squeezed my abdomen up and down, and pronounced me A Healthy Kitty. He gave me a bunch of shots so I'd stay that way.

When we got back to the lady's house, she gave me a special treat for being so good at the vet.

And the wait continued.

The weather got colder, the days got shorter, and then one night there was even sleet! Yucky, miserable sleet that froze my paw pads and soaked through my fur and sapped all the hope out of me as the wind blew ever stronger. The rain on my head joined with the tears leaking from my eyes, and I was so bereft that I didn't even notice the nice lady saying hi to me. *I'm never going to have a home again, I thought. No love, no people, no nothing, just a life on the streets, scrounging in garbage cans and dumpsters because I can't hunt. And I don't even have my purr to comfort me anymore! There's nothing worth even living for.*

Ferrol came scrambling over the chain-link fence at the far end of the yard and ran toward me. "Get ready!" he said, his chest heaving from exertion. "Your person is coming tonight!"

"W...what? Really?"

"Yes! The Licton Springs Court of House Cats told the chief of the North Broadview Colony that the Cat Saint is on her way right now with your person, and he told me! Dry your eyes and get ready!"

I sat up, washed my face, and gave all my fur a quick once-over—just in time because then I heard two sets of footsteps coming down the walkway. Around the corner came the dark-haired lady I'd

seen before, and another human who wasn't familiar to me. The dark-haired lady was carrying a pink box that looked like a backpack, and the other person was carrying some treats.

"I just want you to meet her, JaneA," the dark-haired lady said to her friend.

"Yeah, I am curious about her," the JaneA person said. "I remember when Caitlin sent me a text with a picture of her, wondering if she was the indoor-outdoor cat who lived in my building. But I'm not looking for another cat. After Siouxsie died this spring, I got used to having two cats."

Hmm. Which one of these people is my person? I wondered.

The dark-haired lady knocked on the door of the nice lady who left food and water out for me. When she'd opened the door, the dark-haired lady said, "Hey, Caitlin, I brought JaneA over to meet Willamina."

"Oh, come on in! It's terrible out there! I would have taken her in myself if I didn't already have one very jealous cat," the Caitlin lady said. She closed the front door for a minute, and when she opened it again, she made the kind of kissing noise Grammie used to make when she was asking me to visit with her. I popped out from under the bench and let her pet me.

"Would you like to come in?" she asked.

"I thought you'd never ask!" I said as I ran between her legs to the warm indoors.

And then I saw JaneA kneeling down and holding out an outstretched finger for me to explore.

This lady and her friends sure have great cat manners! I thought.

I sniffed the end of JaneA's finger, and as soon as I did, I knew they were the one! I climbed into their lap, threw my forepaws around their shoulders and rubbed my cheeks all over them as my paws kneaded furiously at their coat.

“Oh, sweetheart,” JaneA said. Their voice was so kind and compassionate. They just held me and petted me in silence for a few minutes. “You’re such a lovely and friendly cat. How on earth did you end up out on the streets?” they asked.

I looked up at them and I just felt something click: it was like they heard me telling them about Grammie and Lisa and Michael and the Horrible Dog and the run and Ferrol and everything!

“Oh, God, I’m a sucker,” JaneA said. Then she looked down at me “Don’t you worry, sweetie. You’re never going to have to live on the streets again because you’re coming home with me!”

And.

It started.

Slowly and almost silently,

barely more than a vibration.

Gradually crescendoing

Until it became a rafter-rattling ***purrrrrrrrrrrr***.

JaneA Kelley is an award-winning author and one of the earliest cat bloggers with their cat advice blog, Paws and Effect. In addition to being a cat blogger, JaneA is a public speaker and mental health advocate. Their memoir, *Still Alive, Still Smiling*, is due out in 2024. Follow JaneA at <https://janeakelley.com>.