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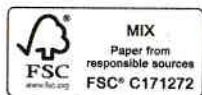
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# THE CATS WE MEET ALONG THE WAY

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GUPPY  
BOOKS

For Child



## The Cat, Part One

*(the present)*

The cat that followed them home had a bald patch on his left hind leg and one ear missing. It was orange, a distasteful, dirty shade of it, one that reminded Aisha of fish curry gone off.

“Shoo,” Aisha told it. The cat ignored her.

“Don’t be mean,” Walter said, reproachfully. He leaned down and flashed his crooked canines at it, bent his dark head to look properly. “Kitty, are you lost?”

“Mew,” said the cat impatiently, which to Aisha sounded like it meant *obviously not, I’m following you to my new home.*

When Walter got up and they rounded the corner to her street, the cat followed steadily, like it was inherently familiar with the place.

“Oh, it probably has fleas,” she protested, making a more vigorous shooing motion.

“I don’t think it matters,” said Walter. He meant, *since we’re all going to die anyway*. “I don’t want it to be alone when . . . well. When.”

Still, Aisha would rather die with her scalp not itching, thank you very much. She opened their lime green front door and said, “Hi, Mak.”

“Hi, *sayang*,” said her mother, looking up from the lined exercise book she used for recipes. The sun struggled through the grimy windowpane, on its last legs. Everything was on its last legs these days, it seemed. “Hi, Walter. Hi, stray cat I don’t want in my kitchen.”

Aisha looked at Walter and shrugged not-very-regretfully. “You heard her. Her kitchen, her rules.”

But Walter looked at her mother, and Aisha knew it

was a lost cause already. They exchanged a glance in which Walter communicated to Esah plaintive sentences about not wanting the cat to be alone at the End, his gaze beseeching, and Aisha could see the moment when her mother’s eyes softened. A beat later Esah asked, “So what’s his name?”

“It’s a he?”

Esah gestured towards where the cat was sitting on the doormat, licking clear evidence of he-dom.

“Hm,” said Walter. “What’s his name, Sha?”

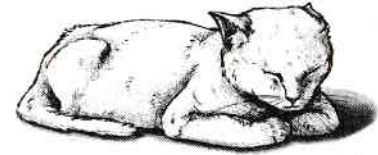
“Fleabag,” said Aisha.

Walter flicked her ear gently, thumb and index finger. “Don’t be so mean.”

“You know, I think it’ll stick,” Aisha’s mother said. She smiled absently in the direction of Fleabag, who made a huge show of a ragged lick to his nether regions, as if to illustrate the point.

“Fleabag,” Walter said, crouching over him and scritch-ing at his chin. “Don’t worry about her. Think of it as a fond nickname.”

Aisha was watching her mother, who was still looking vaguely at the cat. She wondered what Esah was thinking about. June had told her, once, that strays had used to follow her father home as well, close at his heels, rubbing their heads against his ankles. Perhaps Esah was remembering them in Fleabag's furry face.



## The Cat, Part Two

*(the present)*

Perhaps the problem was that they might have gotten married if the world was not ending. Aisha could see it sometimes, arrayed in front of her, the progression of their decades: the engagement, the house, the dog, the first kid's wide grin, the second's chubby fists. Lazy mornings, her favourite bowl of *laksa* brought to her in bed, packing their lunches for work, Sunday evenings at the neighbourhood park.

She would have been happy too. They would have been delirious with it, that uncomplicated happiness. Now they were fighting more than ever, eight months

before the world ended. Aisha would have named her first child Amin after her beloved uncle, her father's favourite brother. Walter would have loved that name because of all the stories she'd told him of Uncle Amin and how he'd taken her to the swings every Friday before he'd died. Aisha would have gone to school and tried to help people who were in pain. Walter would have meandered from career to career, indecisive and passionate about everything. Aisha would have wanted to travel the world. They would have had a number of cats because Walter wouldn't have been able to say no to strays who followed them home.

Walter cooed silly things at Fleabag, now sitting at her mother's kitchen table, and Aisha loved him, loved him desperately, loved him more than anything.

"You know," Esah said, her low voice cutting smoothly into Aisha's thoughts, "I've been thinking about June." She said it very carefully, like it was just another thing on the grocery list she wanted Aisha to get. Both Aisha and Walter's heads snapped up. Fleabag, who clearly couldn't

stand the attention not being on him for a second, jumped gracefully onto the floor and padded away.

Like it was his own house. Aisha supposed abstractly that now it was.

"Oh?" Aisha said, just as careful. She felt rooted to the spot, felt something clawing at her throat, wasn't sure if it was panic. "Everything okay? Did you hear some news?"

"No, I didn't hear anything." Esah put her blue mixing bowl down, into the sink, and ran the tap. She wasn't looking at it. The bowl still contained all the batter she needed for the cake. "I was just thinking that I want to make things right," she said. "What with, you know, everything."

"Everything," Aisha repeated uselessly. "So you want to go to her?" Walter's head turned back and forth, as if he was watching a tennis match.

"Maybe," said Esah. The water flowed down into the batter, ugly, and Esah looked at it, unseeing. "What else can I do?" She meant, *now that we have no time left.*

Aisha walked over to her mother's side and put her arms around her very, very gently. She reached forward and turned off the tap. The batter lay there, embarrassed and ruined. Esah let out a loud annoyed sniff and muttered about the loss of cake.

"What else can *we* do, you mean, Mak," Aisha said. "I'm with you." She ignored whatever it was that was clawing inside her and nodded firmly, forehead against her mother's warm shoulder, trying to be convincing. "One step at a time. It'll all be okay."



## A Story about June

*(three years ago)*

June had been nineteen when she'd decided she'd had enough of the house.

"What do you mean you've had enough of the house?" Aisha had demanded, following her around the room as she picked up things, considered them carefully, and either threw them back down or into her suitcase.

Her suitcase was fading and huge and still shockingly pink. June had pleaded for it when she was sixteen, for her trip to Europe. Their mother had given in to the trip after a month of June alternating between furiously sulking and sweetly doing every chore in the house. She had made

June install a tracking app on her phone, so she could check that she was at exactly the places she'd said she'd be, at exactly the times she'd said she'd be at them.

"I just . . ." June considered her sister, her suitcase, her stuffed dinosaur, Lala. "It's not the house. The house is a metaphor."

"We're not in English class, June!" Aisha had been fifteen and distressed. She watched as June picked up a pair of socks and discarded them firmly into the depths of her wardrobe. "What does that mean? A metaphor for what?"

June stopped short and stared at her, as if it was obvious. "For how if I don't leave now I'll stay my whole life," she said.

"You won't, you're supposed to go to university!"

"University schmuniversity," June declared, succinctly. She'd finished her last A level that day. As Aisha recalled, it had been Literature, hence the metaphor talk. "I'm not going. I just haven't told Mak and you since you'd both

be on my case and this way I got to enjoy these last few months with you both . . . I'm not dying, Sha. I'll still be your sister."

At this she sat down on her (faded pink) bed and held firmly onto Aisha's shoulders like she would never let go (she had). "I'm just . . . finding myself."

Aisha stared at June, the almost manic glint in her eyes, the (bright pink) highlights in her hair. "You can do that here."

"I know I can't," June said, stubbornly sure about this like she was stubbornly sure about most things.

"What will Mak say?" Aisha asked, a last-ditch attempt. She was fifteen and too fifteen to say *please don't leave me*. *Not yet*.

"Ah," said June, looking away. "There's the rub. If she could only understand – but she'd never – but you never know, she might." She rubbed at her chin, unsure. Then she looked back at Aisha with something like hope. "Maybe if you said something. Maybe that would help?"