

Alan DuPont woke with a fat tongue smearing his face. He pushed at the muzzle with his newly six-year-old arms. Unable to hold the mutt back he yelled for his mom. On his face sat a bland smile. His mom came in and pulled the dog back by the collar. Above his bed hung a poster of a gorilla holding a book open and looking at the viewer over the top of reading glasses. It used to have the word 'read' in fat white letters on the bottom but that part had been ruined by juice in a move and so Alan tore off that part.

"Happy birthday Mr. Alan!"

Having forgotten today was his birthday the realization brings spontaneous joy. A scowl carves itself into his face. He bounces out of bed. Jumping around the room he hoots and yays. The dog barked but was too old to join in the frolic. The room is small and Alan has just enough room to circle his mom and the dog.

"That means I don't have to go to school today! You said I wasn't going on my birthday because you had a surprise for me." The positivity furrowed his brow. He wore Transformers pajamas.

"That's right. No school today. Get dressed and have some breakfast and then we are going on a little trip to get your surprise."

Alan scarfed Lucky Charms, practically flipped into shorts and a football jersey, and had his oversized sunglasses on in the front seat of their car faster than his mom would have believed. They drove an hour with Alan staring out the window at overcast. The journey ended at a two story building with several long, one story buildings arranged behind it. Inside his mom talked with an old woman and from back rooms came the sounds of dogs of all sizes. After the grown-up talk had gone on for an eternity the old woman took them out a back door and into the second long building. The building was one long room with a cement floor. It smelled like dog, and pee, and hay. Lined up on each side of a long corridor were cages of canines. Schnauzers, Labradors, Pitbulls, Pomeranians, splotchy colored mutts all yelped, and wagged tails, and pawed the chain link doors. Their enthusiasm acted as a magnetic field and repulsed all of Alan's positive feelings. He began to smile wider as he made his way down the corridor. The old woman accompanying misread this sign.

"Are you having trouble deciding? They are all so happy to see you."

"I don't like them."

"Oh. Well...we only have a few more dogs in the next building. Perhaps you'll like one of those ones."

The old woman led them back outside and as she put her hand on the knob of the next entrance Alan pointed at the next one down.

"What's in that building?"

"That's the cats. Your mother said you were wanting a dog."

"Mom? Can I see the cats?"

His mom frowned, which meant exactly what it usually does. It could scratch the couch up. Will have to clean the litter box. Two different bags of food. She looked at her scrawny, freckled son. His smile faded into a something that looked close to constipation. She recognized it as a hopeful plea. He will not have an easy life later on. I should give him any chance for happiness that I can.

"Sure. Let's give them a look."


The cat lodge was infinitely quieter but not quiet. Many of the felines meowed and rubbed their sides against the cage doors. Some of them remained in the same aloof position they had been in, others gaped for a second before curling as far back into a corner as they could squeeze.

Alan ignored the eager yowling ones and stopped first at an imperious long haired gray. He stuck two fingers through the grating and the cat sniffed cautiously before rubbing its head against the fingers. Alan pulled back and smiled. He bypassed a calico, two black short hairs, and a brown tabby. In the second to last cage on the right side a white cat with two black patches down its back hunched mid cage. It was wide-eyed and ready to bolt. When he put his fingers through the grating the cat hissed and swatted him. Before he turned around his mom told the old woman they would take it.

The next day Alan's mom heard the cat growling in the other room. She found the cat on its back. Alan was tweaking its belly and all four legs raked his skin. Beads of blood grew from the scratches.

The cat's white fur became smeared with pink. When his mom entered Alan wore an expression of deep, vacant depression. She couldn't remember ever seeing him this happy.

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