

# Upfront

I heard muffled voices through our front door, loud enough to suggest they were sitting on our steps. A sweet Southern accent. One with a New York bite. The makings of a small group.

It happens. People walk by and coopt the stoop as a resting place. Typically, they move on after a few minutes. But these voices persisted. Eventually, I put the crossword puzzle on the floor beside my chair and stood to investigate the sound source.

One of our neighbors was sitting on the center step. Another was standing on the sidewalk. She looked up at me and flashed a broad smile. I didn't see Jenna until I turned my gaze left, where she was kneeling next to the opening underneath the stoop. Shifting my eyes to the brick walkway on the opposite side of the stoop from Jenna, I noticed the center-step-sitter's boyfriend, prone on the ground, bristle-end of a broom in his outstretched hands, handle probing the darkness under the steps.

I walked down the steps, past the sitting neighbor who was wearing a cat-that-ate-the-canary grin, and asked Jenna, "What's going on?"

Her response was non-verbal, as they often are. She cast her eyes towards the under-stoop void, pointed, and prompted me to look there. Expecting something sinister like a snake or a rat, I was surprised by a white orb of fluff, like the spilled contents of a bag of cotton balls. Then, the fluff moved.

The prone neighbor gently coaxed the fluff out of the opening on Jenna's side. Jenna extended her arms and corralled the mystery kitten. The standing neighbor lady said to me, "It looks like you have a new cat."

I half-smiled and answered quickly and definitively, "Absolutely not."

We humans adopt a high pitch when we address babies and domestic animals. The scene outside our front door featured a chorus of these falsetto tones. I retained my natural tenor. Soon, I was back inside with the



crossword.

The group did not disassemble, so it was difficult to concentrate on my Saturday leisure-work. Half-annoyed, I went back outside. "Bring her in; we'll have her checked; and we'll find her a permanent home."

"Really?"

"Really. But just for a day or two."

The hypothetical permanent home turned out to be our own.

Roughly two months ago, a nameless white Siamese-looking kitten, no bigger than the palm of an adult hand, joined our family. We searched and inquired for and about news of a little lost cat. None came. A comprehensive veterinary exam declared her healthy. Providence declared her ours.

We debated prospective monikers for days. Jenna proffered one that I embraced: Chinotto, which is a popular (and my favorite) Italian soda that tastes of the small, bitter citrus of the same name. Soon thereafter, Jenna started calling her "Kiki," a justifiable shorthand for her proper name, and carrier than a fizzy beverage brand. Kiki/Chinotto: Something for her, something for me. A marital win-win.



Kiki is maniacally active, much of the time. She runs away from us tauntingly in a perpetual game of hide-and-seek. Yet she stops scurrying regularly to roll onto one side, belly exposed, asking-without-asking for a tummy-rub. It's a thing that Mushu did for almost two decades when he was alive. Kiki looks a lot like Mushu, actually. Evidently, Kiki looks and acts like Cooley, too. Cooley was younger-Jenna's beloved cat.

"Absolutely not" has a funny way of acting as a placeholder on the way to, "Sure, let's figure it out together." When we do the latter – figure things out together – the results tend to be very good.

"Where did she come from?" Jenna has asked several times since June. The question is both rhetorical and asked-and-answered. She believes – we choose to believe – Kiki is a divine gift. Not in an immaculate-conception way, but one of the infinite everyday miracles God offers to those willing to see them as such. A breathing tribute to the love Mushu and Cooley gave and received and the lives they lived.

If the spilled contents of a bag of cotton balls was an accurate description when we found her, Kiki is at least two bags now. She's adorable and precocious and fully integrated into her forever home. Which is the happiest accident I can recall.

*Scott A. Lawrence*

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