

Free Kittens

CASTLE FREEMAN, J.R.

“‘Where are you going?’ I asked him, and he said, ‘To the river.’ And I said, ‘Oh, no, you’re not.’

“‘Oh, no, you’re not.’ Because he’s carrying this bag, this sack. He’s carrying one of the long sacks we always had around the place that the chicken mix came in. The poultry mix. The feed. And the bag, the sack, is moving. It’s kind of jumping, where the little things are kicking and squirming around in there. They’re struggling in there. And he’s going down to the river.

“‘No, you’re not,’ I told him. ‘You’re not going anywhere.’”

* * *

The women had left Kathleen’s little house in the village directly after their breakfast. They walked together to the end of the street. The pair of them: Kathleen, six feet tall and made of cord, thin, too thin; her daughter at her side, shorter by a head, softer, attentive, competent, watchful. On these walks, Emily sometimes took her mother’s arm, though she knew Kathleen didn’t like her to. She didn’t like to, herself. The truth was, she didn’t like to touch Kathleen. She would touch her—she had touched her—but she didn’t like to.

At the end of the street they sat on a bench in front of the church. They sat for five minutes. Then Kathleen got to her feet, and they walked on, across the common, down the main street, left on the cross street, then left again and back to the house. Before Kathleen's treatments had been ended, when Emily had come from Denver to help her, their walk had taken half an hour. More recently, it took three-quarters.

Today, by the time they turned into the cross street, Kathleen was walking slowly. Her breath came short, and her little cough was back. They stopped for a moment. They waited for Kathleen to get her wind. They stood. Shortly, Kathleen nodded. She looked up, looked down, looked around. Just there, where they had halted, in front of the slum house Kathleen called Woodstock Nation, somebody had put up a sign on the overgrown front lawn: a square of brown boxboard stapled to a piece of lath, lettered, perhaps by a child, in black marker:

FREE
KITTENS
FREE

"Need a kitten?" Kathleen asked.

"Ben's allergic," Emily said.

"He says he is," said Kathleen.

"He is."

Kathleen looked at her.

"Although," Emily went on. "Otherwise, yes. I would. I'd love to have a kitten."

"Not these, though," said Kathleen. "Free kittens. Shoebox kittens. Strays. They're full of fleas, lice; they've got worms. They've got distemper. You spend a fortune at the vet, and then they die on you anyway. Go to a breeder. At least go to an animal shelter. Get yourself a proper kitten."

"I might, if Ben weren't so allergic."

"Get yourself a proper man, then," said Kathleen. "Oh, now, listen to me. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," said Emily. "Don't worry about Ben."

"Not him. The kittens. Listen to me: no, no, no. Worms, fleas, lice. Distemper. No, no, no. Who do I sound like?"

"I don't know," said Emily. "Who do you sound like?"

"I sound like your father," said Kathleen.

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