

Library Queen

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You live a few blocks from the library located on the same street from your elementary school. The library is a learning sphere. Shelves of books, containing words, English words, Spanish words, Vietnamese words.

You can picture the library before its renovation. Cassettes replaced by CDs, some of which are being digitized into audio books, which insert audio in your ears with a click. There are many words you don't know how to pronounce because the voice in your head wasn't born into English. You like listening to audiobooks. It's how you've learned to pronounce words like "pneumonia." In English, so many letters are made invisible to the tongue.

Yesterday, you stared out the window, past your co-worker typing on her desktop computer, past the stacks of envelopes at her desk. You remember when the tree outside was full of branches. The sun was at an angle that made the orange leaves glow, and the wind rustled. You waited for the hour to pass and go home. To leave work at the office door. You can't remember a year when you really liked this job.

This morning you find yourself by a bench outside the library. The internet was down. You were immediately annoyed and thought of going home. But instead, you're sitting at this bench eating a mangerine... *a mandarin, mandarine?* English has so many words for things that look alike.

Orange. Like the leaves on the trees. Or the fruit on a tree somewhere, a tree not here. Orange like the cat that's approaching. One sniff and two sniff and the cat walks back. A quick leap into a bush and you think it's gone. Then it moves its paws a little closer and blinks its big eyes.

As you lift yourself from the bench, the cat scoots back. You get your stuff, deciding it's time to go anyway. Later that evening, you are thinking about the cat. You return and of course, the cat's not there.

You knock on your neighbor's door, a graduate student with purple hair opens the door. She introduced herself last year, mentioning her two cats. You have only spoken a few times at the lobby picking up packages. You tell her about the cat you've seen and ask to borrow some cat food.

"I have plenty. Come in. Meet Jazzy and Franky. Jazzy loves to share," she says, glancing over at her cat, who in fact, is pushing aside Franky from his feeding bowl.

You take the bag and glance around the apartment, full of cat things.

"Thanks! Tuna flavor, huh?"

"Yes. Have you checked the library for missing pet posters?"

"I didn't think of it."

"Cats don't wander off too far if they're missing. Mine are microchipped. There's a chance this one's too."

You nod and try to keep up with her quick speech.

"So, after you get their trust, you can pet them. The cat's gotta get comfortable in your presence. You won't get a good picture if they're scared. Food is a great peace offering."

"I'll check the library when it reopens on Monday for posters."

You take the cat food and go home.

The next morning you pour some cat food into a baggie and pack some books. You wander outside the closed library, looking around the bushes and trees. You wait and see nothing. You unwrap a breakfast sandwich and as you eat, you hear soft meows.

The orange cat. You remember your neighbor said let the cat get comfortable. You walk to one end of the bush, place a bowl, and pour some food from the baggie.

You walk away. The cat stays still. You start to walk away and when you look back, the cat is taking bites. Both the cat and food are gone within a few minutes. You decide to come back tomorrow.

You are on your way to work and check the library bulletin board. No meow meows pictured. You leave the library and pour food into the bowl. The cat comes out from hiding and sways their tail. Darts for the food.

You give the cat a pat. Step back and catch the bus to work. You spend the work week like this. Now, when you look outside the windows at work, you picture the cat moving about their day.

On Friday morning, you take a photo and resolve to find that cat's owner. And what about in the meantime? At the office, you think it over in the quiet breakroom. Why not bring this cat home?

Later, when you enter the pet store, you are overwhelmed. You realize you'll need more than the boxy carrier you found in one of the aisles. You get a shopping cart and before leaving the store, you call an old friend for a ride.

Outside the library, you create a food trail leading into the carrier, which you got for its convenient top lid. You call out, "meow meow," and wait for the cat, who appears within a few seconds. You pet behind their ears, grab and push their soft and resistant body, and close the lid. Immediately the meowing increases.

The next day you call a vet. Your neighbor recommended this. She had also helped you post about the cat on different social media apps. You had left a flyer on the library bulletin board and left some at the front desk, where a librarian helped you find reference books on cats. You consult the books through the weekend where you learn cats meow to communicate with humans. They can make more vocal sounds than a dog.

The vet doesn't find a microchip. She estimates the cat is a year old and female.

"An orange female is not common. She isn't spayed, so I have to do an ultrasound," the vet says.

"What does all that mean?"

"It means she could be pregnant. She's a queen."

"Queen of?"

"That's what we call female cats like her."

"That's what I'll name her then. And are male cats kings?"

"We call them toms."

Language is so odd. You wait. You listen to the doctor interpret the ultrasound images.

Over the next weeks, you take care of the cat and find a shelter. You don't think you can keep all the kittens, or Queen. Already you are struggling with the rent. You had been looking for a new apartment that day when the library internet was down.

Baby cats are called a litter. The same word used for the bathroom sand. The vet estimates Queen has a month left of pregnancy. You take out the Christmas tree and set it out. And every morning, she comes to snuggle next to you while you flip through the reference books.

Queen is x-rayed on the second visit to the vet. Eight future kitties!

You catch up your co-workers about Queen. The ones who don't keep their office doors closed. You call up the shelter that had agreed to take in the new cats. The lady on the phone sounds concerned, asks that you call again in a few weeks. The weeks go by fast. It is the middle of December. Queen is a giant ball of fur who sleeps a lot.

She is meowing frequently. She hides in the closet, where you've left a box and blanket for her. Then one day cats take over your home. They hide under the sofa and step into your boots. They fight over your shoelaces. They paw at your hoop earrings. Queen keeps a distracted watch, licking her paws. You take photos of each.

The shelter agrees to take in four kittens. You call up friends you haven't spoken to in years. Call your aunts and uncles, who send you occasional birthday cards. You don't bother your parents who only call to make sure you're not homeless. Your dad resents your career choices. A decade later, you can still hear his voice asking, "What are you going to do with a theater degree? Be a clown at birthdays?"

Your neighbor helped you set up online ads. And you wait. And as you wait, the kittens run around and chase each other, knocking against doors. They move in ribbons of orange and white like party streamers. You stifle a laugh, picture yourself with a clown nose, and send a photo to your parents, who acknowledge the kittens a few days later. "What little beasts," your mother texts.

Queen leans into you. She is spayed now. You pet her belly and together listen to the birds outside. The next day is hard. You give away a kitten to an old friend; Queen and her siblings look around for the missing. The siblings give up that same day, but Queen keeps looking for a few days. You watch this process with a mixture of relief and sadness for each kitten.

You go into the library, return some books, and update the librarian, who is enthusiastic to know the kittens are well.

"Queen hasn't found a home yet," you say.

"I took down the missing cat posters weeks ago. Isn't she already home? Why not keep her," the librarian asks.

"She's not in my budget," you say.

The librarian types something.

"There's a resume workshop in the regional library for next week. Let's sign you up."

You show up to the workshop, doubtful. You've had your job for 10 years. You don't think you can do it, but you start applying for new jobs. You always knew you didn't get paid enough at work. You keep at it until you land interviews and one day you are offered a job. Thinking of life without Queen, you negotiate a higher starting salary.

You give two weeks' notice at work. You renew your lease. You finish paying the vet bills and you buy pet insurance. For months now, there have been new sounds in your life. You wonder what sounds sum up humans in the ears of Queen. Is it the hum in your repetition, the imitation in your meows?

You build climbing shelves on the wall. Queen stays.