



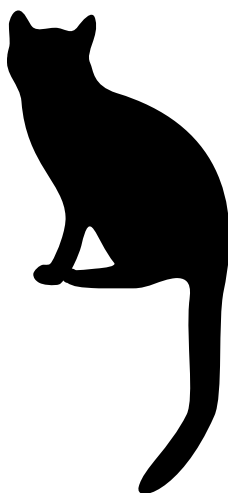
# **The Cat That Made Nothing Something Again**

**James D. Maxon**

# The Cat That Made Nothing Something Again

~ ~ ~

by James D. Maxon



Purchase Paperback for \$6.99 at Amazon.com:

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1440485275>

The Cat That Made Nothing Something Again  
Copyright © 2008 by James D. Maxon

Original Edition 2008  
Second Edition 2009

ISBN: 1440485275  
EAN-13: 9781440485275

Requests for information should be sent to:  
[info@JamesMaxon.com](mailto:info@JamesMaxon.com)

---

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

This is a work of fiction. References to the biblical characters Samuel and Hannah are mentioned, but other names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover background image: © Andrea Danti - Fotolia.com. Cat image: © 34rl - Fotolia.com. License for use of images was purchased by the author.

<http://www.JamesMaxon.com>

# The Cat That Made Nothing Something Again

---

---

## Contents

### Book 1 – The Journey

1.	Chapter 1	8
2.	Chapter 2	12
3.	Chapter 3	17
4.	Chapter 4	20
5.	Chapter 5	24
6.	Chapter 6	29
7.	Chapter 7	34
8.	Chapter 8	42
9.	Chapter 9	45
10.	Chapter 10	50
11.	Chapter 11	56

## **Contents**

### Book 2 – The Way Home

12.	Chapter 1	62
13.	Chapter 2	69
14.	Chapter 3	72
15.	Chapter 4	76
16.	Chapter 5	80
17.	Chapter 6	82
18.	Chapter 7	85

This book is dedicated to my mother who kept asking,  
“When are you going to finish that cat story?”

Special thanks to Evelyn Hall and others for their great  
suggestions and editing expertise.

Deepest gratitude to the creator of life in whom all things  
are possible.



# BOOK 1

The Journey



# Chapter 1

A dense, hazy mist hung over the tops of shapeless houses and shabby shops, which stood motionless beneath a pale, dead sky. The ground was barren, like sandpaper that could scrape the moisture out of anyone who dared walk with bare feet, and the air was thin and dry. Indeed, in this town, there was no moisture at all.

Each morning, when the town bell struck nine, the people would emerge from their homes and scuttle, aimlessly, like fallen leaves blown in the wind. Not a wrinkle could be seen on their faces, for they rarely changed their expressions or bothered with the weary motion of talking, smiling, or frowning. Nothing—not kindness nor anger—changed their daily routines. And to engage in any deep thought would be absurd. How could one ponder the mysteries of life when nothing unusual ever took place and no mysteries ever appeared?

Not only were the people dry, like sun-baked sand left on a deserted beach, but even the birds had forgotten how to sing. The trees

had no leaves, flowers never bloomed, and the lakes and ponds were only empty holes in the cracked, barren ground. There were clouds, but they never produced any rain. Had it not been for the town's deep well, they wouldn't even have enough to drink.

But it wasn't always this way. Many years ago the people had been moist and fervent—they laughed and sang and quarreled. The men tipped their hats to the ladies who returned the courtesy with a curtsy. Travelers had visited often to trade goods, and the town had prospered.

Then the sponges came, and sucked up all the moisture. It seemed as if they had consumed the rays of the sun, the shimmer in the stars, and freshness of the air. They removed the laughter of the children and even the twinkle in the eyes of the grandfathers. Everything they touched was drained, and when at last they departed, the town was left empty and dry.

That is, except for one crafty cat who had no name. He foresaw the intent of the sponges, so he acted as if he was already dry. It never occurred to the sponges to rob an already drained cat. He spent most of his days lying in a corner, sleeping, unmoving. His black fur kept him well hidden, even with the splotch of white on his face, so he was easily forgotten.

It was to the cat's advantage once the sponges left, for people began to feed him at five o'clock sharp each and every day—unlike before when they would laugh and talk and forget until many hours later. The mice forgot to run so they made for easy targets, and the

nameless cat's family no longer cared when he jumped on the counter, nor yelled when he tested his claws on an unsuspecting chair. For many years the cat lived in utter contentment.

But eventually he became bored of the sameness of every day, and tired of the dry nothingness of the village. No one played with him anymore or engaged in conversation. Catching mice that didn't run wasn't much of a challenge—or much fun. Worst of all, no one in the village ever read anymore, so there were never any open books laying about for him to nap atop. And though cats hate to get wet, he began to yearn for the life-giving rain to return. So he took it upon himself to see the dry mayor.

When brought before the mayor, the cat stopped and gazed up at the man's tall wooden desk. It was covered in paperwork so high that the mayor had to sit upon many books just to reach the top of the pile.

"What is it you want, cat?" the dry mayor asked, not moving his eyes from his papers. "I'm very busy with nothing and have no time for something."

"There are troubles about," the nameless cat meowed, "that need your attention, if you please."

"What?" the mayor asked, scratching his head through his white, curly wig. "I cannot hear you clearly. Speak up you curious feline."

“Perhaps you should put down your paper,” the cat said in a raised voice, “and listen to what I have to say.”

The dry mayor heard, and turned a distracted glance down from his tall wooden desk.

“You need to send a messenger,” the cat continued, “to find those old sponges and take back the moisture they have stolen.”

“What do you know of dry people’s ways? You’re just a cat and have no understanding of important matters,” the mayor replied. “But do as you wish. If it is a messenger you want then *you* it will be. I have too many nothings I must attend to. Now leave.”

The cat kept still and stared up at the dry mayor. “Very well, I shall go myself. If it weren’t for my very boredom I wouldn’t be concerned, but it seems that going may be something, and that is far better than nothing.”

The mayor took no notice that the nameless cat still remained. He continued to read the dry paperwork while scratching at his curly wig.

The cat turned, trotted to the door, and then shook his paws clean as if removing dirt stuck from between his black toes.

## Chapter 2

The nameless cat remembered that the sponges had departed to the west, so he figured going in that direction would be the best place to start.

“The sooner I go the sooner I get petting,” he said aloud. “But it’s already ten to five and it would be a shame to miss dinner.”

He returned home for his evening meal, and as always it was presented to him on time. When finished, he licked his paws, back and shoulders. Once spotless, he curled up against a clean white towel for a nap—after all who doesn’t enjoy a mouthful of cat hair when wiping one’s face on a towel?

When the cat awoke the village bell was chiming nine in the morning—so much for a short nap. The bell finished and the dry people emerged from their homes just the same as the day before.

The cat joined them on the streets, only he didn’t intend to scuttle around the town as they were. He would leave this town and the

people behind in hopes of changing their ways. Several dry people nearly stepped on him, but he was quicker than their careless feet. Thankfully it wasn't long before he made it to the other side of town. Without giving it too much thought the cat turned and looked back at his home one last time. Now was the time to turn back, but turn back to what? No, something had to change and he seemed to be the only one to do it.

There were no signs of life on the path, just a few wilted trees and sorry looking bushes. The land was flat, as if the hills forgot how to stand, and the ground was dry, so much so that the cat could feel it sucking the moisture from his paws. His feet pattered against the ground as clouds of cool mist streamed out of his nose and the corners of his mouth. It felt as if the air was trying to take the moisture from him as well.

He would have checked his reflection in a puddle to be sure his fur was spotless, but there weren't any around. It occurred to him that he should have found a way to carry some water with him, but turning back now seemed like a waste of time. He would have to be content with the idea that he looked his best, and that he would find some water to drink along the way.

Many hours went by, and nothing changed—no water in sight and the scenery just continued in its monotonous display. It all looked the same, and at times he wasn't sure whether he gained any distance at all. In the back of his mind he wanted to ask for help, knowing that the creator of life had the ability to intervene, but there was something that

told him it would be useless. Had the creator been there from the start, then why were the sponges allowed to drain the village to begin with? No, he was determined to find his own way.

Suddenly, something sharp jabbed his paw. He looked down and saw what appeared to be a seed.

“What are you doing in such a poor place?” the cat asked the seed.

“A farmer dropped me here,” the seed said. “And I expect to grow.”

“But you are in the way,” the cat replied. “And when you grow tall you’ll be cut down.”

“I didn’t think of that!” The seed shuddered.

Just then a crow swooped down and grabbed the seed in its beak. The bird clumsily fluttered its wings, dropped the seed into a nearby patch of thorns, and cawed loudly as it flew back to the sky.

The cat approached the area in the bushes, being careful not to brush his coat against the thorns.

“Now I can grow and always be protected!” the seed exclaimed.

“Only for a while. You may grow big, but the thorns will rip you to shreds.”

“Oh woe is me,” the seed whimpered. “What shall I do? I don’t wish to be slashed to bits! What a sad life I have.”

“Don’t worry,” the cat said softly, feeling a sudden and unusual urge to help. “I will set you free.”

He crouched down and stretched a paw under the bushes, feeling beneath the thorns. At the tip of his pad he could barely touch the seed. It was like another cat lying comfortably out of reach, knowing full well that someone wanted to pet him—something the nameless cat had done many times himself.

“I cannot quite reach you,” the cat said, grunting as he stretched.

Just then a gust of wind blew the seed off the ground, through the thorns, and set it down on a nearby rock.

“At last I have settled!” the seed shouted happily.

Standing back on all fours, and licking the dirt from his paw, the cat once again instructed his helpless acquaintance. “How shall you grow without a place for your roots?”

“But there must be a way,” said the flustered seed. “I cannot worry about that now. If I don’t get to work soon, then I will never bloom.”

“But there is no moisture on that dry rock. You will be unnourished and wither away.”



After thinking about it, the cat realized that there wouldn't be enough moisture for the seed to grow in normal conditions anyway, and since he was hungry, and there was no hope for the seed, he ate it.

## Chapter 3

The cat began to get tired, so he found a comfortable spot to settle down for a nap. If you've ever watched a cat nap, then you know catnaps can last almost an entire day, but this time the ground was so dry and uncomfortable that he could feel it sucking the moisture right out of him.

*The sponges must have passed by here, he thought. I need to keep going, or I will become emptied like everyone else.*

He got up and trotted along the path until he came upon a village of bicker people.

"Oh look, it's a dog," one of the bicker people shouted.

"That's not a dog," another disagreed. "It's a Guinea Pig."

"That's not a Guinea Pig," the first villager retorted. "Clearly, it's a dog."

"What do you know about dogs? You have never even seen one."

“I’ve seen more dogs than you’ve seen Guinea Pigs.”

“Oh, sure, like you would know.”

This went on for quite some time until they realized the cat was walking away. Upon noticing, they started to argue what day of the week it was instead. The nameless cat knew full well he wasn’t going to get any petting from these bicker people, but it was worth looking around for some food and water.

The village was peculiar: Houses were painted in hues of red, black, violet, blue, orange, pink, green, and just about every color combination one can think of. But that wasn’t the strangest part. It was the fact that none were painted the same that caught his attention. In fact, nothing and no one was the same. One bicker person’s clothing was stripped, another’s spotted, another’s printed with stars, and yet another’s had triangles. Each person wore a hat, which seemed common enough, but none of them were the same and each one seemed odder than the last. He stared at one of the hats which looked to be made from a box. It sat awkwardly on the bicker person’s head, with two eye holes cut out for him to see through.

Some of the people wore shoes with heels, and other’s with none. One had pointy curling toes that stretched over six inches. With each step the toes extended and struck the air like a whip. But even that wasn’t so bad—the worst part was listening to the way they talked to one another. All the bicker people seemed to think their way was right and were constantly trying to prove why. It made the village very loud

with their constant shouting and hollering, as they were all trying to be heard above the other, but not a one listened to what the other had to say.

*They must like the sound of their own voices,* thought the cat. But it was too much for him. All the noise made him dizzy, so he ran out of the village with his ears laid back on his head.

## Chapter 4

The path was no longer flat as a pancake. It had become rocky and bumpy, with tree roots sticking out of the ground. Misshapen bushes garnished the edges of the trail and the trees looked as if some strange force had warped them from their original appearance.

The cat proceeded, sleek and dainty as possible considering the conditions, and hopped from rock to rock and pounced over this root and that. After a while he heard a faint humming noise. It grew louder and louder until words took shape:

“It’s all a game.

Sugar and sweets

are all that I eat,

it’s all a game to me.

No stuffy old job,

or things to be robbed,  
forever and always free.  
To giggle and twiggle,  
and de' whittle wee,  
it's all a game to me."

There were other variations and words to the song, but the nameless cat could barely understand the ones he heard.

He watched with disgust at the lack of dignity the singer possessed, and cringed when it wiggled and giggled and hopped and bopped all over the place. Then suddenly, it tripped over a rock and fell flat on its face.

Bells jingled from its funny looking, forked hat, as the singer wiggled back to its feet. It patted at the dust which covered its baggy, loose clothes, and then rubbed its large, red, pointy nose.

"Hello there kitty," it giggled, starting once again to hop and bop, but all in one place. "I am a fool. It's nice to meet you. Isn't it pretty?"

"To what do you refer?" the nameless cat asked, annoyed.

"To everything, or nothing," the fool said. "It's all how you see, and that's what will be."

The cat sat still not uttering a reply. He was feeling dizzy watching the fool dance around. Knowing he wouldn't be rid of him

without finishing the conversation, the cat spoke again. “Whatever do you mean?”

“I can’t remember . . . from a book, or on a hook, by a brook, or in a nook. That’s where I know what I mean.”

“Where have you come from?” the cat asked, hurrying the conversation as best he could.

“From far west,” the fool said. “Where I had jest. From the palace of the King, is the news that I bring. I performed and tried to give cheer, but his advisers the sponges drew near. This fool knows better, and is really quite clever. I jumped through the window and escaped their swindle.”

Now the cat was very interested in what the fool had to say. “Can you tell me how to get there?” *This ‘King’ must be in caboots with the sponges*, he thought.

“The journey is only as long as you desire. The distance is always the same. It’s to the west; I don’t remember the rest. I just danced and pranced all the way.”

The cat sensed that the fool wasn’t very dependable when it came to important things, as if he had his head in the clouds, and rarely thought of anything but himself. At least the annoying thing had given him some useful information.

The cat excused himself, and the fool just hopped and wiggled and giggled on his way, while continuing his bizarre song:

“Where to next?  
Some place to jest.  
Without any cares,  
or hard things to bear.  
No one to love,  
other than me.  
No friends to hug,  
just fun and glee.  
Nothing holding me back,  
nor things to pack.  
I’m always free,  
It’s all a game to me.”



## Chapter 5

His stomach started to growl like a hungry dog. The nameless cat wasn't used to going so long without eating. The seed he devoured earlier wasn't enough to even fill a mouse.

*A mouse, thought the cat, now that would be a good meal.*

As if in answer, he heard a cheerful chirping in the distance. His ears perked up, and he sniffed at the air. He followed his nose and ears for several minutes until he came upon a large tree. It was dark and gloomy, but high up in its branches was a little bird.

*Not too little to make for a good meal, thought the cat. Or at least an appetizer to hold me over for awhile.*

He poised himself for a pounce, swished his tail, and then lunged forward. His feet left the ground and he grabbed at the bark of the tree. To his unpleasant surprise he found he wasn't able to hold his grip, and he slid back down to the ground, landing on his rump. The cat was quickly back on his feet—for a feline should never been seen

without its composure—but it was too late. The bird stopped chirping and stared at him with small, beady eyes.

The cat's ears lay back, indignant, and a scowl formed across his face. How could a tree have gotten the better of him? He was a cat after all, and climbing trees is what cats do.

Trying again, he took several steps back, and then posed his stance like before. With his behind wiggling back and forth, he released like a spring. He lunged upward, twice as high as before, and ended up with the same results. His claws didn't sink into the bark and he slid back down to the earth, this time landing with a hard thud. His head throbbed—he could almost see stars encircling it—but he shook it off, sat up, and twitched his tail with displeasure.

"You cannot climb this tree," the bird chirped. "It has been turned to rock, and is as solid as your head."

"I'm sorry," the cat said while licking his lips. "I cannot hear you, could you come closer?"

The bird hopped back and forth on the branch, as if considering, then landed on a lower limb. "Is this better?" she asked.

"A little." He grinned. "But if you come down here it will be easier to talk."

The bird's head bobbed from side to side, then cocked inquisitively to the left. "I think you can hear me fine, no?"

The cat slumped down, by now he was too exhausted to engage in this trickery any longer. He lay back against the rock-hard

tree, and made himself as comfortable as he could in its shade. “I must get some rest,” he said as his eyes lazily closed. “We can talk in a little while . . .”

He didn’t know how much time had passed, but it must have been a few hours, for when he awoke he felt somewhat refreshed. That is, as refreshed as a cat could be with his moisture draining out of him. His stomach wasn’t as fortunate, however, as it resumed its nagging for food.

A yawn extended his jaw, and when he opened his eyes they quickly came to focus on the bird, who was standing right in front of him. Before the cat had time to react she flew back up to the lowest branch of the petrified tree.

There was something moving out of the corner of his eye. He looked down and saw a pile of worms.

“Please eat,” the bird said. “I have brought you food.”

An unusual feeling fluttered inside the cat’s chest. He never experienced anything like it before. It was peculiar, but not unpleasant, and contained an enjoyable light-heartedness to it. It almost felt like gratitude, or at least what he thought gratitude must feel like.

“You mean you brought this for me?” he asked.

“Of course.” The little gray bird stared at him. “You seemed to be hungry, so I brought you food. I have been saving them up.”

For the first time he noticed that she had a white splotch on her belly. It glared at him like a beam of guilt.

Worms weren't the most enjoyable meal, but they looked good to a hungry cat. He dove in and began to feast on the rubbery, noodle-like creatures.

"You like?" she asked.

"Yes," he managed to say through a mouth full of worms. "Thank you." Suddenly he stopped chewing, what had he said? Thank you? This might have been the first time in his life he ever thanked anyone, and he had done it without even thinking about it. Back home he just expected everyone to do what he wanted and he always got his way without having to think twice about it.

"Would you like some?" he asked, after swallowing, surprised at not only being thankful but considerate as well.

"I already eat worm," said the bird. "They be hard to find now. So much dry, not much water."

This made the cat feel even worse. He had wanted to eat the bird, and here she was giving him the little food she had.

"Don't worry," he said at length. "I'll get back the moisture that the sponges have stolen. Then you'll have plenty of worms to eat. By chance, do you know where the King lives?"

"The King? Of course," said the bird, bobbing her head. "Up the path, there are two ways to go, take the one to the right, and you will find the palace."

“Thank you,” he found himself saying again. Then he curled up with a full tummy and slept until the next morning.

## Chapter 6

When he awoke, the little bird was nowhere in sight. The sky was a pale blue, and the sun shone through the crisp, chilling air. He stood up, stretched his legs, and shook the loose dirt out of his fur.

*A drink of water would be nice,* he thought, *or a nice bowl of milk.* But neither was to be had.

The road divided into two paths just as the bird said, and it didn't take him long to find it. There was a small sign in the middle of the crossing, but he couldn't read it—books were only things for lying on when someone else wanted to read. There was nothing to do but to trust her.

As he proceeded, the landscape changed yet again. Vegetation became so sparse that it was easier for him to see further ahead. There were no towns in sight, but the cat noticed something off in the distance that looked like a square blob, blurred by the rays of the hot sun.

His legs moved slower than before, and his pads dragged against the dry earth as it took what little moisture he had left.

*If only I can get a single drop of water*, he thought, but wishing so only made it worse.

The blurry blob started to take the shape of a bridge, and that meant water. Water! Frantically, he quickened his pace to get there as fast as he could. Several minutes later he was looking over the edge, but to his dismay there was only dry, cracked mud. At one time water must have been there, that was evident, but the work of the sponges was more powerful than he had imagined. How could they have drained an entire river? He supposed it shouldn't have been such a surprise; after all he was approaching the castle where they lived.

Suddenly, something flashed before him and landed with a thud on the wooden bridge. At first he wondered if it was a hallucination brought on by dehydration, but to his irritation it wasn't. A large, ugly troll stood menacingly before him.

"You cannot pass," the troll said in a growl. "Not until you pay your dues."

The cat was thirsty, tired, and not at all in a mood to deal with this situation. But it wasn't like a cat to lose its cool, and so he calmly sat down, licked at his fur, and ignored the bothersome pest.

The troll's features grew stern. "You pay me now!"

The nameless cat finished licking his collar before glancing up. When he did, the troll winced back from the feline's piercing glare.

"Why should I?" he demanded.

"Because . . ." The troll stammered. "If you want to pass, you must pay me."

"Is this your bridge? Did you build it? Do you own the property on which it stands?"

"Well . . . no." There was a look of bewilderment.

"And you expect me to pay you for something that isn't even yours?"

"That's right . . ."

"And what would you do with the money? It's not like anyone would sell you something, looking the way you do. And it's not like you wouldn't just steal whatever you wanted anyway. So what good would it do if I were to give you money?"

The troll didn't respond. He looked too confused to know what to say. Likely no one had ever questioned him before. They probably just paid him or ran away as fast as they could. He must never have planned on having a challenge of wits—something that put him at a huge disadvantage.

"And what if I were to just walk under the bridge? Would you expect a fee for that too?" The cat stood up and slowly moved towards the troll, who staggered slightly backwards at the feline's unblinking and



aggressive demeanor. Keeping his eyes on the troll, he stared him down as he spoke. “I do not have any money. I’m a cat, and I don’t even have pockets. Did you even begin to think about that? No! And let me tell you why: It’s because you’re a troll, and you are too stupid to know any better.”

That last comment suddenly changed the troll’s timid expression. A surge of rage flooded through him, reddening his face with anger. No more batting around words. He was a troll, and would do what trolls do best—attack with brute strength!

Just as the troll lunged, the cat jumped out of the way, causing the beast to land like a sack of potatoes on the bridge. The boards shook and vibrated as the monster collapsed in a heap.

The cat hopped up onto the railing and sprinted across the bridge. By the time the troll got back to his feet the cat was calmly sitting, like before, but on the opposite side.

An even greater surge of rage flooded into the troll’s hulk. He jumped so high in the air that he almost cleared the railing. It wasn’t until he landed that he realized the folly of his temper. Wooden planks broke beneath his feet and he plunged through like a sea otter diving into water. When all movement had stopped, he was stuck in the wooden bridge like a cork with only his arms, shoulders, and head remaining above the surface.

It was as if time had stopped—the expression on his face was that of a bewildered child—but it wasn’t long before time began again.

A shockwave shot across the bridge so fast that in a matter of seconds the whole thing collapsed. The troll fell to the dirt below, cringing as boards landed on the top of his head.

A loud sobbing filled the distant air as the cat proceeded down the path towards the castle.

*Serves him right, he thought. It's not the same when you are the one who becomes the victim.*

The troll learned a hard lesson that day: Never mess with an irritable and thirsty cat.

## Chapter 7

By now it was almost noon, and the cat was hiding behind a bush just a few yards from the castle gates. Two guards stood just before the doors. They were dressed in full metal armor, both holding a shield and spear. The gates were four times the height of the guards, and looked to be made of solid wood. There was no way one little cat could push them open, let alone make it past the guards.

The guards had helmets so thick that they probably couldn't see more than a few feet in front of them. Still, that didn't mean they wouldn't see a cat passing between their ankles. One good thing was that their armor seemed heavy enough to slow them down. But so what if they would not be able to walk faster than a turtle? That wouldn't stop the thrust of a spear.

His thoughts were interrupted by something moving under his paw. The cat looked down in surprise at what looked to be a rock. A

small, round head emerged from the side of the rock and looked up at him with beady eyes.

“Your paw is on my back,” the rock said.

The feline immediately pulled his leg away.

“That’s better. How would you like it if someone stood on your house?”

“Oh, pardon me,” the cat said. “I thought you were a rock.”

“Why of course I’m not! Have you ever heard of a rock that can talk?”

“I guess not.”

“I may be old, but I’m not that old.” Four more rounded objects came forth from the shell and took the shape of legs. A turtle emerged and turned to face his new acquaintance.

“Do you know a way into this castle?” the nameless feline asked.

“Why would you want to go in there?” the turtle asked. “The King’s advisers would only try to take away your moisture.”

“What about you? How have you managed to stay around here without getting drained?”

“Aah, but you see, I am smarter than they.” He winked.

“Well,” the cat said. “I have come here to get back the moisture they have stolen.”

“I see,” the turtle said, clearly amused by the feline. “But why?”

The cat paused for a minute as if to ponder the question for the first time.

“I guess it’s because I was bored of nothing.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! I think I like you cat. That’s as good a reason as any I suppose, but how do you plan to do that?”

“I don’t know yet.” He ignored the taunt, but his whiskers twitched with irritation.

The turtle’s smile grew broader. “Well, at least this will be entertaining to watch. You can’t see it from here, but there’s a crack between the doors, just large enough for critters like us to squeeze through.” He motioned his head towards the guards.

“And them?” the cat asked.

“They can’t see a thing, and are probably asleep anyway. I go in and out all the time.”

The cat smiled, licked his paw, and looked at the large wooden doors. His tail twitched with excitement. “Shall we get started then?”

“You bet! I wouldn’t miss this for anything.” His voice became a sinister whisper, “I thought the fool was entertaining, but this should be even better.”

The turtle led the way and, as expected, was very slow. The cat was a little annoyed, but he paced himself for the old fellow. His new rock-like friend was, after all, good enough to show him the way in.

They crept between the guards. Sounds of heavy breathing and snoring echoed in their suits of armor, just as the turtle had said. It was a good thing too, because the cat didn't like the thought of having one of those spears injected into his paw.

The crack between the doors appeared before them. It looked worn down from excessive rubbing—most likely from the turtle's shell. It was a tight squeeze, but he should be able to make it.

The turtle passed under as if it was part of his daily routine, but when it was the cat's turn, he struggled a bit. Crawling with his legs in front of him, it felt undignified, something cats hated. But unusually enough, he didn't feel as irritated as he would have expected. After all, he had been doing a lot of things lately that pushed him beyond his comfort zone.

The turtle's face was the first thing to greet him on the other side. Its huge smirk was anything but kind. Ignoring it, the cat looked around.

The courtyard was huge and filled with beautiful plants and flowers. Sunlight glimmered against a large fountain in the center, as rich, spouting water flowed down into a huge man-made ravine that went deep underneath the castle.

*So this is where all the moisture has gone,* he thought.

The turtle nodded his head in agreement, as if reading his thoughts.

Without questioning what he was doing, the cat leaned over the fountain, lowered his head, and lapped at the liquid. It tasted like nothing he had ever experienced before. It was more than refreshing. It was as if all the good things in the world were mixed together into a watery form. He thought of beautiful mountains full of trees, singing birds, waterfalls flowing down and splashing droplets against his whiskers. He could smell flowers in the air, the greenery of grass, and the coolness of moisture in the sky. Minutes passed before he finally pulled back and took a breath of air.

“It’s not good to drink so much,” said the turtle.

“Shush,” the cat whispered. “They might hear you.”

Suddenly the cat froze. His eyes widened and he could feel the beating of his heart. Energy surged into his limbs, sending a tingle of excitement to the ends of his hairs.

The trees and plants looked richer than before. Their colors more pronounced and their definitions crisper. Puzzled, the cat turned his gaze towards his new companion.

“I see it finally hit you,” the turtle said, while holding his trademark grin.

“What hit me? I feel strange . . . as if my senses are sharper and my mind and body stronger, smarter, lighter . . .”

“That is the effect of the moisture you drank. It takes a few minutes before you feel it, but once you do . . .”

“How can that be?”

“It’s very simple,” the turtle went on. “That was not purely water you drank, but part of the moisture that was stolen from the world. Some from the hearts of man, some from animals, and some from the earth itself. The sponges go out and collect the moisture, and then they empty it here in this pool. They are saving it up so that once everything is drained they can sell it back to the people at a high price. That means only a few will be able to afford it, and many will go without. You drank enough to keep several grown men happy for a week. That is their plan: to take from the many and give to the few. It will be a hot item, and people everywhere will stop at nothing to get it. The sponges will begin to soak up the riches just as they have soaked up the moisture.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I told you.” The turtle winked. “I’m smarter than they are. You were not the only one to mistake me as a rock. I have listened in on the sponge’s conversations many times. It’s strange too, because they cannot speak themselves. They control others to be a voice for them.”

“But where do the sponges come from?” the cat asked, desiring to fully understand the situation.



“They were born from man’s desires, his greed, his passion to become better than everyone else. The cost is great, and most people will remain incomplete and unsatisfied with their lives. It will affect everyone differently, because the sponges only take that which is most dear to them. Painters will forget how to paint, musicians will forget how to play, teachers will forget how to teach, and so on. Everyone will continue in their dry, empty lives, unknowingly missing the gifts they once had. The sponges are tricky; they know who to sell the moisture to. A person who desires to be great can buy as much moisture as they can afford. They will possess other people’s talents. The more moisture, the more talents, but the original owners are left empty.”

“I see,” the cat said. “That is, I think I see, but if you know so much about this, why haven’t you done anything about it before?”

The turtle laughed again. “And how do you propose I return thousands of gallons of moisture? And if by some miracle I was able to do so, how do I stop the sponges from taking it back?”

“By making the sponges return it all, and forcing them to change their ways,” he responded.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! How do you plan to get close enough to them to demand such an absurd thing? You will be drained as soon as they get within inches of you.”

“Well,” the cat said. “I don’t know, but someone has to try something, and I for one am sick of nothing.”

The turtle had no more arguments—he just looked at the cat’s huge saucer-like eyes.

“Will you show me where the King and his advisers are?” the cat asked.

“I sure can,” said the turtle. He turned and slowly led the way.

## Chapter 8

The turtle led the cat through many different hallways, up winding stairways, and through various rooms. The slow pace allowed the cat to admire the castle's interior, and the water he drank increased his sense of curiosity. He peeped into empty suits of armor, admired swords that were fastened crisscrossed behind shields, and gazed at pictures and tapestries hung along the gray stone walls.

The paintings were of magnificent scenery and realistic looking portraits of lords and ladies. The thought of what the turtle said before, and how even painters would lose their talent, made him feel empty. Did the ones who painted these pictures also forget their special ability?

He realized it was a miracle to have come across such a helpful guide. Obnoxious as the turtle was, the cat would have been lost without him. It seemed the cat was stuck with depending on things as they happen. Perhaps he was too hasty before when he didn't want to ask for help from the creator of life. Regardless, it seemed that

something was changing events. After all, how could one have planned this? Even if he was able to prepare, by some amazing ability, it would be of no use, since there was no real way to predict what would occur. No, it was by miracles he made it this far, and it would be by miracles he kept going.

The cat was surprised that they never ran into anyone. The palace seemed to be deserted. Perhaps the sponges chased everyone away? Or maybe they drained the people of so much moisture that they never left their rooms? Whatever it was—even though he was glad to avoid any early encounters—it made him feel uneasy.

Finally the turtle stopped in front of a large wooden door. A muffled voice could be heard from the other side. The cat felt a jitter of uneasiness creep through him, and it wasn't the after-effects of the moisture he had drunk.

"This is it," the turtle said. "The King's throne room is just behind this door. First, there's something you should know. The King used to be a good man. I have lived a very long time you see, and saw how he once was. When the sponges came they drained him of his moisture. He hasn't been the same since. The sponges are just using him, but he isn't wise enough to see that, since his gift of wisdom no longer belongs to him, you see?"

The cat nodded with understanding, then put his paw up to the door and tapped it.

No response. The noise wasn't loud enough to draw any attention. The muffled talking continued on the other side of the door, like a room haunted by ghosts. But the odd thing was that it seemed to be only one voice talking, as if it was answering its own questions.

Suddenly something occurred to him. Before his masters were drained, they used to get really mad at him when he sharpened his claws on their things—such as a couch, the carpet, their pants legs. No matter how quiet he tried to be, they always seemed to catch him in the act. It was as if they developed super-sensitive hearing when it came to his naughty behavior. Perhaps those on the other side of this door were the same way.

There was a grating sound as claws scrapped against the door. He reached up again, higher this time, and then pulled down using the weight of his entire body. The scraping echoed in the hallway with a loud “Screeeeech!” Strips of wood peeled underneath his claws, and the voice within stopped. The two companions could hear metal clunk across the floor and then stop. The latch turned. They stared as the door swung open before them.

## Chapter 9

A guard dressed in armor stood in the doorway. He wasn't wearing a helmet like the others, but he did have a spear in his hand, and it was pointing back and forth between the cat and the turtle.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

The cat and the turtle turned and looked at each other, waiting to see who would speak first. The turtle gave the cat a look as if to say, "This is your thing. Go for it."

"We would like to talk to the King," the cat said.

"What makes you think the King would want to talk to the likes of you?" the guard replied, poking the cat lightly with the tip of the spear.

The nameless one flinched back, but then something odd happened. Perhaps he was emboldened by his recent moisture consumption, or maybe the experiences of the trip had changed him more than he had thought, but whatever it was it caused him to let out

a giggle. It started off slow and uneasy, but then turned into an all out belly laugh.

The turtle looked confused for a second, then understood what the cat was doing. He joined him in his rant, and the two of them were rolling on their backs, slapping their stomachs, and roaring with laughter.

A voice spoke from behind the puzzled looking guard, "Let them in." It had a sinister underhandedness to it that made them both stop laughing at once. But the cat's plan worked: They had just demonstrated an enormous amount of moisture, and the sponges wanted it.

Without hesitation, the cat got to his feet. He noticed that the turtle was still stuck on his back. The scene made him want to laugh again, but he knew it was no longer the time for that. Putting both paws under his friend's shell, the cat flipped it over and set the turtle back onto his feet.

"Thanks," the turtle said.

"Follow me," the guard commanded, gesturing with his spear.

The two entered the chamber. It was beautifully and magnificently adorned. The walls stretched high to the ceiling where a giant crystal chandelier hung. Pillars were carved with intricate designs, and large paintings filled the empty spaces on the walls. Before them a high stairway led to an enormous throne that was covered in gold and

jewels. On it sat a plump-looking King. To his sides were the sponges, each sitting on its own elegant chair. The cat was reminded of their awful appearance. They didn't have faces, arms, or legs. Their yellow bodies took the shape of a tall narrow square, and each was covered with tiny octagonal-shaped holes. They looked smaller than before. Perhaps they had already squeezed out all the moisture they gathered.

"Only two?" he whispered to the turtle.

"Did you want more?"

The cat paused for a moment as if to ponder the question.

"Two is all it takes. If there were more of them, then I suppose it would be too much competition. With two there's less division of the wealth."

"Quiet," the guard intoned as he led them to the bottom of the staircase.

The sponges, though smaller than before, were still twice the size of the King. They towered over the two creatures, staring down with what would have seemed inquisitive expressions—if they had faces, that is. True, the sponges didn't have faces, but the upper part of their yellow sponge-like heads bent slightly toward the cat and the turtle. The King on the other hand, just held a blank gaze, looking off into the distance as if he were an empty shell.

A broken window, off to the left, caught the cat's attention and he remembered the fool. The fool probably had danced in this very spot before the sponges tried to seize him. It wasn't a long drop, but



going through the glass and hitting bottom wasn't an experience the cat wished to share. And from the sound of the fool's song, they must have gotten some moisture out of him before he escaped. That too worried the cat.

"How can we help you?" the King asked. His voice sounded unnaturally pleasant.

The cat couldn't help but watch the wiggling of the King's chubby cheeks as he spoke. It both horrified and amused him.

A grin, nervous and genuine, sunk across the turtle's face. He must have noticed the King's odd tone too.

Whenever the King spoke, one of the sponges creased its head—or rather the upper part of its body—in his direction, as if controlling him through some kind of mental energy.

*That only makes sense,* thought the cat, *after all they don't have mouths.*

A cat and a turtle—the two really must have looked ridiculous together, standing small and insignificant at the bottom of the staircase. But that didn't deter the cat's determination. He came here for a purpose and he would succeed.

"We have come here to get back all the moisture you have stolen," the cat said, trying to sound confident.

The King's face didn't change expressions. He waited like a puppet for a new message from the sponge that was controlling him.

Suddenly there was a horrifying noise, which sounded like someone squishing water out of a rag. It came from the two moisture thieves. Was this their laughter? Before the cat could figure it out, both the sponges stood—if you can call it standing—and started to move down the staircase. There was no more need for words. They all knew what was going to happen next.

## Chapter 10

It was the turtle who lost his courage first. He hid himself inside his shell, looking like a rock once again. The cat's heart jumped, and he felt his courage sinking too. But he didn't want to be drained. He didn't want to become an empty shell like the people back home. The desire to keep his moisture was stronger than ever before. The turtle obviously didn't want to be an empty shell either.

The pudgy King's face remained placid, emotionless, and held its blank gaze as if no one was home. The sponges came closer, and the nameless one feared he would soon be like the King. They moved end over end, flipping down each step one at a time.

The cat swallowed hard. His throat felt dry as the sponges approached. He sensed the hair rise on his back, and no longer being able to bear to watch, he closed his eyes.

A strange feeling came over the cat. He felt something prompting him to ask for help. It was as if a voice was speaking to him, yet it was silent like the wind.

“I know I haven’t been the best of cats, and I know it was for selfish reasons that I came here, but if you would have me be of any use, please empower me now to bring back the moisture that these sponges have stolen.”

He opened his eyes, and saw that the sponges were stopped dead in their tracks. Were they frightened by the outspoken prayer? The tops of their bodies turned from right to left, as if looking for any kind of answer. When none came, they proceeded towards the cat and his turtle friend without hesitation.

The turtle was still hiding in his shell, and the cat wished he had one now himself, though it wasn’t likely to do any good.

There was a pain in the cat’s stomach. At first he thought it was a reaction to fear, but then it began to rumble. What a time for his stomach to bother him now!

A low, “Rooww, roow, rooooo,” sound came from his mouth as he jerked his head forward. He heaved backwards and forward as if someone was using him as a battering ram.

The sponges stopped again, this time only a few feet away. Clearly they wanted to avoid the impending unpleasantness, but it was too late. The cat hacked up a hairball the size of a fist. It flew from his mouth and landed on the nearest sponge. They both fell back as he’d

spewed an iron bullet instead of a simple hairball. Obviously it was more an instinctive reaction than anything else, since a hairball couldn't do any more damage than a feather.

His partner, the turtle, peeked one eye out of his shell to see what was happening. He must have been just as confused as the cat.

It didn't take long before the sponges realized that no harm had been done to them. Proceeding forward with a hint of caution, they straightened and inched toward the two who were cringing only a few steps away.

The guard kept his distance. He must not have wanted to get in the way, for he'd probably seen more than once what the sponges could do. The King still sat motionless, not uttering a word or showing any signs of emotion.

Then the hairball, still stuck to the sponge, began to wiggle. It looked to be tickling the offender, moving from side to side so fast that it must have felt like a goose feather. If the yellow head had a mouth, it might have released a spurt of laughter as it squirmed on its back. Laughter would have been better than the horrible squishing noise it made now.

The other sponge bent over to see what was happening. In that instant something shot up from the wad of grass.

Little, thin green stalks emerged. They grew, spurting upward so fast that leaves began to sprout as more branches etched their way

forward. Before the observing sponge could jump back, one of the branches struck it, and then started to grow and spread inside its body.

The guard had already fled the scene by now. He obviously didn't want to get involved in the chaos. If only the King had the same sense of awareness he might have left too, but it was likely he was drained of more moisture than the guard was.

The cat and turtle (who had emerged from his shell by now) took several steps back. Both villains were laid out on the staircase as a green vine rapidly covered them. Soon it had swallowed up any signs of their yellow shapes.

"I'm growing! I'm growing! So much moisture, so much fertilizer!" It was a familiar voice. Where had the cat heard it before? The seed! It was the seed that the cat had eaten earlier. It must have come out of his stomach along with the hairball. When he ate the seed near the start of his journey, he'd thought he was putting it out of its misery. But it was happy now—it could not have been any happier.

The turtle looked at the cat and motioned his head toward the window. It took him a few seconds, but the feline finally understood his partner's plan.

With a chomp, the cat grasped an edge of the vine in his teeth. He started pulling as the turtle pushed against the wad of vines with his head. He might not have been a fast turtle, but he definitely was a strong one. Between the two of them—and the smoothness of the vine that made it easier to slide across the floor—the pile that had once been

the sponges started to move. They heaved, inching it along the ground, bit by bit. The seed kept shouting in ecstasy, loving the fact it finally found a place it could grow.

At last they came to the edge of the broken window. With one final heave, the vine and sponges went over the edge and landed in the pool of liquid below.

The massive amount of moisture sent a surge of power into the growing plant. It sucked up gallons of fluid as it rapidly increased in size. The cat had never seen something grow so fast before, let alone so large. He watched in wonder as the vine wrapped itself around the outside of the castle. It continued to grow until it finally consumed all the moisture that the sponges had stored.

The towers and walls were covered by the vine, and looked as if they were part of the garden. The voice kept shouting with pleasure as the vine tightening against the rock.

Buds surfaced across the entire vine, and then opened into pink and white flowers. It was as if paradise had appeared before their eyes. Never before had the cat witnessed such beauty.

And then, to his surprise, grains of pollen exploded out of the flowers and shot into the air like magical fairy dust. It spread as it glimmered in the rays of the sun. The wind blew the glittering pollen up and into the clouds above, for what seemed to be miles and miles away.

The turtle's tail twitched. "It's going to rain," he said. "This old tail of mine never lies." As if wanting to prove him right the sky suddenly grew dark, and the air turned cold. Thunder boomed as flashes of lightning shot across the sky. The two companions watched in awe as blankets of water flowed down from the clouds.

Wind blew water through the broken window covering the cat and the turtle. It was cold but pleasant, making the cat feel confident and calm. Creative ideas flooded into his mind, and the empty places in his heart started to fill.

He and the turtle looked at each other with tears in their eyes, and happiness on their faces. He felt young again, fulfilled, and content . . . something he had not felt in a very long time, if ever.



## Chapter 11

Once the cat saw enough, he turned towards the King, who still sat motionless on his throne. He and his turtle companion walked up the stairs and stood before the chubby ruler. His blank stare was just as unsettling as before.

Like a dog jumping out of a pond, the cat shook. His fur released droplets of water, which landed against the King's face, robes, and limbs. The liquid visibly soaked into his skin and several seconds later, the King blinked. The cat could see the color returning to his face.

As if waking from a dream, the King shook his head, rubbed his eyes, and let out a big yawn. Both his arms and chest stretched out wide as snaps sounded from his limbs.

The King looked down, and what he saw must have surprised him. "A turtle and a cat?"

“Yes sire,” the nameless cat said as he elegantly bowed before the monarch. The turtle did the same—that is, as much of a bow as a turtle can do.

“Why, what ever happened here?” the King asked, looking around.

It was the turtle that responded this time. He told the King all he knew of the sponges and their schemes. How they ransacked the land and stole all the moisture. How they must have taken control of his majesty, and forced him to do things which were against his will. Finally, he told the King how the two of them were able to put a stop to it. The cat cut in every so often to confirm or correct a point or two, but the turtle had it down pretty good.

All the while the King sat with a puzzled expression on his face, but he listened to every word. It wasn’t every day one was told he lost control of his kingdom to a couple of sponges.

Once neither of them had any more to say there was silence.

The King’s face creased deep with concentration.

“I dare say,” the King said at last. “I was suspicious of those sponges when they first arrived. Entertainers my foot! And to think I’ve been in their control all this time.”

“You were not the only one,” the cat said. “Many people had their moisture stolen, and lost much of their free will.”

“My word,” he retorted. “And you defeated them with one little seed? How extraordinary!”

The King stood and walked toward the broken window. Both the cat and turtle followed closely behind. Leaning over the edge the King looked out and stared at the rain still pouring down from the clouds.

“I say, good work, old bean,” shouted the King in the direction of the vine that now covered his palace.

“My pleasure,” the vine responded. “I am the happiest plant in the world. I have grown fuller than my heart’s greatest desire. Will it be okay for me to live here on this wonderful wall of yours?”

“You are welcome to live here as long as you want. I mean that for all of you,” the King said now looking at the two by his side. “You are both welcome to stay here in my palace. I will give you your own rooms, a personal servant, plenty of food to eat, and whatever else you desire. What do you say?”

“That is very kind,” the cat said.

The turtle nodded his head in agreement. “We gratefully accept your generous offer.”

“Wonderful!” the King said. “We shall have a feast! But first, we need to get everyone outdoors so that they can reclaim their moisture. Hold on a minute, I didn’t catch your names?”

“I have no name,” the cat answered. “I am only known as ‘cat’ where I come from.”

“Well,” the turtle interrupted. “I know I had a name at one time, but when you live as long as I have, you see, one tends to forget such things.”

“Wot? Wot? That won’t do,” the King said. “We will have to give you both new names then. The Kingdom will need to know who their heroes are. I shall christen you both, that is, as soon as we get things settled here. You will be the honored guests at our feast.”

All three looked at each other, blushing and brandishing big smiles. It was, after all, a glorious day.

# BOOK 2

The Way Home



# Chapter 1

All the King's men, women, children and animals were exposed to the rain and regained their stolen moisture. The spores the vine had released drifted far and wide, restoring all the land.

The King was good to his word and gave both the cat and turtle their own rooms, which were large and beautifully adorned. An elegant canopy bed lined with silk centered the rooms, and windows overlooking the courtyard filled their view with the garden below. They had their own personal servants too, who brought them food whenever they wanted and whatever else they wanted.

A week or so passed, and the effects of the moisture that the cat overdosed on had worn off. He had a headache that lasted a day or two, but he felt back to normal once it was gone.

It was a good thing the sponges were destroyed, or he might have been tempted to get more than his fair share again. Even so, the

cat realized it was this kind of thinking that lead to the problem to begin with. There was comfort in knowing it was enough just to enjoy the amount he naturally had.

It was finally the night of the great feast. It took longer than originally thought to get things back to normal, but the cat and his friend didn't mind—they enjoyed spending time together in their luxurious new home.

Everyone was seated at the banquet table. There were lords and ladies, dukes and duchesses, princes and princesses, and a great deal of common folk too. The table was long and wide, with hundreds of seats. Cutlery of real silver was placed beside china plates and crystal glasses. A huge roast on a great silver platter was the centerpiece of the table. Surrounding it were exotic fruits and vegetables, freshly baked bread, scones with whipped butter, different varieties of soup, cranberry sauce, bread pudding, popovers, egg scuffles, fresh cakes and the list went on.

Both the cat and turtle sat on either side of the King. The cat tried his best to eat with good manners, but he wasn't able to use the silverware with his paws, so he forced himself to eat daintily with his mouth. He lapped up soup, tasted the roast, and most importantly enjoyed a bowl of milk.

The turtle, who had the same problem, was nibbling on a piece of lettuce when the King tapped his spoon against his glass. It tinged loudly, hushing the assembly, and as soon as the conversations died down he spoke.



“Greetings ladies and gentlemen,” the King said. “We are gathered here today to honor the courageous heroes who have restored to us our kingdom. Let us drink to their health and happiness.” He raised his glass as a cheer arose, and then clicked it against the cat’s, and next the turtle’s. Even though they were not able to hold their glasses themselves, it was still a welcomed gesture of goodwill.

“Now bring on the entertainment!” the King shouted. Another cheer rose from the assembly.

The cat’s jaw dropped open as soon as he saw the entertainers walk in. At the head was the same fool that he met earlier on his journey—the very one who only weeks before had jumped out the castle window in fear of his life. To the cat’s surprise there were two other fools with him.

*How unlike his song from before, he thought. What did it say? Something about not needing any friends?*

The fool bowed towards the King, then towards the guests, and next to the turtle and cat—giving him a special wink.

The cat squinted his eyes, not sure how to take the gesture.

Then the entertainers settled into formation, with the fool standing in the middle, and his companions kneeling down beside him. A moment later, he started his introduction:

“Games are good you see,

they bring us fun and glee.  
But something they cannot be,  
is a friend to me.  
Sweets are good to eat,  
but too much will make you weak.  
Enjoy your good meals too,  
and don't forget to chew.

The next time you see a cat,  
be sure to scratch its back.  
And if you see a tortoise,  
please don't disturb its fortress.  
And don't forget about the seed,  
It's because of them we're freed . . .”

Just then the other two fools—or the nameless cat supposed, one should no longer call them fools, but rather jesters—jumped up with their heads and arms pointed upward. The leader performed a back flip in the air and landed on top of their hands. The guests clapped and cheered.

Reaching his arms forward, the fool spread out his fingers like a cat's claws.

"What's the unluckiest kind of cat to have?"

"A catastrophe!" answered the assistant below his right.

The cat sneered, but the turtle and others laughed out loud.

The Jester jumped off his companion's hands and landed on the ground, forming into a little ball.

"Where do you find a turtle with no legs?" he asked, peeking through his arms.

"Where you left it!" answered the other jester.

This time it was the turtle who didn't look amused, but the cat laughed—or more appropriately, meowed.

The three jesters went on to juggle balls, perform acrobatics, tell more jokes, and finally end with a bow. The King stood and clapped as everyone cheered. The jesters bowed again and left the room, falling over each other as they went. More cheers went out until everyone was seated once again.

The King was the only one left standing. He opened his arms wide and addressed the guests. "My good people, we are here today because of this cat, and this turtle. And let us also not forget the seed that caused the sponges to dry up and crumble away. All three have returned to us our freedom, and all three have been living here in this

castle for the past few weeks—or on the castle in the case of the seed,” he said smiling. “Both the cat and turtle will be given a name, and I have the honor of presenting them to you now.” He motioned to his arms bearer, who brought the King his sword.

Both the cat and turtle were signaled to stand before him. The turtle went first with his head bowed low.

“I dub thee, Oliver, tortoise to the King and to his people,” he said while placing the tip of the sword from one side of the turtle’s shell and then to the other. The reptile’s cheeks turned a bright red against his olive green skin.

*Oliver for his olive green skin of course, thought the cat. Brilliant!*

Next the nameless cat came forward. He bowed ever so elegantly. The lady guests looked as if they wanted to run up and stroke his fur, and tell him he was a good cat. And the men wore expressions of pride.

“I dub thee, Samuel, kitty to the King and to his people.” The blade passed delicately over his head, tapping one shoulder then the other.

*Samuel?* He wondered, and then remembered a story. One that came from an ancient book, which history taught was brought by people who called themselves missionaries. They had traveled from a place far over the ocean, and said they were from another world, but that is a different story. The one he was thinking of now was about a man in the book called Samuel. Samuel’s mother, Hannah, had prayed

to the creator of life and asked him to send her a little boy. The creator heard Hannah's prayer and sent her Samuel, who grew up to be a man who served, and the people all liked Samuel very much. The cat wasn't sure what that had to do with him, but overall it was a nice sounding name. Much better than being called simply "cat."

The guests, with standing ovations, applauded and cheered as the King, Oliver and Samuel bowed before them all.

## Chapter 2

It was another week before the no-longer-nameless-cat became restless. Samuel wondered if his owners had ever come out of their dry condition, and if they ever thought about him. It occurred to him that he loved them, and missed them, and wanted to see them again. It was nice in the castle, but it made his life so easy and soft that it reminded him of the same boring existence he lived before his adventures began.

One afternoon he approached his turtle friend, Oliver, and told him, “I think it is time for me to go back home.”

The turtle couldn’t respond. His face turned from green to red and he started to cry.

“You can come with me,” Samuel said, feeling sad for his friend. He put a paw on his shell.

“No.” Oliver sniffed. “I’ll only slow you down. Just promise to visit me sometime.”

“Of course. I will visit you at least once a year. How could I ever forget my good friend?”

They would have hugged, but being a turtle and a cat made that kind of difficult, so they touched noses instead.

Samuel visited the King next. He found him jogging in the garden. The King had lost many pounds since taking up exercise. Perhaps the return of his moisture had motivated him to get back into shape.

“Sire,” Samuel said, “I have come to tell you that I need to go back home. I have been happy staying here with you in your palace, but I miss my owners. Don’t worry though, I will be sure to come back and visit often.”

“I’m sorry to hear you are leaving,” the King said, jogging in place so not to lose a step. His forehead was sweaty and his face was bright red.

The King stopped jogging, bent down, and proceeded to scratch the kitty’s head. “You will always have a place here with us. I will keep your room ready and waiting for you.”

“Thank you, sire.” He purred, and his eyes squinted shut from the pleasure of the King’s scratching fingers.

Just then he heard a familiar voice, “Goodbye, kitty. Thank you for helping me to find a place that I could grow.” It was the vine.

“You are welcome,” he said. “Sorry for eating you earlier, but I was hungry and you were in despair, so I thought I’d put you out of your misery. I realize now that anyone’s life can turn around from emptiness to fullness. I should not have made the decision to eat you, for all life is precious and has a purpose.” Samuel felt strange. It was unusual for him to act so philosophical, but he had learned many things since his travels, and it was only right for him to reflect on them.

“It’s alright,” the vine said. “Because of you I have found my place. I have the entire castle wall as my garden now. No bird can eat me, or thorns rip me to shreds, but it is a little ironic that I was able to grow on rock after all.” Both Samuel and the vine laughed out loud. The King looked puzzled, but soon joined them with a hearty smile.



## Chapter 3

The next day Samuel pulled himself out of his cozy bed. He turned and stared at the silk sheets. It would be another year before he slept on them again, and for an instant he felt sad, but quickly shook off the feeling. Leaving was the right thing to do.

He took one last walk around his room before finally getting enough courage to say his goodbyes.

The dining room was filled with people of the castle who were eating breakfast. His bowl of milk tasted abnormally sour. After the meal was done, he said his goodbyes and headed for the entrance. The King, Oliver, and a few others were waiting for him there.

The guards opened the gate. A few snuffles sounded and tears were wiped away, but they all supported his decision to go. Once past the guards, he turned and waved his paw until the doors were shut behind him. He heaved a sigh—was this really the right thing to do? It

wouldn't do any good to question his decision now; it was time to go, and they all knew it.

The guards had resumed their usual posts, holding their spears up and looking alert. At least they seemed alert; one never knew what was happening inside their massive helmets.

Samuel walked past the bushes where he first met Oliver. A smile creased his face as he looked down at the rocks. How could he have mistaken his friend for one of them? A small giggle escaped his lungs.

"Thank you," Samuel said. "I will never forget."

The path looked very different this time. He could hardly believe it was the same place. The ground was soft and smooth, frogs jumped across it and teddy bear caterpillars crawled slowly along. Birds sang in the newly lush forest, and other critters scampered amongst its greenery. His pads no longer felt the earth below trying to drain his moisture. He was able to walk softly along without fear.

After traveling for several hours he began to wonder how he would cross the river. Last time Samuel was able to use the bridge, but now that the troll destroyed it, how would he get to the other side? Since the return of the moisture, the water was sure to be there, and cats really hate to get their toes wet.

Before he knew it he found himself standing before the troll. A look of shock fell upon Samuel's face. The beast's appearance was completely different. A clean, shaven face met his gaze. The creature's

hair was neatly trimmed and combed, and he wore a suit fit for a gentleman. He was a beast no longer.

The troll recognized Samuel instantly. To Samuel's surprise, the troll took off his top hat, held it across his chest, and bowed.

Samuel cautiously approached.

"Thank you for helping me," the troll said. "Because of you I no longer have to steal to make a living. Once the rain returned, a change came over me, and I felt like a new troll. A voice inside me told me to build, and so I did. I have constructed a raft out of the wood from the bridge that I so childishly destroyed." He pointed to a flat wooden boat. "With it, I help people across the water, and they are often kind enough to give me money for my trouble, but I don't ask them for it. Those who don't give me anything, I don't mind, it is my pleasure just to help. I have found my purpose in life, kitty. I used to think it was to be a troll, but now I realize I was meant to be a toll."

Bowing in return, Samuel said, "I don't think you can thank me for that. All I did was help to restore the moisture to its original owners, but I am glad to know you have found your place."

"That may be so," the toll said. "But you have helped me all the same. Please, allow me to take you safely across the water."

Samuel happily accepted, and found a place to stand in the large wooden raft. It felt sturdy enough, and he thought that the toll could do worse than to become a carpenter.

Pushing with a staff, the toll shoved the raft out into the water. It gently glided along the surface as he pushed steadily in and out with the staff.

“I plan to save up my money,” the toll said, “So that I will be able to buy a rope someday. Once I do I’ll tie each end to a stake on both sides of the river. That way I can get heavier loads across, and I’ll be able to serve more passengers.”

The cat wondered if it wouldn’t be easier to just construct a new bridge, but he didn’t want to squash the toll’s dreams. He was, after all, doing good for a change. He was sharing his moisture. Perhaps he would figure out, on his own, that a bridge would be the best way to go. He may even pursue a career in carpentry in the end. It did seem ironic, however, that his current system wasn’t that far from what he did before. At least this time he was helping people across the river rather than just demanding money from them.

The raft landed safely on the bank. They had reached the other side in less than a minute. Thanking him one last time, the toll waved goodbye as Samuel made his way up the path.

## Chapter 4

The journey home seemed far shorter than the trip to the castle had been. Of course last time Samuel was tired, hungry, thirsty, and didn't know exactly where he was going. Now he had plenty to eat and drink. There were plants to feast on and all sorts of puddles of water left over from the rain. It rained regularly now, not so much that it made the atmosphere dreary and depressing, but just enough to keep the earth well moisturized. The ground soaked up the fluid like a child devours candy until it was too full to take any more.

Samuel bent down to drink from a puddle and saw his reflection staring back at him. "You look different now, don't you?" he said aloud.

"Yes."

Samuel jumped back. *Where did that voice come from?* he thought.

He leaned over and looked in the puddle again. As expected his reflection stared back at him again. Why wouldn't it? After all seeing

one's own reflection in a pool of water was a natural occurrence, wasn't it?

"I am the part of you that has been hidden." The mouth on the reflection spoke. It was his mouth, but it wasn't his words. Samuel flinched, but didn't run away.

"Do you remember how you used to frown all the time?" it continued. "Even though the sponges didn't drain you directly, you kept me away. You lived a selfish life thinking only of your own comfort, never caring about anyone else. You were miserable inside and always felt that something was missing. No matter how much you took you never had enough. I was the voice that kept whispering to you, trying to break through the hardness of your heart, but you wouldn't listen."

Samuel touched the water with his paw. A ripple ran across the surface, but the reflection didn't move.

"That is all different now," the voice said, "For you have finally let me break through, and have learned how to be a full cat, a caring cat. But be careful that you don't go back to the way you once were. Keep my voice alive in you, be nice to your human masters and they will love you forever. Be one who serves rather than one who is being served, and continue to do kind things. If you live by this you will have a fulfilling life, and will no longer be bored.

"When you try to only satisfy yourself, you become unhappy, and empty inside. Moisture evaporates and dries up if you don't use it,

and when you do things against others your moisture evaporates even faster—like a pot of boiling water. But if you share your moisture with others, they will share theirs with you. Maybe not at first, but in time, and if you succeed you will have created a constant flow that moistens the entire earth.”

A sternness crept into the reflection’s voice, like a father warning his son. “However, if you keep it all to yourself, or do something mean or hurtful, you give power to the darkness that formed the sponges. What’s to stop them from being created again?” There was a pause, and the reflection smiled at Samuel. When it spoke again it was calm. “There are always many ways to serve others, and to help them. A person without a need does not exist. Use your time wisely and unselfishly. If everyone lives by this then needs would begin to disappear, just as the sponges have, but it has to start with you. The name you have been given, Samuel, is a good name. Live as the first Samuel lived by serving others, and by not letting the moisture inside of you dry up. Use it to help keep the sponges away for good.”

Samuel sat down. The reflection was still there, but the power behind the voice was gone. A strange feeling sank inside of him. How many can say they have actually heard the voice of their heart? This was too much to comprehend. It revealed a hidden truth to him, but what would he do with that truth? Could he just ignore it?

He sat there for quite some time, pondering the words, and what they meant. Finally he said out loud, “Thank you. I will try to live as you have said.”



## Chapter 5

Samuel walked up to the familiar tree where he first met the bird. It was hard to see it at first because the surrounding trees and bushes were richly filled in with leaves. They grew brilliant and beautiful from the moisture, but this tree looked as cold and uninviting as it had before. It hadn't changed at all. It was still solid as a rock.

Samuel wondered if it hadn't simply gone too long without moisture, too long in its hardened form, too long for it to change back. The thought of it saddened him, and it occurred to him that maybe some things just can't change.

Was he too late? Was he not able to restore the tree back in time?

Just then he heard a fluttering of wings. He turned his head upward, and before him was the little gray bird with a white splotch on her belly. She landed on the very same branch of the old petrified tree where they first met.

“It didn’t come back to life,” Samuel said in a solemn voice.

“Good to see you again, kitty,” the bird said. “What has not come back to life?”

“This tree. I thought if the moisture was returned that everything would be restored.”

“Oh, do not worry. You cannot change everything. You did a great deed, and now there are plenty of worms for me and my little ones to eat. I helped you earlier, and now you have helped me. Do not worry about that which you cannot change.”

Samuel looked down. He took a moment before responding. “You knew it was me who restored the moisture?”

“Why yes, I’m a bird don’t you know. News travels far in the sky.” She winked at him, turned and fluttered off.

The lifeless tree stood before Samuel. He stared long and hard up at it. Had he risked himself becoming like it? So drained of moisture that there was no way to get it back? The idea sunk deep inside his chest, and the words of his reflection became even more terrifying.

He shuddered.

There was a cool shade and so he decided to take a nap before heading off. His eyes closed, but sleep temporarily evaded him. The feeling of the loss of the old tree etched into his memory, and it became an image he would never forget.

## Chapter 6

Morning came with its bright rays of early sunshine. Samuel awoke with light glimmering against his fur. The warmth reminded him of home, and all the times he laid sprawled out on the carpet.

Delaying no further, he got up and continued on with his trek, but before leaving, he gave the petrified tree one last look. Its tall, haunting shape towered over him, casting a creepy and lifeless shadow.

“May you always serve as an example to us all,” he said, as if it could hear. “I will share my moisture with others so that I won’t end up evaporated and dry forever.”

He turned and walked along the path. It was once full of roots and rocks, but the rain had softened the ground enough to swallow them up. He didn’t cease to be amazed how quickly everything changed back to its natural appearance. The beauty of the natural state of things was truly magnificent to see.

Samuel found himself at the town of the bicker people. The rain washed away a lot of the ugliness of the town, such as the absurd colors of paint on the houses. And the people were dressed in a more simple fashion.

Samuel came across two men who were working on changing the Town sign. He remembered it had read, “Bicker Village” before.

“Look, it’s a dog!” one of the men shouted.

“Why, my good fellow. I believe it’s actually a cat,” the other responded.

“You know, I do believe you are right! How smart you are!”

“No, no. It was you, after all, who spotted the little fellow. If it weren’t for you I’d have missed the delightful chap.”

They put an arm around each other’s shoulder and began to complement the nice weather they were having. Samuel looked up at the new sign and read the words: “Harmony Village.”

This was a welcomed change. Samuel didn’t need to fold his ears back since there wasn’t any bickering. The villagers were still loud, to be sure, but not the kind of discomforting loudness that previously made his stomach turn. Rather it was the sound of laughter, cheers, and goodwill.

Samuel smiled as he walked through the new village. He watched as they busily helped one another. To his left was a team working to repaint a neighbor’s house, to his right another person helped an elderly couple carry groceries down the street, and just a few

yards ahead a kind boy lifted—what looked to be his sister—out of a puddle.

Making note to come back to visit this town, Samuel moved on with an even stronger urge to be home.

## Chapter 7

Samuel's stomach nagged him for food. Even though he was close to his home town, he wasn't certain whether or not he wanted to make his entrance. After all, maybe nothing changed. Maybe it was a mistake for him to have come back.

There was a patch of mushrooms not far from the path. Their white shafts supported dainty round caps, reminding him of a miniature village. A village of welcoming food that is. He bit off a small piece just to be sure it was safe to eat, since he knew one should never eat strange mushrooms, but being a cat meant he possessed a stronger sense for food than humans do.

He tested a piece and spit it out. It seemed to taste okay, and didn't harm his stomach, so he took a few more bites. Soon he was comfortably full.

Samuel lifted his paw to his mouth and licked it clean. The rest of his fur received similar treatment until he felt spotless. A nice, thin tree, only a few paces away seemed to be calling out to him. He walked

over, reached out his front legs, and hooked his claws into the bark. With ears laid back and eyes squinted shut he slowly pulled down. A burst of energy flooded through his limbs. Bark tore under his feet as he clawed like a wild animal, marking his territory with scent glands. It wasn't long before he ran out of breath and settled back down to his normal level of sanity.

It really is good to be a cat. But he knew it was time. He felt ready. After all—he finally made it back, and wasn't about to turn away now.

An old, rusty gate was the first thing to welcome him. Newly grown vines wound around its rungs. He passed through, feeling shivers of uncertainty. Would his family be happy or mad? Would they take him back? Would they chase him away? Was his trip just a waste of time?

The town stretched before him and he couldn't believe his eyes. The once dusty ground was moist, soft, and pleasant to walk on. The shops were clean and welcoming. But that isn't what made his jaw drop. Gaping, he watched a once dead village now full of life.

People were happily engaging in conversation, a woman curtsied as a man tipped his hat in a gentlemanly manner, and children were playing in the puddles—splashing water at their friends and getting full of mud. Color returned to the villager's faces. Even the twinkles had returned to the eyes of the village grandfathers. No longer

was this a village of dry people. They were full of moisture and were happily sharing it with one another.

Even the mayor was out in the streets, shaking hands and kissing babies. He looked happy to be away from his mountains of paperwork. Samuel stopped to think that, perhaps, since everyone was loving each other, the paperwork would not be as necessary as it once had been. No one would be suing, since they were too busy giving everything away. Theft wouldn't be an issue because everyone was content with what they had. No one inflicted physical pain, because they were concerned with providing care. Those who were once dishonest found that they had no reason to lie. No longer was their focus centered on themselves, but on serving each other, just as his reflection had told him. A large smile crept across his once bleak face.

*Samuel, he thought to himself. My new name. It really is a good name. May I always be reminded of the first Samuel who lived as a servant. May I never fall back into my old and selfish ways. Let the moisture flow out and spread to those around me. May it never evaporate, may I never go dry.*

It wasn't long before he came to his house. He stepped nervously up to the front door, and after a pause, he meowed. The door immediately swung opened and his owners greeted him joyfully. They hugged and petted him without ceasing. Their words comforted him and were filled with the happiness of his return. Even the mice winked at him through a hole in the wall, as if looking forward to chasing one another again. He returned to the home that he knew and loved, and it would be better than ever before.



*I am truly blessed, he thought. How could I have taken all this for granted? I will never do so again.*

The petting and kitty talking continued. He squinted his eyes and purred in delight. He was home at last and nothing truly was something again.

## The End



Purchase Paperback for \$6.99 at Amazon.com:

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1440485275>