

## Dirty Animals

Buck wasn't like other members of his species. In fact, he wasn't like most wild animals at all. For one, he was exceptionally hairy. His brown fur grew in thick bushes that matted as hard as stone when left unclean. He would stare at his domestic cousins, confused by their clean fur and pearly fangs. It was hard for Buck to keep himself clean. Maybe if the others decided to ditch their human homes and get dirty like him, the world would at long last start to make sense.

He wasn't clean, but Buck was smart. Smarter than the rest of his kind. He spent most his days walking along the streets, taking in the world that he belonged to. He pawed around litter – plastic bags and empty soda cups – squinting at the words, imagining himself to be reading their bold logos. If he could, he would love to write. He had so much he wanted to say to everyone. He had seen so much in his days.

A few miles away from where Buck roamed, there was a tangle of apartment complexes. The apartments were the territory of a mother cat who wasn't like other member of her species. Her kitten was over three months old and she still kept him around. The streets outside of the apartment were not safe. When she was young, the mother cat nearly lost her life to a car thundering down the road. Now that she had reared a kitten of her own, it made no sense to let her little tomcat go.

The mother cat and her kitten spent most of their days sprawled out on a warm garden of rocks near the parking lot. They both had white and gray fur, but often times you couldn't see the white patches. The mother cat could taste the dirt and car exhaust as her sandpaper tongue raked through the kitten's fur. Sometimes the humans got a bit too grabby with the wild cats. Particularly, the human children would chase them, laughing as they ran, never stopping. It was

still the safest spot for two scrawny cats. Sometimes, the more careless humans left out tins of fish for them to eat.

Buck was a busy creature. He needed plenty of rest during in the warm days so he could spend the cool nights sniffing around dumpsters for food. One of his favorite places to lounge at was near the ice dispenser at the neighborhood grocery store. It gave him somewhere to return to. It was like a home.

The shoppers didn't see it that way. They saw the mangy animal and always took careful steps around him. Sometimes a person with an apron would step outside of the store to try to and shoo Buck away. No matter how many times they scared him off, Buck always returned to his spot. It wasn't all bad. Sometimes, they just let him be. Some of the humans were nice and dropped scraps near his jaw.

Until one day, something changed.

He didn't do anything wrong. He was just curled up by the ice dispenser, as he always did during the day. A man in a thick uniform approached him with a metal stick.

Buck's flank ached with a long-buried memory when he saw the stick. He scrambled to his legs and hobbled away from the man.

When the flesh on his paws hit the boiling asphalt, Buck remembered why it was so nice to sit and relax. His skin burned as he raced the man in the uniform. Buck panted, his hot breath sticking to his whiskers, the fleas burrowing deep into his skin. It was a bumpy ride.

The streets along the strip mall were crusted with litter from fast food meals eaten weeks ago. Every corner had a pile of cookies-and-cream pigeon shit. There was a corroded bus stop

and a thick bus exploding with gas on every sidewalk. This was the world Buck knew. This is all he remembered. Why were they chasing him?

“Son!” the mother cat yowled. She padded along the concrete walkway between the tall human homes. Her tail stood tall and alert. “Little tom!”

Her kitten had not returned to their resting spot all night. The sun would be coming up soon. The bruised purple sky was turning pink. Her nostrils flared as she tasted his sweet, milky scent in the air, buried beneath the musk of pollution. Wait, there was another, bitter scent. Her son wasn’t alone.

The mother cat turned the corner. There was her precious kitten, cornered by a large tabby tomcat.

“Get away!” she hissed, her fur bristling as she saw them.

“Mother,” the kitten mewled, his whiskers twitching in delight. “Meet my new friend, Edward. He’s telling me about the human homes.”

Next to the mother and her scrawny young, the tabby was a giant. His smooth, glossy fur and plump size told her that he was well-taken care of by his humans.

On the other side of the pavement, Maroony stood there, trying to puff up her lanky body as much as she could. Her own pelt clung to her bones like roadkill draped on sticks.

“I see you and your kitten struggle out here in the dirt and I often think, how foolish you are,” the tabby purred. “The human home is cold in the summer and warm in the winter. They give you food and shelter for no reason. Why stay out here and torture yourself? It makes no sense.”

Creeping low, the mother approached her kitten, ready to strike if Edward made a move. The housecat watched on, amusement glinting in his amber eyes.

“I take care of my son just fine,” the mother’s throat rumbled. “We don’t need your human garbage.”

“It beats living among real garbage.”

The mother cat hissed and swatted her claws. Anything to scare this housecat away.

“You are weak!” she cried. “Stay away from my son! He will not become a human toy.”

Edward refused to move. The mother braced herself for a sudden attack – until they heard a heavy body rustling in the bushes. The three cats turned their heads and pointed their ears to a dark figure worming its way through a gap in the fence. Their nostrils flooded with a sour scent that surrounded the figure like a fog. The figure lifted its bushy face, ice blue eyes peering out from a dark mask of dirt and fur.

Edward yowled and darted in the direction of his human home. The mother cat watched him run, humming in satisfaction.

Buck kept his eyes on the two cats. The mother cat went on as if Buck wasn’t even there, beginning to groom her son.

“Little tom, stay away from that type of cat,” she instructed. “Stay away from humans and their animals. They hate you for being dirty and only love you if you become their toy.”

“Aw, Mom,” the kitten mewled as he ducked his furry head away.

“Listen to your mother, kitty,” Buck said as he pulled a hind leg from the fence.

“I am sorry, but did I speak to you?” the mother meowed to the stranger.

“No, but I am speaking to you.” The strange animal almost seemed to smile. “My name is Buck. What’s your name?”

“You can call me Maroony,” the mother cat meowed. She batted her son’s ears. “This is my little tom.”

“All night and day, I’ve been chased by humans. Gave up chasing me a while back, but I might have to hide out for a while.” Buck explained. He broke into a coughing fit that cracked through his lungs. When he could breathe again, he wiped a trail of spit off on his forearm. “They’re scared of me, I think. How come I didn’t scare you?”

“I’ve lived on the streets before,” Maroony answered. “I know that your kind is of no danger to me.”

“Ah. It’s nice to have a friend.” Buck’s blue eyes glistened. “Well then, Maroony, would you say the grass around these houses are good for sleeping on?”

“Don’t sleep on the grass unless you want to wake up blasted with water from the ground rain,” Maroony replied. She shuddered at the memory of all the times her and her kitten were blasted with sprinklers. “My little tom and I need rest. Best of luck to you, Buck.”

Buck dipped his head to her. “And you, Maroony.”

The mother cat and her kitten left Buck and followed the loose stone path back to their favorite resting spot. They passed the stray dog whose stomach was too bloated to chase a cat. They passed Edward the housecat, who looked down at them from his window. They scared away the flock of pigeons with half their feathers missing.

“What kind of animal was Buck?” the kitten asked.

“I’ve only seen one once before, back when I still lived on the streets,” Maroony responded. “I’m not sure what to call them. All I know is that no other animal likes them.” Maroony stopped in her tracks. She looked back. Buck remained slumped where she left him, wriggling and winking at the morning sun.

She had an idea.

That morning, Maroony and her kitten dozed on the warm rocks. Buck slept better than he had in weeks, a comfortable distance away. Nobody, human or animal, disturbed their rest.

The people living in the apartments walked by and gasped at what they saw. They made sure to keep their distance. Parents made sure to keep their children inside their apartments, for now. No playing outside.

Maroony's kitten got up early before the others did. He looked at the sleeping figures of his mother and Buck, the flies that buzzed around him. The kitten padded away on his soft paws, not making a sound.

When Maroony woke up, she smelled her son's stale scent on the spot he slept the night before. She looked around and saw Buck's blue eyes peering at her from his furry face.

"Oh, did you see where my little tom went?" she asked him.

"He's awful old to be with his mama," Buck mumbled, his voice weak and his shaggy body not moving. His throat began to rumble, which broke into a cough.

"I know," Maroony meowed. She looked up at the humans from the second story balconies. They watched the animals from on high. They had their phones pressed against their heads.

"I used to have five kittens," Maroony said. "They were all taken away. I wanted to see at least one grow old, to know that I succeeded. To know that I..." She stopped herself, choked by sudden emotion.

"You're a good mom," Buck said, closing his eyes. "I don't remember if anyone cared about me. I wish I had a mother like you."

“You have to have someone who wants to take care of you,” Maroony insisted. “I like you, Buck, but I don’t see why you are living out here.”

“I could say the same of you,” Buck said defensively. “You could be in a cool human home right now, being petted and fed by some humans. Why aren’t you?”

“Because I am a cat. This is how I was meant to be.”

“What does that make me?” Buck asked. “I was born on the streets, just like you. I can’t remember it being any other way.”

“That’s because you’re sick,” Maroony stated.

There was a silence. That was all Buck’s ears heard. He laid there in silence, watching the cat begin to lick her paw. Every so now and again, whenever he let out a gasp or wheeze, her head would flick to him. Her yellow eyes widened, watching him to see if he posed any danger. She did not speak again, because cats aren’t evolved with the vocal cords or brain regions that produce speech.

An hour passed. Buck didn’t move again.

The cat was scared away by the bright flashing lights of the ambulance. The heavy truck made a slow crawl to park in the middle of the lot. It was in no hurry.

The nearby renters poked their heads out to watch the action. The humans in bright yellow pelts unloaded the stretcher and checked Buck’s body. They were blown back a bit by the smell. They had picked up homeless persons before, but this guy was in it deep.

Buck’s body was loaded onto a stretcher and zipped up in a black bag. Buck had nothing on him. No belongings. No identification.

Hours after the ambulance drove off, the mother cat returned to her spot and sniffed for her kitten. She was just in time to watch her little tom slip beneath a short fence that surrounded

a human patio. A can of food and a friendly pet from a human hand waited for him behind the glass doors.

The dirty cat left the apartment complex. She wandered until, for the first time in months, she returned it to the dirty streets, the realm of dirty animals who die without names.