

Katherine's Gift

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Katherine was building a snow cat. She had already built a snow gentleman, a snow lady, and something that looked like a snow kangaroo. Now it was time to build a snow cat. Her sculptures were not very, very big, but they all looked quite cheery there, side by side, enjoying the view across the field.

“Today is Thursday,” Katherine thought to herself. She liked Thursdays. She liked knowing that Thursday would keep coming back, every single week, just like in the song.

She had learned another song, too, about fall and winter and spring and summer and how they kept going around like a merry-go-round. Katherine liked thinking about the year riding a merry-go-round full of colorful animals and happy music.

If she kept playing long enough, afternoon would turn into evening. December would turn into January. Katherine thought how lovely that was, and wondered if the year ever got dizzy. She thought about things that would come after December.

Sydney's birthday!

"Oh, my goodness," Katherine said, right out loud. "If the merry-go-round keeps going round, then Sydney's birthday is coming!"

Maybe Mommy would make a carrot cake for Sydney's birthday. Katherine would suggest it right away.

She patted the snow cat's ear into shape. She stepped back and admired the cat's long tail and pretty face. She sat down, right in the snow, to talk to the cat.

"You see, Kitty, it's most important to plan ahead for Sydney's birthday. It's her first birthday, so she's never had one before, and she doesn't know how to have one. So I should give her a special Sister Gift." Katherine wondered for a while what a Sister Gift would be.

"Actually, Kitty, it's very hard to plan a Sister Gift for Sydney, most difficult indeed! First, I don't have a car to go shopping in. Second, I don't have any shiny pennies to spend. And after that, I'm not supposed to go shopping without a grown up, and Daddy's busy making bread."

Katherine pointed in through the kitchen window where her Daddy waved with floury, gooey hands.

When Katherine turned back to the snow cat, the cat started growing! The snow cat got taller and taller and larger and larger, taller than Katherine, until it was just the size of Mommy's car. The snow cat stretched, the snow cat yawned. The snow cat shook her huge body and shook all the snow right off!

"Maggie!" Katherine shouted. The giant cat was her friend Maggie exactly, except for being bigger than the cat box. She hugged the giant cat, and scritchd the spot at the base of Maggie's ear. She called to her Daddy, but he had gone back to kneading the bread dough, and wasn't looking out the window.

"Meow," said Maggie, "Good afternoon, Katherine. Do you like this trick?"

"How did you do it, Maggie?"

Maggie licked her should proudly. "Cat magic. I've been taking night courses at the Knowledge College." Maggie saw that Katherine did not understand yet. "The Knowledge College is a school for cats in Dream-land. We can go there when we cat-nap. It's why we cats know so much. I've been studying Cat magic for quite a long time now. Stanley has been reading the judicial philosophy of Radamanthus."

Katherine and Maggie grinned and rolled their eyes. It was just the sort of thing Stanley would read.

“What are you doing here now?” asked Katherine. “If you’ve been learning Cat magic for so long, why didn’t I know it?”

“Remember the disappearing trick I can do with your socks?”

Katherine nodded.

“Cat magic.” Maggie twitched her enormous tail decisively. “But you have a real problem to solve, it seems. And I can help.”

Katherine looked confused. “I have a problem?”

“Right,” said Maggie. “To get Sydney’s Sister Gift. Transportation, spending money, and a grown up to go with you.”

Katherine remembered what she had been thinking about. “But how can you help, Maggie?” she asked.

Maggie stretched her neck and preened. “I’m as big as the car. You could ride on me.”

Katherine clapped her hands with delight. She could indeed ride on Maggie’s big, strong back. “That’s great, Maggie! Now I just have to see if I can find some money...”

“I can help with that, too, Katherine,” interrupted Maggie. “I can show you how to find and make gifts for Sydney without using money.”

“That’s wonderful! Thank you, Maggie! Now I just have to find a grown-up.”

Maggie stood still and pretended not to look at Katherine. That was cat language for “You’re being silly.”

Katherine laughed. “You’re a grown-up, Maggie, and you’re a grown-big, too!” She didn’t hesitate another moment, but climbed right up Maggie’s strong shoulder and settled herself in the softness of extra-warm fur and held on tight.

Maggie gave one good stretch and then bounded away, leaping right over bushes and snow drifts to the lovely woods nearby. The trees were still, tall and silent in their white snowy gowns.

“What are we looking for here, Maggie?” Katherine asked.

Maggie looked about her. “I know that you and Sydney go for walks here. What is Sydney’s favorite thing in the woods?”

Katherine looked about her, at the birch trees shiny with ice on their tips, at the beech trees with coppery leaves still clinging. It was all so beautiful. She took a deep breath of frosty air. “That’s it!” she exclaimed. “Sydney loves best the smell of the pine and hemlock trees. When we came here last summer, Mommy spread her little blanket out right on the pine needles and she cooed and wiggled

until she reached a big fistful of the sweet needles. She squished them all up and stuck her nose in them and laughed.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Maggie. “Why don’t you gather a big bunch of them for her to sniff when it’s too cold to come outside?”

Katherine thought about that. “It would make a huge mess on the carpet,” she said, “and that wouldn’t be nice.” She thought another minute. “But what if the pine needles were in a little pillow? Then she could sleep with the needles right next to her nose and dream about the woods. I’ll bet I could ask my grandmother to help me make a little pillow.” Katherine slid down off of Maggie’s back and burrowed between the branches of a big white pine tree. The snow was held up by the branches, so inside it seemed like a little cave. Katherine stripped little bunches of needles from the branches being careful not to tear the bark. “Thank you, tree, this is for my little sister who loves you.” She stuffed her pockets bursting full of the beautiful needles, wiped her sticky hands on her snow pants, and put her mitts back on.

Back on top of Maggie, they padded around through the woods back to the field. Suddenly Maggie stopped very still and quietly lay down right at the edge of the trees. There, right before them, was the largest flock of wild turkeys Katherine

had ever seen! She watched and watched as they flopped through the snow, sticking to the little trails that had been broken by other animals, by snowmobiles, or by people. There must be more than... well, more than eleventy turkeys. She especially liked to watch when the great Tom turkeys spread their wings and flew in the slow, lumbering way. The turkeys were ambling across, heading for the spot where Maggie and Katherine watched them.

“I’d better not get up, Katherine, that would probably scare the feathers off them.” Maggie shifted her furry body.

“I wonder if turkey feathers are soft,” murmured Katherine to herself. “Sydney likes soft things. Maggie, can Cat magic make the turkeys understand me?”

Maggie considered. “Well, the trees understood you. Of course, trees are smarter than turkeys, but you can certainly try.”

So Katherine slid down again and stepped out of the brush into the path that the turkeys would almost surely take. “Hello,” she called gently, and the Tom turkey right in front of her stopped and stared at her.

Katherine took a deep breath and said, “I’m looking for something very nice for my little sister Sydney. It’s supposed to be a Sister gift for her very first

birthday. I got her something nice to smell, I wondered if turkey feathers are nice to touch?"

She wasn't even sure whether the turkeys understood her, but they all had turned their heads to stare at her. After a moment of silence, there was a general gobbling and clucking and various turkey noises. Then the big Tom turkey waddled cautiously up to her. He was about as tall as Katherine! He bent his head down and rummaged in among his feathers. In a moment he pecked and scritchd a bit and plucked two tiny down feathers. They were so light and fluffy that they almost blew away in the breeze!

Katherine quickly grabbed them as they drifted past and stuck them firmly in her pocket. "Thank you, thank you!" she called to the turkey. Lo and behold, the next turkey had approached and presented her with two down feathers. Katherine chased feathers and called thank you until all eleven of those turkeys had given her two tiny down feathers. That made a lot of soft, soft feathers stuck down in her pockets.

Katherine climbed back up on top of Maggie. "Maybe my grandmother can help me make a pouch, too, so Sydney can reach in and feel the softness with her fingers!" She felt very happy. "Where are we going next, Maggie?"

Maggie stretched and purred and kneaded her feet into the snow. “I think we need to make just one more stop. You have something for her nose and something for her fingers. How about something for her ear?” she gathered up her big, muscled body and leaped away over the snow and all through the hidden places behind the houses until Katherine could hear the sea.

“Oh! How Sydney loves the ocean, Maggie. Every time we came down to the beach last summer she played and played and then fell asleep just the moment we got in the car. She would love to hear the sea’s lullaby again.”

Katherine and Maggie combed the pebbly beach in the biting wind. Maggie turned her face into the wind and let it ruffle her whiskers. She closed her eyes and seemed to be thinking.

A breaking wave made a big crash and then pulled back from the shore, revealing a strange pink spotted shell. Katherine ran to pick it up. It wasn’t a clam or mussel shell. The opening showed her a dark tunnel that spiraled away from her sight. She could look at the spiral from the outside, and the delicate spikes of shell. She wondered what kind of creature had built that pretty shell and lived in it.

She thought of Sydney, and slowly held the shell to her ear. Inside the shell, she heard the roar and hiss of the ocean waves. The sea’s lullaby!

Smiling from ear to ear, she ran and hugged Maggie around the neck.

“Thank you, Maggie, it’s exactly what I wanted.”

Maggie stretched against Katherine and purred. “How about a saucer of hot milk?” she asked.

Katherine considered. “I’m not so sure she can drink out of a... Oh.”

Maggie rolled her eyes.

“Hot milk sounds great,” answered Katherine. She stopped just as she was getting ready to climb back up. “How am I fitting all these things into my pocket?” she asked.

Maggie twitched a whisker. “Cat magic,” she said.

Back at home, Maggie small-en-ated herself so she would fit into the kitchen. Katherine put her treasures safely in a special drawer of her room to make the pillow and pouch later. Daddy was surprised that Katherine wanted warm milk for snack time. She shared it companionably with Maggie, who twitched her tail, lapped the milk, and didn’t say a word.