

The Cat's Owner
By David Nye

Charlie got down on his hands and knees to look under another car.

"Here kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty," he said. "Come here, pretty boy. Come on, Noah."

Claire was standing over him, looking around the night street. Streetlights sat dark on most of the block, and the ones that flickered to life every night illuminated only graffiti and trash.

"You don't have to do this," she said. "It's his own fault he's missing."

"He doesn't like the house since..."

"Since his owner died? Yeah, I'd think not."

Charlie stood and they made their way down the street. Charlie would look under every few cars and call to the cat every few feet. Claire walked slightly apart, clutching a thin cardigan around herself against the fall chill.

"Claire, I'm sorry. I know you don't like this part of town."

"Yeah, I didn't want to move here. And I didn't want you to stay here after I left. You know there are parts of town where you could lose your cat overnight and the worst thing that would happen is a neighbor would give it food it liked more?" She looked around the cold night. "Here, there's a chance it will become food the neighbor likes more."

"They don't eat cats here."

"You don't know what they eat."

"It's an Asian stereotype, this is a Mexican neighborhood."

Claire sniffed distastefully, "I bet cat would make a great burrito."

Charlie was surprised by a voice behind him.

"Hey holmes, this ain't no Mexican neighborhood." A hand grabbed Charlie's hair as he tried to stand up. "Course, it ain't no white boy neighborhood either."

"Long way from white boy neighborhoods, *ese*," said another man as he circled around Charlie, stopping in front to face him in the dark. "This neighborhood is for Cubans."

"I'm just," Charlie's words faltered as his head was jerked back harder. "I'm just looking for my cat, guys."

"Are you Cuban?"

Charlie shook his head.

"Doesn't have to be full. Half? A quarter? Is the cat Cuban?"

Charlie shook his head three more times.

Claire was against the brick wall near the mouth of the alley mostly obscured by shadows. She was petrified with fear.

A clanging noise came from the alley. Charlie jumped and Claire yelped in surprise.

"Cats don't run down here. They know better." The leader lit a cigarette as he spoke.

"Is there anything we can do to make this right?" Charlie didn't want a fight in front of Claire, not after all she had been through. Charlie chanced a glance in her direction and was surprised to see her darting into the alley.

"You have the money for a fee? Fine? Safe passage? No? Special skills that would be helpful to my organization? Then no, I'm not sure you can make it right.."

The hand gripping his hair grew firmer as the gang leader pulled a large pistol from his pants and pointed it at Charles.

Just then, a streak of black and white slammed into the gunman's face and the man holding Charlie let go out of shock.

The shooter managed to keep a hand on his gun but Charlie took off as soon as the grip in his hair slipped. He ran as fast as he could back to his apartment a few blocks away.

Charlie sprinted the full distance. It was close enough to this neighborhood that he was worried his attackers would follow, but the only thing that chased him was Noah, the black and white cat Charlie had been looking for.

The two of them ran through the last turns and up the stairs to their apartment.

Sitting on the couch when they arrived was Claire. Noah cleared the threshold and immediately ran for Claire's lap while Charles locked the door.

Claire was crying as Charlie sat next to her. Noah purred at her petting like he never did for Charlie.

“I was so scared,” she said. “I know it seems ridiculous, for me to be scared of them, but it was so much like last time.”

“Were those the same guys?”

She shook her head. “No, probably from the same group though.” She stroked Noah.

“Thanks for getting my cat back,” Claire said.

“No problem, sweetie.” Charlie petted Noah, his hands passing through Claire’s wispy form.