

A Home for Sophie

Martin Gilbert loved animals of all kinds, but he was especially fond of cats. He and his family had two of them, a coal-black Persian named Mocha and an orange tabby they called Carrot. Back before Martin had started school, the two were hyperactive little kittens, always playing and wrestling and running up the drapes. Their energy and endurance had once seemed endless, but now they were older, overweight, loving companions who slept excessively. There had been a third cat, a calico named Sophie, but she had strayed away the previous summer. Despite all the time that had passed, Martin hoped that she'd come back someday.

There was an animal shelter near the Gilbert home, and the staff there welcomed visitors. Nancy, the shelter's manager, liked it when strangers came and played with the dogs and cats; it allowed the animals to get used to people and helped prepare them for permanent homes of their own.

The shelter's cats lived in an area called, appropriately, the Cat Room. It was a big, bright place with scratching posts, cat toys, and plenty of windowsills. When Martin visited, which was often, he'd look around the room for his favorite residents. When one of the cats wasn't there anymore, he'd be somewhat sad, but he would console himself with the thought that a formerly homeless animal had finally been adopted by a loving family. And besides, there were plenty of other cats who always came running when he visited, rubbing against him, crawling up his legs, and trying to outperform each other to gain his undivided attention. And although Martin's parents were firm that he couldn't adopt any of them, he felt like they belonged to him anyway.



One Saturday afternoon, while Martin was visiting the Cat Room, Nancy walked in, carrying a small cat crate. She set the crate on the floor and opened it.

"Martin, here's someone who's been with us for a while, but you haven't had the pleasure of meeting her yet," Nancy said.

A tiny, skinny cat came out of the crate, slunk to the nearest wall, and followed the wall to an empty corner. She lay down, pulling her feet beneath her as if to make herself even smaller. When she turned her face toward Martin, he saw that she had only one eye.



"She's a little timid," Nancy explained. "She was found abandoned in an unoccupied building. She had to be isolated due to health problems, so the other animals wouldn't catch her germs."

Martin looked at the newcomer, who cocked her head as she tried to make sense of the romping going on around her.

Nancy went on, "The absence of company for so long might make it hard for her to adapt, especially with her disadvantage. When she first arrived, she had pneumonia and a bad infection in her eyes. She lost one of them, and the one that's left is cloudy and sensitive to light. She can't see very clearly with it, but she can detect motion."

"She's so little," commented Martin.

"Well," said Nancy, "She looks immature, but she's really just underdeveloped." Her voice became a little wistful. "We're afraid that nobody's going to want her."

"She's done being sick, though, right?" Martin asked hopefully.

"We think so." Nancy shrugged. "We *hope* so." Then, to cheer things up, she said, "Nobody's given her a name yet, so I would love it if you could help me give her a name."

"Sophie," said Martin, without thinking. And Sophie it was.

On his next visit to the Cat Room, Martin petted and played with the cats while he watched Sophie wander and explore. She sniffed and listened, listened and sniffed, and remained mostly unnoticed by her new roommates.

Then, a fly buzzed over Sophie's head. Martin watched in amazement as Sophie reared onto her hind legs and clapped the insect between her front paws. The fly fell to the floor. Sophie sat and looked around as if trying to detect whether she'd impressed anyone. She had; Martin was very impressed. He could not conceive of how she had accomplished what he'd just seen.

"She was catching them yesterday too," said Nancy when Martin told her how Sophie caught the fly. "She's quite a little show-off. I wouldn't want to be a fly in this place, I'll tell you that."

"But...I mean...how?" Martin asked. "She can barely see the flies!"

"She hears them," Nancy explained. "She uses her sense of hearing to navigate her way around. She's as mobile as any cat we have here."

And as if to prove Nancy's point, Sophie caught two more flies the next time Martin came to visit.

But then, on Martin's following visit, Sophie was gone.

"Sophie's not sick again, is she?" Martin asked Nancy, fearing the worst.

Nancy laughed, "Not at all. In fact, the vet looked at her yesterday and said she was going to be fine from here on out."

Martin suspected what Nancy was about to say next.

"She performed her fly-catching routine yesterday for a little girl. It was love at first sight," smiled Nancy.

Martin felt the mix of gloom and happiness that he always experienced when a favorite cat of his moved on.

Nancy noticed the expression on his face and said, "By the way, the family really liked the name Sophie. They said they're going to keep using it."

This detail made Martin smile, and he pictured Sophie running, leaping, and clapping, ridding her new home of flies.

