

NIKKI AND THE CLOSET

Once upon a time there was a cat named Nikki who lived with a boy named TJ, a girl named Stacie, a baby named Alyssa, and their mother and father. Nikki loved living with this family. There were lots of things to do in the house, and even more things to do outdoors. On rainy days Nikki played indoors. Nikki didn't like the rain! Today it was raining, so Nikki was playing inside the house.

Nikki's favorite toys were little white pieces of plastic that came with TJ's Tinkertoy set. When Nikki batted them with her paw they skittered across the floor, bouncing first one way and then the other as they tumbled. It was fun to send them flying across the carpet, but even more fun to play with them in the hallway. The hallway had hardwood floors, so they'd go a lot farther when she batted them and they made a loud clattering noise as they went. Nikki would scamper after them, her claws scritch-scratching on the slippery floor. Sometimes the toy would bounce down the stairs and Nikki would fly down the stairs after it, her paws thumping on each step as she went. The toy was just the right size to pick up in her mouth and carry it back up the stairs. Then she'd bat it around the hallway some more. She could play this game for hours! That is, she could play this game for hours if TJ's father let her. Sometimes he got tired of hearing her scratching her way across the floor and banging into doors. Especially when she did this in the middle of the night. Sometimes he took the white toy away from her. One night he walked out of the bedroom in his pajamas, tossed the white toy in the hall closet, and slammed the door so she couldn't get it.

On this particular rainy day Nikki had already played with her catnip mouse, explored the dusty cave under the living room couch, and chewed several leaves off the potted plant on the kitchen table. She felt cooped up and wanted to get some exercise. Chasing one of the white toys would be lots of fun, so she scampered up the stairs to look for one. She noticed the closet door wasn't closed all the way. Maybe the toy TJ's father had tossed into the closet was still there! She pawed at the door until she pulled it open enough to slip inside.

It was dark and slightly musty inside the closet. Nikki waited for a moment until her eyes adjusted to the dark. The floor of the closet was filled with boots, shoes, umbrellas, and a few

scattered gloves and scarves that had fallen from above. Above her sweatshirts, jackets, and overcoats hung on hangers. The overcoats stretched almost all the way to the floor. It was going to be harder to find the white toy than Nikki expected. The shoes and boots filled the closet with an almost overpowering mixture of smells, so there was no way she could use her nose to find the toy. She gingerly climbed over the clutter on the floor, peering into the darkness as she looked for the toy. Finally she found it – inside a boot. She stuck her paw into the boot and reached down as far as she could, but she couldn't find it. Then she pulled her paw out and stuck her head into the boot. She could see it, but she couldn't get her head far enough into the boot to grab it with her teeth. Then she pulled her head out and stuck her paw in again. Outside, in the hall, she could hear noises.

“Come on, kids. Aren't you ready yet? We're going to be late.” It was TJ's mother calling. Nikki could hear scurrying footsteps in the hall, but her attention was focused on the toy. As she tried to stretch her paw out further the boot she was standing on flipped over. Nikki and the boot tumbled to the floor. There! The toy bounced into a position where she could grab it. She was just pulling the toy out when there were more footsteps in the hall and the closet door closed with a click.

Nikki grabbed the toy in her mouth and leapt to the door. She slammed against it with a thump, but it didn't budge. She scratched the door with her claws and started mewling, but there was no one in the hall to hear her. She heard the front door slam. Then she heard the car start, back into the street, and drive off. She was trapped! Fortunately Nikki was no scaredy-cat, and she certainly wasn't going to panic over a little thing like being locked in a closet. After pushing against the door a few more times to see if it would open she started looking around to see what there was to do. Her first thought was to play with the white toy, but there were too many shoes and other things on the floor to chase it. Next she tried jumping from one shoe to another, sticking her head and paw as far into each shoe as she could to see if there was anything interesting in the toe.

When she jumped onto a tall rubber boot it tipped over and she crashed into something made of wood. It tipped over and fell to the floor with a loud “Twang!” It was a guitar TJ's mother had played when she was in college. Nikki climbed on top of it and discovered it made the most

wonderful screeching noise when she sharpened her claws on the strings. It would have been even more fun if there had been someone nearby to annoy with the noise, but since Nikki was the only one in the house she soon tired of this game.

Nikki couldn't see anything else on the floor to play with, so she climbed up one of the overcoats to see if there was anything interesting higher up. When she got to the top she could see there was a shelf full of things above the coats. It was hard to climb up onto the shelf, though. To reach the edge of the shelf she had to climb out on the shoulder of the overcoat, and when she did that her weight tipped the coat hangar away from the shelf. She could just barely stretch far enough to get a paw onto the shelf, but when she tried to grip the shelf her claws just pulled a mitten off the shelf. She shook the mitten off her paw and tried again. This time she pulled a hat off the shelf. Eventually she pulled two hats, three mittens, two gloves, and a purple scarf off the shelf before she finally cleared a space big enough for her claws to grip the wooden shelf. It took a lot of scrambling and another falling glove before she finally lifted herself onto the shelf.

It was even darker on the shelf than it was in the lower part of the closet. Nikki blinked and slowly inched forward while her eyes adjusted to the dark. Suddenly she saw another cat! She instinctively arched her back and hissed as she backed away from the cat. She stopped when she backed into a stack of puzzle boxes.

“Whack!” Something hard hit Nikki on the head. She shook her head and saw that a round plastic jar had fallen off the stack of boxes and hit her. The lid had popped off and the box smelled funny. Nikki stretched out her neck so she could look inside the box and sniff.

“Ahhh-Chooo!” A cloud of face powder flew out of the jar and covered her face. Fortunately she closed her eyes when she sneezed so she didn't get powder in them. She blinked a couple of times, and then remembered the other cat. She turned to look at it, and it was staring back at her. Its head was covered with face powder. Nikki tilted her head and the other cat tilted its head.

“A mirror!” Nikki thought with disgust. “What do people want with those things? I should have known it wasn't real because I didn't smell another cat.” Nikki groomed her head with her

front paws and wiped off as much of the powder as she could. Then she looked around to see what else was on the shelf. There didn't seem to be much here, but maybe there was something on top of the puzzle boxes. She climbed up to the top of the pile. There was a small pile of lipstick, eyebrow pencils, and other makeup items sitting on top of a crinkled newspaper. It looked like the makeup had been wrapped in the newspaper and held together by a couple of rubber bands, but the rubber bands had broken. "That's probably where the face powder came from" thought Nikki. Nikki didn't have any interest in the makeup, but the newspaper was a different story. Cats love newspaper! She batted the makeup away with her paw and lay down on the newspaper. She tucked her front paws underneath her chest, closed her eyes, and started purring. Soon she was fast asleep.

A couple of hours later Nikki woke up. There were still no noises in the house. This was getting serious. She had been stuck inside this closet for a long time. She was hungry and she had to use the litter box. She looked around. The light seeping in through the crack around the door was dimmer, so it must be late afternoon. Fortunately cats don't need much light to see. Nikki stood up and stretched. She didn't notice that one end of the boxes hung over the edge of the shelf until she stepped on that end and the whole stack of boxes began to tip. She tried to jump back, but that just made the boxes flip up in her face.

"Crash! Bang! Twangggg!" The puzzle boxes, the puzzle pieces, the jar of face powder, and a very surprised cat tumbled off of the shelf. Nikki hated falling, not because she was afraid of getting hurt (cats almost always land on their feet) but because it was embarrassing. Cats are supposed to be graceful, poised, and beautiful, but it's hard to look graceful when you're falling in a closet amid a shower of puzzle pieces and a cloud of face powder. Nikki grabbed at a sweater as she fell but it just pulled off the coat hangar. Then she managed to catch hold of an overcoat with her back claws, but she started to tumble over backwards. She frantically reached out with her front paws and managed to grab the door handle. She was hanging upside down in the closet, stretched between an overcoat and the closet door.

"Now what?" she thought. She took a deep breath and let go with her back claws. Her back thumped against the door and she scrambled to turn around and face the door. Her front paws were losing their grip and she frantically pawed at the knob trying to get a better grip while she

swung underneath it. Finally she lost her grip and fell with a thump onto the hallway. It took her a moment to realize she was outside the closet, sitting in a pile of shoes, mittens, and puzzle pieces which had tumbled out of the closet when the door opened.

“Now how did that happen?” Nikki wondered as she looked up at the door. She felt certain it had something to do with that knob, and the way she’d twisted around while she hung from it. “Humans always grab doorknobs before they walk through a door” she thought. “Maybe that’s how they get it to open.” She wanted to try it again, on another door, and she knew just the door to practice on. The door to the pantry. Just inside that door she knew there was a big bag of cat food sitting on the floor. “I’ll go there in a minute” she thought. But first she had an appointment with the litter box.