

The Gift of the Magpie

Once upon a time, there was a boy named TJ. He lived in a big house with his mother and father, his little sister Tracy, and his cat Nikki. TJ and Tracy often told their friends that Nikki was “their” cat, but Nikki wouldn’t have agreed with that. Nikki was her own cat. She loved TJ and Tracy very much, and she felt that she was a part of their family, but she didn’t “belong” to anyone. Nikki thought of herself as a wild jungle animal, a fierce hunter, and a mighty queen who ruled over all the land that was visible from the top of the tool shed. It was true that this ferocious beast liked to sleep in a yarn basket next to the heat vent, wouldn’t set foot outdoors if it was raining, and would mew plaintively while rubbing against TJ’s mother’s leg any time she opened a can of tuna, but that just proved that even a wild animal appreciates the finer things in life.

One crisp winter morning as Nikki was patrolling the borders of her realm she met Snookums, a gray Persian cat who lived in a yellow house two doors down from Nikki’s house. Nikki had never been especially fond of Snookums, and the feeling was mutual. They weren’t enemies, but Nikki felt that Snookums was conceited, pompous, and boring. Snookums, on the other hand, felt that Nikki must not be very smart, because any cat with intelligence could clearly see that Persians were the superior breed of cats.

“Hello, Snookums” Nikki said coolly.

“Oh, hello Nikki darling” Snookums replied. “I didn’t see you loitering beneath that tree. Your drab coloring looks so much like dead leaves and dried-up moss that you just fade into the background.”

“It’s supposed to” Nikki replied. “It’s called camouflage. Blending into the background helps me sneak up on mice when I’m hunting.”

“Yes, well I’m sure there must be *some* good points to being undistinguished” Snookums answered. “Personally I’ve always liked the fact that people admire and adore me when I walk into a room. Speaking of which, did you notice my new collar?” She stretched out her neck and lifted her nose even higher in the air so that Nikki could clearly see her collar. “It’s genuine

Vachetta leather, and the bell is sterling silver. You know, a collar makes a statement when you walk into a room. You can tell a lot about a cat just by looking at its collar.”

“It, it looks very nice.” Nikki said awkwardly. She felt confused. She didn’t want to say anything nice to Snookums, but the collar *was* beautiful. Nikki had never paid any attention to collars before, but suddenly she felt ashamed of her plain blue collar with the aluminum tags from the veterinarian’s office. She wanted a fancy collar like the one Snookums was wearing. Then she realized that what she *really* wanted was that collar. She wanted to wear it, and she wanted Snookums to stare at her neck and wish she had a collar like that.

“It doesn’t just *look* nice,” Snookums corrected. “It *is* nice. Vachetta leather is *so* much more comfortable than, than whatever that is that you’re wearing. Woven nylon? Those synthetic fibers just don’t breathe the way genuine leather does. The people I live with just *adore* me, and they always buy me the finest accessories.” Snookums strode off toward her house with her nose held high.

Nikki shuffled miserably back home, but instead of going inside she wandered into the woods behind her house. She was acutely aware of her collar. It seemed old and shabby. It also felt uncomfortable, like the synthetic fibers weren’t breathing properly. It felt like it was chafing her neck. Finally, she could stand it no longer. She lay down on the ground, put her front paws behind the collar, and pushed. The woven fabric was designed to stretch, and she was soon able to push the collar over her head. She tossed it onto a pile of leaves under an old oak tree. Then she turned her back to it and contemptuously kicked dirt and leaves onto it with her back legs, burying it as though it were a piece of trash. Then she ran back to her house, eager to see what kind of a new collar TJ’s mother would give her when she saw that Nikki had lost the old one.

Tracy was the first one to notice Nikki’s collar was missing. “Look, Mommy!” she said. “Nikki doesn’t have a collar.”

“Oh dear,” her mother answered. “Her tags were on that collar. We’ll have to take her to the vet to get new ones.”

The vet?!!! Nikki hadn’t expected that. She knew that the veterinarian could make her feel better when she was sick or injured, but there was nothing wrong with her now. Trips to the vet

when she was feeling good were usually the worst. That's when they poked her with needles or made her take bad tasting medicine. Once they even gave her a bath with some stuff that smelled funny. And what they did with a thermometer, well, let's not even talk about that! Nikki tried to hide under the couch but they soon found her. They tucked her into her cat carrier and drove to the vet's office.

The vet's office smelled funny, and there were dogs barking in the background. The vet was kind and gentle, as she always was, but she put Nikki on a metal table where there was nothing for her claws to grab hold of. "So, Miss Nikki's lost her tags," the vet said. "We'll just give her a quick checkup and look at her records to see if she's due for any shots."

By the time she was finished, Nikki had endured two shots, one pill, and they put something smelly on the back of her neck. And, of course, they had taken her temperature. "This new collar had better be worth it" Nikki thought. They went back out to the receptionist's counter and Tracy was holding her while her mother talked to the lady behind the counter. The lady set a rack full of collars on the counter. There, near the top of the rack, was the same collar Snookums had been wearing! But that wasn't the one the lady was taking off the rack. Tracy's mother was pointing to a woven blue collar, just like Nikki's old one. Nikki hadn't gone through all this just to get another blue collar! She sprang from Tracy's arms and started batting the leather collar at the top of the rack.

"Look, Mommy" Tracy said. "She wants that one."

"How much is that one?" Tracy's mother asked.

"It's the same price" the lady replied. "It's an inexpensive leather with a chrome plated brass bell."

Inexpensive leather? Brass bell? Nikki was sure that this was the same collar Snookums had been wearing. She began to suspect that Snookums had been lying about the "Vachetta leather" and the "sterling silver bell."

The lady put some new tags on the collar and fastened it around Nikki's neck. Then they drove home. Nikki immediately ran upstairs to Tracy's bedroom so she could look at herself in the mirror. She looked strange with the new collar. The collar looked very nice, but somehow it

just didn't look right on her. She felt a little self-conscious. As though she was wearing another cat's collar. Still, it was a very nice collar. She ran downstairs and mewed at the door until Tracy let her out. "Now don't lose your new collar" Tracy said as she opened the door.

"Fat chance of that!" Nikki thought as she ran out the door. "I'm not about to go back to the vet's again!" She strode into the woods behind their house.

The first thing Nikki noticed about the new collar was that it made an annoying tinkling noise as she walked. It wasn't just the bell itself, the collars rattled against the bell every time she took a step. She soon discovered this made it impossible to hunt. Nikki had long since given up hunting for food. The cat food her family gave her was much tastier than anything she could catch. But she did love to creep up on mice and small birds, silently getting within range, and then pouncing to a spot right beside them. She laughed at the startled looks on their faces as they scurried or flew away from her, knowing as well as she did that she could have caught them if she'd really wanted to. Nikki thought this was great sport, but now she couldn't do it. She tried to sneak up on a field mouse who was impudently sitting on the ground in her woods, nibbling on a small piece of mushroom. As soon as she took the first cautious step in his direction the bell on her collar tinkled. The mouse instantly stopped nibbling and looked straight at her. She tried to squat down and hide behind some small plants, but the bell tinkled as she did this and gave her away. The mouse gathered up the pieces of his mushroom and carried them into a hole under a tree root. He was in no great hurry, as Nikki was still far away. She had similar results when she tried to stalk a robin who was looking for worms, and when she tried to creep up on a squirrel he scampered up a nearby tree and laughed at her with that irritating chatter squirrels have.

Nikki gave up hunting and walked further into the woods. She soon spotted Ed, a black and white tomcat who lived about a half-mile down the road. Ed roamed far and wide, and Nikki often saw him in these woods.

"Hi Ed!" Nikki called cheerfully.

"Hi Nikki," Ed replied. "I thought I heard a squirrel laughing at something. Have you seen a squirrel around here?"

“Not recently,” Nikki answered. She hoped Ed wouldn’t ask her how long ago “recently” was. She didn’t want to tell him the squirrel was laughing at her. She was beginning to feel a little self-conscious about that bell on her collar, and also about how bright the leather looked compared to her old one. She didn’t want Ed to know that, though, so she decided to act proud about it. “Notice anything new about me?” she asked.

Ed stared at her intently. “Your eyes are brown!” he finally replied.

“My eyes have always been brown” Nikki replied, a little exasperated. “It’s my collar.”

“Oh, yeah. I see you’re wearing a collar now.” Ed responded quickly.

“I’ve *always* worn a collar, Ed. This is a new one.” Nikki said. “It has a bell” she added coyly.

“Oh, I see.” Ed answered with embarrassment. “It looks good on you. Doesn’t that bell get in the way when you’re hunting?”

“Honestly! Men don’t know a *thing* about fashion!” Nikki said icily as she marched away. She felt guilty as she did it, though. Not only was Ed absolutely right about the bell, she realized she was beginning to talk and act like Snookums. In a little while she saw her friend Muffin chasing some dead leaves that were blowing in the wind. “Hi Muffin!” she called out.

“Hi Nikki!” Muffin replied. Then she stopped dead and stared at Nikki. “Whoa! New collar!”

“Oh, yes it is new.” Nikki tried to sound casual. “I lost my old one so I had to replace it.”

“It sure is fancy-looking!” Muffin answered. “It looks just like Snookum’s collar. Is that one Vachetta leather, too?”

“I really didn’t pay any attention to what kind of leather it was,” Nikki answered. “I just picked it out because I thought it looked nice.”

“It does look grand,” Muffin said hesitantly.

“Do you think it’s too much?” Nikki asked.

“Well, no. It’s not too much. I’m just not used to seeing you in such a fancy collar.” Muffin explained. “Doesn’t that bell make it hard to go hunting?”

“There’s more to life than just hunting,” Nikki said defensively. “A collar makes a statement when you walk into a room.”

“And your collar says ‘I don’t hunt’” laughed Muffin. “Hey, wait. Come back. I was only joking.”

But Nikki didn’t come back. Nikki was feeling miserable about her new collar. She had wanted it so much when she saw Snookums wearing it, but now she realized it wasn’t the right collar for her. She was about to cry when she heard a bell tinkling and saw Snookums approaching. She quickly dried her eyes and straightened up into a proper, haughty cat pose. “Hello, Snookums” she said coolly.

“Hello, Nikki dear” Snookums answered with equal restraint. Then she stopped and stared icily at Nikki’s collar for a moment. “I see you’re copying my style.”

“It’s not exactly *your* style,” Nikki replied. “They sell them at the vet’s office to anyone who wants one. They’re the same price as any other collar.”

“Then it’s clearly not Vachetta leather with a sterling silver bell” Snookums answered with disdain.

“No,” said Nikki. “It’s clearly not. As a matter of fact, the lady at the vet’s office said it’s a brass bell. With chrome plating. Just like yours.”

“Well I never!” Snookums exclaimed. “I am not going to stand around and be insulted by someone who can’t even tell the difference between a silver bell and a cheap knock-off! Good day, Nikki. Enjoy your dime store jewelry.” Snookums tossed her head so her bell tinkled as she turned away and marched home.

“And good riddance” thought Nikki. She was no longer sad about her collar. She was angry with herself. She realized she had wanted a fancy collar to impress someone she didn’t even like. Not only had it failed to impress Snookums, she’d insulted two of her best friends just because they had told the truth about her collar. It wasn’t the right collar for her. It was too

fancy, and the bell made it impossible to hunt. And to make matters worse, it wasn't even comfortable. Snookums had lied when she said it "breathed" better than her woven collar. It didn't breathe at all. It was hot and sweaty where it wrapped around her neck, and her neck was beginning to itch. She wished she'd never seen this collar. She tucked her front paws behind the collar and tried to push it over her head, but it wouldn't budge. It didn't stretch like her old collar did. She pushed even harder and shook her head from side to side. Suddenly, her left front paw slipped under the collar and socked her in the chin. She tried to pull it back, but it was stuck fast. She hopped around on three legs and tried to shake her way out of the collar, but her leg was trapped under the collar. Frantically she lay down on her side and used her left rear leg to try to push the collar over her left front leg. It still wouldn't budge. Frantically, she began kicking the collar with both rear legs. Suddenly, with sickening ease, her right rear paw slipped under the collar. It, too, kicked her in the chin as it slid through. Now both her left front and her right rear paws were trapped under the collar. She couldn't stand up. She thrashed back and forth wildly as she lay on the ground, trying to free her paws, but it was no use. The leather collar squeezed her legs tightly against her neck and it wouldn't let go. Finally she stopped thrashing and lay gasping for air as she tried to catch her breath. Gradually, she became aware of some high squeaky voices behind her.

"Hey there, Ms. Kitty-Kat. Having some trouble?"

"Awwww. Has the big strong puddy-tat got her paws caught?"

"Looks to me like that cat is hog-tied. Anyone got a branding iron?"

Nikki stretched her neck out and saw that a small crowd of field mice had gathered behind her. They were laughing and pointing as they called out their insults. Some of the bolder mice were creeping up closer to her. One was little more than a foot away. "Come a little closer" thought Nikki.

As if on cue, the mouse stepped closer. "It appears that this cat is dumber than a hound dog!" the mouse called to his friends. "I do believe I could **Sque e e e e e e e e e e!**" The mouse's squeak faded in the distance as he sailed through the air, finally landing in a pile of leaves about twenty feet away. Nikki had lashed out with her free hind leg and kicked him. The rest of the mice scurried for safety as he sailed over their heads.

“Well, that took care of one problem anyway” Nikki thought to herself. She tried carefully turning this way and that, seeing if there was any position in which she could pull her legs free. What started as a careful set of experiments in positioning her body soon degenerated into another frenzy of wild thrashing as frustration and panic overcame her. Exhausted, she finally stopped thrashing and lay panting upon the ground. “I’ll try again after I catch my breath” she told herself. “There’s got to be a way out of this, only I’m just . . . so tired.” Gradually her breathing slowed and her heart stopped pounding. She closed her eyes as she lay still on the cold ground, trying to think of a way out of this predicament. She was beginning to doze off when . .

“Ouch!” She felt a sudden, sharp pain on her rump. She opened her eyes and saw that a bird had landed on her. As she watched, it pecked her again. “Ouch!” she called out. “What are you doing?”

“Looking for ticks” the bird answered, cocking his head as he eyed her fur before giving her another sharp peck. “My grandmother told me that we Magpies used to ride bison across the prairie, picking ticks out of their thick fur.” He pecked again.

“Ouch!” Nikki called out again. “Stop that! Do I look like a bison to you?”

“Maybe” the bird replied as it turned to look her in the face. “I don’t know what a bison looks like. Are you a bison?”

Nikki was about to make a smart-alec comment about not being a “bird brain,” but she realized that she wasn’t in a very good position to insult anyone with a sharp beak. Besides, she wasn’t entirely sure what a bison looked like herself. “No” she finally answered. “I am not a bison, and I do not have any ticks.”

“That’s too bad” the bird said. “I’ve always wanted to pick ticks off a bison.” He raised his wings to fly away.

“Wait!” Nikki called out. She suddenly had an idea. “There might be ticks in my collar.”

“Really?” the bird asked. “Have you ever had ticks there before?”

“I don’t know” Nikki replied truthfully. “It’s a new collar, so I’ve never looked. But if you don’t find any ticks there, I promise I’ll come back her the next time I have ticks and let you pick

them off me.”

“OK” the bird said happily. He hopped up on Nikki’s shoulder and began to peck away at the collar.

“Keep pecking at the same spot” Nikki suggested. “They might be down deep.”

In almost no time the bird had pecked one spot of the collar so thin that it snapped. Nikki stood up and stretched her cramped legs. “Thanks for freeing me” she said. “Did you find any ticks?”

“No” the bird said sadly. “No ticks.”

“I promise I’ll come back the next time I have some” Nikki replied, as she picked up the broken collar in her mouth and headed home. She was careful to make certain she kept the tags this time. She didn’t want to go back to the vet!

“Nikki’s new collar broke!” Tracy announced as she let Nikki into the house. “She brought it back but it’s broken.”

Tracy’s mother was cooking dinner on the stove. “I can’t stop what I’m doing to get her a new one” she answered. “I’ll call your father. He drives right by a pet store on his way home. He can pick one up tonight. Just keep Nikki inside until we get her a new collar.”

When Tracy’s father came home he had a plastic bag in his hand. “Where’s Nikki?” he asked. “I bought her a fancy new collar.” He reached into the bag and pulled out a brilliantly white plastic collar. It had bright red stitching on the edges and was studded with fake diamonds. It also had a gleaming silver bell that was twice as big as the bell on her leather collar. “Merry Christmas, Nikki!” he said as he held it in front of her face.

“Wow!” said Tracy. “That’s beautiful! Is it Christmas already?”

“Not for a few weeks yet” her father answered. “This is an early Christmas present.”

“That sure is a fancy collar, Dad!” TJ said.

“That’s hideous!” Nikki thought. “It’s even worse than the leather collar. Much worse!” But

she meekly let TJ pick her up and hold her while his father buckled the new collar around her neck.

Nikki didn't go outside for two days. She was afraid of what her friends would think of the new collar. But she finally got so bored of staying inside that she decided to risk it. Besides, she was feeling guilty about the way she'd tricked the Magpie into helping her. She had never had ticks in her life, and even if she did have one she didn't trust the Magpie to peck it off of her. So she pulled a little piece of cloth out of the mother's quilting basket, wrapped it around some cat food, and set off to take a present to the Magpie.

She looked all through the woods, but didn't see a sign of the Magpie. When she got to the oak tree, she suddenly remembered that's where she'd buried her old collar. She dug all through the leaves, but there was no sign of it. Finally she gave up looking for it. She decided to visit Trixie and her new kittens. She didn't have enough cat food for the kittens, though, and anyway she wanted to give it to the Magpie, so she buried her bundle of cat food in the leaves and set off for the hollow under a fallen tree where Trixie lived.

Trixie's kittens went nuts when they saw her new collar. They thought it was the most beautiful thing they had ever seen. They kept batting at the bell, and asking Nikki if those were real diamonds. Finally Nikki told them they could play with it if they could help pull it over her head. She wasn't about to go visit the vet again! It only took a few seconds for them to pull it off. TJ's father hadn't fastened it very tightly around her neck. Nikki and Trixie talked for a long time while the kittens played with the collar. They took turns slipping it over their heads and marching proudly around the den. It was much too big for them, though, and the bell dragged on the ground. When they tripped over it, it was time for the next kitten to wear it. Finally it was time for Nikki to go home. The kittens looked so disappointed when she reached for her collar that she changed her mind. "Why don't you kids keep it" she suggested. "It will be sort of an early Christmas present." The kittens went wild with joy, but they all calmed down and said "Thank you Miss Nikki" when their mother prompted them. Nikki had a warm feeling in her heart when she left the den and heard the kittens mewling with delight as they played with the collar. She knew it meant another trip to the vet, but it was worth it.

As Nikki walked back toward the oak tree, she saw Snookums strutting along a path. Only

she didn't seem to have her head held quite as high as she normally did. Nikki blinked her eyes in surprise. Could that be a plain, white plastic collar around Snookums' neck? "Hello Snookums" she called out. "Got a new collar?"

"Why, uh, yes" Snookums answered. It's the latest fashion. It's called a 'fun collar.' It's very chic. You know the simple look is in, nowadays."

Above her, a squirrel in a tree started laughing uproariously. "It's a flea collar" he chattered. I heard all about it from a mouse who lives in her house."

"Don't be ridiculous!" Snookums demanded. "I have never had a single flea in my life!"

"That's right, you didn't have a single flea" the squirrel laughed. "You had millions of them. The vet said they laid their eggs in that fancy collar of yours, so you had to get rid of it."

"Well I never!" Snookums hissed as she turned and marched back to her house.

Nikki laughed all the way to the oak tree. She was glad she had gotten rid of her leather collar before the fleas laid eggs in it! When she got to the tree she uncovered the cat food and started calling to the Magpie. In a few minutes he fluttered up beside her. "What's this?" he asked as he cocked his head to look at the cat food.

"It's an early Christmas present" Nikki replied. "I realized I wasn't going to get any ticks on me, so I brought you some of my food instead."

"It's delicious!" the Magpie chirped as he happily pecked away at the food. He paused for a moment and looked at Nikki's neck. "Weren't your people able to fix your collar? I've been feeling really bad about breaking it."

Nikki told him the story about all the different collars she'd had as he ate her food. She insisted that he shouldn't feel bad, as he'd really helped her by pecking a hole in her collar. When he finished eating he told her "Stay right here a moment" and he flew off.

Nikki wondered what was going on, but she stayed put and in a few minutes he fluttered back again. In his beak was her old blue collar! "Merry Christmas!" he said as he dropped it at her feet. "I found this the other day. I thought it would look nice in my nest, but you need it more

than I do.”

“Why thank you!” Nikki exclaimed. “I hope you have a very Merry Christmas yourself!” She picked up the collar with her mouth and happily trotted home.