

## Coco

“Get out of here. Don’t show your face here again. You have some nerve taking in that cat. Putting us all in danger,” the mother spat at the boy. The boy whimpered, hugging himself to try to fulfill the love he lost from his mother. The woman threw a bag of clothes at him.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” the boy whispered. His apology was met with the door slammed in his face and the sound of a lock clicking beyond the entryway.

The boy wandered aimlessly through the streets, and he kept wandering. Walking, and walking, and walking, until the boy became a man.

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The man was awoken by the sound of an abrupt honk from a truck. He rolled over on his side, pulling his coat off of him. He stood up, wobbling to the other side of his makeshift home. He had renovated the second floor of an abandoned building into an apartment. He clicked on the lamp he had crafted from fabric and a bare lamp stand he had found in a dumpster. He found that he had so much free time, and he spent it all in peaceful solitude, decorating his loft. It wasn't glamorous or clean, but it was his. He loved it, especially the lamp.

He hummed under his breath, undoing the lock on his bike. He mounted the bike, riding through the streets. He didn't love much about his country, but he couldn't deny the streets of France gave him a sense of freedom. The whole city was a land waiting to be explored, and he

planned to explore every inch. His thoughts were interrupted by a grating electronic voice coming from a billboard above the town square.

The billboard showed two dogs frolicking in the forest. It then transitioned into the same two dogs in somebody's home. The home was dark and the dog was sad. Big letters appeared across the screen reading '*Let them free*'. The man thought this was a load of crap. He had seen dogs starving on the streets, getting hit by cars. The truth was, animals like dogs and cats had been domesticated for so long, they didn't know how to function in the wild. The wild. The wild has been transformed into concrete mazes and automobiles, traps lurking around every corner for the animals.

The man sighed and continued to pedal along the cobblestone streets. His senses were overcome by the smell of warm bread. He turned the corner to the bakery, stationing his bike outside in the alleyway. He leaned his head against the wood crate, tracing the lines in the cobble. He hummed quietly, hugging his knees to his chest. He would wait here for fifteen more minutes until the woman who made the bread tossed the bad loaves into the dumpster. There were always bad loaves. He often found himself thinking about how he was like one of those bad loaves, tossed out on the streets because of an imperfection.

His pity party was interrupted by a thump. He looked up at the window, but there was no bread to be seen. He crept towards the window. The woman was still baking bread. No loaves were available for discarding. The thump appeared again. It was coming from the wooden crate. The man curled his fist, approaching the crate apprehensively. He pushed the crate gently, meeting with another thump. He opened the top of the lid an inch, greeted with a pair of eyes. He yelped and stumbled backwards. He stared at the crate. There was a gentle shuffling from within. The lid of the crate fell onto the ground, causing the man to back away.

A loaf of bread fell at the man's feet. The creature in the box jumped out, pouncing on the bread. The man dove for the bread, taking it from the creature. The creature whined. He looked up. He was met with the eyes of a pitbull puppy. The man felt a tug at his heart, and a smile crept across his face. He broke off a piece of bread for the puppy, handing it to him. The puppy cocked its head to the side, its glimmering eyes fixated on the burnt bread. The puppy started to eat the bread. They ate together for the duration of the morning.

The man leaned his bike against the wall of his loft. He sat on his chair, immediately springing back up with a gasp. He stared at the chair. The baby pitbull was staring back at him, his tongue extended. The man felt his eyes well up with tears. The dog whined, pawing at him. The man smiled, petting the puppy. The puppy nuzzled its snout into his chest. The man picked up the dog.

"Coco," the man said. The puppy yawned in his arms. "I'll name you Coco."  
He fell asleep on his chair, Coco in his arms.

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The man and Coco grew very close throughout the winter. They would sit outside the bakery together, eating the burnt loaves leftover from the day. The man saw the dog as a son as opposed to a wild animal. Coco enjoyed the long bike rides throughout the city, and the man built a small basket out of sticks for the dog to sit in during the rides. The man loved Coco, and Coco loved the man. Living with Coco, time seemed to stop for the man. He realized how alone he had been, how he missed his mother and his father. How he wished he never brought that cat into the house. He wondered if his mother still hated him. Maybe she hated his father, for taking

the blame for adopting the cat off the street. The man still remembered how the police officer yelled at him for ‘abusing’ the cat, as if he wasn’t the reason it was still alive. Sometimes, he would wonder where that cat was.

Coco was different from the cat. Coco cuddled with the man at night, and fetched sticks and hay for fires when it got too cold. Coco knew the man’s habits. He knew the man went through one pack of cigarettes in three days. He knew the man cherished the lamp he made. Coco would often lay under the lamp while the man smoked. If the man was lucky, he would have today's paper. They lived happily throughout the winter.

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It was Christmas time. The streets were filled with people Christmas shopping, and the man found that people were much more generous to the homeless than the rest of the year, so he could afford to go into the bakery, Coco wrapped under his coat, and buy freshly baked pastries. He also bought real dog food for Coco, which the dog very much enjoyed. The man was under the lamp, spooning dog food for Coco. The man placed the can under the ground.

“Coco!” he called, walking through the loft to search. The dog was nowhere to be seen. The man felt his heartbeat start to quicken.

“Coco!” he yelled, louder and more forceful. The man heard a whimper outside. Coco was surrounded by men in uniforms.

“Stop!” the man yelled, lunging for Coco. An officer grabbed the man, pushing him back against the wall.

“It is illegal to domesticate a wild animal,” the officer said. The man stared at him, his eyes wide and sad.

"I was helping him," the man pleaded. The officer sighed.

"You people never understand. Wild animals have special needs you can't provide for. You're keeping them captive, you know. And what happened in '81 just adds to it all," he said. The man knew what he was referring to. Two boys begged their mother for a dog. They proceeded to torture the dog, sparking other children to engage in this act as if it was a game. It grew and grew, and some adults even participated.

"He was going to die," the man said. The officer glanced at the dog, and then at the other officers around him and chuckled.

"He seems pretty well-off to me. Got some pudge to him," the officer said. Coco looked at the man, his eyes wide with sadness and confusion. The man felt tears well up in his eyes.

"Please. I'll do whatever you want. Let me keep this dog," the man whispered, his voice barely audible. The man laughed and picked up Coco. Coco scratched the officer, writhing in his grasp.

"This dog seems as if it's a danger to your well being. It is our responsibility to look after the citizens of France," the officer said. The man felt bile rise up in his throat, and he wanted to lunge at the man and beat him for his hypocrisy. He knew that would only make the situation worse. The officer handed Coco to another officer, who placed him in the back of a van, slamming it closed with an eerie echo.

"No! Please, I beg you," the man said, dropping to his knees. He laced his hands together, begging at the officer's feet. The officer let out a hearty laugh, and struck the man across the face with his boot. The man sat there, hunched over and shaking. The officers drove off, Coco in the back of the car.

The man yelled strings of profanity at the van, sliding against the wall. He ran inside the loft, punching the wall. He fell backward into the lamp, causing it to fall into a puddle and extinguish. He let out a sob, cradling the gentle fabric of the lampshade in his lap. He muttered Coco's name, hugging himself until he could no longer breathe.

The man ceased his bike rides after that. He stopped going to the bakery. He knew everything would remind him of Coco.

He also knew Coco was dead.