

A Present From Pudding

By Elsie Locke

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In the dark of the night Kylie sat up in bed, wide awake, listening to something.

What was it? Her parents were asleep. The house was quiet, and the street outside was quiet too, with no cars passing.

The only sound was right there in her own room, a very soft sound, a purring sound.

"Pudding!" Kylie said. "How did you get in?"

Her darling cat purred louder, and that was no answer at all.

Pudding was always put outside at night. And the bedroom door was shut. As for the window, only the top part was open and Pudding had never jumped through there before. It was much too high. But this time she must have done it.

Kylie drew back the curtain so that the light from the street lamp came in. Pudding rolled over to be stroked and petted, and then - she started to squeak!

"Pudding, what are you up to?" said Kylie. "First you get through a window that's much too high. And everybody knows that cats don't squeak!"

Pudding answered with a long, loud purr. But the squeaking went on, too. Something else must be making the squeaks.

Was it a kitten? Pudding didn't have any kittens. Had she stolen one from another cat?

Kylie felt all round the bed. Her hand came down on something warm and furry. No, it wasn't furry! It was fluffy, and it had hard feet and a hard bill.

"Pudding!" said Kylie in wonder. "You've brought me a duckling!"

She held it up to the light. Yes, it was a wild duckling from the river, all brown and yellow. Pudding was purring louder than ever because she was so pleased with herself, and the duckling was squeaking all the time.

"It's very kind of you, Pudding," said Kylie, "but what ever can I do with a duckling? I can't take it to bed like a teddy bear. And I can't take it back to the river in the dark, either."

Then she had an idea.

Kylie went tiptoe to the laundry and ran some water into the tub. She put a small wooden box in the water, and then she put the duckling on it. Now it could swim or stand on the box just as it liked, but it couldn't get out. After that she gave Pudding a cuddle, and put her outside, and went back to bed.

Kylie woke again at the first glimmer of morning. Nobody else was awake. She got dressed and went to the laundry. The duckling began a long string of squeaks, just as the ducklings did on the river when they were parted from their mothers.

Kylie picked it up and talked to it softly. Then she went outside with the duckling and walked down to the river.

When she got there she could see two broods of ducklings. Kylie wondered if a duck would know this was one of her own children, after it had been away all night.

The first duck had twelve ducklings. Pudding's duckling never stopped its squeaking, but the mother duck took no notice.

The other brood had seven ducklings and they were on the far side of the river. But this time the duck lifted her head and the duckling squeaked a little faster. Kylie guessed that this was the right family. She let the duckling slide out of her hand into the water. Away it went with its little feet going flat out, while its mother swam over to welcome it home.

How pretty it looked on the shining river!

Kylie danced her way back to the house. She could hardly wait to tell her own father and mother. Nothing so special had ever happened to her before. She was proud of Pudding for being so clever.

Her mother was bringing in the morning paper. "Where did you get to?" she said, surprised.

Her father looked through the window, laughing. "What got you up so early?" he said.

Kylie tried to tell them, but she was so excited that the story didn't come out very well. And then - they didn't believe her.

"You'll be writing books one day if you can make up stories like that," Dad said.

"Pudding couldn't jump through that high window," Mum said.

"Anyway, if she caught a duckling, she'd kill it."

"She didn't even hurt it," Kylie said. "It swam away as fast as fast."

"*You* tell us the story, Pudding," joked Dad.

But all Pudding would do was open a lazy eye, as if she would never dream of jumping through a high window with a duckling in her mouth.

Kylie went to school feeling angry. Grown-ups were hopeless. -

Something special had happened to her and she wanted to tell the world, but they wouldn't believe her. If she talked about it at news time, the teacher would say she had a great imagination. Well then, she would make it a secret.

But a secret has to be told to somebody, so she told her friends Lisa and Karen.

Lisa said, "Why did Pudding do it?"

And Karen said, "I know! Pudding loves you, and she wanted to bring you a present!"

Could this be true?

The next night, Kylie dreamed she was at the netball tournament with all the teams mixed up together. She was looking frantically for the duckling so she could get it back to the river. And she couldn't find it, or Pudding either.

Suddenly Kylie woke up. Pudding was purring loudly, but she wasn't on the bed. She was stretched out on the floor and the duckling was walking over her. The same duckling? Or a different one?

It wasn't the least bit afraid of the cat. Kylie took it to the tub, and gave Pudding a cuddle and put her outside, and went back to bed, and woke very early all over again.

This time she was going to make sure they believed her.

The duckling was squeaking loudly as she took it into the front bedroom and held it close to her father's ear. Dad sat up with a jerk, half asleep and half awake.

"What's got in here?" he cried. "What's going on?"

"It's only a duckling, Dad," Kylie said. "Pudding brought it, just like yesterday."

"By all that's wonderful," said Dad, "it is a duckling!"

Mum woke up too. "Where's Pudding, then?" she asked.

"I put her outside," said Kylie, "after she brought the duckling."

Dad came over to the river and watched how Kylie gave the duckling back to its own family.

By now he was so excited that *he* wanted to tell the world.

He told the neighbours, and the people at work, and he rang up the teacher so that she would know it was true.

Kylie told the story to the class and they all drew pictures of cats and ducks and ducklings. She felt very special all day, because of the special thing that had happened to her.

That night Kylie went to bed early. She was sure that Pudding would wake her with yet another duckling. And she was right.

Altogether seven times over seven nights did Pudding bring in a duckling, before they grew too big for her to carry. And every morning, Kylie took the duckling back to the river.

Why did Pudding do it? Was she pretending the ducklings were kittens, because she had never had a kitten of her own?

Or had Karen guessed the true reason - that Pudding brought the ducklings as a present, out of love?

"You silly Pudding," said Kylie, stroking the deep, soft fur.

"Why don't you bring me a present I can keep?"

But Pudding only purred on, as loud as loud could be.

This is a true story. Pudding was a real cat who lived by the Avon River in Christchurch, and she really did bring seven ducklings home.