

AVA

and

TACO CAT

BY

CAROL WESTON

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To the cats in my life,
cuddly and otherwise:

Rosie,

Smokey,

Pokey,

Lilac,

Chanda,

Slate,

and

Mike

12/28

DEAR BRAND-NEW DIARY,

I'm really worried. At dinner tonight, Mom said that right before closing, a man came into the clinic with an injured cat. He'd found him shivering in a tree! The cat was scrawny and scared and his neck had a gash and his left ear was bitten up. The man got the cat down and took him to the nearest vet—which was Dr. Gross.

“Poor cat!” I said.

“Is he going to be okay?” Pip asked.

“I don't know,” Mom said. “Dr. Gross stitched him up and gave him antibiotics. If he makes it through the night, we'll call the shelter in the morning.”

“*If?*” I said.

Mom nodded. “I think a coyote got to him.”

“What's his name?” Pip asked.

“No idea. But he's neutered, so he's not feral.” Pip and I know that “feral” means wild, and “neutered” means he can't make baby cats. But does Mom know that stories about hurt cats and dogs make me sad?

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“What does he look like?” I asked.

“He’s honey-colored,” Mom said. “But his right leg and paw are white, and he has a white zigzag above his nose.”

“Awww,” I said, trying to picture the cat’s sweet little zigzag.

“No chip or collar or anything?” Dad said.

“No identification at all,” Mom said.

Soon Mom and Dad and Pip were talking about other things, including dinner, which was stuffed eggplant—*blecch!* (Dad just started a terrible tradition of “Meatless Mondays.” Fortunately, tonight he also made plain bowtie noodles for me.)

Well, I couldn’t stop thinking about how lonely that cat probably felt all by himself in a cage at Dr. Gross’s. I wished we could go check on him. But no way would Mom agree to go back to work after she’d already come home and put on her slippers.

I was trying to imagine what it must have been like for the skinny cat when the coyote started attacking him. He must have known it was life or death. He probably thought he was a goner for sure! It was lucky he was able to scamper up that tree, but then he must have been too afraid to come back down! And maybe too weak? I bet he was starving as well as stuck and petrified! Poor little thing!!

Suddenly my nose and eyes started tingling. I blurted, “May I be excused?” but it was too late! Teardrops fell right onto my bowtie noodles.

“Are you *crying?*” Pip asked, surprised.

“Oh, Ava.” Mom met my eyes. “I’m sorry I brought it up.”

Dad gave my hand a squeeze, and I ran upstairs and splashed

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water on my face. I don't know why I was getting so upset about a lost honey-colored cat. But I was. I *am*.

It's just so sad to think of him all alone in a cage instead of a home.

AVA, UPSET

12/28
A LITTLE LATER

After dinner, Pip came and knocked on my door, which was nice of her. She's been easier to talk to now that she's an official teenager. I think it's because she's been coming out of her shell instead of staying scrunched up inside it.

Anyway, she said, "Want to do another page?" so I said sure. Pip and I started making a book on the third day of winter break when we both got bored at the exact same time. I'm the author and Pip is the illustrator.

I'd wanted us to write *A Duck Out of Luck*, but I couldn't come up with a plot. Then I suggested *A Goose on the Loose*, but I couldn't come up with a plot for that either. Finally we decided to make an alphabet book because alphabet books don't have plots. I said it could be about animals, but Pip said it should be about fish.

Pip is constantly doodling fish. Her favorite stuffed animal is an orange fish named Otto. She named it Otto for two reasons:

1. O-T-T-O is a palindrome. It's spelled the same backward and forward, like A-V-A and P-I-P and M-O-M and D-A-D.

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2. Otto is the name of the fish in *A Fish Out of Water*, which was the first book Pip read all by herself. (She has now read about a bazillion books.)

So far, our book is two pages long. It's called *Alphabet Fish*, and these are the two pages:

A is for angelfish.

The shy little angelfish has fins like wings.

Shh! It is hiding among weeds, rocks, and things.

and

B is for bumblebee fish.

If you found this fish, would you name it Bumblebee?

It doesn't buzz or sting, but it's black and gold, you see.

Pip has already made a list of the twenty-six fish she wants us to do. C was supposed to be for clown fish, but I thought about the lonely injured cat and said, "C should be for catfish." Pip agreed and drew a cute catfish with pointy whiskers.

I'm going to sleep now. I hope the lost cat is already asleep.

What I really hope is that he makes it through the night!

AVA...ALMOST...ASLEEP

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P.S. If I cross my fingers for luck, will they stay crossed while I'm asleep?

12/29
MORNING

DEAR DIARY,

In three days, I turn eleven. If I could ask for any present in the whole wide world, I would ask for a pet. But a real pet this time—one with fur.

Whenever I beg for a cat or a dog or even just a gerbil, Mom always says she has enough pets to worry about. She once admitted that the main reason she applied for her job as office manager for Dr. Gross was because the clinic is near our house—*not* because she adores animals.

I can't believe I've been alive for over a decade and have never had a real pet. I've never even had a bunny! Or a turtle! Or a frog!

The only pet Pip and I ever had was a goldfish named Goldy Lox, and we loved her, but she was not exactly Little Miss Personality. (I'm not even sure she was a she!)

Maybelle once had a frog. And last Christmas, she got one of those kits of chrysalides that turn into butterflies. This year, she got a makeup set, a manicure set, and beads for making bracelets. I don't get why so many girls in our class (including my BFF!) all of a sudden want to wear makeup, nail polish, and jewelry.

Maybelle even got a pink *sports bra* for Christmas. When she showed it to me, I almost fainted on the floor. But I tried to act like it was no big deal.

Later when I told Pip about Maybelle's sports bra, I pointed out that boob (B-O-O-B) is a palindrome and that bras seem like booby traps. I also mentioned that "booby trap" spelled backward is "party boob." Pip said I was being an immature idiot.

Pip thinks she's very mature because she is in seventh grade (I'm in fifth), and she has a boyfriend, Ben. He's our friend Bea's brother, and right now Bea and Ben are both in Chicago.

Our family is not going away on vacation. Mom says we're having a "staycation" in Misty Oaks.

I think "staycation" is a dumb word.

The reason we're not going anywhere is because we don't have a lot of extra money.

We aren't rich, but Mom and Dad say it's better to be *enriched*. That's why Pip takes art classes.

Mom and Dad have offered me writing classes, but I'd rather write just in you, my diary, because then I can write down all my secrets and private thoughts, and no one but me ever reads them.

So far in my life, I have started eight diaries and finished one. The one I finished last week is on my bookshelf. The other six are in my dead diary graveyard, underneath my underwear.

Here is a private thought: I *still* feel bad about what happened to Goldy Lox. Two years ago, I did not take good care of her. I accidentally overfed her, and she did not grow bigger and bigger like Otto in the picture book. She floated to the top, sideways

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and dead. I wanted to give her a proper burial, but Mom flushed her down the toilet. When I started to cry, she said, “Oh, Ava, it’s only a fish.” Which was true.

But she was *our* fish.

AVA ELLE WREN, STILL JUST TEN

12/29
AFTER BREAKFAST

DEAR DIARY,

Outside, some of the trees have snow on their branches.

Inside, Dad made snowman pancakes just for me. That's when he places three round pancakes in a line (not a stack) and adds chocolate chip eyes to the top one.

"Can you make me a cat pancake?" I asked.

"I can try," he said, and he did try, but the tail and legs blobbed together, and the pancake looked more like an amoeba than a cat.

I said, "Do you know the Aesop fable 'The Cat and the Fox'?" Dad knows I like to read short fables more than long books, probably because 1) they are about animals and 2) they give you a lot to think about in just a few pages.

He said, "Remind me." So I did. I said:

A fox is bragging to a cat that he knows a ton of ways to save himself from hounds. The cat says he knows only one and asks the fox to show him more. The fox sticks his snout in the air and says, "Maybe someday if I'm not toooo busy." Just then, a pack of hungry hounds comes bounding toward them, barking furiously. The cat

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escapes by racing up a tree and says, "This is my one and only trick. Which of yours are you going to use?" But while the fox is thinking and thinking, the hounds attack.

Dad asked what the moral was. I said: "It's good to have a plan." Then I confessed that I was still worrying about the honey-colored cat who escaped up the tree.

When Mom came downstairs, I asked her if she'd called Dr. Gross.

"Ava, he's not in at this hour," Mom said. "And I haven't even had my coffee yet."

Dad handed Mom a mug of coffee and mumbled, "You think the cat will have to be put down?"

Hello! I know what "put down" means! It's a euphemism for "kill"! (I know what *euphemism* means too. It's a nice way of saying something not nice. It's also an extremely advanced spelling word.)

"Depends on his condition," Mom said.

I stood up so fast, my chair fell over. "You can't kill him!" I said.

"Sweetie," Mom replied, "Dr. Gross is not in the business of killing animals. He does everything he can to *save* animals. But if the cat isn't going to get better..."

"Please don't kill him!" I felt like Fern in *Charlotte's Web* when she tells her father not to kill the runty newborn piglet. (Note: Mr. and Mrs. Arable love their daughter Fern very much, so they let her keep the piglet, and she names him Wilbur.)

"I'll call you when I get to work," Mom said. "And now I'd like

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to change the subject. Have you thought about what you want for your birthday?”

Without missing a beat, I said, “Yes. I want a cat. I want *that* cat!”

A-V-A WHO WANTS A C A T

12/29
11:40 A.M.

DEAR DIARY,

Mom didn't call, and when I couldn't stand it anymore, I called her even though she doesn't like to be "interrupted" at work.

"Did he make it through the night?" I asked.

"Yes, he did. He's a tough old boy."

"Can I visit him?" I could feel my heart beating extra fast.

"Actually, the man from the shelter just came and picked him up."

"No!"

"Ava, that's *good* news. They'll try to find a home for him."

"I want him to live in *our* home! And not all cats get adopted! You always say people like kittens best—and he's a scratched-up grown-up with ears that don't match."

"Honey, we've been through this. At the end of a long day, the last thing I want to do is deal with pets."

"It's *pet*, not pets! Singular, not plural. And you won't have to. *I'll* do everything! Besides, dogs need to be walked, but cats just sit around purring all day."

"Ava, it's a moot point, so you might as well save your breath.

That cat's been stitched up and sent on his way. He's not here anymore. I'm sorry."

"Where is he?"

"At the Rescue Center."

"What 'Rescue Center'?"

"I have to get back to work now," Mom said, sounding exasperated. But she didn't get that *I* was exasperated too!

We hung up, and I looked up "Rescue Center" on Dad's computer. Guess what? The Misty Oaks Rescue Center is pretty close to Taco Time, our favorite place for lunch!

Ten minutes ago, one of Dad's students showed up. Besides writing plays, Dad tutors reading and writing and helps high school seniors with their college essays. When the teenager rang the doorbell, Pip was coming downstairs. She had slept right through breakfast, which she never used to do. I decided to ask Dad if he'd give us money for lunch.

Dad said okay because he likes having a "quiet house," which is "impossible" when we are "underfoot."

Pip is now zipping up her winter boots. Here's what she and Dad don't know: I have a plan. A BIG one!

AVA ON A MISSION

12/29
3:33 (A NUMBER PALINDROME!)

DEAR DIARY,

Pip and I went to the Rescue Center! It's a brick building with an old bike stand near the entrance.

We parked our bikes, and I almost stepped in something warm and brown and gooshy. I told Pip to be careful, and she looked down and said, "Dog doo? Good God!" (D-O-G-D-O-O-G-O-O-D-G-O-D). That made us both crack up because "Dog doo? Good God!" is an extremely funny palindrome.

Inside, behind a counter, a lady with a high ponytail told us that if we wanted to visit the cats, we had to be accompanied by someone at least eighteen. She looked like she was around eighteen herself! Pip got nervous and whispered, "We should leave," but I convinced her to stay so that we could people-watch—and animal-watch!

I wanted to know why someone lucky enough to have a pet would decide to give him or her up. Pip and I sat down and started observing, and soon we had answers.

- A man in a suit came in with a barky dachshund and said

he and his wife had a newborn baby and couldn't keep their noisy dog.

- A woman with dark purple fingernails came in with a pit bull with claws painted the same color and said her new landlord had a “no dogs policy.”
- A hippie-ish couple came in with five black-and-white kittens and said their tuxedo cat had seven kittens and they could keep only two.
- A boy and his mom came in with a bunny they called Peter Rabbit, and the mom said the boy turned out to be allergic, and the boy said, “And, it poops all over the place.”

It was sad, really. All these people coming in with furry animals and leaving with empty pet carriers and droopy leashes.

Next thing you know, a family with four kids showed up and said they wanted to “pick out a dog.”

Ponytail Lady left to take a lunch break, and a bald bearded guy took her place. He told the parents that if they wanted a “companion animal,” they had to fill out an application form. I started talking with the oldest kid, and Pip started talking with the youngest kid and told her she liked her yellow mittens, and suddenly a lady with a little ring in her nostril came and invited their family to meet the dogs.

When the lady with the nostril ring said, “Right this way,” I made a face at Pip and hopped right up. Pip hesitated, but then she hopped up too! We tagged along as though we were Kid #5 and Kid #6!

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The family was so excited about getting a dog that they didn't notice us sneaking in behind them. And the lady with the nostril ring was so happy that someone was *adopting* a pet rather than dropping one off that she didn't either.

The family followed the signs for dogs and turned left. Pip and I followed the signs for cats and turned right.

Soon we were standing in front of cages and cages of cats! It was like a wall of cats!

Each cat had a food bowl, water bowl, litter box, and soft cloth. Some were asleep, but most were wide-awake. One poked his nose out, and another poked his paw out, and another twitched his ears. There was an old white cat and an old black cat pacing back and forth, back and forth. I wondered if they were senile felines (S-E-N-I-L-E-F-E-L-I-N-E-S), which is a palindrome I came up with last year. Then I felt bad for wondering that. Poor cats!

On the cages were clipboards with pieces of paper. They said things like "indoor cat" and "outdoor cat" and "finicky eater" and "not good with other cats." One said "gentle with children." Another said "may require time to warm up to new people."

"Where's the one that got hurt?" Pip asked. We both knew that we needed to find him before someone found us!

"I'm *looking!*!" I said. And I was! I was searching and searching for the honey-colored cat. I did not want to fall in love with the wrong cat by mistake!

Pip spotted a sign about "adoption options." It said that if you couldn't provide a "forever home," maybe you could provide a

“foster home.” She read it out loud and said, “Think we can talk Mom and Dad into letting us have a cat for a month?”

“I don’t want a cat for a month!” I said. “I want a *forever* cat! And I want the one we came to find!”

But where was the cat with the bitten-up ear and soft white zigzag?

We walked down the hall and entered a second room filled with nothing but kittens. Observation: the only thing cuter than a wall of cats is a wall of kittens! The room smelled a little tiny bit of cat pee (kitten pee?) but I didn’t even mind because the kittens were *seriously* cute—probably because they were so *unserious*. One was swatting a ball. Another yawned a big yawn, and then started closing its eyes and flopped over—fast asleep on its food bowl. Another was napping *inside* its litter box. Each cage had one toy and two or three (or even four!) kittens, and most were licking each other and playing and tumbling. One fluffy gray kitten stood on its hind legs and put out a front paw as if to high-five me. It was hard not to fall head-over-heels in love—but I resisted because I’d made up my mind about which cat I wanted to save.

Pip pointed out a sign that said: “Please adopt kittens in pairs.” She looked at me and said, “I wish we could.”

Just then a short lady with a long braid walked in. “Hello, girls.” She was carrying a cage and must have assumed we were allowed to be there.

“Hello,” we chimed and followed her back to the room with the grown-up cats.

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The volunteer placed the cage on top of a row of other cages. “This yellow tabby arrived this morning,” she said, adjusting the clipboard. “Got himself into quite a scuffle, poor fella.”

Pip and I walked over to the yellow tabby. He looked at me with big, sad, round green eyes. He was like a skinny lion cub with a white Harry Potter zigzag above his nose. His right leg was also white, as if he’d broken it and was wearing a cat cast. And the tip of his tail was white, as if he’d dipped it into paint.

Pip and I both knew this was the cat we’d come to find! I looked at him and he looked at me, and I wished I could adopt him right then and there!

“He’s a bit skittish,” the lady said.

“Scottish?” Pip said.

“Skittish,” the lady repeated. “Frightened. You know, a scaredy-cat. But who can blame him? He’s been through a lot.”

“How much does he cost?” I asked.

Pip stared at me, eyes wide.

“Kittens come with a small price tag—unless you take two,” the lady answered. “But older cats are free. *We want* them to find good homes.”

“Can I put this one on hold?” I asked.

“That’s not our policy.” She smiled. “But you may spend a few minutes with him to see if it would be a good fit. And your parents can fill out an application stating that they understand that pet ownership is a big commitment and responsibility.” We did not mention that our parents were not with us and didn’t even know we were there. “Cats can live fifteen to twenty years,” the

lady continued, “so we always check references. But if everything goes smoothly, you can take him home today. I bet he’d like that.”

She gave the cat a smile, and the cat gave me a blink, and I wished I *could* promise him a forever home.

“Would you like me to go over this with your parents?” the lady asked. Pip and I exchanged a look and said, “No!” at the exact same time.

I wanted to say, “Jinx!” but instead mumbled, “Thanks anyway.” Then Pip and I hurried off and raced downstairs and out of the building.

Outside, we started biking the three blocks to Taco Time. Pip was just ahead of me.

“He neeeeeeds us!” I called up to her.

“If we get to keep him,” Pip shouted back, “we could name him van Gogh.”

“Van Gogh?”

“Because of his ear!” she shouted. Pip has a poster of van Gogh sunflowers and once told me that when van Gogh couldn’t sell any paintings, he got so upset and unstable that he cut off a piece of his ear and mailed it to a woman. Or something.

Well, I did not want to name our cat after a depressed artist with mismatched ears! So I said so—or shouted so.

“You have any better ideas?” Pip shouted back.

I considered saying, “Dandelion!” because then we could call him Dandy. But the cat’s fur was more *lion*-colored than *dandelion*-colored. I also considered saying, “Honey,” but he was a tough tomcat so that wouldn’t work. I shouted, “Not yet.”

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Pip and I got to Taco Time and parked our bikes. I was trying and trying to come up with the perfect name, but I couldn't think of one. We ordered and our tacos arrived, and soon I was staring at mine and suddenly it occurred to me that the hurt cat was the exact same color as my...taco!

"I've got it!" I said a little too loudly. "Taco!" I couldn't believe what my brilliant brain came up with next. "No! Wait!" I said. "His name is... *Taco Cat!* T-A-C-O-C-A-T! It's a palindrome!"

"That's genius!" Pip said, and I could feel myself beaming. "But you'll never be able to convince B-O-B and A-N-N-A." To be funny, Pip spelled out our parents' names.

"Never say 'never,'" I said.

I will now stop writing because my hand is about to fall off. (Figuratively, not literally.)

AVA WREN, FUTURE CAT OWNER?

12/29

AFTER DINNER, WHICH WAS STEW

DEAR DIARY,

Pip's boyfriend texted Pip a photo of a big lungfish in the Shedd Aquarium. She texted him back a photo of the little catfish in our ABC book. Then Ben texted her a whole *school* of fish. From the face she made, you'd think he'd sent her a box of chocolates.

I just looked up "school of fish," and here are ten more good expressions:

1. A kindle of kittens
2. A prickle of hedgehogs
3. A troop of monkeys
4. A band of gorillas
5. A pride of lions
6. A leap of leopards
7. A tower of giraffes
8. A zeal of zebras
9. A flamboyance of flamingos
10. An exaltation of larks

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A bunch of people is called a *crowd*, but there's no expression for a bunch of wrens—besides *flock*.

If I could invent one for my birthday, I'd invent "a wonder of wrens."

WONDERFUL AVA WREN WHO WANTS WONDERFUL TACO CAT

12/29
BEDTIME

DEAR DIARY,

Pip and I made a drum fish and an electric eel. The electric eel, I'm sorry to report, is pretty ugly.

Funny that some things are *pretty ugly*, but nothing is *ugly pretty*.

This is my eel poem:

E is for electric eel.

The electric eel looks like a worm or a snake.

Beware, beware of the shock it can make.

I wish I could *shock* my parents and tell them that we *are* adopting a cat, instead of having to ask (or beg).

AVA, ASKING ABOUT ADOPTING AN ANIMAL

12/30
RIGHT BEFORE DINNER

DEAR DIARY,

Pip and I didn't know whether to tell Mom and Dad that we went to the Rescue Center. We didn't want to lie, but we also didn't want to get in trouble if they found out.

Finally I decided to spill all to Dad. A few weeks ago, Mom and Dad both said I should speak my mind. Besides, my birthday is in two days, and parents don't ground kids right before their birthdays, do they?

While Dad was paying bills, I got out thirteen index cards and wrote one letter on each. When I finished, I made a fan out of them so Dad could see it was a palindrome: W-A-S-I-T-A-C-A-T-I-S-A-W.

"Was it a cat I saw?" Dad read. "Good one, Ava!"

"Dad, Pip and I *did* see a cat," I said. "We went looking for that injured cat Mom told us about. And we *found* him!"

"What do you mean 'found' him?"

"At the Rescue Center."

Dad looked more puzzled than mad. Maybe now that Pip is a teenager and not as shy as she used to be, he doesn't object to our doing some things on our own?

Weird that Pip is old enough to be independent and wear a bra and have a boyfriend!

I don't want to be independent or wear a bra or have a boyfriend. I just want Taco Cat!

I told Dad all about him, even his name.

"T-A-C-O-C-A-T? That's clever." Dad laughed. "But Ava, you know Mom doesn't want a pet."

"I know." I wanted to add that it's not fair that Mom gets to spend all day with tons of animals when we don't even have one. "But I almost wish we had a mouse problem," I said. "Like, an *explosion* of mice."

And that's when I got an idea. An amazing idea. It was so amazing, I decided to call Maybelle and ask her to come over and help me with an "art project." (Dad said we could have a short after-dinner playdate since it's still vacation.)

But when I called Maybelle, she said, "Zara asked if she could sleep over, and I said okay and now we're about to have dinner. Can she come too?"

"I guess," I mumbled, surprised that Maybelle was having a sleepover with Zara, a girl who had just moved to Misty Oaks in September. Since when did my best-friend-since-first-grade have sleepovers with anyone besides *me*? To be honest, the thought of Maybelle and Zara having dinner together or even microwaving marshmallows made my stomach lurch.

Next I called my neighbors, Carmen and Lucia. I could hear Carmen asking her mom in Spanish if they could come over. Their parents are from Peru. Carmen and Lucia are twins and

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they each have a Paddington Bear. They say their bears are twins from Peru too.

I wish I could speak Spanish. I wish I were bilingual instead of just lingual. People say I have a “way with words,” but I know only one language—so far.

I went into Pip’s room. She was illustrating our F page:

F is for flying fish.

This lucky fast fish has wings and can fly.

When mean fish swim close, it jumps ten feet high.

“Pip,” I asked, “do you know how to draw mice?”

She made a face and said, “Duh.”

“Good,” I said and told her my amazing idea—my amazing *plan*. She said it sounded dumb—but she got right to work.

AVA THE AMAZING