The ballad of the five kittens
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Ion Drutsa  The ballad of the five kittens

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The upper part of the town was considered by cats the happiest corner in the world and each of them dreamed of moving there some day. God knew what drew them to that part of the town — it might be the small market, where the salesmen were dozing all the time waiting for their customers, and it was always easier for them to pilch something; it might be the large orchards, where it was possible to come across old and short-sighted sparrows; it might be the old and shady roofs, where one usually found a cat ready to listen to another’s trouble...

Anyhow, the upper part of the town was considered by cats a kind of paradise, and they came there from far away. Many of them lived at their masters, having names and shelter, others lived from hand to mouth, but most of them roamed through orchards to see if it was true what they had heard about the cats from there.

Then on a fine day one more cat appeared. Nobody paid attention to her as she was too nasty-looking—her both ears were nipped, and more than half of her tail was torn off. God knew whose she was. She probably had no master — her coat, which once had been
white, was already yellowish, as a sign of many years of wandering. She even grew a little wild — she had a gentle, stealthy walking and was ready to run away in no time...

She walked from one yard to another more than half a day and, most likely, she intended to move and live there. She was looking for something all the time — and was so busy that she did not even pay attention to the dogs, when they followed her.

Only when the fangs of the cursed dogs were an inch from her coat, the cat turned into a ball, uttered a short hissing but so wild that the vile dogs minded their own business, pretending that they simply wanted to crack a joke...
She passed through, fences smelled somebody's traces, and then stopped in the back part of a yard, near a board hut. It was a very old hut with the roof slid over its forehead and a whole army of props thrusted into its sides. It had been standing there for a long time, waiting for its last hour. Nobody used the hut, because it had fallen on one side and the door had closed for ever. The lodgers of the surrounding houses left it alone, but from time to time they put another prop, and forbade the children to play near it so as not to be there when it might happen to collapse.

But the cat was not a fearful one. She tried to get in under the door, then through a crack of the foundation, but at last, climbing up the longest prop, she jumped on the roof, and began to purr pleased. The roof had such holes that the cat could
have passed through them together with her mistress if she had one.

She did not come out of the hut till evening. At twilight she jumped down and began to carry up different things. She took up some rags, a glove finger, a piece of fur, stolen from an entrance hall. She had been gathering things all the night through. By morning she carried a fish tail up into the attic of the hut and did not climb down any more. She climbed down neither that day nor the next one.
Only on the third day in the morning she slipped down the prop as lean as a bag of bones.

The cat approached the first threshold, which she came across, and began to mew softly and timidly. She was begging. But she had no patience to wait until the mistress' charity woke up. She entered a glass verandah but soon flew back, followed by a broom, thrown behind her. Then the cat jumped into a dustbin, without waiting for her turn till evening. It raised a great hullabaloo among the other cats, who had gathered there.

The vagrant cats have their dignity, and the yellow-grey cat had it too, but something happened
to her that morning and no trace of her dignity could be seen. She begged at each door, dashed at dogs, beginning a great scuffle for the food thrown to them, stole food from the market or from cellars. She returned to the attic of the hut only for half an hour and then the race for food began anew.

Some weeks later a little kitten’s muzzle appeared on the roof of the hut and he began to examine the world around as if asking:

‘Brothers, who’ll give me a small ball to play a little with?’

Some minutes later another kitten, who wanted a ball, appeared. But he did not stand still to wait for a ball to be brought. He stepped bravely towards the eaves and of course he fell down on a bed of carrots. The poor kitten was so astonished that he did not even mew. His brothers, instead, raised an unheard-of hubbub. The cat appeared all in a breath, took the kitten into her mouth and began to climb up the prop with rare slow steps. She took hold of the eaves with one paw, hung in the air for a moment, and then turned into a bow. The bow straightened and disappeared into the attic of the hut.

There were five kittens all in all. The one who had appeared the first on the roof was a little taller than the others, and he was very proud of that. Then came the one who had fallen — a brave, plump and cute kitten. He was the only one to whom it occurred to get on his mother’s back to sleep as it was so soft and warm there.

Then there were two who looked alike — they were probably glad of the fact and became very close friends, a thing which rarely happens among kit-
tens. In the morning they came to the glove finger and played with it until they fell asleep.

The fifth kitten was small and wretched, he scarcely began to walk.

Now the cat was angry. How could it happen that her kitten had gone down to the eaves as a silly one and had fallen with the head downward?! However, when she saw the smallest kitten coming to suck, she left the others alone. Then when the two friends, who had been playing with the glove finger all the time and had no idea of what had happened, came to suck, the bigger one made haste to surpass them...

The kittens are sucking. Five tails are raised and shaken to and fro with pleasure. Ten ears are pricked up ready to begin a quarrel with anybody who will try to disturb them from their sucking... Then the tails lowered little by little, the ears lost their vigour, and the kittens fell asleep all in a heap. Only the plump one gets out from among his brothers and sleepily climbs up his mother’s back. What is to be done when one has got used to it!...
All the five kittens were white and clean as the cat herself had been once. Their ears were intact and the tails nice... Those tails were a great wonder. After wandering so much, the poor cat probably expected her kittens to be with nipped ears and their tails half-size.

But it had to happen the other way round and her mother's pride was endless. Quietly, without awaking them, she began to lick their coats as if she wanted to see them as clean as they had appeared in the world for her whole life... A ray of light, which penetrated through the roof of the hut, fell warmly over her kittens who were unspeakably nice.

At the break of day she awoke them to suck again. The smallest one did not even want to wake up.
‘On dear, what suck, what to suck?...’
Still, being treaded on by the others, he awoke
and began to push them as hard as he could.
‘How can one interfere with my sleep?!’
After the cat saw them sleeping again, she quietly
slipped down the prop and went through the yards
to look for something to eat...
It was late autumn... The cats who had mistresses
went to sleep in their houses; the cellars were
already locked, while the salesmen from the little
market did not dose
any more as they felt cold...
Now the yellow-grey cat found food with difficulty... She hardly managed to go out of the hut three times a day and returned so tired that it was rather difficult for her to climb up into the attic...

But one day she disappeared in the very morning and did not come back any more. The kittens heaped up all together and were waiting to see what to do with such a terrible hunger. The cat did not return and the hunger drew the kittens out on the roof. They had been lying in the sun for some time, then began to mew sorrowfully in five voices. Their mother
might have forgotten about them or she might come any minute...

Some time later the plump kitten was sick and tired of mewing ceaselessly. He decided to climb down himself and to see why mother had not come back... This time he was careful as he had already been through the mill. He did not go blindly to the eaves, but climbed down the prop as his mother used to... Then the bigger one, probably being jealous that his brother had gone before him, climbed down too... The two close friends followed him and in a quarter of an hour all the five kittens were on the ground... Even the smallest one looked around taken aback. Such a damned nuisance: he managed to climb down as well...

When the poor cat returned home she was at a loss. There were five white furs all over the yard. Well, will they find anything to eat by themselves?... Haven’t they also got four paws and a muzzle which catches the smell of everything tasty at once?!

The cat stood dumbfounded for some time. She called them, but they wouldn’t come. Only the smallest one directed his steps towards her, but then he found an empty match box and began to smell it... The kittens grew very slowly and were still so small and puny that even the most wretched puppy could make a heap of all five. Maybe in her absence somebody had been in the attic and had bewitched them not to grow...

She moiled and toiled the whole night to get them back into the attic. Now it was not so easy to catch them with her mouth. By daybreak she saw them all flocked together in the attic, but could not gather them in their couch.
A cold drizzling rain came and they became small again as they had been before. They all lay in a heap beside her, and she began to tell them the tale of the cats from the very beginning up till that day. She told them about the starting point of the quarrel with the dogs, and, at last, how the matters stood with the mice...

When they fell asleep, she climbed down from the attic to see if that drizzling rain had stopped or not. But her coat, which had been in a scrap for so many times, bristled up at once, telling her that the winter was coming. A severe and bitter winter was coming with snow and frost... The cat climbed up the prop and lay by her kittens to warm herself and to warm them. She was lying with her eyes widely open as they were five all in all and so small and puny, and the winter was coming with snow and frost... Many nights she thought about the five lives of the kittens, whom she wanted to be the most beautiful in the world. Then one morning she did not go anywhere. She found some crusts and a fish tail hidden by her for a rainy day...

It was a bright and nice day... How glad the kittens were. They did not even know that their mother also liked to play with the glove finger. They were so glad that all of them got on her back. Then they began to clean her coat to make it white. After that they heard a gnawing and were all on the watch to catch the mouse. The kittens fell asleep only by sunset. The cat lay for some time by them, then awoke them and began to call them down from the attic.

She seemed to be angry a little, and the poor kittens did not know why their mother could be, and thought of doing something to reconcile her. But
the cat did not want to be reconciled. She squeezed through the fence and called them after her. She stepped slowly as if she were on watch. Her eyes were widely open and she had a cold look while choosing the shortest way and the best holes through fences... Her nipped ears pricked up at each rustle of the leaves, at each barking of the dogs...

Five small balls were seen white in the shades of the twilight, glad that they were going somewhere. A breath of wind was taking the coolness of the autumn night through the orchards... The lighted windows were glimmering through the bare branches. The wind was bringing a very tasty sweet smell from houses.

Then the cat stopped at once. She gathered the kittens near a bush, took the eldest and most cared one, and entered a yard together with him. A little girl, for whom the day had not been enough for playing, was standing at the gate, looking with longing eyes along the street. The cat passed by her with her kitten, then returned and passed by once more... As soon as the girl noticed the kitten she started running after him, crying: 'Pussy-pussy!'; until she caught him. After that she hurried to the house calling out:

'Granny! Granny!'

The cat did not stop to see how joyful the grandmother would be. She went to her kittens, who were waiting for her near the bush. She wondered why they were only four, but then she remembered...

They passed through some more fences, and at a turn of the street she noticed only three white furs behind her. The plump one had disappeared. Could he realize where the cat had started with them?
Could he find a suitable place all by himself? She stopped in doubt for some time if to go further or to return and look for him.

She returned and looked for him. He was two yards back, where he had stopped near a dustbin. He was already hungry and found something to eat. She wanted to take him with her to find a better place for him, but then she caught sight of a grey cat, who was coming to the dustbin. She turned into a ball, ready to jump and help her kitten, but the grey cat approached the kitten, sat by him, and began to gnaw something together with him. She was gnawing rather to pass the time away. It was quite clear that she was a cat with a master and a spoilt one... She did not call the plump kitten any more. Instead she returned to the three kittens...

The other two, who were good friends, did not want to part, and the cat took them into the corridor of a school. The floor was cold there as it was made of cement, and the kittens did not want to remain. They came again after her. The cat took them once more into the corridor, gave them some crumbs, but they ate them and ran after her. Nevertheless the cat decided to leave them in the school corridor at any price. She found a piece of kerchief and gave it to them. The kittens began to play with it, while the cat disappeared.

It was more difficult with the youngest one. He probably felt that she intended to leave him and that was why he followed her whimpering all the time. She took him into a cellar, but he came out. Then she lulled him asleep in a basket, but he jumped out of it.

By midnight, walking and whimpering, he fell
into a pit, dug on the road side for planting a tree. The poor kitten was meowing in despair.

The cat hid in darkness, waiting silently. The kitten kept meowing. The cat had been waiting for rather a long time, when a man appeared in the distance. He was walking slowly singing and staggering. He passed by the kitten continuing his song. Then he returned to the pit and took the kitten out of it. After that the man stood for a moment thinking, then he went further. But the kitten ran after him whimpering all the time. The cat followed them closely. At last the man got angry that he could not finish his song because of the kitten. Then he stopped, took the kitten and put him into his pocket. The kitten did not whimper any more in the warm pocket, and the man went further, staggering but singing.

It was already early dawn... The wind was picking up the last leaves from the trees of the orchards. The cat was walking ovetired to some other place. Her head was lowered, her nipped ears were not pricked up any longer and her yellow-grey coat hung oddly down from the backbone as if she had borrowed it from a cat a little bigger than herself...

When it was daylight she found herself at the board hut. She jumped quicky up the prop towards the roof, but the attic was empty... The cold coach was waiting for her. Both the cold coach and the glove finger, for which nobody fought any more, were waiting. Quiet and exhausted, the cat streched herself near the coach and remained to lie there. She had been lying coiled for a whole day and a night. It seemed that she did not even breathe.
Next day she jumped down, determined to run away from that part of the town and to disappear in the same way as she had appeared long before that...

She left, but in a day she came back. Then she disappeared again and again came back. The empty coach seemed to her one of the kittens; a kitten whom she could neither leave nor take with her...

And she remained there. Then the winter came. When it was too frosty or she was hungry, she got down from the hut attic. She walked up and down the yard with closed eyes and tousled coat, came to the dustbin and waited quietly until the last cat ate to her fill, to see if there was anything left for her.

Very seldom, when a stranger appeared in the yard, the cat enlivened. She ran limping to him and mewed softly as if she wanted to ask:

‘Haven’t you seen my poor kittens? Where could they be, what are they doing, how are they getting on?...’
Ион Друцэ

БАЛЛАДА О ПЯТИ КОТЯТАХ
(на английском языке)

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