

## Anastasia

ORGANISER'S NOTE: 'ANASTASIA' WAS WRITTEN BY LINDA McKENNA AND WAS THE JOINT WINNER OF THE ADULT PROSE CATEGORY OF THE WRITING COMPETITION.

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It was Monday evening when I saw her again. I remember the evening was clear, the moon full, and though the day had ended on a chilly note, the evening had turned out to be warmer than was normal for the time of the Year. March had always been my favourite month, it was Natures awakening, and I loved the smell of the first flowers and the calls of the birds returning home from afar.

I was returning home late after a busy day at work, my arms ached with the weight of the four carrier bags I carried from the local supermarket and I longed for the warmth of my small cosy kitchen and the smell of freshly brewed coffee.

She was at the gate to greet me and my heart leapt when I saw her. She looked thinner that when I had last seen her, I thought to tell her so but then checked myself and remained silent.

As I approached the gate she didn't move toward me but remained motionless, her eyes meeting mine for just a second before she looked away. I didn't know what to say to her, part of me wanted to shout, to angrily chastise her for leaving me so suddenly without warning. True we had had our differences as all family members do. I had the wisdom of maturity and could talk a situation through, Anastasia, however was not capable of this, her anger showed often by her refusal to acknowledge me, which only served to deepen the hurt I felt.

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I had known for some time she had wanted to travel, she had taken to gazing out of the cottage window with that far away look in her eyes and refusing to sit with me. I had suspected that she had been making preparations, she had taken to popping out a couple of evenings a week to visit friends, sometimes staying over and returning late next morning, hungry for breakfast as usual, and I often wondered why it was that whilst she was happy to relax in the surroundings of friends' houses, she always refused breakfast. I was comforted by the knowledge that whilst Anastasia's friends might be her preferred company at this time, at least I was obviously the better cook.

Three months ago my life had been interrupted by her departure. It was not the fact that she had gone, it was the way she had gone about it. No note, but then Anastasia had never been one to put family first. 'Here today and gone tomorrow' my neighbour John complained, 'You know Lizzie, I am surprised you put up with her for so long, the way she treated you.' Whilst John meant well, he didn't understand. I had brought Anastasia up, taught her right from wrong, been there for her particularly in the early days when no one else seemed to want her. Folk in the village couldn't understand why I had adopted her, I already had three of my own, and money was tight. True it hadn't been easy, there were days when I did not know where the next meal was coming from and my part time job as a cook in the local school became a life saver when I was able to bring home occasionally left over food, though barely enough to feed a family of five.

The Death of my husband Bill had torn me apart. It was Anastasia who helped pull me through those dark days, she was there for me then, when the rest of the family seemed so taken up with their own grief and wrapped up in their own lives. She stood by me. Though she couldn't help me financially, she would often go out in the early evening into the centre of the village and return with a small present for me, never a gift of my choosing, but these tokens showed me she understood and was trying to help in her own

way.

I had come to depend on Anastasia for company and I resented her having friends or her need to socialise on occasions. My jealousy deepened further when new neighbours moved in across the road and Anastasia became friendly with the youngest family member. She would disappear for hours, returning in high spirits, excited and unable to sleep.

It was November last year when she left. The cottage had seemed empty; I cried endless tears for the years we had spent together and the few months when I had been unable to understand her need for freedom. She had left with her friend, he had since returned, alone. Obviously the relationship had not worked, I failed to understand why she had not returned with him. I heard stories of their travels from villagers who had seen them together, the local farm owner told of how they had spent one night at his farm and then gone on to board the local ferry for a 'voyage of a lifetime'.

And now she was back.

Part of me wanted to rush toward her, throw my arms around her and tell her how much I loved and had missed her. Instead I approached slowly and deliberately, my heart pounding and hands shaking, small customary beads of perspiration forming on my upper cheekbones, the flushed feeling of excitement and yet dread at what I felt was about to happen.

It was then it happened, a moment which would last forever. From the rear of the cottage I heard a sound, which I did not immediately recognise. Anastasia looked in the direction of the noise and moved toward it. I followed.

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Behind the cottage, tucked away amongst the clay pots and garden rake, were three kittens, huddled together for warmth. ‘Well I never,’ I murmured, ‘Oh Anastasia, you are a clever girl’. Anastasia turned, stretched and purred. My beloved friend had come home.