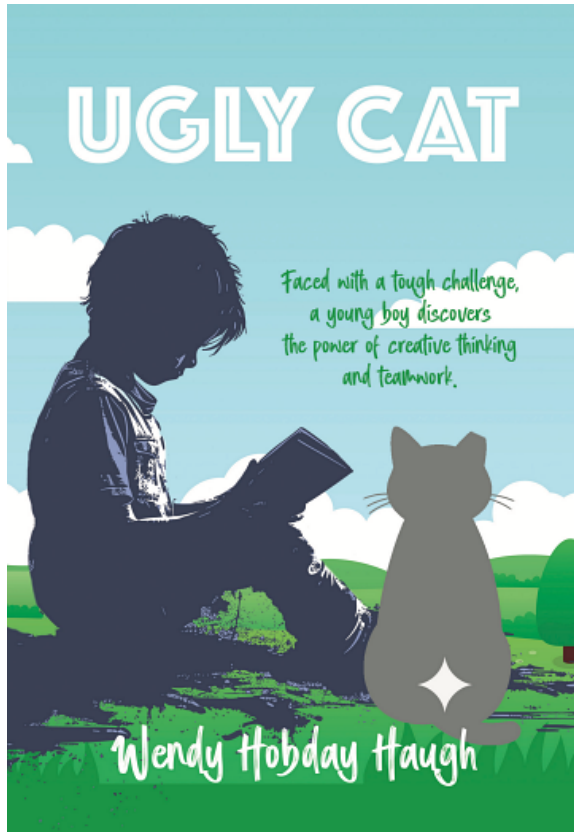




Faced with a seemingly impossible challenge, a young boy discovers the power of creative thinking and teamwork.

Ugly Cat

By Wendy Hobday Haugh

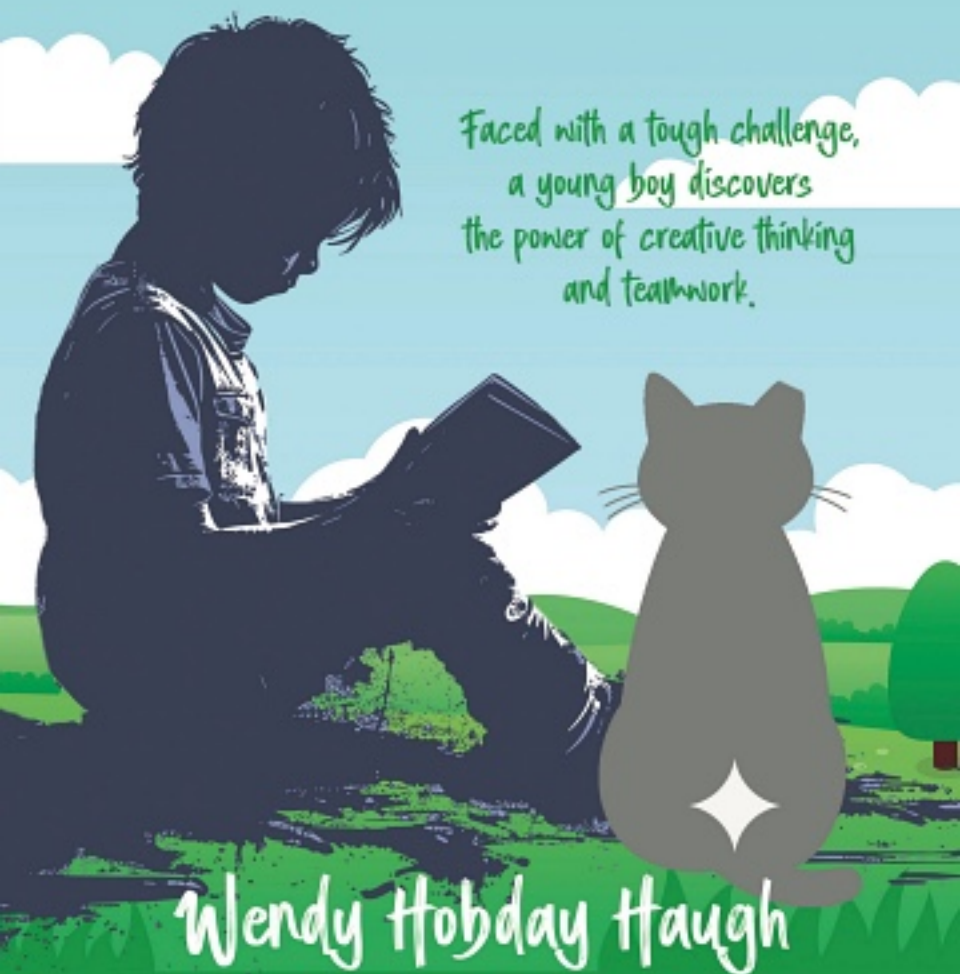
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1

Late September: 5th Grade

UGLY! That's the first word that pops into my head when I spy the scruffy, beat-up cat slinking through the overgrown farm field behind my house. His right ear is torn and droopy. His eyes are squinty. I think he's gray, but his fur is so dirty it's hard to tell. He's skinny, too. I can see his ribs poking through. Slowly, I slide off my porch chair and slip into the kitchen to look for some food. Spotting a can of tuna, I pop it open and head back outside. Stepping off the porch, I start inching toward the field.

"Don't encourage that filthy thing!" the grouchy old lady next door suddenly shrieks.

Glancing left, I see Mrs. Pitkin standing on her screened porch, glaring at me. I grit my teeth, wave, and keep walking. Dad says I have to be nice to her because she's old and lonely. *But it's hard!* She's always spying on me and yelling at me in a voice that sounds like a

clogged shop vacuum. My dad used a shop vac once at our old house when the cellar flooded. It was super-loud to begin with. But once it got clogged with gunk, it morphed into an ear-piercing *screech!* That's what Mrs. Pitkin sounds like when she yells at me. And she yells at me every day!

The squinty-eyed cat sees me coming. Before I'm halfway there, he crouches down and slinks off in the tall grass. I set the can of tuna on the ground. "It's okay, buddy," I call softly, so he can hear me but Shop Vac can't.

I stick around a few more minutes, hoping the cat will return. But the whole time I can feel my nosy neighbor's eyes burning two deep, dark holes in my back. Abruptly, I turn and race down to my house. Mrs. Pitkin starts screeching again, but my hiking boots are pounding so hard I can't hear a word she says.

Tearing into the kitchen, I trip on the ripped linoleum and face-plant on the floor. Usually I get mad when this happens. But today the crummy floor hardly bothers me at all because—for the first time since moving to this dump—I *actually feel excited!* The ugly,

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messed-up cat out back needs a home, and I need a pet. We're a perfect match!

All my friends in my old neighborhood had cats, dogs, or hamsters. But I could never have one because my mom was allergic to all things furry, including my super-hairy dad—or so she said. Mom used to break out sneezing whenever we visited her Great-Aunt Berta. “Aunt Birdy,” as everyone called her, had two black cats. I always thought that was funny. A Birdy with two pet cats!

Anyway, with Mom now living almost 3,000 miles away in California, maybe I can finally have a pet of my own. I'll ask Dad tonight at dinner. I think I have a pretty strong case for adopting the cat. The problem is, ever since we moved out here to Cow Country, Dad and I haven't agreed on much of anything. So no matter what I say, he might just say “no” like he's been saying “no” to almost everything else I've asked for since Mom left.

All through dinner my stomach twists like a pretzel. Finally, drawing a deep breath, I say, “I saw a stray cat in our yard today, Dad. I think he's living in the field out back. He's really bony and dirty, so I'm sure he's

homeless. Can we adopt him, please? He'd be my pet, and..."

"NO," he cuts in, shaking his head. "Sorry, Max. Now isn't a good time."

The pretzel tightens. My toes start tapping the floor. "The cat needs a home, Dad, and I need a pet. I've never had one before! A pet would teach me responsibility."

"Balderdash," he mutters. "The last thing we need is another mouth to feed."

So I drop it... for now.

When Mom first told me she was allergic to Dad, I didn't believe her. But, later, I couldn't help wondering if she'd become allergic to me, too, when I morphed into a hairy teenager. I hope I don't end up all fuzzy-wuzzy like Dad. Imagine a million tiny black ringlets, *everywhere!* That's my dad. I'll probably be okay, though, because my hair is light brown and straight like Mom's.

I don't remember Mom sneezing around Dad like she did around Aunt Birdy's cats. But maybe she did, and I just didn't notice. I didn't notice a lot of things, apparently, because one day we're Mark Camp, Reva

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Gregor, and me, Maxwell Camp—a normal family living in upstate New York—and the next day Mom is moving to California with her sculptor friend, Mandy, to work in an artists’ *con-SOR-she-um*, whatever that is.

“Just think, Max, we’ll be bicoastal!” she gushed, like it was going to be really *fun* living a continent apart.

It’s not. Having a West Coast Mom and an East Coast Dad headed for divorce *stinks!* Just thinking about the D-word makes my heart feel like it’s too big for my chest, trying to claw its way out. In her emails, Mom is always talking about all the fun we’re going to have when I spend next summer in California with her and her new friends. *Ten whole weeks! My entire vacation!*

Talk about scary. Change makes me nervous, and I’ve had way too much of it lately. But it’s only September now, so I’ve got nine months to get used to the idea. And, who knows? Maybe Dad will change his mind about Ugly by then, too. I hope so. Having a cat to hang out with sure would make things easier for me. I’ve just got to keep pushing Dad... *without being pushy*. That’s the trick.

2

Every Saturday morning, Dad makes blueberry pancakes with real maple syrup. It's a 'Camp family tradition,' and I look forward to it all week. I've just shoved a forkful of buttery, syrup-soaked *yum* in my mouth when I spot the sorry stray cat slinking through our back yard.

"Th'r he'zzz!" I cry. Swallowing quickly, I point to the window. "There's the cat, Dad! See how bad he looks? We've got to help him!"

Dad chews slowly. His dark eyes narrow. "I don't know, son. He looks sick."

"Then he needs our help even more, right? You're always telling me to help others. Be kind to Mrs. Pitkin. Don't judge a book by its cover."

"I do say that, Max, but a sick cat would cost us a bundle in vet bills."

"Then let's go to the shelter and adopt a *healthy* cat," I snap, frustrated.

But he shoots that idea down, too, of course.

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My eyes sting with angry tears. Suddenly feeling like I've got a golf ball stuck in my throat, I drop my fork. It clatters noisily on my plate. "Just once, Dad, would it kill you to say *yes*?"

Pushing away from the table, I race upstairs and launch myself face-first on my bed. MY LIFE SUCKS! I miss our nice little brick house in town and all my friends. I still see everybody at school, sure, but it's not the same. Out here, my only neighbor is the grouchy old lady next door, who Dad visits **every day** like they're best friends or something! What's with that? He even brings her pancakes on Saturday, and that's OUR tradition, not hers.

I don't get it. But whenever I ask Dad why he goes over there so often, he just says he's being a good neighbor, and I should be one, too. Yeah, well, maybe he should try being a good *Dad* for a change! That would be something new and different.

My heart pounds in my chest. My arms tingle, itching to break something. I sit up and shake my hands—*hard!*—but the itch remains.

Dropping to the floor, I dig out the gray metal lockbox I keep stashed under my bed. Pinching the key from its secret hiding place, I unlock the box and pull out the six letters Mom has written me since she moved away. Chest heaving, I recall how happy I felt every time I spotted a letter in the mailbox... and how lonely I felt every time I finished reading one.

Scrambling to my feet, I rush to my open window and lift the screen. Hands trembling, I tear the letters in half and toss them skyward, then watch as they flutter slowly to the ground. For a long time afterward, I just stand by my window, breathing in the cool morning air. Gradually, my heart calms. My arms stop tingling. My head clears. With a sigh, I head downstairs to retrieve Mom's letters.

3

“I SEE WHAT YOU’RE DOING, MATT!” my next door neighbor shrieks a few days later.

Startled, I almost drop the can of tuna I’m carrying out to Ugly.

Glancing up, I see Shop Vac standing by the break in the rickety fence that separates our yards. Glaring at me, she looks like a creepy turkey vulture eyeballing road kill—and I’m the kill!

Ignoring her, I just keep walking and set the food down where I always do. Then, turning, I start back. “He’s got to eat, Mrs. Pitkin, same as us,” I say, trying to sound pleasant even though she’s *never* pleasant to me. “And my name is *Maxwell*, ma’am. *Max*, not Matt.”

“Max, Matt, close enough,” she snorts, flicking her hand like she’s swatting a bug.

Just yesterday Dad reminded me for the umpteenth time to be nice to Mrs. Pitkin. “When older people live alone,” he explained, “sometimes their social skills get rusty. They forget how to interact with people.”

I almost bit my tongue off when Dad said that because I could say the same thing about him! Ever since Mom left, he's been a regular Mr. Cranky Pants—*almost* as grouchy as my next door neighbor.

“Come here, kid,” Shop Vac orders, “I want to talk to you.”

I inch toward the fence, not quite trusting her.

“Does your dad know you're spending his hard-earned money feeding that wretched beast? Tuna!” she snaps. “I can smell it all the way over here! The fields are full of mice, Matt, *Max*, whatever your name is. That cat could eat like a king, if it wanted to.”

My face starts to burn. Money, money, *money!* That's all grown-ups care about.

“He's got a hard life, okay? I'm just trying to help him.”

“Yeah? And what makes you think he's a *he*, anyway? Could be a *she*, for all you know.”

Leave me alone, you old bat! I want to scream. But if I ever said those words out loud, she'd tell Dad. Then, I'd *never* get Ugly.

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“Why do you hate cats so much, Mrs. Pitkin? What did a cat ever do to you?”

The old woman jerks back in surprise. “*Hate*? That’s a strong word. I don’t *hate* cats.”

“You sure act like you do.”

“I don’t dislike cats,” she sputters fiercely. “I even had one, once.”

“Well, what do you have against this one? Look at him! He’s a mess! He needs our help!”

Her breath catches oddly. She starts to say something but stops. For several long, awkward minutes we just stand there on opposite sides of the fence, watching the hungry cat eat.

“You think I’m hard-hearted,” she says at last in a quiet voice I’ve never heard before. “But that cat will break your heart, kid. They always do—Piper did, anyway. *Piper Pitkin*, my husband used to call him. He died last winter, just two days after my husband passed away. I lived with Carl for 57 years and Piper 10. Losing both of them like that, one after another, was hard.”

Her pale blue eyes shimmer with tears.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur.

Sniffing, she clears her throat and nods toward the stray. “Piper came to us homeless and hungry, just like this one. He was such a mess I was afraid to let him in the house. But Carl insisted, and Carl was right. Piper cleaned up nicely, just like this one might.”

My eyes pop open. “You really think so, Shop Va—uh, Mrs. Pitkin? You really think he’d make a good pet?”

She wags a bony finger in my face. “Hold on there, sonny! From what I’ve heard, your dad doesn’t want or need a cat right now, and I’m not one to meddle in other peoples’ business.”

I stifle a laugh when she says that. She meddles in my life every day!

Her eyes narrow. “All I’m saying is that stray cats make nice pets *sometimes*. In fact, stay here. I’ve got a few things you might be able to use.”

Slowly, my neighbor turns and hobbles home. She’s gone so long I start to wonder if she’s ever coming back. Bored, I start looking around her overgrown back yard. Instantly, a vocabulary word comes to mind. DISARRAY: confusion, disorder, a great big mess! The

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ground is littered with dead leaves and empty flowerpots. Old hoses poke through the weeds like snakes in a jungle. Birdfeeders dangle crazily from dead tree limbs. A roll of wire fencing lies by the screened porch, near a small bush.

Finally, a door groans open. Mrs. Pitkin steps out on her porch, holding a brown paper bag.

“Well, don’t just stand there, Matt!” she barks, snotty as ever. “Squeeze through that broken slat and come get this stuff! I can’t be running all over the place with this bum hip of mine.”

Before I can even thank her, she drops the bag on the floor, steps back inside, and slams the door.

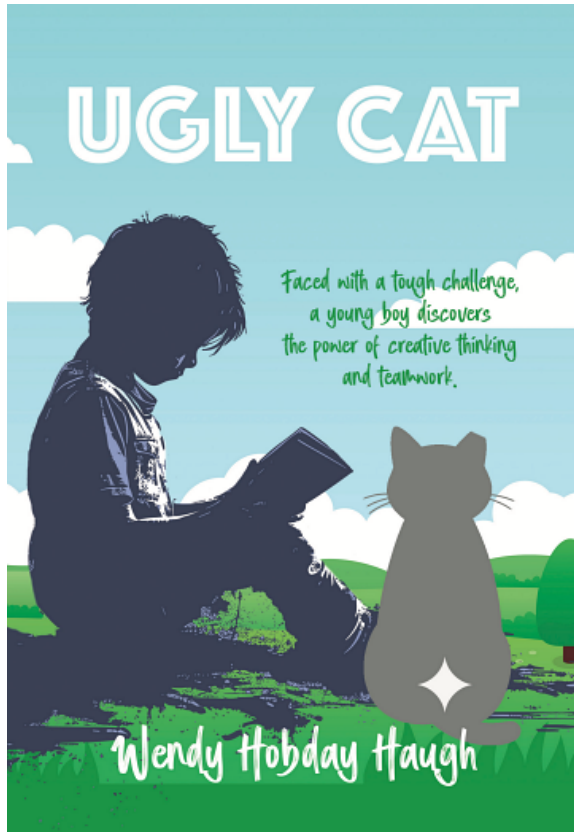
Shimmying through the fence, I run to the porch, open her screen door, grab the bag, and race back home. Opening it in my kitchen, I find six cans of shredded chicken, a partial bag of cat chow, and a blue plastic food dish with a goldfish on it.

“AWESOME!” I whoop. Ugly will feast like a king now, and Dad can finally stop bugging me about all the tuna I’ve been ‘eating’ lately. When he first noticed a

few cans missing, I told him I loved the stuff—which isn't true. I *hate* tuna fish!

“Now, you can have it for breakfast, too,” Dad joked yesterday when he brought home another six cans. “Maybe I’ll even make tuna pancakes next Saturday. How does that sound, Max?”

My stomach lurched at the thought. I told him to stick to blueberries.



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