

ETCETERA

USC's homeless kitties tell their side of the story

BY MARK PIRAS
STAFF WRITER

The soft drizzle makes a staccato pattering on the thin cardboard roof as five glowing sets of eyes peer out at me from the gloom behind a rust-coated green dumpster next to a residence hall on campus.

A shaky, stooped black cat walks slowly from the gloom, approaching me. A dry, hollow cough rattles out of him from deep inside his chest.

"It's like I have a hairball that I can't get up," he apologizes with a sheepish grin, barking out another cough.

He introduces himself to me as Pachiz. "It's supposed to be 'Patches' even though I'm solid-colored," he explains. In a conspiratorial whisper, he confides: "My original owners weren't too bright."

Four cats walk slowly out from behind the dumpster and align themselves behind him. Three are kittens. The fourth appears to be their mother, constantly grooming a light brown-colored kitten as he squirms and tries to get away.

"We're hungry," Pachiz says simply. "And we've been out

here a long time, since all the college kids went home for summer. The kittens are new. We didn't plan them, but sometimes things happen, you know? I feel sorry for these kids. They've never been in a home, never had an owner. And truthfully, I don't think we'll ever get one as long as we stay together. Who wants to adopt a ready-made family these days?"

"Especially when there's so many of us out here on the streets already," chimes in the mother, who introduces herself as Tabby. She explains that she used to be a mascot at a fraternity house with her own mother, but decided to run away after her owners started giving them beer instead of water. "My mother loved it, always in a drunken stupor," she says. "That's no way to live your life. So I got out."

"I lost my home after the school year last year," Pachiz tells me. "When they go home, they don't have any place for

us, so they just toss us outside and assume we'll be alright. I've heard lots of reasons for cats like us getting thrown onto the street - peeing in a potted plant, going into heat and meowing until they can't take it anymore - lots of stuff. But when they just toss you out like old garbage because they're going home for the summer... well, that really hurts."

Resin is a gray and white kitten. The couple worries about him constantly. "He disappears for hours," Tabby says. "And he's been seen running around with that catnip crowd. We try and keep him straightened out, but what can you do? We're so busy fending for ourselves that we don't always have time to watch our own. And the last thing this family needs is a junkie."

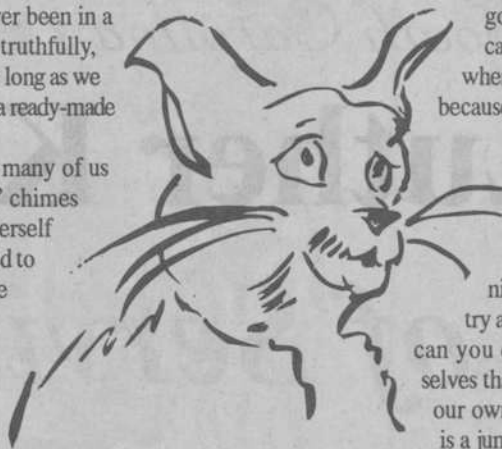
"So I do a little catnip," Resin says defiantly when he's alone. "Who am I hurting? No one. I find scraps of food and trade them; I don't rob or steal. Who could blame me for wanting to find an escape from this life?" He admits that some of

his friends aren't the best role models for him. "I've seen them jump other cats, run around till all hours of the night scrounging for some more catnip. But I'm just a harmless user. I don't hurt no one."

Gomez is the light-brown kitten. "Everyone says I look Mexican, like a Chihuahua. I don't see it," he tells me. "But let me tell you this, you walk around here and drop a chalu-pa... it's mine."

Raven is a dark-black kitten. She doesn't talk much, and has nothing to say to me. "We think she's been working on the streets to get food," Pachiz admits to me in between coughs. "It's just sad to watch. She denies it, of course, but we have our doubts."

"The competition out here has gotten worse," Tabby tells me. "Ever since Christmas break, our numbers have jumped staggeringly. Of course, as the semester drags on, those numbers will dwindle while people adopt one of us for a little while. But then, when summer hits; it'll be the same thing all over again." Pachiz has a message for students who decide to adopt a cat from the streets. "Take them in, get them checked, pay for their shots, and for God's sake, keep them. There's enough of us out here already."



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