

Saving the Kind Barber and His Street Cats by Laura Simpson

With two hefty sacks of cat food in her arms, Manuela Wroblewski can't stop smiling as she whisks toward the familiar shop on the corner. She's making her weekly visit to see Hussein the barber. He spots her through the picture window of his quiet shop and bursts through the door and into the sunlight, stretching his arms wide with a Turkish greeting. Hussein clasps his hands in gratitude as he eyes the bags of food and the two hurry over to the tiny food dishes lined up in the alley. Soon the sound of kibble clinks against the bowls and several stiff tailed cats begin to appear.

Here in Avsallar, Turkey, there is a cultural aversion to cats and dogs, and those who feed the animals are often scorned. But Hussein pays no mind to those who glare at him. He takes his time in the alley, kneeling for the longest while, stroking each cat and speaking softly. Hussein is simply a man who loves with his whole heart, and in this moment, he is lost in the comfort of his family.

As the two finish up and make their way back inside the shop, Hussein's smile fades and Manuela can't help but notice that he is beginning to look rather thin. Manuela, a native of Germany, has led a volunteer animal rescue program in Turkey for the last three years, but the language comes slowly. Only by chance, when a multilingual acquaintance arrives, does the room begin to darken as Hussein explains that he is about to lose his barber shop.

After decades in the same tiny room with immaculately polished scissors and grooming tools precisely aligned along the counter, Hussein has been told that he must leave. His withering barbershop simply doesn't pay enough rent and with so few customers calling for his "old-fashioned" services, the landlord has invited in another tenant... one who won't be feeding animals outside.

Manuela's eyes begin to flood as Hussein expresses his worry for the cats he cares for. There are only seven days until Hussein will vanish from the shop and Manuela fears for his very survival and for that of the animals who depend on him.

But as fate would have it, there is something better in store for the barber and his cats. You see, although animal rescue is thought of as an art exclusively devoted to the four-legged, it is often about saving people as well. As Manuela's Facebook supporters read her post about the barber's fate, there is a swell of support. One after another,

readers begin making small contributions to help and Manuela can't wait to share the news with Hussein.

Every day for the next week, Manuela goes to see Hussein and has a little pile of money to give him. And on the third day, something incredible happens when Hussein is able to secure a storefront in a dilapidated building adjacent to his shop. No electricity, no running water, but there is potential in this spot.

Manuela and veterinarian Dr. Osman come by to help with the painting and clearing of rubbish while electricians and plumbers make all the necessary connections.

In less than two weeks, the barber is back in business again, his whole world restored through the kindness of strangers. And as for the cats, Manuela reports that the barber shop's smallest customers are doing just fine. They are among the hundreds here in Avsallar who receive daily meals through this charitable mission sponsored by the Harmony Fund.