

MICHAEL'S SURPRISE
by James Sherry

Michael had a cat named Jo. His parents had another and longer name for Jo—something like Jonathan, Jacqueline, or Jehoshaphat. But for Michael Jo was simply Jo.

The two of them were great friends. They talked together, walked together, and shared the same bedroom at night. Michael even gave Jo one of his favorite action figures as a birthday present.

Every morning Michael would wake up to find Jo curled up at his feet like a ball of fur in the folds of his bedcovers.

Then they would both yawn and stretch and run downstairs to breakfast. Michael often told Jo to go slowly down the stairs so as not to slip and fall. But Jo never listened and always got to the kitchen first.

Breakfast was Michael's favorite meal. He liked the way the sun poured in through the curtains of the kitchen and mixed with the sounds of the morning news broadcast. He liked the clack of Jo's bowl being struck with the spoon as it was filled with good food. Jo seemed to like it too and was always impatient for breakfast to begin. They both drank lots of milk and sometimes compared their moustaches.

After breakfast, when Michael had gotten dressed, they would run outside and play with Jo's favorite red ball. Jo would bat it between both front paws or even do somersaults over it when Michael rolled it along the ground.

Sometimes, if the weather was not nice enough to go outside, Michael would show Jo his books as they sat together on the couch. Then they would talk about the pictures. Jo's favorites were the pictures of the animals, especially the cats. Michael was careful, however, to skip over the pictures of dogs and birds, Jo didn't like dogs very much. And Michael was sure Jo liked birds for the wrong reasons.

In the afternoon Michael and Jo would pretend to be great hunters and crawl around the house in search of wild and mysterious creatures.

But though they looked very hard, all the creatures they found were as tame and friendly as Jo. And the only one of those who was not pretend was Max, the cat from next door.

After dinner Jo and Max would usually go out together—"to explore the neighborhood." At least that's what Michael's mother would say. She and Michael would often stand at Michael's bedroom window and watch as Jo and Max met under the yellow circle of the streetlamp.

But Michael knew better. For as Jo had often told Michael, there was a magic land at night beyond that streetlamp. And Michael was sure that one day, maybe next week when he was grown up, he and Jo would visit it together.

Though he often tried, Michael could never manage to stay awake until Jo returned. But he knew that in the morning Jo would be there at his feet curled up like a ball of fur in the folds of his bedcovers.

One day, however, Michael began to notice a change in

Jo. Now when Michael got up, Jo would sometimes stay in bed, only lifting a sleepy head as if to say, "Save some milk for me."

Now, when Michael rolled the ball at Jo, it would simply bounce against a paw, wrinkle an ear or ruffle some fur, and roll away.

Michael was no longer afraid to show Jo the pictures of the birds in his book. In fact, he would sometimes point to them and say, "Look Jo, there's a bird," hoping to rouse his drowsy cat. But it didn't work. Jo just got fatter and lazier,

So Michael asked his father and mother about Jo. They said he should not worry, that Jo was simply planning a surprise.

This made Michael very curious. He asked Jo and Max about the surprise. But neither of them would tell him anything about it. What could it be, he wondered.

One day, however, when Michael had just about given up on Jo and the surprise, he woke up to a curious feeling. At first he didn't know quite what it was. But then he realized that Jo was missing.

So he looked under the bed.

And in the closet.

And on the cool tiles of the bathroom floor.

Jo was nowhere to be found. Then it struck him. This must be the day of the surprise.

So he ran downstairs holding on to the banister so as not to slip and fall. And at first Michael thought that the surprise was a very poor one. For Jo seemed to have made everyone disappear. This is no fun at all, Michael thought, as he stood in the empty living room.

But just then he heard his mother's voice coming from the laundry. And when he walked in, he got his surprise. For there amid a nest of clean rags was Jo...with three little fluffy kittens!

Michael loved them at once. And after he had stroked and patted them very gently, he was even going to give them some of his action figures. But his mother and father convinced him to wait until the kittens had opened their eyes and could really appreciate them. So Michael promised that he would show them his best figures later.

In the meantime, he decided that all the kittens should live in his bedroom and be named Jonathan, Jacqueline, and Jehoshaphat. For now he remembered that Jo's real name was Josephine. But he still called her Jo.