

# Mister Pushkin

## Shows Off



Narrowing his sulphurous eyes, Mister Pushkin stared frostily at Klem through the bolted wire door of his tiny cell, his stocky body wedged between a rapidly evaporating

bowl of warm water in one corner, and the sharp rim of an impossibly small litter tray in the other. This sweaty little box would be his home for the next six long hours, and was one of a hundred equally sweaty little boxes arranged along the walls of this feline Alcatraz, otherwise known as St Catherine's Church Hall, commandeered for the day by the Autumn Cat Show.

From the moment he'd woken up, he'd known it was going to be a bad day. His teeth had been brushed, his claws had been trimmed, and he'd been shampooed and blow-dried and combed, all before eight o'clock. It was as though he'd been caught in a whirlwind of frantic activity that – before he'd worked out what was going on – had culminated in his present incarceration.

Mister Pushkin purred, reflecting that he hadn't felt so fed up since... last year's Autumn Cat Show. He was only fifteen

minutes into his sentence, and already he desperately wanted to go home. But he thanked his lucky stars that the feisty Burmilla called Camilla wasn't here.

As Klem stood there, chatting to the other cat owners, fiddling with his greying moustache, and sipping tea, Mister Pushkin narrowed his eyes even further, and thought, 'You're going to pay for this!' And judging by the cacophony of yowling and growling and snarling, most of the other inmates felt exactly the same about their owners. In the cell opposite, there sat an exceptionally grumpy Himalayan that lashed out at anyone who came too close, its long beige fur flooding the tiny cell, its eyes so small that when combined with its snub nose and full cheeks, Mister Pushkin found it impossible to determine which end was which? And in the cell next door, sat a snow-white Javanese, its pointed face poking through the wire door, its slender

front legs reaching out for freedom, but its claws only ever snagging its owner's woollen jumper. Why couldn't they all be calm like the petite Singapura that sat watching proceedings through its pretty hazel-coloured eyes, occasionally grooming its sepia coat, clearly relishing being on show?

Mister Pushkin looked through the square window high up the wall, and watched the browning leaves raining down, as the enormous oak in the car-park was buffeted by strong winds. The air outside might have been cold, but at least it was fresh.

He almost choked on the stuffy concoction of rose-water and lavender perfumes oozing from the wrinkled skins of a multitude of old women, whose joints creaked as they stooped to admire each prisoner in turn. And woe betide any gnarled hand that dared to stroke the grumpy Himalayan. The first aid officer already had a long queue of lacerated

patients to attend to.

Just as Mister Pushkin thought the situation couldn't possibly get any worse, he saw the formidable Ms Potamus float into the hall, followed by her obsequious entourage of Assistant Judges. He'd hoped that after what'd happened last year, he'd never see her again. Observing the clock on the wall opposite, he purred like a little engine. Fifteen minutes gone. Five hours and forty-five minutes of pure hell remaining...

The waves of old women parted as Ms Potamus cleaved her way into the narrow hall and positioned herself before Cage #1. From the corners of her eyes, she looked across the hall and observed with trepidation the occupant of Cage #100. It was no coincidence that this cat would be the last to be judged.

Turning her attention back to Cage #1, she held out a chubby hand and clicked her fingers. Immediately, her assistants rallied

around, one presenting her with a golden clipboard loaded with blank scoring sheets, and another handing her a sharp HB pencil. The remaining assistants were poised to give her a measuring tape, a magnifying glass, and a fine-toothed flea comb the instant she needed them. A trolley with a squeaky wheel followed in her wake, on top of which was the examination table, and an ancient brass seesaw of a weighing scale; and stored secretly beneath, was enough black coffee and chocolate gâteau to sustain her for the hours of scrutiny to come.

Mister Pushkin watched Ms Potamus reach into the cage, grab the grumpy Himalayan by the scruff of the neck, and drop it unceremoniously onto the examination table as if it was an old mop-head. He'd attended dozens of cat shows over the years, and had met many judges, but none of them had been as critical or as mean or as nasty as Ms

Potamus. He waited for the Himalayan to lash out, if not to draw blood, then at least to shred the woman's multicoloured floral dress. But bizarrely, the cat exhibited almost Zen-like calmness. Despite living on a dairy farm, Ms Potamus was the most domineering and frightening creature it had ever seen! Mister Pushkin watched as the woman measured and weighed and combed the cat, squeezing it and poking it and swinging it through the air, then peering at every individual strand of fur through a magnifying glass, searching for even the slightest imperfection, the smallest grain of dandruff, and any excuse to award fewer points. And then there was the inevitable scratching of that HB pencil as the final score was etched at the top of the sheet. Alas, according to Ms Potamus, the cat's fur was "*the wrong shade of beige*", so it wouldn't win any prizes today.

She was equally critical of the snow-white

Javanese, whose long plumed tail was *“too long and too plumed”*. And the petite Singapura’s large hazel-coloured eyes were *“not hazel enough”*. So neither of these two cats would win a prize, much to their owners’ immense frustration.

Ms Potamus floated down the hall, slurping black coffee, munching chocolate gâteau, and picking fault with every cat she examined. She declared that a Selkirk Rex’s loosely-curved fur was *“too loosely-curved”*, and that a Munchkin’s short legs were *“too long”*, and that a wrinkly Sphinx’s bald skin was *“too wrinkly”*. Disgruntled owners folded their arms and looked away, wondering why they bothered to come. But Ms Potamus wasn’t only critical of pedigrees. No, she also picked endless fault with every moggie she saw, complaining that the fur colour, the shape of the head and the length of the tail were *“not quite right”*. Every so often, she saw from the



corners of her eyes, the occupant of Cage #100 glaring at her with those eyes of molten sulphur. With any luck, and if she worked slowly enough, she may not have sufficient time to judge this particular cat.

Five hours later, Ms Potamus stood reluctantly at the door of Cage #100, her palms sweating and her hands shaking.

**TO BE CONTINUED...**



This tale is included in Book 2

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