



A MESSAGE FROM AFAR

Day One

I quickly skipped down the stairs from my eighth-floor beach condo. I was rushing to join Lena, my lady partner; she was waiting for me atop the hilly pine and eucalyptus forest. It's where we go for exercise and peace, our ritual ever since the high season tourists flooded our otherwise tranquil resort. My pace was growing faster while I tried to adjust my earphones – I was listening to Richard Bach's seagull saga.

I had already hit the sidewalk when I heard a high-frequency noise that didn't seem to belong to the story I was listening to. I caught the sound again, as it had now become louder. I turned my head to where the sound was coming from, and I walked back as the squeaking intensified. Something was crawling on the bushy side of the sidewalk. It was a greyish newborn kitten slithering like a snake toward me. Its eyes remained shut. Its umbilical cord, longer than its body, was trailing behind. There

were no signs of its mother or any other cat. Its cries for help became louder as we approached each other. It was clear: this living thing, although blind, could not only hear but was eager for life; it was aware of my presence and was making its appeal to me, another living being.

I looked around for a piece of paper with which to grab it. I hardly deserve credit for thinking about what I was doing at that point -- it was some kind of an instinctive reaction. Picking up a plastic bag lying about, I wrapped it around the kitten; its body was large enough to fill just my hand, no more. As my thumb touched its head, I felt its warmth and sensed its life. I marched resolutely back to the "portería," the doorkeeper's booth.

"¿Dónde está su madre?" (Where's its mother?), I asked. The man shrugged his shoulders, looking at me somewhat puzzled. Mind you, the people here are not unkind to animals. Stray dogs walk among the people and sleep anywhere on the sidewalks feeling completely confident and comfortable -- a civilized accommodation has resulted.

And here, at the gated community where we come to escape our northern hemisphere winters, a homeless cat community feeds on scraps from the workers' lunches and from the garbage dumpsters and the fields. These cats have grown to like us, as we have regularly fed them ourselves with better food bought at the farmers' market or in the town nearby. Interestingly, one of the cats the workers call Salomé has picked me out as her human. She never misses an opportunity to cozy up to me for a few minutes of caressing contact and cat talk. I feel genuinely graced and uplifted after each visit with her.

So, the attendant's puzzlement at seeing the newborn kitten in my hand was not what a northerner might have taken it to mean. With his head, he pointed to where the cats congregate. That was no less of a response than I had expected, and I hastened to deliver the kitten to its mother as was my plan. There were only two cats at the cat place at the time. None of them looked like the kitten's probable progenitor. No matter. I placed the kitten on the ground and resumed my walk. I was expected to reach the top of the forest in twenty-five minutes, and I was already running late -- my partner would be unhappy if I didn't show up on time.

A while later, just before dark, when Lena and I got back from our daily forest outing, I took her directly to where I had placed the kitten. It had managed to crawl off the plastic bag; it was now inside a concrete pavement corner blocking its way. The cold late evening had already started enveloping the place, and a much colder night was expected. It was a no-brainer that the kitten wouldn't survive the southern hemisphere night. Right away, while looking at me as if possessed by something urgent, my partner exclaimed:

"Мы заберем его домой" (We're taking him in), she said in her native Russian while stooping down to pick it up.

Of course, I had no objection, but I heard myself proclaim: "There will be some complications and some good feelings." My partner is used to my predictions, as this is my penchant. She ascribes it to my intuitive nature.

Once in the condo, ensuring the kitten's survival took precedence over our strict daily routine. My partner wasted no time creating a cozy home for the kitten: a shoebox with a bottle of warm water padded with a towel must have felt like nirvana after the cold outside. She started talking to it in tender tones and language that made me jealous. Such was a side of my partner I had not known -- the maternal instinct had seemingly taken over, was my first thought. The newborn became quiet, and I became silent too. I suspected that my partner was secretly delighted. Indeed, the kitten's presence had brought some cherished warmth to our recent monotony, and a ray of joy began springing in my heart. I have to confess: I like pets. And then again, it may be that I revere life.

Are we somehow wired for this sort of thing? I wondered.

An image from my childhood flashed through my mind: I'm about six or seven years old; I'm lying in bed under covers. One recently born kitten is in my left armpit, another in my right armpit, a third between my legs, and a fourth in my hands on my tummy. I'm keeping them warm. I feel good. My memory is, I must have been doing this at night over a few days. A family authority figure gets a whiff of this and summarily yanks the kittens off of me while scolding me angrily; then... I never forgave her for that and never forgot it. I cried and cried. It must have been a truly traumatic experience for me. It may well be why I've been striving to make it up to those flushed-down-the-toilet kittens ever since. Without further ado, I dedicate this story to them here and now.

Cruelty to animals is not a new thing. Humankind has practiced cruelty more often than not. People can even be exceptionally cruel to each other. Let's face it: cruelty is part of our nature. Leaving institutionalized cruelty to animals aside, I believe there's a connection between people's station in life and animal cruelty. You can hardly expect, for example, starving people in a war-torn country to be kind to or even spare animals. Kindness to animals is not always a top priority. Undeniably, affluent societies offer good opportunities for animal life. Volunteers of all kinds devote a great deal of their time and resources to caring for animals. So, kindness to animals and cruelty must be part of human nature. It seems as if the design of our soul has good intentions unless the circumstances dictate otherwise. Sociologists might be interested in using this as a classificatory metric for the status of society's development. It won't surprise me if they have already done so.

"What shall we feed him?" I asked after a while, decisively taking the second seat in the rearing process and simultaneously compensating myself for my show of humanity by using an animate pronoun. The word for "it" and "him" is the same in Russian, and using "him" might have been my subconscious way of personifying the kitten.

"We can't feed it anything now; it won't open its mouth," she said. "What it needs is warmth and rest. Tomorrow, we'll go to town and get it a pacifier," she added, turning the lights in the kitten's bedroom off while gently pushing me out of the room.

I went out to our spacious balcony overlooking the oceanic vastness. Somewhere out there was Australia, about 8,000 miles into the endless west; an enormous quantity of water and an immense force. On calm days, long waves peacefully lap the beach as they've done tirelessly off and on for time immemorial. It occurred to me that the waves are not as docile on stormy days. They will pound the beach mercilessly, reshaping it for another day. And they always hold the nasty tsunami threat over our heads. Yeah, sometimes the ocean is kind, other times not so. Like people and how they treat animals was the idea.

I marveled at the cloudless sky with its starry chandelier hovering over the southern hemisphere. But the night chill quickly leaching into my bones abruptly dispensed with my musing and forced me unapologetically back inside.

Day Two

We sat down to breakfast, wishing our little guest would call us. I had already peeked at its box more than once. Betraying the first signs of attachment, Lena declared that I should take the kitten to America. She had forgotten that we had agreed only to help it survive and return it to its "community" at our stay's end. I said nothing as the process of bonding had also started taking root in me. The thought of appropriating the kitten and of a life together had already occurred to me.

Had we wanted to show we are indifferent to gender, this could be a good excuse for inattentiveness or ignorance:

"How can you tell if it's a he or a she?" Lena asked. I was momentarily taken aback by this somewhat stupid question.

"If you see two holes, it's a she; otherwise, it's a he," I blurted out in laconic precision while instantly regretting my rudeness. I had not paid attention either; what was important was to save the kitten, not to determine its gender membership, I thought.

No sooner had the kitten let out the first squeak than my partner rushed to its side. I followed closely behind. She picked it up tenderly and then went to the kitchen where she had previously prepared an eyedropper bottle with store-bought cow's milk at room temperature. Every time the kitten would open its mouth to squeak, she'd try to drop some milk into it. But the kitten was too quick and unwilling to let any milk pass. We were both rather distraught, she more than I.

"We're going to lose him, I'm afraid," she lamented with a nascent tear in her eye. After trying a few more times, she gave up for the time being. She asked me to hold it while she refreshed the warm water bottle and refashioned its comfy box with a towel on top.

Neither of us had expected the effect or rather -- permit me to put it less modestly - - the magic of my hands. No sooner had it landed in my palm than it stopped whining; my fingers gently caressed it behind the ears. Indeed, I was now entering my expert cat mode. It was clear it liked my treatment: its feet relaxed, and its breath evened out. I began humming and enunciating my silly, home-spun feline sounds to up the ante. It was as if we were now in harmony, it and I.

Lena glanced over at the twosome with relieved satisfaction, determining this was a good time to get some food through again. She put her thumb and index finger around its tiny mouth and gently forced the mouth open. Its white row of reddish gums came to view. She was able to release a drop or two. But the kitten ever so stubbornly turned its head away. Still, we both felt we were making good progress. A minute went by, and another drop got through. As the kitten went about this ever so reluctantly, we decided it was good enough for the time being. Lena picked it off my hand and gingerly placed it in its box. She covered it with a towel leaving just a crack for air.

"It's a she," she suddenly whispered after we got back to our dinner. "It has two holes," she added. The empirical evidence had now emerged. We knew we had a female.

"Let's call her Gritis," she said after a considerable pause. She's grey like your Gris, she continued. Gris was my last cat, which fell victim to my globetrotting, but that's another story.

Our kitten now had a gender and a name; she was well on her way to forming a personality in our minds and hearts.

Day Three

Unbeknownst to me, my partner had been getting up during the night to refresh the hot water bottle and to try to feed Gritis. Her efforts neither yielded great results nor encouraged greater hope, so she was frustrated. The loss of sleep made her more discouraged and distressed. Lena asked me to hold Gritis in my usual "magical" manner in the morning. I was now the official house shaman -- if my hands couldn't do the trick, nothing could, was probably the operative understanding. A couple of more drops of milk were allowed to pass Gritis' strict oral control before she went back to sleep. Lena refreshed the warm water and placed an extra warm water bottle on the outside adjacent to her shoebox.

We went to town to do our Saturday grocery shopping and get a pacifier for Gritis' bottle as per our plan. However, when we got to the pharmacy, I realized I didn't know or couldn't remember the Spanish word for a pacifier. I decided to use an old tactic on the spur of the moment: I'd mine my mental linguistic reservoir and resort to circumlocution. The closest I could come up with was the French word "biberon" for the pacifier.

"No sé como se dice en español, pero estoy buscando un biberón" (I don't know the word in Spanish, but I'm looking for a pacifier), I said in my usual above-the-fray demeanor. To my polyglot linguist's surprise and joy, the pharmacist knew right away what I meant. He took me over to the proper counter where a full array of exquisite and expensive pacifiers -- "chupetes" -- was displayed.

It had been a long time since I had put my college French degree to use, and I gleefully surmised the pharmacist must have known French until I found out that the same word exists in Spanish. Words can be lots of trouble, and languages constitute an incurable headache. Still, they can be a lot of fun too and quite helpful at times.

We couldn't wait to get back home to try the new Japanese pacifier. My caring partner had learned from her internet search that the sucking function was necessary for the kitten's feeding. We were now going to find out if it worked. She had also read that if the kitten does not exercise this function during the first six hours of its life, it never will. This first sucking imparts a lot of needed microbial cultures necessary to kick-start the kitten's immunity; moreover, one must observe strict hygienic conditions.

We rushed home with expectant excitement. Gritis was already calling us. I didn't want to admit it, but it seemed to me that her cries sounded a tad weaker. Although I said nothing, the impression hung ominously in my mind. I placed Gritis on my palm, her little head resting between my thumb and index finger. At the same time, my lady prepared a unique concoction culled from her internet search, presumably an adequate replacement for cat's milk. She picked Gritis off my hand ever so gently and repeatedly tried to place a few drops into her mouth.

"She's taking it," Lena exclaimed in cheerful gratification. One drop got in and then another, and yet another. We looked at each other in delightful disbelief feeling certain this was the turning point. We went as far as to high-five ourselves and felt confident we had already won the battle. Now, Lena was thinking aloud; she would never let go of Gritis. Deeper bonding was getting sealed.

Day Four

The first thing upon getting up was to look after Gritis. I can't explain why but I wanted to participate and did so every time Lena took her out of the box for feeding or cleaning. There was an attraction, a strong interest in her wellbeing, and joyful anticipation of good times. The kitten had now become our ward; she was in our care; we were going to help her manage her challenging first steps into our world. From her internet searches, Lena learned that, after feeding, gently massaging the lower part of the kitten's tummy causes urination. She thought that would be a perfect way to start getting Gritis potty-trained and help keep her sleeping area clean.

"What's this?" Lena asked, pointing to the dried-up umbilical cord still hanging from the kitten's navel.

This was a question I did not expect from a sophisticated person such as my lady, who happens to be a medical doctor. But it also occurred to me that I had failed to address that item myself earlier.

"Of course, you know what it is; it's her umbilical cord," I said, still wondering whether Lena had simply misfired in asking for the obvious.

"What shall we do with it?" she asked while placing Gritis into my hands. I was still incredulous that she would continue this play in absent-minded seriousness.

"Get me a pair of scissors," I said, looking at her from the corner of my eye in unconcealed disbelief. It was hard to believe we were having this conversation. The truth be told, Lena was not thinking about what she was saying. The concern for Gritis's wellbeing possessed her so much that her words bore no literal meaning. Instead, they were a shield for the fears consuming her mind. Lena was committed to the survival of this kitten. Spinning out of her semi-reverie, she uttered:

"She will be fine; she will grow somewhat slower and may not reach her ideal weight."

I was OK with that. The situation now seemed under control, but I didn't forget the importance of the first six-hour feeding. Contrarian words wanted to leap out of my mouth at that moment. Still, even though we didn't know whether that first necessary feeding had occurred, both of my females were doing fine. I decided to leave well enough alone.

Day Five

It's common knowledge that some people have accomplished extraordinary things under certain circumstances, like a mother lifting a heavy car to free her trapped son. Whether these stories are urban myths or cases of unusual amounts of adrenaline should not concern us here. I was only trying to figure out the transformation before me. My partner so values her sleep that nothing is ever allowed to interfere with it. She's consistently dutiful about it. Yet, she's been getting up more than once every night to care for Gritis. She's done this, she explained, every time the kitten calls. Although we slept side by side, I had not heard anything despite being the lighter sleeper. My first thought was that the difference must be due to her maternal instinct, which raises another question: can the maternal instinct operate cross-species?

On the other hand, it's simpler to stick with simpler clarifications. Lena's overarching may be understood as an unusual innate attraction for pets in some people. It has nothing to do with the maternal instinct as both men and women like pets. Instead, it relates to the domestication factor -- an urge to enslave or be enslaved. Humankind has domesticated for practical and non-practical reasons, thus forming bonds between its kind and another. Perhaps this is what was operative in this case. Then out of the blue, I recalled some wise words from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: "You become responsible forever for what you've tamed." It felt like a warning where perhaps none was needed but suited my proclivity for lugubrious predictions.

Yet my thinking advanced: It occurred to me that the real reason for people's affinity for pets is that pets fill a need; people need to trust but fear betrayal. The more disillusioned one is, and the more frequently one has been betrayed, the more likely to resort to pets. Pets seem to come with an iron-clad guarantee for unconditional friendship and non-betrayal. To your pet, it matters not whether you are rich or poor, young or old, male or female; it matters not whether you're overweight or slender, tall or short, beautiful or ugly. What matters is you, exclusively and categorically you. Your pet grants you permanent super-priority status; you are the veritable Número Uno. Your pet will never betray you.

Where can one find this premium quality of friendship?

When I came out of my mental rambling, the reality was waiting for me: Gritis refused to eat again. Other than the few meager feedings, a few drops of a recommended mixture, she stayed the course.

"I think she's dying," Lena confessed, bursting into tears. She put her arms around me, her head leaning on my left shoulder while sobbing uncontrollably for what seemed to be a long while. My efforts to console her proved ineffective.

"I murdered her," she cried in histrionic exaggeration while snapping out of our embrace and stepping back. Her face was now assuming a dark expression. I was afraid she'd lapse into one of her mini-depression moods.

"What are you talking about? "I rushed to repair while quickly following up: "You've been doing everything possible." And I continued: "I don't know of anyone who could have done more." Next, I enumerated the many things she had done, including sacrificing her very precious sleep. My efforts seemed to have had only a minor momentary effect as the weeping resumed, albeit somewhat less intense. It appeared that she was intent on punishing herself. What was I to do? Should I let this follow its natural path and deal with the consequences, or should I continue with my helpful inputs?

The battle of rationality vs. emotionality was on.

If this was how Gritis's coming into our lives was to end, then it was high time for me to revise my thinking on the meaning of pets. Pets, I've always maintained, enrich our lives; they reflect and complement our personalities to a large extent. How could such an innocent and harmless being bring harm? How could our best intentions and good actions lead to unintended pain?

Day Six

I've got to be frank with you: things aren't going very well. Lena has become quieter than usual. While I've placed myself on perpetual call for hand-healing sessions, Lena continues to clean Gritis daily. She does not miss an occasion to attempt to feed her. She never misses a call day or night. It's a side of hers that I hadn't seen before. I was revising my assessment of her selfish traits. She's clearly downcast and quite disheartened, as the kitten now has clamped her mouth shut. I was worried about what was coming next. The situation affected me, and I was beginning to tiptoe around her and this entire state of affairs. We were now getting enveloped by a somber mood. We both knew we were losing ground, but I still did not want to give up. The thought about the first critical feeding flashed through my disquieted mind once again. And I decided to do something about it on my own.

Without any specific plan in mind, I went downstairs. I aggressively marched up to the portería, where two attendants were chatting.

"¿Quién de ustedes ha estado echando a los gatitos?" (Who among you has been tossing out the kittens?), I heard myself interrogating. As if on cue, their mouths dropped open while looking at me somewhat incredulously and then quickly glancing at each other, wondering if I hadn't lost my marbles. They assured me no one ever dumps kittens out but that some cats themselves indeed do. Just the other day, one

of them -- he had Gritis' mother in mind -- discarded another one of her newborns there and pointed to where some big bushes were. He stopped me before I could rush over, explaining that there was nothing there now. I did not have the heart to ask what had happened to Gritis' sibling. I figured they'd have told me if it was good news.

Sometimes, it's better not to know.

Day Seven

We like to have breakfast on the east side; it feels good to let the gentle morning sun transition us to the new day. As I started eating my breakfast, Lena quietly entered the room and handed Gritis to me.

"Держи!" (hold her!); she said lifelessly, thinking that some "vital energy" from my hands would make Gritis feel better.

I held the kitten for a long time while humming a sweet but sad Greek tune about a loved one the trains had taken away. The song choice was entirely serendipitous -- earlier in the morning, I had caught its first couple of bars while shuffling through the files on my mp3. I continued holding Gritis, face away from the sun, so that the weak morning sun would warm what small part my hands could not cover. This action seemed to relax her somewhat and to console me some, but our little friend, still refusing to eat, still with her eyes shut, was now lying motionless. And hope against hope, I remained still vested in believing she was merely resting and would be alright.

Oh, how blinding hope can be! It can lighten the present but cannot guarantee the future.

I heard Lena's prolonged, quiet weeping in the next room. She knew better and had now evidently given up for good. She returned to the breakfast room, where Gritis and I were, her eyes flooded with tears, feeling like an utter failure. She had something to confess; she managed to mumble. She pointed for me to sit down. Solemnly she bent over the kitten's makeshift home, and with the utmost care, she picked her up. She then screwed up her eyes, fixed her grief-stricken gaze on mine, and hissed out: "Gritis is dying today!" Making a supreme effort to contain her sobbing, she added: "She'll be gone shortly." She then placed the kitten in my hands and made me promise to hold her till she was gone. "Focus on her pain!" she cautioned. "Ease off her pain! You can do it!"

I intuited that this entire episode may not have been accidental. Hardly anything comes our way fortuitously, but always with a message that gets lost if we are unprepared or unable to receive it, to figure it out. A torrent of thoughts rushed

through my head. Involuntary comparisons bombarded my brain, questioning some long-held notions about life. I struggled to focus on the task at hand, not to let my mind wander away now. Bits of my humming resumed momentarily before the message took entirely over. My eyes glued on the kitten; I wondered if the energy flow had not reversed, no longer from me to Gritis, but the other way around. And in a split second, it all became clear, or so I thought: a powerful message had muscled its way through to me, and I had gotten it: *life is more precious than we think.*

I gently massaged Gritis' little legs; they were motionless. As if her mission were accomplished with the message delivered, she slightly moved her little head to indicate she was pleased, contented, and satisfied. I saw tangible signs of her letting out a deeper breath. Her tiny legs moved ever so slightly one more time.

And then, all of a sudden, she was no more.

A while later, I made this entry in my journal:

"The kitten died about an hour ago after I held it for about 30 minutes, during which time I saw it relax and breathe out for the last time. Gritis' Seven Days of Passion came to an end today."

Lena cried a lot and is still mourning. She wanted to bury Gritis at the playground and the "oratorio," the praying spot where she spends her mornings. I suggested finding a different place to forestall a daily, sad reminder for her. She agreed to let me bury it on the beach, which I did. It was an emotional experience for me, but I did it with great reverence in a way befitting a once-living being.

I couldn't hold back my tears. There's no doubt I'm sentimental; I've always been that. Above all, I was emotional for personal reasons: do you suppose we shower our pets with love because it hasn't been so with ourselves? Lena proved to be a soft soul as well. I was able to see another good side of hers. Gritis' coming to our lives was laden with meaning and significance. Her brief presence helped us discover and comprehend things about ourselves that we were either unaware of or had forgotten. There was every reason to be genuinely grateful to her, to a message-ridden, short-lived kitten named Gritis."

Day Eleven

I set out to go to the forest where Lena was waiting for me. I decided to go by way of the beach. While passing by where I had buried Gritis only four days ago, I looked for the stick marking her grave. Seeing none, I approached. The sand burial mound I had formed lay demolished. A pit had taken its place; chewed-up pieces of the blue

bag where I had placed the kitten lay scattered around. Her decaying flesh must have exuded enough of a smell through the bag and through the pile of sand to attract some predatory animal, probably one of those hungry errant dogs. And so, nothing was left of Gritis, and nothing was wasted: meaningful in life and beneficial in death.

Demetrius Koubourlis

Papudo, Chile, 2012