



A MESSAGE FROM AFAR

A story by Demetrius Koubourlis

Day One

I quickly skipped down the stairs from my eighth floor beach condo. I was rushing to hook up with Lena, my lady partner, who was waiting for me atop the hilly pine and eucalyptus forest. This is where we go for exercise and peace. This had become our ritual ever since the high season tourists flooded our otherwise very quiet 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 be part of the story I was listening to. I heard the sound again, as it had now become louder. I turned my head back 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 were still 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 to grab it with. I hardly deserve credit for thinking about what I was doing at this point -- it was some kind of an instinctive reaction. Picking up a plastic bag that was lying about, I wrapped it around the kitten; its body was large enough to fill my hand, no more. As my thumb touched its head, I felt its warmth, I sensed its life. Resolutely, I marched back to the “portería”, the doorkeeper’s place.

“¿Donde 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. In fact, 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, there’s a homeless cat community that feeds on scraps from the workers’ lunches and from whatever they can garner from around the garbage dumpsters and the fields. These cats have grown to like us, as we have taken the pleasure of regularly feeding them ourselves with better food bought at the farmers’ market or in the town nearby. In fact one of them, the workers call her Salomé, has picked me out as her human and never misses an opportunity to cozy up to me for a few minutes of caressing contact and cat talk. I feel truly 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. This is about as much of a response as 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 had to reach the top of the forest in twenty five minutes and I was already running late. My partner would be annoyed if I didn’t show up on time; I knew that for sure.

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. The poor thing was all alone; it had managed to crawl off the plastic bag and into an inside corner formed by the concrete pavement which was now blocking its way. The cold late evening had already started enveloping the place, and a much colder night was to follow. It was a no-brainer that the kitten wouldn’t survive the night. Right away, while looking at me as if possessed by something truly urgent, my partner blurted out:

“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 did hear myself proclaim: “There will be some complications but some good feelings as well.” My partner is used to my predictions, as this is a penchant of mine. She ascribes it to my intuitive nature.

Once in the condo, insuring the kitten's survival took precedence over our strict daily routine. My partner wasted no time in creating a cozy home for the kitten. A shoe box 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 such tender tones and language that made me jealous. This was a side of my partner I had not known -- the mother instinct had seemingly taken over, was my first thought. The newborn became quiet; and I became quiet 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.

"What shall we feed him?" I asked after a while, decisively taking a second seat in the rearing process, but simultaneously compensating myself for my show of humanity: you see, there's one word for both "it" and "him" in Russian; and, being a product of yet another language and culture, I was clearly thinking of "him" in my subconscious way of personifying the kitten. This must be a complex process that occurs with multi-linguals whose gender hybridization may be a mystery to the uninitiated.

"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 a pacifier for him", she added turning the lights in the kitten's bedroom off while gently pushing me out of the room.

Day Two

We sat down to breakfast expectantly waiting for our little guest to call us. I had already peeked at its box more than once. Betraying the first signs of attachment, Lena declared that I should take it with me upon my return to America; she was forgetting that we had agreed only to help it survive, and then return it to its "community" at the end of our stay. 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.

If we wanted to show we are indifferent to gender, this could be a good cover 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 rather nonsensical 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 coarse manner. Fact is, I had not noticed 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

eye dropping 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 went about refreshing the warm water bottle and refashioning its comfy box with a towel on top.

What neither of us expected was the effect or rather -- permit me to put it less modestly -- the magic of my hands. No sooner had it landed in my palm that 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. To up the ante, I began humming and enunciating my silly, home-spun feline sounds. 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 try again getting some food through. She put her thumb and index finger around its miniscule 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. Nevertheless, 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. She 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 was now in. 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 in itself.

It was thus that our kitten had a gender and a name and 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. She was becoming frustrated, and the loss of sleep made her more discouraged and distressed as her efforts were neither yielding great results, nor encouraging greater hope. In the morning she asked me to hold Gritis in my usual "magical" manner, as I now was 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. The warm water was refreshed and an extra warm water bottle was placed on the outside adjacent to her shoe box.

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

"No sé como se dice en español, pero busco 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 linguist's surprise and joy, the pharmacist knew right away what I meant and took me over to the proper counter where a full array of all sorts of exquisite and expensive pacifiers – chupetes -- was displayed. It had been a long time since I had gotten any value out of my French degree, and I 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; but they can be a lot of fun too and even quite useful at times.

We couldn't wait to get back home to try the new Japanese pacifier. In her internet search, my caring partner had learned that the sucking function was important 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. Evidently, this first sucking imparts a lot of needed microbial cultures necessary to kick-start the kitten's immunity. Moreover, it's important that strict hygienic conditions be observed.

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. Gritis was placed on my palm, her little head resting between my thumb and index finger while my lady went about preparing a special concoction culled from her internet search. This was billed to be adequate replacement for cat's milk. Ever so gently, she picked Gritis off my hand and tried repeatedly 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 after that yet another. We looked at each other in delightful disbelief. This thing worked. We felt certain this was the turning point. We went as far as to congratulate ourselves and felt confident the battle was already won. Now, Lena was thinking out loud; she would never part with Gritis. Evidently, the 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 take part, and did so every time she was taken out of her box for feeding or cleaning. There was an attraction, a strong interest in her well-being and a joyful anticipation of good times to come. The kitten had now become our ward, she was in our care; we were going to help her manage her very difficult 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?" asked Lena pointing to the dried up umbilical cord still hanging from the kitten's navel.

Now, 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; her concern for Gritis' wellbeing had possessed her to such an extent that her words were just words without literal meaning, and didn't apply to what was before her; rather, they were a shield for her fears which were consuming her mind. Lena was totally 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 wasn't forgetting about the importance of the first six-hour feeding. Although the contrarian words wanted to leap out of my mouth at that moment, I decided I should leave well enough alone as both of my females were now doing just fine despite the fact that we didn't know whether that first important feeding had occurred at all.

Day Five

It's common knowledge that under certain circumstances some people have been able to accomplish extraordinary things like a mother lifting a heavy car to free her trapped son. Whether these stories are urban myths or a case of unusual amounts of adrenaline should not concern us here, but I was trying to figure out the transformation before me. You see, my partner so values her sleep that nothing is ever allowed to interfere with it. She's unfailingly dutiful about it. Yet, she's been getting up more than once every night to care for Gritis. She's done so, she explained, every time the kitten calls. Although we sleep side by side, I did not hear anything despite the fact that I'm supposed to be the lighter sleeper. My first thought was that the difference must lie in the mother instinct. Which raises another question: is the mother instinct transferable? And can it be cross-species?

On the other hand, I think it's simpler to stick with less complex explanations. Lena's overarching may be explained by an innate attraction -- in some people stronger than in others -- for pets. This evidently has nothing to do with the mother instinct as both man and women like pets, but rather with the

domestication factor -- an urge to enslave or be enslaved. Mankind has domesticated for practical and non-practical reasons, thus forming ties and bonds between its kind and another. Perhaps this is what was operative in this case. Then for some reason, I recalled some wise words from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: "You become responsible forever for what you've tamed." This felt like a warning where perhaps none was needed, but which suited my proclivity for lugubrious predictions. Yet my thinking advanced: I was beginning to think that the real reason behind people's affinity for pets lies in the simple fact that pets fill a need; people have a need to trust, but fear betrayal. In fact, the more disillusioned with friendship one is, and the more one has been betrayed, the more likely one is 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 over-weight 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 Numero Uno. Your pet will never betray you.

Where can one find this premium quality of friendship?

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

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

"I murdered him", 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 you possibly can." And I continued: "I don't know of anyone who would have done more." Next, I proceeded to enumerate the many things she had done including sacrificing her very precious sleep. My efforts seemed to have only a minor momentary effect as the weeping resumed, albeit somewhat less intense. It seemed that she was intent on punishing herself. What was I to do? Should I let this follow its natural path and risk the consequences, or should I continue on with my helpful inputs?

The battle of rationalism vs. emotionalism was on.

If this was how Gritis' coming to 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; to a large extent, they reflect and complement our own personalities. How could such an innocent and harmless being bring harm? How could our best intentions and exemplary 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, and does not miss an occasion to attempt feeding her. She never misses a call day or night. This is 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 was affecting me as well, 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 disquiet mind once again. And I decided to do something about it on my own.

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

"¿Quién de vosotros bota los gatitos?"-- Which one of you has been throwing kittens out? I heard myself interrogating. As if on cue, their mouths dropped open while looking at me rather incredulously, and then quickly glancing at each other apparently wondering if I hadn't lost my marbles. I was assured no one ever dumps kittens out but that some cats themselves indeed do. In fact, this particular cat, one of them said – he had Gritis' mother in mind – dumped another one of her newborns over there and he pointed to where some big bushes were. He stopped me before I could rush over there 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 told me if it was good news.

Sometimes, it's better not to know.

Day Seven

Whenever the sun is out we like to have breakfast on the east side; it feels good to let the gentle morning sun transition us to the new day. I had just started eating my breakfast when Lena quietly entered the room handing Gritis to me.

"Держи!" -- hold her; she said lifelessly. As was her wont, she thought 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 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 still. And hope against hope, I remained still vested in believing she was just resting and was going to be alright.

Oh, how blinding hope can be!

I heard Lena's prolonged, quiet weeping in the next room. She knew better, and had now evidently given up for good. Feeling like an utter failure she returned to the breakfast room, where Gritis and I were, her eyes flooded with tears. She had something to tell me, she managed to mumble. She screwed up her eyes, fixed her grief-stricken gaze on mine, and let it out: her brother's girlfriend had once told her that, while working at an abortion clinic, they would place aborted live fetuses near a heater to comfort their passing. She knew the kitten was dying today, she explained, and that's why she wanted my hands to be what the heater might have been for those living aborted fetuses. The association and the timing seemed odd to me; I intuited that this entire episode from start to finish may not have been accidental; that hardly anything comes our way fortuitously, but always with a message which gets wasted only 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 threatening some long-held notions about life. I struggled to focus on the task at hand, to not let my mind wander away now. Bits of my humming resumed momentarily, before the message took completely over. My eyes glued on the kitten, I wondered if the flow of energy had actually 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 message was sent; it had muscled its way through to me, and I had gotten it: life is more precious than we think.

I gently massaged Gritis' miniscule legs; they were motionless. She moved her little head very slightly as if to indicate she was content, pleased and satisfied: her mission was now accomplished. I saw solid signs of her letting out a bigger breath; the 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 was able to hold 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 for us to bury Gritis where she spends her mornings, at the oratorio and playground; I suggested finding a different spot so as 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 loaded with meaning and significance. Her brief presence helped us discover things about ourselves that we either ignored, or had forgotten. There was every reason to be truly 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. As there was none to be seen, I approached. The sand burial mound I had formed had been demolished, and a hole had taken its place; chewed-up pieces of the blue bag I had placed the kitten in could be seen scattered about. Evidently, her decaying flesh had exuded enough of a smell through the bag and through the pile of sand to attract some carnivorous animal, probably one of those errant dogs. And so nothing was left of Gritis and nothing was wasted: meaningful in life, and beneficial in death.

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