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Carmen

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*L'amour est enfant de Bohême / Il n'a jamais, jamais connu de loi
Si tu ne m'aimes pas, je t'aime / Si je t'aime, prends garde à toi !*
(Love is a Gypsy child / It has never known any law
If you don't love me, I love you / If I love you, beware!
Georges Bizet, Carmen: Habanera

*Cats know how to obtain food without labor,
shelter without confinement, and love without penalties.*
W. L. George

1

Every morning, after gulping my bitter tea (since I was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer, I'm not allowed coffee or sugar any more) I would put on jeans and my old parka and get out of the apartment for a walk in the woods on my creaking legs to take in the morning air. The footpath meandered along the banks of a lazy rivulet and, in good weather, I enjoyed the scent of pine and the violet glow of bluebells in bloom. It was the highlight of my day.

On one such morning in early June, my stroll took an unexpected turn. I was walking next to a pile of moss-covered rocks when I heard a feeble sound, like a cry, coming from behind the pile. There I found a very small kitten with striped white and gray silky fur, shaking with

cold or hunger. As I bent down to inspect it, it looked up with bright blue eyes brimming with mischievous intelligence and stared fixedly at me, as if beckoning that I approach it.

I no longer kept pets since Foster, my golden retriever, died of old age two years before; all I have left of Foster are fond memories and a large snapshot that I keep on my desk. (Actually, I kept four goldfish in a large aquarium left behind when my daughter moved to Brazil, but these hardly counted as pets.) Perhaps out of missing a companion, I was immediately captivated by the kitty. There was no way I was going to leave such a helpless creature to devoured by a predator. I took a handkerchief out off my back pocket and picked up the kitten gingerly, taking care not to squeeze too hard while avoiding its small sharp teeth.

I returned to the apartment with the foundling, intending to take it right away to the town pound. But I had to feed it first, for it was clearly starving. I lay it on the kitchen floor, drew a saucer and filled it with cream, and placed it in front of its nose. The kitten lunged at the cream and began slurping it avidly. In less than a minute it had licked the saucer clean and was looking intently at me, demanding more. When I failed to move, it meowed with surprisingly great force.

I had to smile at the brazenness. “One moment, Your Majesty,” I chuckled and went back to the refrigerator for more.

The cat cadged three saucers of cream, yawned, curled up into a ball, and dropped into a contented sleep. I went to my office and placed a call to the vet who had cared for Foster during its last illness.

“Dr. Strickland, this is Chet Ellison. I have a funny situation here. This morning I picked up a stray kitten, probably a few weeks old. I plan to take it to the animal shelter, but I’d like to know if there is anything I need to do before going there.”

“Are its eyes open already?”

“Yes.”

“Does it seem healthy?”

“I don’t know... it’s so little...”

“Do you want to bring it over so I can take a look at it?”

I was about to decline politely, then I remembered how nice Dr. Strickland had been with Foster during its final years. He deserved one more fee from me.

“Alright. When will be a good time?”

“I’m booked the rest of the day, but I can see you tomorrow, early. Say seven-thirty?”

I’m an early riser. “Sure. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

2

The kitten hardly moved from the kitchen all day, except to imbibe more cream. I didn’t have a litter box, but placed an old blanket on the kitchen floor and hoped for the best.

As I was getting ready for bed, I went to the kitchen to take a last look at the kitten. Maybe I should place it outside overnight, I wondered; but the poor animal must have had enough trauma already, being abandoned like that in its early infancy. I began retreating and, to my surprise, the kitten got up, gave a big stretch, and took off after me.

I returned to the kitchen, picked up the sacrificial blanket, and led the visitor to my bedroom. I spread the blanket at the foot of the bed and turned to the kitten, which was watching me with an expectant look.

“This is all for today, Your Majesty,” I said, adding with mock humility: “Will these modest quarters be satisfactory?” The kitten yawned.

I changed into my nightclothes and promptly fell asleep. Sometime later, I was awakened by a sudden commotion. Not fully alert, I turned the lamp by night table on and instantly became

awake. The kitten had managed to jump into my bed and was trying to dig a hole in the sheets in the space between my legs to bury itself there.

“Shoo, cat! Shoo!!!” I admonished, half angry, half bemused. My bed is not high off the floor, yet it must have required quite an effort for the kitten to get on it. It sat there, staring at me calmly, while I tried to scream it into jumping down. It wouldn't budge.

I finally picked the cat up gently and laid it on the blanket. “This is where you belong” I remonstrated with the animal, shaking my head in disapproval. I went back to bed and turned the light off.

3

The kitten did not resist when I picked it up and placed it on the now familiar blanket as I drove to the vet in town. Dr. Strickland was alone at the clinic at that early hour. He took the little bundle of fur that had fallen asleep along the way and led us to his office. He weighed the kitten, took its temperature, and rubbed gently along the body looking for hidden tumors or deformities. He turned to me, approvingly:

“Congratulations, Mr. Ellison. You have a healthy seven-week-old female kitty, pound and a half, alert, showing no obvious deformities. I would need to run blood tests to get a better fix on her condition. You should have no health problems with her between now and when you take her to the shelter.”

I was about to thank Dr, Strickland and say my farewells when he added: “She was abandoned recently and shows no signs of malnutrition. But, unless you are planning on taking her to the shelter right away, you should get her kitten food ... and a litter box.”

“Out of curiosity, how often should kitties like this be fed?”

“Two or three times a day. They need food that is high in protein, no carbohydrates; a mixture of kibbles and wet food works best. The pet store should carry several brands that will be adequate. They will also have a variety of other items that you may want to consider purchasing.”

I stopped next at the pet store, bringing the kitty along. A young clerk intercepted us as we went through the door and sidled up to the kitty. “Hello, precious! What’s your name?” she asked, caressing the cat’s belly as her own large eyes twinkled in approval.

I was taken aback by the question, for I had no plans to name a kitty that was about to be dropped at an animal shelter. “I haven’t picked a name yet” I confessed. “What’s yours?”

The clerk answered: “Carmen.”

“That’s a very nice name” I replied. “Well, this kitty is almost as pretty as you, so let’s call her Carmen.”

“Oh” the clerk said, blushing a deep pink. “If you do that, you’ll have to bring her to the store for treats on her birthday.”

“Will do” I responded. “In the meantime, I need to get some supplies for Carmen.”

“I’ll be glad to help you.”

Half an hour later, I left the store with far more merchandise than I had been planning. Included in the loot were packages of Meow Mix, cans of Fancy Feast, a litter box, a bag of litter, a scratching pad, toys of different sizes, a pet bowl, and an orange, catnip-filled teaser toy, which became an immediate favorite. The cost of the items was over sixty dollars, and I felt silly at the extravagance. Perhaps I was unconsciously flirting with the lovely clerk, who could have been my granddaughter; in any case, Carmen (the cat) and I were to be parted, but these would be nice gifts for other animals.

4

Upon returning to the apartment, I placed a call to the animal shelter to confirm their opening hours. The lady who answered the phone provided the information and then asked:

“What animal will you be bringing?”

“A kitten, seven weeks old.”

“I’m sorry, sir. We don’t accept cats less than three months old.”

“Why?”

“It is against State law. Also, such young animals require more care than we are able to provide.”

I frowned. I would have to keep this little bandit for a month and a half. No wonder Dr. Strickland had suggested I stock up on items for the care of young cats. Maybe he foresaw what was going to happen.

Strangely, I was not as upset at this turn of events as I should have been. Perhaps some company would be good for a change. Goldfish are nice, but hard to relate to.

5

It took no time for Carmen and me to develop a daily routine. Even though she had a bed in the kitchen that used to belong to Foster, she slept in the bedroom under my bed. She would sometimes jump on my chest and, if that did not work, would lick my ears and my face, and bite me softly to wake me up. One way or another, she would manage to draw my attention until I grumpily got out of bed and went to the kitchen to get her breakfast ready. While I was doing this, she would proceed to the litter box and relieve herself. (One thing I quickly learned is that cat pee has a terrible smell; the litter box had to be kept fresh at all times else she would find a different place to do her deed.)

After breakfast, it was play time. I would hang the orange toy from a fishing rod, cast it just out of her reach, and circle it while she lunged at it, until I would let her catch it and try to get at the catnip filling. But our favorite play was tug of war: I had come up with a heavy knotted rope that I would drag the length and width of the room growling, as Carmen hung from the rope with her paws, biting into the fibers from time to time with ferocity.

Other times Carmen played by herself. She would stalk, chase, and attack an invisible prey; when there was a toy lying on the carpet the hunt would be completed as she took turns at shaking and biting it. She would race up and down the furniture and around the floor as if possessed. She would attack the scratching post and sharpen her nails on it, although sometimes the sofa was the object of her attentions. Sometimes she would chase after odd things, like paper bags or empty boxes. Anything was a potential target.

I would go to my studio to write short articles for the community newspaper and Carmen would follow me and jump on my desk while I typed on my ancient Underwood. She would watch with rapt attention at the up and down motion of the keys; she quickly learned that the “s” key got stuck in the upright position, and would thrust a paw at it every time this happened. It was both charming and annoying.

Playing one-on-one with her was a temptation and a risk. She would quietly let me rub her tummy and tickle behind her ears and, all of a sudden, would bite my hand or scratch my arm with a kick of her back legs. Some of her bites drew blood and were painful; to discourage such attacks I carried around a spray bottle and squirted water on her face, to her utmost indignation.

In short, Carmen kept me entertained and on constant alert, since her surprise attacks on my person would usually occur when I was doing something that drew her attention, such as vacuuming the floor, making the bed, or dusting. She was a mischievous little devil, but would

purr when I rubbed her belly and would cuddle by my side when I read in bed or sat on my recliner doing the crossword puzzle.

Somehow the twelve-week milestone was reached and I found myself placing a call to Dr. Strickland to ask about shots. “But Chet, aren’t you planning on turning the cat over to the animal shelter?” he asked with unconcealed mirth.

“Maybe, but not at the moment. How about those shots?”

“Bring her on Monday, anytime.”

“How about neutering her?”

“She’s too young. Neutering is not done until the cat is three months old. Anyhow, shouldn’t you let the shelter worry about that?”

I had no response.

6

I considered Carmen on parole pending an ultimate decision on whether to keep her. The need for such decision was precipitated by the events of Black Tuesday. That day, I left to go grocery shopping and run other errands and did not get back to the apartment until mid-afternoon. A vision of carnage greeted me when I returned: Carmen had managed to topple the aquarium, spilled its contents, eaten two of the goldfish, and left the corpses of the other two on the carpet. She was still licking her chops contentedly.

After screaming at the cat a couple of times I paused to consider the situation. She had been with me for three months and was more than ready for disposition. Yet I kept procrastinating. “She’s very bad, but at least she is entertaining” I told myself. As if reading my mind, Carmen lifted her head and stared at me inquisitively with her big eyes, which now had

changed to their final emerald hue. “So, what are you going to do about it?” she seemed to be asking.

I punted.

7

Two months later, the oncologist gave me more bad news: I had to go to the hospital for a series of radiation treatments for my worsening cancer. Since the length of my stay would be uncertain, I would need to make provisions for Carmen’s care while I was away.

First, I tried my few still living friends and relatives. None were able or willing to take custody of a willful kitty for an indefinite time. I considered a “pet hotel” but the ones in the city, and even those within driving distance, were too expensive and their high costs did not guarantee decent care for her. Finally, I looked into giving her up at the animal shelter. A brief tour of the shelter convinced me that Carmen would not do well in the overcrowded, understaffed environment of the shelter. The facility was dismal, reeking of bodily fluids, disinfectant and despair. I was greeted by a chorus of mournful exhortations for help from animals of all sorts and conditions. I judged that leaving Carmen there would be an act of cruelty.

That left me with only one other, slightly less cruel option: releasing Carmen back into the woods and pray for the best. Carmen was a pretty strong and resourceful animal and was ferocious, as her liquidation of the goldfish proved, but she was used to a sheltered life and might not be able to protect herself from the perils that lurked in the wild. It was a grim choice, but I didn’t know what else to do.

The morning I was to leave for the hospital, I fed Carmen a very big helping of cat food, played get my rope with her, tickled her under the ears, and picked her up off the carpet and took

off for the woods. I was crying profusely; Carmen immediately noticed my distress and became unwieldy in my arms, trying to get herself to the ground.

I carried her to the same rock pile where I had found her months before and lowered her gently. The moment she landed, Carmen meowed piteously. Had she realized she was being abandoned again? Did the sight of the pile of rocks bring back long buried memories of fear and loss?

I couldn't stand it. For a moment I thought of picking her back up, returning home, and forsaking treatment. But then I considered that if I did so the next few months would be hell for both of us and swallowed an anguished cry. I turned my back on her and began leaving as fast as I could. Alas, Carmen began trailing me, and soon caught up with my receding steps, and began brushing against my leg.

I didn't know what to do. I tried to remember how fickle this cat was in her affections but I choked remembering the good times we had shared and my resolve wavered again. I dropped to my knees and ran my hands over her fur, while uttering low nonsense words to reassure her. Then I got up and pushed her away. Carmen yowled, as I gave her a gentle kick. She tried to follow me for a few steps and, perhaps coming to terms with the situation, began walking away slowly.

I was still in shock when I arrived at the hospital. Noticing my distress, they gave me tranquilizers and put me to sleep.

I was in the hospital for three weeks. When I left, around Thanksgiving, I was a wreck. I had lost ten more pounds and was suffering from extreme fatigue. I was exhibiting incontinence,

diarrhea, and other physical afflictions. On the positive side, the doctors assured me that the treatment had been effective in arresting – at least for the time being – the progress of the cancer.

The moment I returned home, I started thinking incessantly about Carmen. How was she faring? Did she still remember me? Would I ever see her again?

I had been able to cope with loneliness after Foster died, but Carmen's disappearance left a tear in my soul that grew larger with each passing day. How could the absence of a kitten have such an effect on an old man, who had raised a family and seen it move out of his life with relatively little suffering? Had the recent nearness of death made me yearn for love and companionship? Were my growing weakness and the physical pain that accompanied my fragile convalescence make me need companionship? Whatever the reason, I no longer felt self-sufficient and capable of facing the world's adversities alone, without blinking an eye. Dammit, I missed that cat, I needed her!

The third day after my return, I took to the woods in hope of finding her. An hour later, bone tired and disappointed, I returned home. Not a trace of Carmen.

I repeated my excursion several consecutive days, without success. After a week, I gave up, and tried to resign myself to live with the loss. I wasn't successful.

Days went by. Recovery was slow and uneven. Fearing a relapse, I kept my activities to a minimum. I slept, ate, read, watched TV. Nothing interested me; I passed the time in a gray fog, disinterested. Whenever I remembered Carmen, it was with a pang of regret that I tried to quell by thinking of something else.

The weather was getting colder, as winter was upon us. One snowy day I was sitting by the window, watching sullenly as flakes drifted down, when a faint sound reached my ears. A small animal was in distress somewhere.

I dropped the magazine I had been reading, rose to my feet quick as lightning, threw on a parka and, still in my slippers, ran outside, calling out: “Carmen! Carmen! Come here, baby!”

There was no answer to my cries, which grew increasingly louder and more desperate as they echoed in the silent woods.

10

I had a pet door installed on the entrance of my apartment in case Carmen found her way back to me. It was too cold and icy outside to go out looking for the miscreant anymore. I waited and fretted.

One night in darkest February I was awakened by the sound of scurrying outside the bedroom. Half asleep, I went out to investigate. Carmen was crouched in the kitchen, a half-devoured field mouse hanging from her mouth. She was much thinner, dirty and wild looking. She dropped the cadaver on the floor and presented it to me as a peace offering.

I was trembling with emotion, but managed to keep hold of myself and said in an ironic voice: “Oh, thank you, thank you, Carmen, but I already ate.” Then, moving slowly to the pantry not to startle the animal, I found an old can of Fancy Feast, opened it, dropped its contents in a plate, and placed the food before her. She looked at the proffered meal thoughtfully and proceeded to devour it, daintily licking her whiskers at the end.

She stayed with me all night and left through the cat portal early in the morning. She was returning to the wild.

A new routine then developed between us. It was clear that Carmen had achieved total independence and preferred a life in the woods, fending for herself, over being a human's pet. Nonetheless, she remembered the bond that united us and was somehow aware of my infirmity and my need for her. She was willing to meet me half-way, a considerable sacrifice for a feral cat: she would visit, but not stay; she would play, but not linger. We were still friends, but on her own terms.

I, for my part, was content to accept the new arrangement. I needed to treat Carmen as an equal, and realized that it had been selfish of me to expect constant love and devotion from a creature endowed with free will. Being the friend of a wild animal is a great boon that must be cherished; I was now happy to get whatever time she was willing to give me, and enjoy the company and the memory of old times. For, at this point in my life, fulfillment is achieved by enjoying what we can of the present and harking back to the joyful memories of the past for further satisfaction.

Since that night, Carmen comes to me every once in a while, lets me pet her, and plays with me a little. I'm sure to keep vittles and toys available for her enjoyment when she is around.

I never know when she will return. I hope she does, soon, but don't count on it.

Maybe tomorrow she'll visit me again.

THE END