

The Old Man and the Cat

A Short Story by
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The old man loved his cat. On that matter, there was no question.

He'd worried they were too attached. The Creator lives forever, but not so his animal kingdom. The thought of Zozo's paw never again gently patting his face as the clock struck five every morning made him heave a sigh. And if something had happened to him, well...he shuddered to think what fate might befall her. Never since the dawn of domestication had a cat owner become so smitten, nor had a feline so willingly traded its independence for human interaction.

On these matters of the pre-imminent scope of their cat-owner affection there could be some question, but it's what he preferred to think. A mixture of Bengal and something-or-other, Zozo was extraordinary and most people who got to know her agreed. Zozo's vet and his office staff fell all over themselves whenever she paid a visit.

Eva, his Aphrodite, brought the tiny eight-week-old kitten home one stormy night after church choir practice and set her in the palm of his hand, wet and shivering. A scrawny body with tiger-like markings barely supported her large head, making the whole of her appearance seem out of proportion, like a Disney cat.

Eva released the first salvo in the expected war of words. "Now, Bradford Christos, sure as I'm your wife of forty-five years, I'll leave you if—"

"No, we're not taking in another aloof, narcissistic furniture shredder," he'd said, putting his foot down, determined they'd never again pay hundreds of dollars to sitters when they wanted to travel. "My final word, Eva."

Eva scooped the kitty into her hand, stroking its head, and carried her to the kitchen sink where she used a dishtowel to dry her fur. “Wanda Fireside found two of them in a cardboard box in front of Oscar's Market,” she said over her shoulder. “She took them home and brought this one to choir practice. Wanda says she's special...lots'a spunk. Smart too. Might have died out there in the cold.”

There went Eva, working her magic, reeling him in like a largemouth bass. She slipped the kitten onto his oversized paw and sat on the couch, directing her attention to the latest edition of Knitters of America, or some such magazine designed to hold the interest of a woman.

That's when the cat shifted her charm offensive into high gear. Two big, green, almond-shaped eyes goggled at him, sucking him into the world she ruled despite his best efforts to resist. She licked his thumb with her sandpaper tongue and purred a sweet song that tickled his ears, and then she head-butted his other hand as he scratched her neck. When he plopped into his spacious papa's chair and laid her on his lap, she kneaded his thigh and minutes later curled into a ball and fell asleep. He couldn't help but stroke her until he too slipped into a catnap.

He woke to the sound of the kitty scratching the corner of his chair. “Here we go again, Eva. I swear, if this furniture gets ripped to shreds I'll...I'll...” The cat meowed and scurried off.

So ended the exhibition of her charms. And thus began a friendship that brought him great joy and carried him through deep loss over many years.

Zoey, her formal name, soon took command of their two-bedroom Brooklyn apartment. Marriage comes with no guarantee of children, and after years of trying they'd settled for the next best thing...cats. Zozo was their fourth. They had her spayed, and at first Zozo was Eva's pet. When they watched TV at night, she'd curl next to Eva and occasionally lift her growing

body into a high stretch, wander over to the papa chair to say hi, and then make her way back to Mama.

Eva's physical beauty, her smooth olive skin, deep chocolate eyes, and thick brown hair with just a hint of gray, still flew him to the moon. She'd barely aged since the first time they met in her home city of Ioannina, Greece, north of Athens.

He was a second-generation American, his parents having emigrated from Cypress. On a visit to his homeland, he found love. On his third visit they married, so Eva could follow him to the states.

They married in a Greek Orthodox Church and within a few years, Eva achieved her U.S. citizenship. That was a proud day.

One year blurred into the next. If he possessed a quarter for each time he drove across the Brooklyn Bridge to the New York Times building, where he had enjoyed an illustrious career as an investigative journalist, he would certainly have amassed far greater riches than his pension provided. Still, they'd settled into the next phase of life well by the time Zozo arrived, him as a freelance writer, and Eva undertaking a whirlwind of volunteer activities at their local church and various charitable organizations.

After two years, Zozo had grown into an exotic queen. Her elongated body now dominated a small head, and her shorthaired coat of many colors was marked by black stripes reminiscent of a Bengal Tiger. Her sturdy white whiskers flared forward when she yawned and gave her whisker stress when she ate. When Eva bought her longer, shallower dishes, much less of her food ended up on the floor.

As Zozo entered young adulthood, Eva's strength started to ebb away. When the doctor delivered the news that an aggressive stage four cancer would reduce her lifespan to a few

months at best, the Earth stopped rotating on its axis and the universe crashed down all around him. Bradford couldn't hear anything except his heart thumping its way out of his chest, and his vision blurred as though a thick blanket of fog descended on the doctor's office.

Eva managed a weak smile and grasped his hand. "Don't worry," she whispered to him, as tears dribbled to his chin. "Everything will be as it should."

Her courage made him want to be a stronger man, a better man, but life without her would be a faint whisper of his existence. Six months later, he buried his one and only and sank into a deep depression that his few relatives and closest friends tried mightily to free him from, but failed. He was an empty vessel lost at sea with no sails or compass.

But a four-legged rescuer stepped into his void and began a new charm offensive. Whenever he wandered aimlessly through the apartment, Zozo followed close behind, taking every advantage to scale the furniture to some higher vantage point where she could remind him with her captivating eyes, *Remember what she said that day...everything will be fine.*

How could this be? Bradford Christos had just turned sixty-six, ready to collect Social Security, without his lifelong partner to enjoy it with. Zozo worked hard to fill the gap. The cat he almost rejected became his temporary North Star.

She did the craziest stuff. Like fetch the little plastic Halloween spiders when he tossed them across the room. Bellow loudly as she carried a long piece of rope from one room to the next, her way of announcing it was *time again to play swing the rope to see if I can catch it.*

Whenever he sat at the kitchen table, she would lift her front legs to the highest of three open shelves built into a row of kitchen cabinets. A small red bottle of cat treats would beckon her from the ledge, and she patiently stood there like a skyscraper until Bradley noticed and

dropped a couple of treats to the floor. She would gobble the morsels and repeat this gesture, requesting another round without ever using her words, which Bradford swore he understood.

These little things about the cat bemused him. Still, he missed his Eva terribly. She added the salt to his days, made them tasty and fulfilling, and without her everything had turned bland. Until one day, when a large cardboard box changed everything.

He'd ordered a new filing cabinet online. Once the cabinet found its new space in the corner of the bedroom he now used as an office, he left the empty box on the floor and went to make himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich—his usual lunch these days. He bid Zozo to follow but she chose to stay behind. When he returned, she was nowhere to be found until a faint meow came from inside of the box. This gave him a brilliant idea.

The next morning he searched the trash bins behind the local grocery for more boxes. When he returned home, Bradley built the cat a cardboard condominium that would've been the talk among the outside cats on the block if any came over to play—which, of course, he didn't encourage. The architectural design was quite exquisite, in his humble opinion. Zozo agreed. Doorways led to inside rooms, and a stairway to a second level, which in reality was just a step up to another box. For the first time in weeks, he laughed as Zozo explored her new digs, popping her head through the openings he had carved into the walls.

Days later at the pet store, he bought the cat a small round bed covered with fleece and placed it next to his computer, directly beneath the desk lamp. She ignored his thoughtful gift. Perturbed, he planned to return the item, but for some reason he sat at his desk for the first time since Eva died. He'd not written a word in months. With trembling hands, he booted the machine and set his shaky fingers on the keyboard for an excruciatingly slow minute.

The keys coaxed his imagination for a beginning, but not a scintilla of creativity passed from his brain to his hands. He lost hope of ever writing again.

Then Zozo did the unexpected. She jumped onto the chair next to his desk, made the easy hop over to his desktop, and wound her long body into the circular bed. A moan of pleasure invited him to pet his friend. One single stroke of love down her back pulled forth a germ of an idea for a short story. Had the subject been languishing in his subconscious mind, searching for an escape route?

Suddenly his fingers moved over the keys with the familiar confidence that earned him a Pulitzer Prize for a series of articles on the Star Wars Initiative in his early days as a reporter.

The short story that took shape was about the cat.

In the days that followed, thousands of words emerged from a seemingly endless fount. A new novel marked each succeeding year, along with many stories and several novellas. Speaking engagements and book signings followed. The cat would lie in her comfy bed by the keyboard, casting prideful glances at him when he read aloud what he'd written. When her time for attention arrived, she'd arch her back, step from her bed, and nudge his right wrist with her head. Whenever he left for more than two days, she would show her displeasure by leaving personal gifts in all the wrong places. He'd replaced the carpets twice.

So went their lives. She would shed her short winter coat in May, and his hairline continued to recede and thin all year round. With each new season, he sat at the computer less and less until finally, on most days he just whiled away the hours in his old papa's chair, watching his favorite afternoon TV shows. Dream-filled naps rejoined him with his Aphrodite. Zozo always took her place of honor on his lap.

Gladys from down the hall checked on him most Monday mornings, then shopped at the local grocery and stocked his fridge. “I can move about perfectly well!” he would bellow at her in jest. But his driver's license had been revoked and the truth became abundantly clear. He had officially lost his independence. That made him pretend to grumble all the more when she straightened up the apartment, but he didn't really mind the distraction. Gladys was a pleasant sort.

One day he figured out why he adored the cat. She was more like a cat-dog than a feline, but they shared a deeper connection. A little bit of Eva lived inside his furry roommate. The cat became a special friend because Eva had brought her home. Maybe Eva sensed she had limited time left on this earthly plane and wanted to leave him a companion.

Seventeen years vanished like a box of chocolates. The clock always refuses to wait, and for both of them it was getting late. If Zozo could speak she'd complain that her bones were old and tired like his. “We've covered many miles,” he would tell her. Of course, this was impossible since the cat never ventured beyond their front door.

The cat uttered a guttural noise each time she jumped up to his bed, similar to the sound Bradley made when he wedged his body into his tin can on wheels to drive the short distance to his favorite park benches on the East River. (Driving without a current license left him with no guilt. Well...maybe a little.) Neither of them moved as adeptly as they once did, but Zozo still shadowed him wherever he walked in the house.

Until one day, she didn't.

He noticed over several days she would leave most of her food and had stopped drinking water. He took Zozo to the doctor, dreading the prognosis. They had been monitoring her

kidney functions for several months. When the veterinarian returned from the back room after giving her a complete exam, his pained expression shot arrows through Bradley's heart.

“I’m so sorry, Bradley. You can take her home for the weekend, but she'll only suffer more.”

A few moments passed—Bradley wasn't sure how many—as he processed this devastating news. He swallowed, trying to clear the cotton that had instantaneously bloomed in his mouth. Words refused the journey from his brain to his lips. The doctor poured him a glass of water, a welcome relief. He steadied himself in the chair, gripping the padded sides.

“No, doc. I won't have her suffer because of my selfish needs. Can I say good-b-bye?”

The old man's eyes gushed tears, streams of joy and some sadness. He had been gifted with one of God's special creatures and had loved her in a way he never dreamed possible. For this he gave thanks.

“Of course, Bradley. You can stay as long as you need. She won't experience any pain or discomfort.”

The old man managed a nod. In the room, the doctor administered the medication and quietly exited. Bradley laid the cat in his lap and stroked her forehead. The bones that poked through her fur made him angry with himself for waiting so long, for allowing her to suffer even a day. He hummed a favorite melody of Eva's, as the cat's big green eyes exuded pure love for him one last time. Then her eyelids closed and she exhaled her last breath.

The end robbed him of his final stores of energy. Now he longed for the blessed vacuity of sleep.

For the second time, his best friend in the world had left him.

Bradley returned two days later to collect her ashes, and then drove to his favorite park bench at the river's shore. He released her into the current and sat motionless, his wet eyes cast upon the city across the water that never sleeps. The sun beat down on his unprotected head, producing pools of sweat that swept down his face. He'd walked past his hat in his haste to retrieve Zozo's remains from the doctor.

“Hello, sir. Beautiful day, isn't it?”

The voice sounded young, distant, like it was floating across a deep canyon in his head.

“Sir, you look hot. Do you need some water?”

“Huh?”

A young girl, maybe ten years old, stood in front of him holding a small cardboard box. A sweet innocence beamed from her presence, releasing a wave of peace that spread into every fiber of his being. She reminded him that the grass withers and the flowers fade, but Creation ushers in new life in its season.

“What do you have there?”

“Why are you crying?” she asked, the concern of a caring child written on her face.

He smiled. “You didn't answer my question, little girl.”

She flashed an even wider grin and lowered the box to the ground by his feet. “Well...I have the most beautiful kittens in the world. Wouldn't you like to have one? They're fun to play with and watch. Great company on a rainy day.”

He gazed down at the kittens and released a deep sigh, remembering Zozo in the palm of his hand that first day.

“My favorite is that one with the colorful fur,” the girl said, pointing to the cat with a large head and stumpy body. “She's special.”

“And smart too, I’ll bet,” he said.

The girl scooped up the kitten and placed it in his open hand.

She smiled, and he smiled back.

The End