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## Guilty Love of Mao

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In my apartment in Sousse. Sitting in my chair between the French-door of the saloon and the small and only balcony I have. I was reading “The Rooftop Dwellers”—a short story I was going to teach for the third year students at the faculty. I have read it four years ago and admired it; I thought students will like it.

An hour into the reading of the story and after two cups of coffee, I heard a soft but abrupt sound coming from under my balcony—I live on the first floor. It sounded like a cat, or a kitten. I put the anthology aside and looked out the window. Looking left. Looking right. Looking down. Even looking up. Nothing in sight. I told myself I must have imagined it all, after all I just read the passage where Mao—the character Moyna’s cat—is described. I went back to my reading.

“Meow! Meow!”

Soft, very soft. Again and again the same sound. This cannot be my imagination. I used to have a cat before; she died seven years ago. The meowing I hear is that of a sick or injured kitten. Going down the stairs, I opened the building’s gate and stepped into the recently-washed street. Mind you not by the city-hall but by Mother Earth’s teary rain.

“Meow! Meow!”

Again. Where are you kitten? Suddenly I saw something moving between the garbage that has spilled out of the only trash container in this neighborhood. Filthy diapers. Revolting smell. A little kitty, black as the night, emerged from between the diapers.

“Meow! Meow!”

I have found you. Horrible smell. Let me take you inside. O Allah save our noses from this smell! I took off my sweater and wrapped the kitten in it.

We came into the flat. The *shlaka* prevented the door from closing and leaving me outside.

“Allo, Madame Raja. C’est moi Kamal Jamali.”

“Oui Monsieur Kamal. How are you?”

“I have an emergency case with a cat. Can I bring her now?”

“OK. But we are closing in one hour.”

“I will be there before you close.”

As good-byes were said, I took the kitten to the bathroom. Hot water. Some cold water. Lukewarm water. Easy, easy kitty. I washed her with some no-tears-baby-shampoo left from last week when my sister and her baby came and spent four days with me. You smell great now. Towel. Drying time. Hairdryer. Warm air. Are you still wet? No. But I will wrap you in a towel.

Shoes. Another sweater. Keys of the flat. My sweater half-way open. The kitten tucked close to my chest. Warmer for her. Jumping over a small pond in the middle of the street. Crossing the park in front of Farhat Hachad Hospital. Crossing the busy GP1. Seeing the sign of the vet office between two palm trees. Going up the stairs. First floor. Inside the vet office, a dog barked; I looked at him. Poor dog, he was injured for his fur was stained with some blood. His owner, apparently a French woman, was sitting by his side with teary eyes.

After ten minutes, I entered the examination room. I told the vet how I found the kitty and asked her to see if she is sick. I want to take her in and take care of her.

“Mr. Kamal. She is a he. A male cat.”

A male cat. I never had a male cat before. She then asked me to leave the kitten for the night for further examination. I had to come back tomorrow.

I shall call him Mao like Moyna’s Mao.

Four years later, Mao is a medium-sized cat with some loud purring. Every year, I take him to the vet. Seventh of August is his yearly appointment with the outside world. He never leaves the house. Always inside with the exception of winter, when he sits on the balcony to get warm—of course if the sun is in sight.

Mao turned out to be a fussy cat when it came to food. Cans of food and bags of dry food were bought every fortnight. My mother did not like him: “Not only is he black. Jinxing the house. He is also draining your pockets. Get rid of him. Get married, have kids and spend your money on them. You have been teaching for ten years now. When will you marry? When will you make me happy?”

In the streets, more and more beggars on the streets of Sousse. It is impossible to help all of them. Giving a Dinar here and a dinar there. But they are all asking for help!

On the seventh of August 2014, I woke up, relieved myself, took a shower, then helped Mao to get in his carrier. The appointment was by 8 a.m. As usual I walked by Farhat Hachad Hospital; I guess I will never have a car. I found an English woman and a Tunisia man waiting for their turns at the vet office.

By nine, I was on my way home. When I got out of the office and stepped outside the building, my eyes could not miss a pregnant woman sitting on the sidewalk by the gate. She was begging for money, asking for help. I put Mao’s carrier on the ground and fetched for some change in my pocket; I took two dinars and placed them in her hands stretched in front her awaiting El Mana from Allah’s children.

She muttered words of thanking and gratitude. I looked at her helplessly but mostly filled with shame and guilt. I took Mao's carrier off the pavement, gazed at him and was engulfed in contradictory feelings of pride and disgrace. I spend on Mao more than many Tunisian families spend on their kids. Maybe the money spent on Mao should be given to kids in need! Dilemma. My predicament. My Guiltful Love of Mao.