

The cat in the maze

1. A very old cedar tree

I'm just a plain cat. There are millions like me on this planet. But none exactly like me, of course. For one thing, I live in a very special place: in a maze in Paris, France. This maze belongs to the Jardin des Plantes—that is, the Botanical Gardens, which are located on the left bank of the river Seine, not very far from the big cathedral called Notre-Dame.

In the middle of the maze stands a very old cedar tree. If you want to see me, there's a good chance you'll find me near this cedar tree. How do I know the tree is old? Well, its trunk is extremely fat. Young trees are as thin as my tail. My mother used to warn me: "Don't you try to climb a young tree, even if there's a bird nest in it."

A blue panel on the trunk of the cedar tree says: "This tree was planted by Monsieur de Jussieu in the year of our Lord 1734." I understand the language of the "big two-legs," I mean the creatures who call themselves human beings, I can even read the strange claw marks they leave on paper, but many things about them baffle me. Who is this "Lord" who owns the years? How does he number them, exactly? It seems that the current year is called 1997, but I can't count the difference between 1734 and 1997. Numbers are tough. I've never gone to school, you see.

Cats don't use a primitive language like the big two-legs. We communicate with posture and odors. We don't write, but we remember well enough what our elders told us. Thus, we residents of the Jardin des Plantes know that Monsieur de Jussieu was the gardener of king Louis umpteen. Yes, but what is a king? Apparently, a human being so strong that all others obey him... Such a thing is very hard to imagine. Cats are free. We don't obey anybody. We know neither kings nor emperors, presidents, generals, bosses, department heads, etc.

It seems that several kings were named Louis. They affixed numbers to their names so people could distinguish them. Even our wisest elders can't make head or tail of numbers, so we don't know what number the boss of Monsieur de Jussieu wore.

Two different cats won't share the same name. Why should we? Big two-legs don't make sense. Naming all their kings Louis! Here in the maze, I have a friend named Shorty. Let's suppose another cat named Shorty moves into the maze. Well, we'll change the newcomer's name to Stripes or Whiskers. That's all there is to it. We change names

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all the time. Our mother gives us a private name, but we never use it. This name is a secret. Then, if we live with human beings, they also give us a name. Often, it's a stupid name like Polly or Sweetie. Some weak-brained cats stay with the same human family as long as they live. Pitiful! Real cats value their freedom too much to settle into such a life. We're definitely different from these fat barking and biting brutes known as d.gs (I refuse to write their cursed name in full)!

Oh yes, I'll adopt a human family for a while, when I'm really hungry. I don't sign a contract. I don't make promises. When I've had enough, good bye! If I'm starved again, I'll find another family and get a new name yet again. That's how I learned their language. Some of them can really prepare good food, though. "Be careful, I tell the young kids in the maze. They let you eat liver and crab and other goodies. They give you a soft cushion in a warm corner of their house. So, one day, what do you discover? You're hooked! Your precious freedom is gone! You're a slave!"

I've often wondered about this uneasy relationship between cats and big two-legs. How did it start? It must have been very long ago, as the most ancient legends told by our elders already mention human beings. Maybe one hundred years ago, or one million years, or some other big number. My favorite hypothesis is that we just followed the mice when they moved into the houses!

Nowadays, mice are scarce in city homes. What a pity! Crunching a juicy mouse is so terribly delightful... Even in the Jardin des Plantes's maze, mice are not as numerous as they used to be, so I'm afraid our youngsters won't learn the art of catching them. You need to play with the rodent until it is in a pleasant mellow mood, otherwise it might taste sour. Of course, the taste is awful if the mouse suffers when you kill it, so you must close your jaw upon its neck in a flash. That's obvious.

Usually, after spending months inside a warm and dry apartment, after eating tons of liver, after watching TV until my eyes hurt, I begin to feel a terrible mouse urge... A mouse fever seizes me from the tip of my whiskers to the tip of my tail. I tremble, I shake, I spin like a top, I become crazy. Then I move to my favourite hunting ground: my good old maze. I spend hours just listening to the song of the night sounds... The leaves rustle like silk, the twigs crackle mysteriously, the birds coo in their dreams. Besides, I haven't found a more potent restorative for my feline instincts than the strong mixture of perfumes that floats at night inside the maze.

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Sometimes, the human beings kick their cat out. They climb into their noisy machine and disappear altogether. I've known foolish cats who will cross half the continent to find their masters. "They're not worth it," I tell them. Big two-legs consider it a great wonder when their cat locates them, but in fact, it's easy enough. Their awful smell is so loud!

I wouldn't run after human beings. Not me! It's true that we can hardly find a mouse inside the entire Botanical Gardens, as if some pied piper had kidnapped the whole lot of them. What do I care? I know where to find yummy food. Schools, army barracks, prisons, hospitals! Places where many human beings live together. Trash cans full of edibles outside these at dawn. Hospitals are the best, because their trash cans often contain choice tidbits, like morsels of brain or liver.

Lazy cats used to go to the big Père-Lachaise cemetery, where li'l old cat-loving grannies bring canned meat every morning. For the last two or twenty years, however, since the invasion of the Polish cats, competition for the food of the cemetery grannies has become awfully fierce. These Polish cats live in the Tuileries gardens, close to a big Polish church. When they're new here, they're as thin as a young tree in winter, but they fatten up fast enough.

I talked with one of these Polish cats not long ago. They travel inside trucks full of furniture. See how strange big two-legs can be: they hide cans of fish eggs under the furniture. The Polish cat who told me about it didn't know why they do such a crazy thing. These fish eggs are called "carviak" or something. All the cats in Poland, wherever that is, dream of coming to Paris. The truck drivers let them come for free, provided they screech and show their claws when someone opens the back-door of the truck and looks at the furniture. "They don't want the custom guys to find the carviak," the Polish cat said. This doesn't make any sense.

I like to learn new things, so I talk to the Polish cats. Other cats avoid them, though, because they smell strange. Their basic odor is very hard to define. Maybe there's a tinge of furniture truck in it, plus carviak, plus a ghost whiff of their far-away country. Some of my friends pretend that Polish cats drink a strong beverage called vodka, but it's hard to believe, as cats don't like to lose their mind in the human manner.

Let them eat and drink what they want! Let them get the grannies' booty. I prefer the hospitals and their surprises.

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What I would really like to do once in my life is catch a live bird. Anybody can munch a dead pigeon, of course. But a live one! What a dream! What a challenge! If you don't crawl slowly enough, the feathered dish will see you with its devilish globulous eyes and fly away at the very last second. If you do crawl at a snail's pace, the bird will leave the ground eventually because its wing muscles are getting stiff, or because staying put bores the hell out of him, poor fellow! I don't want a pheasant—a swallow would be enough.

I used to know an old cat who lived at the other end of the Botanical Gardens, near the zoo. He was a real daredevil, who loved nothing better than stealing the lions' and tigers' meat right under their nose—until he became so slow with age that one of the monsters ate him for breakfast. We called him Rover, as he had spent his youth exploring this sorry planet. He would go to the giant food-market in Rungis, south of Paris, climb into a truck, then board a ship in Le Havre or Marseille. Sailors love cats, it's a well-known fact, on account of rats in the hold. Rover sometimes stayed away many years, maybe a hundred or more, but then he always came back and told us wonderful stories.

A funny thing about Rover is that nothing ever happened to him. He would spend most of his time inside the hold, trying to win the war against the rats. The stories he told us were second-hand. He heard them from another travelling cat, on a moonlit night, in Hong Kong or Valparaiso. They featured mysterious islands in the south seas, Chinese cats with strange powers, armies of ghost Dutch rats.

Rover never tired of mentioning the most famous legend running among ship cats: that there are millions of islands in the south seas where four-legged animals are quite unknown. These are not desert islands, mind you, but nest islands. Brooding sanctuaries for sea birds. One hundred million gulls, terns, storm petrels, puffins, plovers, pelicans, gannets, lay their eggs on the ground and sit right there, as cool as statues, because they have never seen a fox or a weasel.

When he mentioned the pelican, Rover always added that: "His bill will hold more than his belly can." Good old Rover! We definitely miss him.

So the birds sit there all day to warm their eggs. Now suppose you're the cat in residence of a ship that puts in near one of the nesting islands. The sailors drop the anchor in a cove, then row a boat to the shore, looking for water and fresh fruit. You disembark, stretch your legs, arch your back. The gulls and plovers go on brooding or

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feeding their babies without paying any attention to your antics, as you don't mean a thing to them. You can come as close as you want. You don't even need to crawl. What a feast!

Hearing these mouth-watering stories gave me the shakes. I turned and turned in the maze as if I was full of Polish vodka. When I tried to sleep, nightmares haunted me. Birds everywhere! No need to crawl! Eating a pelican! I bet my belly can!

In the end, I couldn't take it anymore. I decided I'd go and look for the mythical south seas nesting isles!

2. A scent of cinnamon

Rover had explained the first steps very clearly: “The market is half a day’s walk south of Paris. Its smell is several miles strong, so you can’t miss it. You’ll see all kinds of fragrant trucks there. Ignore vegetable and meat trucks. Examine fish trucks carefully. Hitching a ride on a fish truck will take you to a harbour, but you should avoid a truck with an aroma of cod, or herring, or halibut, as these fish reside in cold and stormy seas. Try to find a tuna or lobster truck...”

I can recognize the smell of lobster, because I often eat outside three-star restaurants at dawn. I went to Rungis. There, I saw several trucks with side-panels saying “Homards” or “Langoustes”, which both mean lobster in French. These trucks had no smell at all, however. I know well enough what happens: big two-legs suppress the marvelous perfume of the lobsters by deep-freezing them! This really shows how crazy they are. How many times did I warn the maze youngsters? “Don’t eat outside cheap restaurants! They serve frozen food full of frozen germs. Three-star restaurants won’t cost you more! Go for quality!”

Well, I did board an empty frozen-lobster truck. I didn’t care whether the lobsters it had brought to Paris were palatable or not, as long as it returned to the harbor it came from.

The ride was pretty long, due south. It seems that human beings need instruments to find the north. Isn’t this terribly gross? We can feel the earth’s magnetic field with our whiskers, of course.

The harbor was this same Marseille which Rover had mentioned. Finding a lobster ship which didn’t smell of lobster wasn’t an easy task. Besides, I wondered about the hold of a ship that contains frozen lobsters. Might it not be rather cold? Thinking about such a subject is very difficult for a cat. We need to put ourselves in the skin of human beings, which is quite unpleasant. The hold is frozen when they bring in the lobsters, but what about the trip back to the south seas? Does the hold stay frozen? How do they

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freeze it, anyway? I felt somewhat perplexed. I wasn't an experienced traveller like Rover.

Happily, as I explored the harbor to clarify my hazy mind, a wonderful rainbow of smells hit my nostrils. It came from an old rusty ship called "La Paloma." This was much better than frozen lobster. Although big two-feet have practically no sense of smell, they can compose fragrances into amazing symphonies. On a background of mellow cinnamon, a tingling note of curry played with a heady bouquet of musk and pepper. A faint chord of tea let the mind wander among flowery gardens by the somber jungle. Strange names popped into my mind: Malacca, Moluccas, Celebes, Maldives. I heard the sweet-sour song of the south seas.

I climbed aboard. Even inside the harbor, the ship moved more than I expected. Once we were at sea, I felt rather uneasy. Oh, my, the floor went up and down all the time! The ceiling went down and up! For the very first time in my life, I forgot to be hungry... Also, knowing that there was so much water around us worried me somehow. "Proper cats don't trust water," my mother used to say.

I guess the rats felt as bad as I did. They hid in their holes, and good riddance. I mean, I was in such a state of despondency that catching a rat was out of the question, even if it came and pulled my whiskers.

After a certain number of days, I felt much better. That's because La Paloma rested her old carcass in a harbor. The name of the place was Port-Said. We were in Egypt, a country with a very good reputation among cats. Why does it have a good reputation? Well, it seems that some years ago, the Egyptian two-legs worshipped a cat God named Bastet. They're less stupid than other human beings, obviously.

The sailors emitted a worried smell, all of a sudden. They mentioned engine trouble. Something wrong with the crank-shaft, or was it the crank-arm? They said that the Egyptian mechanics would need at least two weeks to repair the engine, whereas in Rotterdam, wherever that is, twenty-four hours would have sufficed. This probably means that there are more than twenty-four hours in two weeks.

I decided to leave La Paloma to its sad fate and explore the fabled land of Egypt. At first, I was terribly disappointed. As soon as I set my four legs on firm ground, I was assailed by the reek of a gigantic human crowd. There were millions of these cat-lovers everywhere! Too much of a good thing, I say. After a while, I noticed a cat odor behind a

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warehouse. Two reddish cats were resting in the morning sun. Awakened by my strong smell, they introduced themselves as Cleo and Tony, then proceeded to give me a name. This is the proper custom when a total stranger visits. They hesitated briefly between Musk and Cinnamon. They allowed me to arbitrate, which is also proper custom. I chose Cinnamon.

“How can you survive with such a strong human smell in the air?” I asked them.

“I guess we’re used to it,” Tony answered. “Your musk is louder than their sweat,” he added.

“Don’t you have big two-legs where you come from? Where is that again?” Cleo asked.

“The country is called France. Even in the main city, where I reside, human beings are less numerous than here.”

“We’ll show you the desert, if you want. You’ll find it less crowded than Port-Said, I dare say. Please follow us!”

Were they playing a bad joke on me? They lead me to a place in the city where the crowd was so dense that I could smell not only the sweat of the two-legs, but also their very breath. There was also a strong undersmell of rusty metal and gasoline, and indeed I saw millions of buses painted in faded colors, which seemed as old and tired as La Paloma. We climbed upon the roof of a bus. I felt somewhat uneasy, because a mean-looking goat sat among cardboard boxes and canvas bags. It was the first time that I was seeing such a beast at close range. Cleo and Tony smelled my panic and laughed. “Don’t worry, they said. It won’t mistake you for a piece of cabbage!”

Some hours later, we left the city behind us. I dozed for a short while. I think that the heat, which I wasn’t used to, made me sleepy. When I woke up, I saw a yellow sea with gigantic waves all around us. The bus was bobbing up and down in a crazy way, very different from the ship’s regular movement. I looked closer: the surface of this sea wasn’t made of water, but of sand! The huge waves were dunes, actually. So this was their famous desert...

I noticed strange shapes in the distance.

“What are these things over there?” I asked my new friends. “Mountains? Buildings?”

“Pyramids! Have you never heard of our famous pyramids?”

“Are these really the pyramids? I didn’t know they were this big!”

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My knowledge of human words is pretty wide. Sometimes, however, I make mistakes when words apply to things I have never seen. Also, the postures Cleo and Tony used to translate human words were peculiar. Well, I had somehow mixed up pyramids and pygmies in my head, so I expected the pyramids to be very small. As Rover used to tell us, the nice thing about travelling is that you learn a lot.

The bus stopped. We said good-bye to the goat, who stared vacantly at us as if we were mere shadows. We walked a few thousand miles to the pyramids. They were really so BIG! I could hardly believe my own eyes.

“Why did they bother to pile so many rocks?” I asked.

“They wanted to raise monuments to us,” Cleo answered. “They understood that we are the most intelligent beings on this planet.”

“Come with us,” Tony said. “We’ll show you how they buried our ancestors.”

They showed me a narrow opening between two building stones at the base of the pyramid.

“See how much they loved us,” they said. “They build cat doors into their pyramids.”

We followed a very dark tunnel that went right, left, up and down haphazardly. My whiskers told me that I was facing north, but I had no idea whether I was higher or lower than our starting point. I once lived with some people who took me along to a big mountain called the Alps. While they glided on the snow on pieces of wood, an alpine cat guided me into the burrow of a marmot—a local delicacy. I couldn’t help remembering that burrow while I was following Cleo and Tony. My stomach remembered, too, with a slight pang of hunger. Yes, we found the marmot at the end of the burrow. It was hibernating, poor thing, so the hunt wasn’t much fun; I mean, neither for the marmot nor for us. Also, if you want to eat a hibernating marmot, it’s better to catch it at the beginning of winter, when it’s fat and juicy, than at the end, as we did. This marmot had lots of skin, I can tell you. Anyway, the smell in the pyramid’s burrow—a musty smell, colored by a very slight touch of sandalwood—told me it didn’t contain any animal. We walked for many hours. Then we saw a faint light at the end of the tunnel.

We came into a wide room. Strange as it may seem, this room was located just under the surface of the pyramid. The light of the sun came in through a very sliver of an opening between two stones. Too narrow for a cat or even a mouse. Maybe a worm could have gone through. The walls of the room were covered with pictures. A tall statue stood

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in front of one of the walls. I expected to see cat pictures and a statue of the cat god. Horror! A d.g-headed human being was the hero of the frescoes! The statue had a d.g head!

Cleo and Tony found my disappointment very amusing. In fact, they rolled on the floor with laughter.

“Don’t worry, it’s not a d.g!” they said. “It’s the God Anubis. Its head is a Jackal’s.”

“We don’t have jackals in my country. Looks like a d.g to me...”

“Come on, relax! This is just the first room. We’ll show you the cat now.”

We crawled through a much shorter tunnel and discovered another room, lighted in the same way. Ah, this was much better! The frescoes were full of cats and the statue had a pleasant cat head. It was the god Bastet, obviously.

A kind of long box lied on a low table near the statue.

“This is a sarcophagus,” Cleo said. “An old Egyptian coffin, that contains the mummy of the pharaoh’s favorite cat.”

Tony showed me queer pictures on the wall. “These are hieroglyphs, which the ancient Egyptians used as an alphabet. Very easy to understand. A bright cat like you would learn them in no time. See, here it says that the pharaoh named its cat Moon Tiger.”

“What about this?”

“Ahem... Let me get it right... In the summer of great plenty, when the Nile overflowed twice, Moon Tiger the meow (this was the Egyptian word for cat) caught as many mice as there were grains of wheat in Pharaoh’s granary. Everybody knew then that she was truly favored by Bastet!”

Actually, Moon Tiger’s tomb was full of mice. I didn’t pounce upon them when I came in, since the utter lack of mouse odor told me they were fake. They were made of ivory or amber, with parts of gold, a shiny metal that big two-legs venerate inexplicably. The gold didn’t shine much, though, because the whole place was rather dusty. The eyes of the mice reflected the light in such a way that I felt they were indeed looking at me. My friends told me they were tiny stones called lapis-lazuli.

I am not an expert in precious stones. I had never heard of lapis-lazuli. I can recognize rubies, however. The statue of Bastet had two big rubies for its eyes. It was made of massive gold. Or maybe copper. Hard to know, because it was so dull with age

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and dust. I thought I might give it a good shine by rubbing against it, but I was afraid I'd seem foolish, so I didn't. Also, a strange feeling of awe seized me when I looked at Bastet. Cleo and Tony said that the old cat still wielded some power. For example, I must never reveal the secret of Moon Tiger's burial chamber to a big two-feet, otherwise Bastet might throw his curse at me.

Well, I can't deny that I just described the chamber in these pages, which a few million human beings may read someday. But I didn't reveal the secret. I did not include a map, did I?

I sat looking at Bastet and at the frescoes for several hours. Cleo and Tony did not complain. Although they had seen it all many times, they were not satiated. Night was falling outside, however, so that eventually it became very dark inside. We crawled along our tunnel and left the pyramid.

I thanked Cleo and Tony by emitting my most heartfelt odor. Although it was slightly mixed up with musk and cinnamon, I'm sure they understood it. "This visit really opened my mind," I said. "I feel I'm a better meoo now!"

We slept near one of the buildings that big two-legs call "hotels". For some reason, these temporary human abodes usually disgorge lots of left-over food in the middle of the night. As there are many hotels near the pyramids, we didn't have to fight for our food. I could smell hundreds of other cats in the vicinity, some of whom reminded me vaguely of the Polish cats I knew in Paris.

"Do you have Polish cats?" I asked my friends.

"Polish? No, we don't know anything about Polish."

"I know what he means, Cleo. The new cats. They call themselves Russian. Very hungry guys. They're all over the place. What a plague!"

In the morning, we rode a bus back to Port-Said. I asked Cleo and Tony whether our trip had lasted twenty-four hours or two weeks, but they had no idea. I went to the harbor and found that La Paloma was ready to go. The sailors smelled happy, with a definite color of "relieved." They said that these Egyptian mechanics were pretty good, after all. Could repair an old-fashioned crank-arm even faster than Rotterdam specialists, who knew only recent models.

So I said good-bye to Cleo and Tony. While cats don't offer ridiculous presents, like human beings, to show their gratitude, they knew that I would repay my debt if they ever

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came to Paris. “We don’t have pyramids,” I told them, “but we do have interesting tunnels. I’ll teach you how to ride the subway. I’ll show you the ancient catacombs. We’ll go rat hunting in the sewers.”

I’m not sure they’ll ever travel, though. I invited them to sail with me and explore the south seas, but they wouldn’t approach La Paloma at all. “Are you kidding?” they asked. “This thing is surrounded by water!”

3. Looking for a fat gray cat

La Paloma sailed south along a narrow sea called the Suez Canal. This sea was quite flat, so the ship didn't bob up and down as before and I would have felt just fine if the weather hadn't become terribly hot, all of a sudden. I descended into the hold, as far away from the sun as catly possible. I could hardly walk. I fell flat on my belly and stopped moving altogether. Luckily, the hold rats didn't move either.

After many days, the familiar and sickening see-saw motion began again. I figured we had reached the open sea, which meant that a puff of wind certainly rent the thick heat now and then. As I wasn't stupid enough to test my theory in the daytime, under the blazing sun, I climbed onto the deck at night. Well, it wasn't exactly *cool*, but the black air caressed my fur in a pleasant way. I spent hours contemplating the mysterious shimmering of the stars. "Every time a cat dies," my mother used to say, "a new star appears in the sky. Thus, whenever you look at the night sky, give a thought to our myriads of ancestors."

We were sailing quite close to the coast of Arabia, or maybe Ethiopia. On the high dunes, I saw camels dancing tenderly with ostriches. When I described this nocturnal ballet to my friends in the maze, much later, some youngish wise guys said it wasn't possible and I must have been dreaming. So what did they know? Had they ever sailed the Red Sea?

I was spending more time on the deck, in spite of the heat, because musk, cinnamon, curry, pepper and tea appeared less and less exotic to me. Actually, I was just fed up with La Paloma's odors. I was beginning to long for my dear maze, with its sweet perfumes of moss, cedar and cut grass. I felt very lonely, too. If the trip had lasted much longer, I'm afraid I would have danced with the rats. So when La Paloma put in at a harbor named Bombay, I disembarked for good.

The name of the country was India. A strange place. The weather was not as hot as along the coast of Arabia, but it was raining all the time. A heavy and mouldy smell of wet leaves and plants, colored by a shade of incense, permeated everything. This is not a

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country for cats, I thought. In my whole life, I had never seen such obdurate rain. Besides, food was so scarce that I wondered what people ate. I made the round of Bombay's schools, hospitals and jails. I couldn't even approach the trash cans, because hordes of famished human children were picking them clean.

After a while, my nose got better at reading the various smells of India. I located a definite wet cat odor, which led me to an old temple on a hill. In India, millions of human beings sleep in the streets, but animals live like royalty. While Egyptian worshipped a cat god very long ago, Indians still adore an elephant god today. What's more, they consider that cows are holy. Yes, cows! How did they decide to revere such a stupid beast? Another instance of human wackiness, no doubt. All right, good for the cows. I am not their friend, but I'm glad that Indians don't slice them up like other people do.

Cows are not my subject, anyway, so I'll leave them alone. Why did I mention the big brutes? Ah, yes, I remember: I was admiring the respectful behaviour of Indians toward animals. The temple on the hill, for instance, belonged to a group of monkeys. Although many Indian two-legs go hungry, they offer enormous amounts of food to the temple monkeys! These generous animals, instead of letting the offerings go to waste, gave out the surplus to the neighborhood cats.

These Indian cats are even thinner than a Polish cat on his arrival in Paris. Theirs is a very different kind of leanness, however. The Poles put on flesh pretty fast by gobbling the food of the cat grannies. After two or three hours, they're as fat as American cats. Whereas the temple cats prefer to remain as slender as one of my whiskers. Incredible as it may seem, they do not like to eat! At first, I thought they just faked it. I mean, the monkeys give them left-overs, but they're too proud to admit that they beg for their meals, so they pretend they are not interested in food. Then I began to know some of them. Having a decent conversation was not easy, because their posturing was often very clumsy.

Well, I got used to their accent by and by and they revealed to me the actual reason behind their aversion for food: while some of the human beings I shared an apartment with in Paris used to refer jokingly to a cat's nine lives, these temple cats do believe they can live nine times, and maybe even more. They're confident that if they eat no meat and do a lot of gymnastics, their next life will be better than this one. If they are absolutely perfect in this life, they can become a holy cow in the next one!

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On the other hand, if they mess up this life, they suffer the ultimate punishment: they are reincarnated as human beings.

The temple cats had to name me. They let me choose between Frog and Snail, because French people and cats are supposed to eat these slimy creatures. How disgusting! Snail are so damn slow... No, I didn't want to be known as Snail. I asked them to call me Frog. At least, I knew that the rain had washed away the last trace of musk and cinnamon from my fur, otherwise they would have given me the same choice of names as Cleo and Tony in Port-Said.

They seemed to like me. Obviously, they felt sorry that I didn't know about the nine lives and the rest of their lore. They were eager to improve my next life. Another foreign cat had visited them lately. He wasn't as ignorant as me. "Maybe you should try to find him," they said. "As he comes from the West, like you, communicating with him would be easy. He might teach you a few useful rudiments, to start you on the long way to wisdom."

If I believed them, this foreign cat was gigantic and gray. Thus, I could go from temple to temple, asking whether anybody had seen a gigantic gray cat recently.

That's exactly what I did. Of course, I didn't know when the gray cat had left Bombay. The temple cats became rather vague whenever dates were involved. I mean, their wisdom didn't help them get a better grasp of time and numbers. Some said he was ahead of me by two or three days. Others said two or three weeks, or months, or years. They agreed about one thing, though: he went northward.

So there I was, walking toward the north, following streaks of incense to village temples, asking temple cats everywhere whether they had seen a fat gray foreigner. In a city called Indore, they said they had indeed seen him. Such a big cat! Once you had seen this fellow, you didn't forget him. He seemed less stupid than other fat foreigners. He was going to the big mountains, way up north, where he intended to ask the monasteries' master cats to transmit some of their luminous wisdom to him. Of course, the Indore cats could not tell me *when* the fat guy had passed through their town. Most of them said "recently," which didn't help me much. A frightfully thin black cat said "before the long rain," which helped me even less.

In the city of Gwalior, they also remembered him. They told me he came from a former British colony, like India, located somewhere on the other side of the planet.

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Canada, maybe, or New Zealand. Although his foreigner's posturing was very loud, what he said usually made sense.

Now and then, I hitched a ride on a truck. I also tried the train. Passenger cars were so full that even a mouse would have found it tough to get a seat. Cats prefer freight cars, anyway. Trains are very tricky. When you notice that a truck ceases to go in the right direction, you can get off easily, because trucks stop all the time. Indian trucks stopped whenever a cow was standing in the middle of the road, for example. Now, some trains seem never to stop. Suddenly, the train wasn't heading north anymore and I had to jump right away—or rather, dive, since the rain had flooded the countryside. Me, diving and swimming! No wonder most cats refuse to travel. As soon as you leave home, you're in trouble.

In Agra, I saw a big tomb called Taj Mahal. Human beings who build such monuments to their own glory are atrociously vain, I say.

Agra temple cats told me the fat gray cat had received the name "Saint Lawrence" when he arrived in India.

The capital of India is the city of Delhi. There, I nearly caught him up. In the very wet gardens of a big downtown temple, I met a whole legion of extra-thin cats who hoped to become cows. When I asked them about Saint Lawrence, one of them said: "Come with me... He's there, somewhere." We passed many cats. They looked like mere shadows in the evening twilight, but I saw clearly enough that none of them could be called fat.

My guide seemed puzzled. "He was here, yesterday," he said.

One of the cats had seen him today: "I went to the food market with him this morning. He found a lorry that emitted a strong smell of yak cheese. He said good-bye and jumped aboard."

I thought of good old Rover, who had taught me this very same trick. If I ever returned to my beloved maze, I would become a new Rover, always ready to entertain the youngsters with amazing tales from distant lands.

I was sorry to leave the Delhi temple cats. It's the same thing everywhere: cats in the capital city are more interesting than their provincial cousins. Now that I was just a day behind Saint Lawrence, however, I couldn't stop and risk losing him again.

I missed him by a whisker in Chandigarh. It was my fault, actually, so I was quite angry at myself. Stupid me: I got lost in the middle of the city! I could smell the temple

The cat in the maze

very clearly, with its cats and its incense, but the streets were so twisted that I couldn't find it. Whoever built Chandigarh must have been drunk on vodka or something. I was so tired that I fell asleep on a lawn. I felt somewhat weak and I knew that I should have eaten more (especially proteins), but I simply couldn't find enough food.

When I did reach the temple, the cats told me Saint Lawrence had just left. At least, his smell was still there. A pleasant rounded fragrance, which made me even more eager to meet its owner.

Some days later, I was following his smell on the road that climbs toward Simla when I saw him. The high mountains were still quite far away, but the climate was already drier. Odors of hay and sawmills drifted by now and then. Although he was just a gray spot far ahead of me, I knew I could not be mistaken. I heard the stomping of my heart inside my chest. A minute ago, I had felt terribly tired with all this walking. Suddenly, I was full of energy again and started running after him.

4. Him-a-Lier

As the Indian cats had marveled at Saint Lawrence's huge size, I expected to meet a giant, but in fact he was not bigger than some cats I knew in Paris. For example, you couldn't compare him to Tiny Tim, a well-known denizen of the Buttes-Chaumont gardens, in the north-east section of Paris. While nobody would dare pick up a fight with Tiny Tim, it was obvious that Saint Lawrence was a good-tempered kind of fat guy.

I stopped for breath. He stopped too. He examined me with a deep steady glance, as if he was reading through me.

"Some temple cats told me a guy named Frog was looking for me. Are you Frog?"

"Well, sort of. They call me Frog because I come from France, but I don't eat frogs. I don't eat snails either."

"What about mice? Do you eat mice?"

"Of course! Don't you?"

"I certainly don't. You shouldn't, you know. When you eat an animal, you shorten its life. Thus, you suppress its chances of accomplishing good deeds that would better his next incarnation."

Saint Lawrence believed in the same mumbo-jumbo as the temple cats. He came from a Canadian province called "Quit-back," or something. His posturing looked French, but it didn't resemble the elegant poses of Parisian cats. He reminded me of country cats I had seen in the Alps mountains.

He told me how he received his name:

"I arrived in India on a ship that came from Japan. I disembarked in Calcutta. I knew nothing then."

"Did you eat mice?"

"Oh yes, I ate mice. I despised cows, monkeys and other holy animals. Well, anyway, some cats brought me to a great river called Ganges. I must tell you that I didn't take to India at first. My digestive processes were disturbed, what with their food being so spicy.

The cat in the maze

I was in a pretty bad mood and found everything ugly. When I saw their great river, I said that it wasn't worth the Saint Lawrence river."

"Never heard of it. Where is that?"

"In Quit-back. The temple cats had never heard of it either. It runs right through the middle of my native city, Montreal. They found it very funny that anyone would presume comparing the holy Ganges to another river. Why, the Ganges is more than just holy: it is a god, more or less. Only a very naive foreigner could be unaware of this. So they called me He-who-compares-the-Ganges-to-the-Saint-Lawrence, then shortened it into Saint Lawrence."

I discovered pretty soon that spicy food didn't bother Saint Lawrence anymore. I wondered how he could remain so strong (and fat) on a diet of nuts and vegetables. I suspected him of swallowing a mouse secretly, now and then, when I was asleep.

As he loved to talk, he was delighted to have a travelling companion. "Ha, my boy," he said, "I know only one thing as pleasant as talking while walking: it is walking while talking."

So we walked and we talked. Saint-Lawrence asked me again and again to tell him about the Jardin des Plantes and the maze and the Père Lachaise cemetery and the Cat Grannies. My pyramid adventure fascinated him. He had never gone to Egypt. He had crossed Canada by train to a city named Vancouver, then sailed across the Pacific ocean, spent one million hours in Japan, then sailed again to Hong Kong, Manilla, Singapore and Calcutta.

All this geography frizzled my neurons. Unless I have seen a place with my own eyes, I find it rather difficult to remember its name. Because of his strange accent when posturing, I tended to understand "Many-law" for Manilla and "Singer-poor" for Singapore. At least, I didn't have to worry about our destination. I just followed him blindly. We left the hard paved road, which hurt our paws, and walked on narrow earthen paths. The air we breathed became cooler, and sweet mountain scents perfumed it. "Happy" would be a poor word to describe my state of mind. "Ecstatic" would be more like it. In fact, it seemed to me that this strange air was more potent than vodka. We walked late into the night, as if drunk, talking and singing. We lay down anywhere and sometimes discovered a surprising landscape in the morning.

The cat in the maze

Thus, one morning, we woke up surrounded by mountains so tall, so very tall, that we could hardly see the sky anymore.

“Here we are: the Him-a-Lier mountains,” Saint Lawrence said. His postures were slow and slightly exaggerated, which seemed to make his words weightier. “The monastery is located on the other side.”

“I’m not sure I understood what you said. You mean the monastery we’re going to?”

“Yes, my boy. That’s where the Great Cat Lama resides. I hope to see him and acquire a few crumbs of his immense wisdom.”

“Tell me, is there a tunnel anywhere? You don’t want us to jump over the mountains, do you?”

“Do not worry, my lad. Who follows the Way, no mountain can stop him!”

He enjoyed inserting such formulas into the conversation. I don’t know whether he had learned them from the temple cats or invented them. I was perfectly willing to follow the Way, as he said, but I found it quite unpleasant that the Way chose to climb the frightful glaciers I saw in the distance. We were in the middle of summer, but the air became very cold, all of a sudden. We could see snow everywhere. As I had visited the Alps, I knew that glaciers are full of deadly crevasses. For all I knew, Saint Lawrence may have expected the Way to lead him to his next life...

He was amazing. He never seemed to worry. He explained his coolness by his practice of the temple cats’ gymnastics, which he called “Yo-Girl,” or maybe “Yogurt.” I couldn’t help laughing when he twisted his paws as if he wanted to tie knots, or tried to stand upon his head. It was hard to believe that his huge body could become as supple as rubber, especially when you considered that he had left middle age behind him hundreds of years ago. Well, this Yo Girl gave him magical powers, or so it appeared to me. Apparently failing to notice that the temperature hovered around minus twenty thousand degrees, he climbed vertiginous ice-covered cliffs as if he was enjoying his morning walk on Mount Royal. He talked so often of this Mount Royal, in his native city of Montreal, that I felt I had visited the place already.

I was scared stiff, of course. Ha, but he looked me into the eyes, then ordered me to follow him in so convincing a manner that I simply had to obey him. When he wielded his magical powers, nobody could resist him.

Now and then, he would lie down in the snow and close his eyes.

The cat in the maze

“Let the spirit of the mountain enter your bones, my boy,” he said, “then subdue it!”

“I’m willing to try, Master, but I’m afraid the spirit of pneumonia might enter my bones before the spirit of the mountain.”

“Cross your front paws. Inhale deeply and quickly, then exhale slowly. Faster. Fast and deep. Well done... Now slower. Take it easy. Let the breath of Him-a-Lier swell your lungs. Welcome it like a friend... Now escort it politely to the door...”

Master? Did I say Master? Let me think... I called him Master eventually, but that was much later, when we met the Great Cat Lama.

Yes, we reached the monastery. We walked over the mountains, although they seemed to touch the very sky. I don’t really know how we succeeded. I remember vaguely that Saint Lawrence dazed me by repeating Tibetan words over and over. His loud posturing had a strange hypnotic quality. “The spirit of Him-a-Lier sees us and helps us,” he said.

My mind was blank. I crawled ahead like a robot. I forgot that I hadn’t eaten for the last one hundred days. Sometimes, when I lay down to let the spirit enter my bones, I heard the scratching of an animal inside its burrow, but I was much too weak to consider hunting. Actually, believe it or not, hunger isn’t the worst thing that can happen to you. You kind of get used to it after a while. Up on the mountain, I discovered this surprising fact: you can live without eating. Ha, but can you live without breathing? We climbed so high that air became scarce. As we had reached the sky, we walked through clouds. At first, I thought that I couldn’t inhale the fleecy cloud. I am no scientist, so I didn’t understand what was the matter. Then Saint Lawrence remembered what some temple cats had told him: on top of the mountains, you must be very careful not to do anything foolish, as there is no air and thoughts rotate like propellers inside your head.

I declare that Saint Lawrence saved my life, he really did. He stared me into following him. “Just imitate my every movement without thinking,” he said. He repeated it loudly five thousand times: “DO NOT TRY TO THINK!”

He walked very slowly. He raised a paw in slow motion, I raised the same paw in slow motion. He moved it a few inches forward and put it down, I did it too. Then he raised another paw. I advanced like a machine, without feeling the burning bite of the ice under my soles. Something in me drove my claws into the flanks of the great mountain, so I avoided skidding to the bottom of the abyss.

The cat in the maze

The cat lamas were dumbfounded when we entered the monastery. Foreigners hadn't come over the mountains for ten thousand years. Not only did Saint Lawrence's size amaze them, but they saw at once that the spirit of Him-a-Lier had helped him in his daring enterprise.

By the way, when we reached the very highest crags, when we surfed the clouds and escalated the sky, I had a definite feeling that the spirit of the great peaks was beginning to enter my bones. At the very moment when there was no more air, I inhaled the breath of Him-a-Lier.

5. The Great Cat Lama

The cat lamas inhabit the gardens of monasteries, where human monks feed them. They eat only vegetarian food, of course. They are convinced that the monks' generosity is a tribute paid to their high position on the scale of reincarnation.

Ha, reincarnation! They hardly ever talked about anything else. Saint Lawrence was delighted. He had long boring conversations with the Great Cat Lama, a toothless relic who sat on a tree stump without moving as much as a whisker. At first, a young cat novice would act as an interpreter, but Saint Lawrence soon understood Tibetan posturing. In his native Quit-back, there are two kinds of cats, so they're all used to various styles of posturing. As for myself, I had no trouble understanding Polish, Egyptian and Indian cats, but these Tibetan guys were something else altogether. They wiggled and jiggled as if they were trying to obscure the meaning of their sentences. What did I care? I wasn't interested in their former and future lives.

When Saint Lawrence addressed the Great Cat Lama, he called him "Master" and knelt in such a comical way, as if he was trying to flatten his gigantic body, that I could hardly refrain from laughing aloud. That's when I started calling him "Master" too, in mock humility. I intended it as a good-natured joke, but he took it as a straightforward compliment and seemed so genuinely pleased that I went on doing it.

Once I was stuck in the role of Saint Lawrence's disciple, I could hardly do less than call the Great Cat Lama "Master" as well. Yes, I talked to him several times. Saint Lawrence had told him about my pyramid feat. He called a special meeting of all the cat lamas and asked me to describe the funeral chamber of the pharaoh's cat.

They consider that you don't explore the entrails of the great pyramid by sheer luck. They were sure that the chamber had attracted me because I had been an ancient Egyptian cat in a former life. While they all remembered their former lives perfectly, they were very sad to learn that I had no memories of my Egyptian avatar. I was alive during the golden age of Bastet and couldn't recollect a thing! What a shame... One thing amazed them: Why didn't I visit the funeral chamber again on the next day, and then again and

The cat in the maze

again? I should have learnt to read hieroglyphs and deciphered the frescoes on the walls. I was probably a great sinner, in ancient Egypt, otherwise Bastet wouldn't have punished me by turning me into a silly ignorant French cat.

Their eyes glazed whenever they mentioned Bastet and ancient Egypt. How pitiful our own times, compared to that blessed era! Gods were animals, animals were gods! Often, when they were comparing antique memories, the Great Cat Lama would recount one of his early lives. Our planet was still enjoying its infancy. Animals ruled wisely and peacefully—this was before the big two-legs ruined everything. He was so lyrical, when he described prehistorical cats drinking from clear brooks and dancing among wild flowers, that I half expected to see him levitate.

Crying over the past won't bring it back, I say. Just wasting perfectly good present hours. I accepted Saint Lawrence's vagaries, because he was my friend more than my master, but the cat lamas tended to get on my nerves. In fact, I felt disappointed, somehow. What did I expect to find on the other side of the mountain? Why did I walk all over India looking for Saint Lawrence? Why did I leave my maze? My memory was as cloudy as Him-a-Lier. A vague dissatisfaction had pushed me, or pulled me, outwards. I had yearned foolishly for south sea birds. I had followed cinnamon-scented lobsters or something. Whatever the object of my desire, I didn't feel much closer to it... I was glad to see Saint Lawrence drunk with happiness at the feet of his Great Master, but I also felt slightly jealous.

The monastery was located on the outskirts of a city, or should I say village, in the west of Tibet. To avoid terminal boredom, I used to walk into town while Saint Lawrence meditated with the cat lamas. What a god-forsaken hole it was! They didn't even have a hospital. There was one public building, though, guarded by sentinels and red flags: army barracks. When human beings are very poor, they do without hospitals and schools, but they can always afford an army.

The army cooks threw left-overs into a large pit, which doubled as the main meeting-place for all kinds of cats. There I met some Tibetan cats, unbelievers who were not too fond of the cat lamas' vegetarian diet and pious conversation; Chinese cats who had come with the soldiers; cats who had fled the war in Afghanistan.

And then, there was MacDonald. She was American, which accounts for the name the Tibetan cats gave her. Yes, even Tibetan cats have heard of the world-famous

The cat in the maze

MacDonald hamburgers! She lived in a city called Berkeley, near San Francisco in the state of California. She told me she studied science with very learned cats in the park of Berkeley university. She had come to Tibet to look for some rare medicinal plants that could lengthen the life of cats. There was a legend or rumor, in California, that some very old cats lived in a mysterious valley called Shan-gri-la. “I don’t know whether cats are entitled to nine lives,” she said. “Perhaps I’ve enjoyed previous incarnations, but I don’t remember any of them. Thus, it is exactly as if this life was my only one. Adding a few hundred years to it wouldn’t hurt.”

“I know a very old Tibetan cat,” I said. “He sits on a tree stump all day”

“The very old cats in Shan-gri-la do not seem old. They stay young for centuries, that’s the whole point.”

As the novelty of the town had worn off pretty fast, I asked her to take me along as her assistant when she went herborizing. She couldn’t take a Chinese cat, because the villagers hated them. Afghan cats didn’t even acknowledge her existence; they considered that a female shouldn’t work at scientific research, but should have dozens of kittens and spend her days raising them.

Well, I discovered I had learned useful tricks during my trek with Saint Lawrence. I would lie on the ground to let the mountains’ spirit enter my bones, then I would hear the gallop of panicked field-mice inside their burrows. Big two-legs offer useless flowers when they’re in love. As we’re sensible creatures, we prefer to give mice. MacDonald found me to her taste: half French lover, half big-game hunter.

Her fur was a deep and lustrous black, except for white socks on her two front paws.

What happened between MacDonald and me in Tibet belongs to MacDonald and me. I am not going to expose my private life—and MacDonald’s—here. As my mother used to say: “If you babble about yourself, you’re a fool, but if you involve someone else, you’re worse than a fool!”

One thing I can reveal: she insisted I taste some very bitter herbs. Whether I’ll live twice longer than other cats, the future will tell, but I can testify to an immediate effect of the herbs: my stomach hurt for days!

MacDonald returned to America a few weeks after I met her. Or was it a few months? Too soon, anyway. If she found her herbal youth elixir, she didn’t inform me. She did explain how I could find her in Berkeley:

The cat in the maze

“Do you know the smell of eucalyptus?”

“Oh yes. These trees grow in the south of France. I can remember the smell quite well.”

“Then when you come to the park of Berkeley University, go to the western gate and locate a eucalyptus grove. Do you know my smell?”

“Are you kidding?”

“Well, once you’re inside the eucalyptus grove, just follow my smell!”

After she was gone, I felt like moving, too. At the same time, Saint Lawrence was beginning to look toward the high peaks that blocked the northern horizon. He told me that he had learned a lot. The Great Cat Lama had transmitted secrets to him:

“Behind these mountains, my boy, lies the hidden cat kingdom—the only place on this planet that big two-legs haven’t taken over yet.”

His glance had become even sharper. Instead of stabbing you, it went right through you as if you were transparent.

The reason I had not followed the beautiful MacDonald was that Saint Lawrence held a strange ascendancy over me. Even though I found some of his ideas quite foolish, I had indeed been shaken by *something* on top of the great mountain. When he looked me into the eyes and danced his deep postures, I ceased to control my own will.

What’s more, I thought that my good master needed me... At least, to talk while walking and walk while talking.

I could always go to Berkeley later. Whereas the hidden cat kingdom called me now. Undoubtedly, if I wanted to visit it—did it really exist?—it was now or never.

So we climbed the northern cousin of Him-a-Lier. I was not complaining, this time, because I was looking forward to the moment when I would reach the sky again. I was bracing myself for my second meeting with the spirit of the mountain. I would inhale the spirit’s frozen breath. The electric caress of the spirit’s wing would ruffle my fur and twist my whiskers.

My encounter with the spirit didn’t resemble the first one, though. Instead of being sudden and brief, it was progressive and long-lasting. Every single hair of my fur was happy. I was sorry we had to climb down after we reached the summit. Saint Lawrence seemed to understand what was happening. “You learn fast, my boy,” he said.

6. Cat-Jack-Stan and Cat-Hey

Beyond the mountain, we found another mountain, then a valley inhabited by millions of Chinese people and cats. This was not the hidden cat kingdom, obviously. Saint Lawrence did not worry: “To the North, my boy... Let’s walk farther north!”

After walking for several hundred days, we reached a great desert. Saint Lawrence was delighted: “We’re on the right track. This desert shows how clever our ancestors were: it protects the cat kingdom, because big two-legs can’t cross it!”

During this trip, it was my turn to save Saint Lawrence’s life. He would lie on the ground, but the desert’s spirit was less friendly than the mountain’s. In fact, my good master found it terribly difficult to get up again. He hadn’t become any thinner in the monastery. When you carry too much fat under your fur, I guess you can bear the glaciers’ cold more easily than the desert’s savage heat. Not only did Saint Lawrence eat a lot, but he drank several liters of water every day. On the high ridges, we quenched our thirst by eating snow. Now I was trying to avoid thinking about the white stuff. My mouth was as dry as sandpaper. Saint Lawrence seemed ready to switch to his next life. Then I lay down and listened to the music of the ground, as I used to do when I went herborizing with my dear MacDonald. I heard creatures in their burrows and even, at times, the gurgling song of far-away water. I dugged into the sand, caught and ate some innocent beast, gave Saint Lawrence whatever seeds or roots I found in its larder. I brought back humid lumps of earth, which we sucked dry with infinite relish.

Many years earlier, we had woken up one morning and seen the first peaks of Him-a-Lier. Similarly, we fell asleep one night on the sand, under the blinking souls of our innumerable ancestors, and discovered on the following dawn a faint green line in the distance. Trees! A long row of trees on the banks of a river!

“Here we are, my boy,” Saint Lawrence said. “Cat-Jack-Stan! The hidden cat kingdom.” His posturing was so weak that I felt like crying. What’s more, he was soon awfully disappointed: human beings had taken over this Cat-Jack-Stan, like the rest of the

The cat in the maze

planet. True, they were less numerous than elsewhere, but their pungent smell hit our nostrils as soon as we reached the river behind the trees.

While Saint Lawrence seemed very sad not to have found the hidden cat kingdom, I was thankful that the human beings had built a bridge upon the river. Otherwise, how would we have crossed it?

These human beings were different from the standard model. They lived in big round tents, herded sheep, and used camels rather than machines to carry their belongings around. Some of them inhabited houses made of earth, which smelled like a field mouse's burrow.

Although we had covered an enormous distance over mountains, valleys and desert, we found a monastery that looked like the very twin of the Tibetan one. Click-clack-cluck went the music of the prayer mills! The monastery cats were amazed when we told them we had escalated the mountains and crossed the desert. Not only that, but we brought fresh news of the Great Cat Lama! When they evoked the Great Cat Lama, however, we were not sure they meant the same one, as their knowledge came from their grandparents, who had received it from their elders...

These same elders had told the grandparents about the hidden cat kingdom, but it was so long ago that our cats only remembered some vague legends. They thought the real name of the kingdom was Cat-Hey and that it was located farther east. What about Cat-Jack-Stan? Well, Cat Jack was a great cat warrior who lived millions of years ago. He had waged such a fierce war against the wolves that these cowardly beasts had called big two-legs into Cat-Jack-Stan to help them. This betrayal of animal pride had brought a terrible punishment upon them: the human beings had domesticated them into d.gs!

The monastery cats begged Saint Lawrence to teach them what he had learnt from the Great Cat Lama. My master found a pleasant tree stump in the gardens behind the monastery. I can still see him, sitting on his tree stump, keeping his head straight, surrounded by all his new disciples. He seemed so happy! He was beaming with joy! Good old Saint Lawrence!

It was obvious that the time had come for me to leave my master and friend. I certainly didn't want to settle on a tree stump.

"I progressed toward the Way in your company," Saint Lawrence said. "At times, I didn't know whether I was your master or your disciple, whether you were postponing

The cat in the maze

the study of Yo-Girl and the rest until your next life or had already learnt everything in a former life.”

“How could anyone know everything? In fact, I’m sure that I knew very little when I met you, Master, and that I know much more now—although I can’t say what I’ve learnt exactly...”

Cats don’t kiss goodbye. I emitted my friendliest odor in Saint Lawrence’s direction and went away. As I hadn’t become an ascetic fool like all these monastery cats, I thought of MacDonald day and night. I wanted only one thing: to be reunited with her as soon as possible. From Tibet, she had gone eastward. She told me she would cross China, then go to Japan. According to the monastery cats, however, I couldn’t go eastward from Cat-Jack-Stan, because of a real nasty desert. They advised a northern route. Walking a hundred days or two would take me to a railroad that spanned the horizons. Then I should embark on an eastward train.

I walked. I found the railroad. I followed the track until I reached a station. A long freight train seemed to be waiting for me. Most cars smelled of either coal or cotton, but after a while I located some food scents. Alas, no fish or meat, but only wheat and vegetables. I ended up travelling in a freight-car full of carrots. A human family I lived with very long ago had a pet rabbit named Bugs Bunny. He would have loved this cargo!

Once the train started, it went on and on for many days. Chinks in the wooden side of the car allowed me to look outside. I could hardly believe my own eyes: although the train was undoubtedly moving, the landscape never changed... Birch-trees, birch-trees and more birch-trees!

As soon as the train stopped, I jumped out. Too many birch-trees, too many carrots. I discovered a city named Irkutsk, on the shore of the river Angara. Local cats had never heard of the Great Cat Lama. Actually, they knew nothing of the wide world outside. No other foreign cat had come this way for the last ten thousand years. They were extremely friendly and hospitable, though. They took me to the main city market and stole some fish for me. Also some of these fish eggs called carviak, which the Polish cats had told me about. It seems there’s a big lake near Irkutsk; that’s where the fish and fish eggs come from.

I swear I had never eaten such a good meal in my whole life. On the other hand, it is quite possible that I would have found anything delicious after my carrot diet.

The cat in the maze

I inquired about the hidden cat kingdom. Although these cats didn't seem to care about the world, I thought they might have heard some interesting legends from their elders about Cat-Jack-Stan or Cat-Hey. They brought me to a very old cat, who was a kind of professional oracle: he answered questions if you offered him a few fish or, better, a paper pouch full of carviak.

He was really a clever one! His posturing was slow, but marked by a peculiar dance-like grace:

“A cat kingdom without human beings... That would be a bad idea, my foreign friend. Thank you for this fish! Now let me ask you something... Where do the best fish dwell?”

“The best fish? In your lake!”

“Yes, but not just anywhere in the lake... They gambol near the bottom of the lake and the big two-legs get them for us. Shouldn't we consider them as our servants? I've never heard of your Cat-Jack-Stan, but our elders told me about Cat-Hey... This was a wonderful country. A country where human beings were clever enough to understand our posturing... Thus, we could teach them all kinds of useful skills. For example, we explained that we could locate the north because of its strong magnetism. As they lacked our sensitive whiskers, they invented compasses to replace them... Today, the country is called China, but its degenerate citizens can't understand us anymore... Now, if you go there, my friend, you'll see that they still eat d.g.s, just as we taught them thousands or years ago. At least, that's what our elders said.”

D.g meat! My mouth watered when I thought I could taste the flesh of our enemies. This would be something to tell my friends in the maze: “I ate a d.g's leg in China!” I had to decide against it, however, because China was very far to the south of Irkutsk, beyond a vast and empty country, Mongolia. I didn't have that many years to spare. MacDonald wouldn't wait for me in Berkeley forever!

I took the train eastward again. More bitch trees. Many more birch trees... The train went to a town named Khabarovsk, and there were birch trees on both sides of the track. Then it turned slightly southward and the birch forest still covered the ground as far as I could see. Eventually, the train stopped in Nakhodka and the birch forest stopped, too, but that was only because there was no more land—we had reached the shore of the ocean.

The cat in the maze

I wasn't a travel rookie anymore. Instead of trying to guess where a ship came from by its smell, I simply waited for the ship's cats to disembark and asked them. That's how I found a vessel going to Yokohama, in Japan.

7. Raw fish paradise

When I lived with human beings, I read books and watched TV. I liked cheap novels, violent movies and trashy sitcoms. As a result, I knew as little about the world, except for the places I had seen myself, as the Irkutsk cats. Maybe I was not curious enough. When I talked to the ship's cats in Nakhodka, I could have asked them to describe Japan. Instead, I only inquired about the ship: was it steady? They laughed and answered that during the typhoon season, no ship was steady! They were right, but I had rather not add anything on that painful subject.

Thus, I didn't expect Japan to be different from all the countries I had visited so far. How wrong I was ! At first, I perceived a strong smell of gasoline. I saw millions of cars and trucks. Crowds of people were hurrying to and fro. This did not impress me very favorably. Ah, but as soon as I explored the side-streets, marvelous fish fragrances assailed my nostrils. I discovered rows upon rows of tiny restaurants that served all kinds of fish. Tuna, salmon, mackerel, sea bream, shrimps, cuttle-fish, octopus, and many others that I had never smelled before. Like China, this country must have been under the influence of cats long ago. We taught them to eat fish in the raw!

As I soon found out, Japanese two-legs are very picky: they eat only certain fish parts. What about the rest? Yes, oh yes... They give the rest to the cats! To show that this is official policy, Japanese restaurants always display the statue of a smiling cat who raises his paw to welcome us.

I wasn't going to forget MacDonald, but my stomach refused to let me leave this paradise before tasting the full palette of its pleasures. Broiled eels! Sea-urchins! Salmon eggs! Whale meat!

I was careless but lucky. By devouring the contents of any trash can I found outside a restaurant, I risked ingesting poisonous tidbits that careful cooks threw away. I didn't know anything about this deadly danger until some Japanese cats, who tend to distrust foreigners, decided I was okay and showed me a restaurant specialized in poisonous blowfish. I learned the written character for blowfish, so I could recognize it and avoid it.

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Instead of an alphabet, the Japanese people use small pictures to describe words. This is a perfect method for creatures who don't speak, like cats. After a few thousand days, I could read most of the characters. I even read a novel written by a Japanese cat: *Wagahai neko de aru*, which means *I am a cat*. The word for cat is *neko*.

How did I find this novel? The Coral cats gave it to me. It's a long story. The cats who warned me about the blowfish said I should definitely visit the great fish market in Tokyo. Moving about in Japan is difficult, because of all the cars and trucks, but I did manage to walk from Yokohama to Tokyo.

The beauty of the fish market is well beyond my powers of description. What a place! What a fantastic rainbow of smells! I didn't even know there were that many different fish at the bottom of the ocean. If I was a big two-legs, I couldn't work in the middle of this amazing bounty without devouring the fish, but they control their mouth somehow. The fish market two-legs are rather strange, actually: they smell more fishy than human!

A group of cats surrounded me and asked me where I came from. They had never seen a French cat. They were very friendly and showed me the sights. They invited me to their home, a park called Hibiya.

They called their gang the Coral cats. They pretended that their ancestors had come from the south seas long ago. This reminded me of the initial purpose of my trip:

"A cat I knew in Paris told me about islands in the south seas where birds have never seen a four-legged animal. Can you confirm their existence, or is it a legend?"

"Ah, yes... Nesting islands... Indeed... Such islands existed millions of years ago. But no more."

"Our ancestors ate all the naive birds."

"Only the most distrustful birds survived."

"Nowadays, they fly away as fast as birds anywhere."

"So these marvelous islands used to exist, you see. Then the reality died and, out of its ashes, a legend was born. A legend is often a ghost of reality."

These Japanese cats didn't believe in reincarnation. They thought we became ghosts after our death. They felt that the air around us was inhabited by millions of ghosts of past creatures and events. They ate fish but didn't kill mice. If you kill a living creature, its ghost will come back and haunt you!

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As they had never killed anyone, ghosts didn't bother them. They were a joyous band. They loved to sing and dance under the moon in the middle of Hibiya park. They sang old south seas melodies, whose lyrics didn't make any sense, either because they belonged to a forgotten south seas language, or because they had made them up. To impress me, they also sang ancient Japanese ballads that recounted the feats of valiant warriors called "Catmurai".

I showed them the dance of the camel and the ostrich, which I had seen in Arabia.

I told them I intended to sail across the Pacific ocean, all the way to California, and that it was quite possible I'd stop over somewhere in the south seas.

"Why don't you come with me and see the land of your ancestors? Update your south sea dances?"

"We thank you for this pleasant suggestion, but we can't go. How could we leave the fish market?"

They certainly had a point there. I wondered whether I would be able to leave the fish market myself. Well, in the end, I decided there was more to life than free raw fish. Although half of the Coral cats were female, and some of these females could certainly be considered more beautiful than Macdonald, I kept thinking about her every day and dreaming of her every night. I knew that, eventually, we would have kittens together.

I chose a big ship, hoping its size might help it tame the waves. In fact, strange as it may seem, I avoided seasickness—with a nod to Saint Lawrence—by lying on the floor of the hold and letting the spirit of the ocean enter my bones.

The ship stopped near several islands. As it kept out at sea, I couldn't explore the islands. Everywhere, I saw more human beings and cars than birds.

After many hundred days, we put in a harbor and I stepped ashore. I smelled, then saw, a small party of cats, who started dancing when I approached them. Their posturing was quite jolly. "Welcome to Club Med," they sang. "Welcome to the horn of plenty!"

Although human beings do not eat sea birds, they dream of going to the south seas islands, just as we do. At least, that's what the cats told me. With their habit of not leaving things as they are, they have transformed this Club Med island to fit their fancy.

"Follow us," the cats said. "We'll show you something that'll blow your mind." We walked toward some very high palm trees. As we came close, I smelled enormous quantities of all kinds of edibles, as if a food factory was installed in the vicinity, but I

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could see only small thatched-roofed huts in the distance. Suddenly, I saw the food—mountains of vegetables, fruit, cakes, fish and meat, in the middle of a clearing under the palm trees. Mobs of human beings were attacking the mountains and trying to build mere hills of food on large round plates. Big two-legs are stupid and noxious creatures, but you can't deny that they are very skillful. The way they piled up stuff on their plates was truly marvelous.

The Club Med cats said this was only the beginning of a fascinating process. They took me to the other side of the clearing, where the people sat at big white tables. We watched as they threw the food into their mouth with their hands and metallic tools, according to their custom. When they began to dig into their hill of food, they made haste, as if they were afraid their neighbor might steal a crab leg or a lemon cake. Then they slowed down. After a while, sweat appeared on their brow and their whole face seemed to glow in the shade. Their metallic utensils seemed to become very heavy. Eventually, they stopped eating altogether. "Look at this," the cats said. "See how much they leave on their plate!" Instead of recycling this food by adding it to the mountain in the middle of the clearing, they just left it on the table. "Wait and see," the cats said. After a while, other human beings came. They carried big gray plastic bags, into which they threw the leftovers. They piled the bags onto the platform of a blue pickup truck.

"Where does it go?" I asked.

"A field near the north tip of the island."

"The island is not big. An hour's walk."

"The right distance to build up an appetite!"

So we walked along the beach, under the palm trees. Human beings were sprawled on the sand. Usually, they cover their ugly hairless skin with clothes, but these guys wore tiny pieces of fabric and looked ridiculous. Some of them dove into the sea for no apparent reason. Even the Club Med cats, who observed this strange behaviour daily, could not explain it.

As we advanced northward, the number of human beings on the beach diminished, until there were none. Then I saw a fantastic spectacle: millions of white sea-birds covered the ground like an immense cotton blanket. Had I found one of the south sea nesting islands mentioned in Rover's tales, after all?

"There's enough food for everybody," the Club Med cats said. "Just ignore the birds."

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We moved on. The nearest birds didn't wait for us, but simply relocated a few feet beyond our reach. My Tokyo friends, the Coral cats, were right: these birds distrust four-legged animals, like birds everywhere.

Ah, but what a treat! Thousands of gray plastic bags were open and disgorged leftovers. All right, this south sea island wasn't exactly what the legend mentioned. I would probably never catch a live bird. Did I want to kill a living creature, anyway? Deprive the poor guy of a better next life? Risk the wrath of his ghost? Not when I could eat as many roasted chicken legs as I wanted!

I enjoyed the bounty of the great Club Med dump for many months. My stomach was perfectly happy, but my mind was beginning to twist and fret. I felt a painful need to boast. Not only did I want to tell my friends in the maze about this heavenly place, but I dreamt that I was narrating my journey around the planet to my children and grandchildren. So my next step, obviously, was to find MacDonald and found a family.

8. Down and out in America

MacDonald had told me how to reach Berkeley. Finding a ship going to San Francisco was easy. The toughest part of the trip was crossing the Bay from San Francisco to Berkeley. The noise and the exhaust fumes on Bay Bridge were horrendous. This bridge is several thousand miles long. I walked for hours. Several times, I thought I'd faint—but my yearning for my sweet MacDonald kept me going.

Berkeley University lies at the bottom of some hills. I had no trouble locating the eucalyptus cove, as its smell was quite loud. Ah, but something was very wrong: although several cat odors drifted in the air around me, none of them was MacDonald's...

I met the learned cats of Berkeley. Boring cats of Berkeley would be a better description. They spend their life arguing over arcane questions, such as whether cats, as a species, are related more closely to lions or to tigers. They said that MacDonald had returned from Tibet long ago. She had brought back some interesting herbs and roots. In fact, all the cats on the campus had tried the Tibetan herbs, and none of them had died yet, which they considered very promising.

"I was in Tibet myself," I said. "That's where I met her. I helped her find these herbs and roots you just mentioned. Didn't she tell you about me? I'm a French cat. She called me Frog."

"A cat named Frog? Have you heard of a cat named Frog, professor Red Fur?"

"Not. MacDonald never mentioned you. She knew so many cats, though..."

"Excuse me, but would you mind telling me where I can find her?"

"Oh, she left last month on a new mission. She went looking for certain barks somewhere... Do you remember where, doctor Whiskers?"

"South America. They say Indian cats munch barks that protect them against rabies when a mad dog bites them."

I was quite angry against my stomach, whose greed had held me back in Tokyo and on Club Med island. If I had come to Berkeley one month earlier, I would have gone with MacDonald to South America. How could I find her now?

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At least the Berkeley wizards knew where South America was. Too far to walk to, they said. Too dangerous to hitch-hike to. It seemed that, once more, I would have to sail. This prospect didn't make me very happy. Besides, I was sorry to leave Berkeley. When I lay down to let the spirit of California enter my bones, I felt very cool vibrations. Also, I enjoyed a place called Telegraph avenue, where hundreds of Tibetan shops gave off voluptuous incense perfumes that reminded me of my past happiness. At night, I often followed FatBits and Folder, two technoid cats, who entered empty labs in the university and played with computers. Moving the so-called "mouse" was great fun, of course. They tried to teach me how to "surf the Web," but I was too clumsy.

"I'll come back with MacDonald and settle here," I said to myself.

Then I sailed south. I pursued MacDonald from harbor to harbor, as I had pursued Saint Lawrence from temple to temple in India. In San Salvador, in Managua, in Panama, harbor cats said: "An American female cat, black fur and white socks, who travels alone? Oh yes..." But in Lima, they said: "An American female cat, black fur and white socks, who travels with a big striped fellow? She was here last week."

Big striped fellow... These terrible words crushed my heart. I tried to remember what the Great Cat Lama used to say: "Illusion reigns supreme upon this degenerate world," or something. It didn't help much.

I embarked on the first ship that went by. My memories about this period of my life are rather vague. I remember that I caught the ship's rats one by one and that I killed them with a cruelty I didn't know I was capable of. Instead of closing my jaws upon their neck in a flash to avoid unnecessary pain, I tore their limbs and let them bleed slowly to death. During breaks of lucidity, I regretted my behaviour and shed bitter tears. There had been a time when I thought I was progressing toward the Way, but now I had shifted into reverse and was speeding away as fast as I could. What a pity!

The ship stopped in Valparaiso, one of the harbors that good old Rover used to mention. In a country called Chile. Nothing much to talk about, though. Trees, houses, cars, human beings, cats, like elsewhere.

Then we followed the coast of South America and stopped in all kinds of small harbors, until we came to a place called Patagonia. The weather was becoming very cold, which was kind of strange, because my whiskers told me we were sailing southward. I mean, when I left France, south meant hot. Besides, there was something wrong with the

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stars. I didn't recognize their pattern. This had already happened when I lived on Club Med island. I should have asked the Berkeley science buffs to teach me some astronomy.

We passed through a kind of channel called the Straits of Magellan, then sailed northward, away from the cold. The ship's sailors didn't seem to worry about the weather, so I figured that everything was all right somehow.

Our trip ended in a big city, as noisy and smelly as any I had seen. When a ship puts in, young harbor cats come for news. They throng the bottom of the gangway and welcome the ship's cats as if they were movie stars. These little cats told me the city was named Buenos Aires, but (I'm ashamed to confess it) I answered them with insults. As I didn't really want to hurt these naive kittens, who dreamt of sunsets over the waves, I mitigated my rudeness by using Tibetan postures that they couldn't understand.

I wanted to sail again as soon as possible. I wanted to spend the rest of my life at sea, where the rolling of the ship would rock me into dumbness, where the savagery of storms would dim my melancholy. Alas, I had ceased to work on my travel skills. I picked up just any ship, without analyzing its smell or asking its cats where it came from. As a result, the ship sailed for an hour or so and stopped into another harbor, having simply crossed a kind of large river or sound that separates Argentina from Uruguay.

All of a sudden, I felt quite merry. I couldn't help laughing at myself. Isn't it strange? Saved from despair by a sound. I decided not to look for another ship, but instead to walk along the shore of the sound toward the sea-coast. I hoped that a good long walk would put some order into my poor mind.

I was happy, but terribly tired—as if my grief had broken something inside me. Night was falling. Although we were in summer (I was pretty sure of that), the air was bitterly cold. Wrong weather. Wrong sky. I wished Saint Lawrence was there to explain all these mysteries to me. “He who follows the Way is never cold,” he would say.

After many hours, I was relieved to discover the lights of a city in the distance. I would be able to meet some new cats, exchange banter and jokes, become social again.

The streets were empty. As I have never seen a city without cats, I was pretty sure that cats lived here, but they were probably purring snugly near warm fireplaces. I couldn't even smell their scent; odors were freezing, no doubt about it. Where was I going? What would happen to me? I was ready to drop at the bottom of a tree and shiver

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through the night when I had a strange feeling that a dim light, a glimmer in the middle of the darkness, was actually smiling at me.

I know that lights do not smile. Exhaustion and fever were playing tricks on my mind, I guess. When I walked toward the light, I discovered that it flowed from a big house through an open door. This was no ordinary light. It carried golden waves of heat and delicious echoes of dinner fragrances. I stopped in front of the door and looked inside. I saw a large room, a very high glass ceiling, stairs leading to a kind of balcony or gallery that ran all around the room. A gigantic carpet covered the floor. Ah, this carpet fascinated me! Or rather, it fascinated my poor tired paws, worn and bruised as they were by the stones of the road.

My paws were dragging me toward the lovely carpet, and I just couldn't resist their power. A little girl with very black hair was standing near the open door. She smiled and called me: "Come in, Gatito, don't you be afraid!"

I had spent many months at sea with sailors who spoke Spanish, so I could understand this language.

9. Angelica and Dolores

I stepped into the big room carefully. There were several persons and smells inside. It seemed to me that these people didn't belong to the same family. Some were reading newspapers or books, others were talking in a low voice. As I hadn't entered a human house for a long time, I felt rather uneasy. The black-haired girl laughed at my bashfulness. She was no ordinary human girl. It was impossible to feel tired or sad near her. She overflowed with life, as if she had too much of it and offered some to the people (and animals) around her. Her name was Angelica.

"Wait a minute, Gatito!" she said. She went to the farthest end of the big room, opened a door that led to cooking fragrances, then came back with a bowl of milk for me. Although I've always distrusted big two-legs, especially when they try to lure you with gifts, I felt so much gratitude, when I lapped up the milk, that I was ready to cry. I purred my thanks and rubbed against the girl's legs. For mysterious reasons, big two-legs love to feel our fur caress their legs. She was a small two-legs, actually—about half-size.

"Dolores, come see the pretty kitty!" she shouted.

The far door, which led to a kitchen or dining-room, opened again. A young woman appeared. She had the same very black hair as Angelica, but she was the standard human size. Instead of walking on her legs like other human beings, she helped herself with two sticks that she held in her hands. While we cats use our four legs to run faster than human beings, her two extra legs seemed to slow her down. She was tall and thin, with a slight stoop. Her face was serious, but a tender smile lit it up when she saw how Angelica jumped around me.

This house was what human beings call a "hotel" or "boarding-house." The first-floor gallery led to rooms where the guests slept. They ate dinner together in the dining-room at the back of the big room. There was a servant, whom Angelica helped with the shopping, the cooking, the serving, the cleaning, the bed-making, the washing, the ironing, and all the other ridiculously complex tasks of big two-legs' life. This amazing Angelica carried the whole house on her frail shoulders. Dolores, her elder sister, moved so slowly that she couldn't do much. The father of the two girls, a small man with gray

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hair, didn't help much either. As I understood by and by, he was terribly worried because of Dolores's poor health. His wife's elopment a few years before with another man (a big striped fellow, I bet) had also left him rather distressed. He spent a lot of time looking outside the window, as if he was waiting for someone. Maybe he expected his wife to come back.

Being a mere cat, I don't know anything about the economics of a boarding-house. I can report that guests helped Angelica when she washed the kitchen floor or vacuum-cleaned the big carpet, but I ignore whether they did it as part of their room deal or just because they wanted to alleviate Angelica's burden. To thank them, she gave out enough childish jokes and good-natured laughs to make them happy for the rest of the day. I was sorry I couldn't help her with the vacuum-cleaning myself.

Angelica, her sister and her father had a brown skin and slanted eyes. The guests said they were "Indians," but they didn't resemble the human beings I had seen in India. Human don't always use their words logically. No, in fact, they looked like Tibetan people, which can be explained, maybe, by their coming from very high mountains called the Andes.

When Dolores came into the big room, guests always brought a seat for her. Most of the guests belonged to the male half of the human tribe. I think they were competing in a subdued way (I mean, compared to cat manners) for her favors. She sat in her own room and read books most of the time. She didn't like to go out in the street and exhibit her lameness to the cruel glances of the passers-by. I took to spending many hours in her room myself. I loved its quietness after the hurly-burly of my adventures.

I felt she enjoyed my company. Maybe she resented her loneliness. She liked to read to me—stories and poems that she found in her books. I sat in her lap and listened silently. The stories described valiant knights who climbed high dungeons to deliver lovely princesses. The poems sang the torments of unrequited love. Dolores's soft voice reminded me of the summer breeze's whisper in the foliage of the maze trees. I didn't forget to purr my contentment. Often, I closed my eyes and wondered whether I was awake or dreaming. Her scent evoked the mountain meadows in Tibet, just under the perpetual snow.

She gave me one of my strangest names. It wasn't Spanish, but belonged to an Indian dialect called "Quechua." It sounded like "Hupatamac."

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She noticed that I opened my eyes and pricked my ears when the knight escalated the dungeon. “I’m sure you understand everything,” she said. “Maybe the spirit of a beautiful boy is locked inside your body. It happens, in fairy tales, that a prince is changed into a frog and that the love of a shepherdess delivers him from the curse.”

Being compared to a frog was nothing new to me!

By the way, when Saint Lawrence and I came to the end of the desert and saw a river, the first creature I caught was a frog. Well, I was terribly hungry. Besides, since everybody considered me a frog-eater, I thought I might as well give it a try. My verdict: not as good as a fresh mouse, but not as bad as you might suppose.

As placid days followed each other at the boarding house, I gathered the ruffled memories of my misfortunes, folded them up carefully and put them away in a drawer of my mind so that they wouldn’t bother me anymore.

Why shouldn’t we cats use similes and metaphors? Dolores taught me the high art of literature. When she read, she repeated a well-shaped sentence to help me notice it, pointed to an inappropriate word, explained quotations.

“I know you understand everything, Hupatamac,” she said. “You can read, can’t you?”

I purred a positive answer.

“Then why can’t you talk? Maybe you’ve never tried hard enough. See, this is a letter O. You know this letter, of course. Well, to pronounce it, all you have to do is shape your mouth as an O!”

She rounded her pretty mouth, but when I tried to imitate her, the sound I uttered was a poor common meow. She found my grin very funny and laughed a lot.

Her father and all the guests were delighted to hear Dolores laugh. Maybe the old Indian man was worried by his daughter’s illness and there was no big striped fellow in his life. I heard him tell a guest that since the arrival of el gatito (me!), Dolores looked much better. Her temper was more even. She didn’t suffer the attacks of nerves that used to hurt her so cruelly.

She began to go out every Sunday with Angelica and me. Actually, the streets of Montevideo (that’s what the town was called) are empty on Sunday, because everybody watches soccer matches in stadiums or on television. We went to the beach, which was very close to the boarding house. Walking more than a few hundred miles exhausted

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Dolores. Thus, she had to sit on a public bench in front of the sea and wait for a long time before she could get up again. We watched the raucous waves while listening to Angelica's pleasant prattle and clear laugh.

Dolores had read so many fairy tales that she believed in the Prince Charming. She did know that princes, charming or not, have become scarce in our degenerate times, but she couldn't help scanning the ocean with vague glimmers of yearning in her eyes. "I have often dreamt that a poet will cross the sea someday to visit me," she murmured. "When he lands here, he'll call me Princess..."

As cats never walk with canes, I found it difficult to imagine what she felt. Her father and the guests sometimes talked about her when she was not in the room. There was something wrong with her heart, they said. Everybody had noticed that she seemed happier and less stooped now. They added a typically human non sequitur: her good mood would allow surgeons to perform an operation on her.

I had invented a thousand ways to make her laugh. I imitated Saint Lawrence sitting on his stump, straight as a candle. I showed her how the camels danced with the ostriches. I ran around the room like the crazy two-legs who jog in my maze every morning.

She seemed to become a new Dolores. She began to teach old Quechua songs to Angelica. Her father said he hadn't heard her sing for years. His eyes were full of tears. Mine too.

One morning, she walked out of her room with her coat on. Her father preceded her, carrying a small suitcase. An ambulance was waiting in front of the house. She kissed me tenderly and promised to come back soon. I surmised one of these complex and perplexing human affairs.

I followed the ambulance. I don't pretend to run as fast as an ambulance, but I knew Montevideo quite well now. Spending my days near Dolores left me a lot of free night-time, during which I explored the city, as cats are wont to do. So how did I catch up with the ambulance? Quite simply, by darting through one-way streets and shopping districts closed to traffic. After a while, I was pretty sure it was going to one of my favorite haunts, the big hospital of the Holy Trinity. It was not a hospital where I could have breakfast every day, because its trash cans belonged to ferocious "gaucho" cats, who came from a wild plain called "la Pampa." I ate there on Monday mornings, however, having found

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that Montevideo cats cleaned up the left-overs in the stadiums on that day. When people watch soccer, they eat a delicious bread pouch filled up with meat, which they call an “empanada.” As they can’t help jumping like kangaroos whenever a player kicks the ball, tons of meat fall on the ground.

Of course, I wasn’t going to retrieve bits of flesh from the hospital’s trash cans. Not while they were operating on my dear Dolores! I just made sure she was there, then ran back to the boarding house.

10. Maze, sweet maze!

After Dolores was gone, the air in the boarding house was as hard to breathe as the clouds on top of Him-a-Lier. Even Angelica stopped laughing. Her father spent hours near the window. Guests asked him for the latest news. “Everything is okay,” he answered—in such a bleak tone that I shivered with fright. Since I have never been able to count hours and days, I can’t say how long Dolores was gone. Weeks or months, maybe.

After several... well... let’s say winter should have come, but the weather was getting warmer every day... Angelica began to sing and dance again. A wide smile appeared on her father’s face when he said: “Everything is okay.” The guests helped Angelica clean up the big room with renewed gusto.

I knew that Dolores would return soon, but I wondered whether it would be the same Dolores. Would her new heart still love me?

Now comes the toughest paragraph. One evening, Angelica told me her sister would leave the hospital on the next morning. Her father and the guests were standing on the sidewalk to welcome her. A long gleaming car stopped in front of the boarding house. Dolores walked slowly, but without canes. A man held her arm to help her. I believe she could have walked alone, but then she might have stumbled, because her eyes were stuck on him. She called him: “Doctor.” He lead her to an armchair and said: “Sit down, my princess.”

I felt a kind of pinching sensation inside my breast. It didn’t hurt. I wasn’t crushed as on learning that MacDonald was traveling with a big striped guy. Indeed, I think that the glow of Dolores’s new-found happiness was warming my sorry heart.

I went out to dry my misty eyes in the morning air. Old age was making me sentimental. I decided to walk around the block, as a way of putting some order into my tangled thoughts. My steps took me to the harbor. There, I discovered that I enjoyed ship fragrances again. The place smelt mostly of sugar cane and bananas. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to recognize a European scent anymore.

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Ah, but yes indeed. A familiar odor hit my nostrils—except I just couldn't identify it. Was I losing my memory already? I felt stupid, angry at myself even. I walked toward the ship, an old rusty steamer. I walked away. I lay on the ground to let the odor's spirit enter my bones. I was ready to turn back and try to reach the boarding house in time for lunch when I heard suddenly, coming out of nowhere, as if it was a kind of hallucination, the "Kitty-kitty-kitty..." of the cat grannies. The scent of Polish cats!

The old steamer took me to the city of Gdansk, in Poland. There, I had no trouble at all finding one of these trucks that carry furniture and carviak to Paris.

I stepped off the truck in front of the Polish church near place de la Concorde and ran straight to the Jardin des Plantes. I was astonished to discover that the big two-legs, incapable as they are of leaving things alone, had changed the maze while I was gone! The cats told me they wanted to recapture the flavor of the original design by the king's gardeners. I remembered a sentence that MacDonald loved to quote: "You can't go home again!"

Well, I got used to the new maze by and by. I could have sat on a stump and recounted my adventures to the little gatitos. Instead, I began to explore the big university located next to the Jardin des Plantes. Before my trip, I had never thought of visiting this gigantic cluster of buildings, but now I could see that it was similar to the university of Berkeley. I soon found a room full of computers that staid on all night. I taught myself to type. A long and painful process. At first, I used only one paw, but now I can type with my four paws, albeit not as fast as I would like.

I don't know whether MacDonald will ever read this story, which I am sending to America (I hope) along the cord that links the computer to the wall. I feel a little silly when I think that perhaps only human beings will read it!