

## Louis

Sigi craved a friend. She felt lonely sometimes during the day, when her partner, Anne, was out golfing. She didn't remember feeling lonely before sixty. Alone, but never lonely. So when she found the kitten behind the trash cans, paws covered in mud and pus clouding both of his eyes, she reached for him from a deep place of yearning.

Anne urged Sigi to make signs. Sigi knew printed signs were outdated, but she made them anyway, because the alternative was to post something on Craigslist, with the people who paid nothing to advertise their failure and ineptitude at keeping their animals.

*"We unfortunately need to rehome our beautiful black Lab mix. She will only be going to the best possible home. Our female dog has not taken a liking to her and our other dog has tried attacking her. She is not fixed. There will be a rehoming fee for her."*

How this ad infuriated her! Let her list the ways!

She typed the signs on white printer paper – "Found kitten, grey, black and white, timid. Please call if he's yours." Below the writing she uploaded a photograph of him, tucked into a corner of their sofa, eyes half open. She refused to name him, for fear she might fall in love irrevocably, so she just made little "Pssst" sounds, the kind her mother used with all of her strays, and took pictures of him as he looked at her, bashful and bleary eyed. The results were less than beautiful.

Only one call came through.

"Hello?" Sigi'd answered, on her way home from the grocery store.

"I'm calling about the kitten," said a woman's voice.

Sigi tightened her grip on the steering wheel. She stayed silent.

“I don’t think he’s mine, but...” Sigi could hear something in the background, a kind of shuffling noise that made her immediately suspicious, “I’m interested.”

“Interested in *what?*”

“I’ll take him,” said the woman. “I’ll pay you.”

Sigi wasn’t a socialist, per se, but she didn’t believe that animals should ever be paid for.

“He’s been adopted,” she clarified, and quickly hung up the phone.

When she walked into the house, the kitten was asleep on the couch. Anne stood over the sink, washing out a dirty mug.

“I want to keep him,” Sigi said, firmly.

Anne didn’t look up, but she stiffened. Sigi went over and rubbed Anne’s shoulders until she could feel them melt beneath her hands. The kitten was hers.

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She decided to name him Louis, after Louis XIV. There was something regal about him – maybe it was the way he pranced about the house – and she wanted to honor that. Once he’d been formally accepted into the household he took to surveying his kingdom from the living room window, beside the prayer plant and philodendrons. At first, Louis fought with the plants, tearing at their leaves until they curled up, dead. Once he’d conquered them, he spent hours sleeping against the glass, his long hair glowing in the sunlight. When he needed her, he climbed onto Sigi’s lap and demanded to be petted. She would happily stop what she was doing to preen him. She tucked her thumb into the crease of his eye and pulled out the gunk.

It was hard and crusty, and she felt such satisfaction when it came loose. Was this what late-in-life friendship felt like – the unloosening of unwanted things?

The first time he attacked her, she was rising from bed and Anne was getting ready to play golf. Almost as soon as Sigi swung her bare legs over the side of the bed, she felt a piercing pain in her right ankle. “Ow!” she screamed.

“What happened?” Anne shouted from the closet.

“Ow! Shit!” As soon as Sigi saw the bite marks, she understood.

Anne rushed out, in her bra and knee-length khaki shorts, and examined Sigi’s ankle.

“You’re bleeding. Jesus!”

Sigi had a desire to hide the truth, or at least suppress it for a while. But Anne was smart, too smart sometimes. Hadn’t Anne warned her, she seemed to say with her look. Cats were trouble.

“I’ll be okay, I just need a Band-Aid.”

“You need to clean it first,” Anne said as she walked toward the bathroom. She spotted Louis and began yelling at him. “You are a bad cat! NO!” When Anne shouted her whole face turned the color of a tomato, a product of her Irish background. Louis didn’t move, so Anne lunged for him, and that sent him flying. He stayed hidden for the rest of the day.

Sigi limped for most of that weekend, and by Sunday night her ankle was puffy and red.

“You need to have it looked at,” Anne said over baked fish and salad.

Sigi said she would call the doctor in the morning. She was secretly in a lot of pain, but she resented hospitals – with their strict orders and condescending staff – and she didn’t want Louis to get in any more trouble.

The next morning her whole leg was swollen and throbbing. She reluctantly agreed to go with Anne to the emergency room, where a young doctor with pimples gave her a tetanus shot and told her she needed to be on antibiotics immediately. He said she was lucky she didn't have a fever, or he would need to 'keep her.' The words made it sound like she was barely escaping abduction.

Throughout this time, she fed Louis both his dry and wet food, sometimes adding bits of leftover fish skin to his bowl. She knew she should be mad at him, but she couldn't bring herself to feel anything but love for the little green-eyed Sun King.

Her friend, Nancy, who owned a record store, came by and said, "You look like hell." Nancy was seventy-one and still resembled a hip, if somewhat effeminate, Neil Young. "How do you feel?"

"Like hell," Sigi answered. She couldn't lie to Nancy.

"How's Louis?"

"Scared to death of Anne. He runs away from her whenever she enters a room."

"He knows an alpha when he sees one," Nancy laughed. "And how does he act around you?"

"I think he's stalking me," Sigi confessed.

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Six months later, after the third Louis attack, Sigi found herself heavily drugged in a hospital bed.

"How are you feeling today?" asked the nurse, even before Sigi had opened her eyes.

*I. Feel. Like. Shit.*, she thought, as the machine beeped on. The I.V. pumped antibiotics into her bloodstream with punctilious ferocity and made her nauseated. The doctor prescribed anti-nauseating medication, but that gave her migraines, so she was also given a migraine medication, which made her intensely sleepy. Her hunger was blunted by a general sense of exhaustion.

“Word is you let a cat do this to you,” said the nurse. She wore her dyed red hair up in a chignon, as if that were still in fashion. “That true?”

“It’s my fault,” Sigi said, looking out the window at the city beyond. It seemed so quiet out there, like a world contained behind the glass of an aquarium.

“My sister is crazy about cats,” the nurse continued as she typed notes clumsily onto a keyboard. Since when had everything turned into a technology? “Her house always smells like cat pee. I can’t even go inside anymore. When she was little, she and I both liked dogs. But then she met this *friend* who had cats, and she just – she changed.” The nurse had stopped typing and was standing useless, tucking in an errant strand of hair. Then she drowned her hands in sanitizer.

“You get better,” she said, finally, and left, her clogs squeaking across the floor.

When Sigi opened her eyes, the sound of the machine echoed throughout the room. She listened to its mechanical heartbeat until she drifted back to sleep.

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Sigi was nine when she moved from Germany to Ensenada. She had breast buds that hurt like new mosquito bites, and little else that felt her own.

Her mom, Frieda, once a German film star, had silky blonde hair and a fiery personality. After Sigi's father died on the Russian front, Frieda remarried a soldier named Joe who was all things her father was not – funny, American, Jewish. Five years after Hitler killed himself, Joe moved them to Baja California to begin building houses with a friend and fellow soldier. This is where her mother began taking in abandoned animals.

It all started one day when someone threw – literally *threw* – a cat over the fence. Sigi was in the yard, reading a book in German and eating an orange when out of the sky fell a black cat, its ears bitten and its scrawny body covered in patches of fur. Sigi rushed inside to tell her mother, who began by wrapping the cat in an old towel and applying medicine to its ears.

“It will live, ne?” is what Sigi remembers her mother saying, a declaration of hope ringing across the land.

Word must have gotten out, because several days later a man knocked on the door and asked if she knew a place he could leave his mangy dog. Before long, their yard was crawling with animals, mostly cats and dogs, but several chickens and rabbits, too.

Sigi's loneliness in her new country was suddenly eclipsed by this growing menagerie. She happily tended to the newest additions and fed them their meals. Her mother – usually adoring, if not demanding – was busy, but so was Sigi, and for a while, life felt richly rewarding.

Then one day, while she ran through the yard, a giant white German Shepard bit her calf. Shocked at the blood beading onto her skin, she fainted into a mud puddle. When she came to, her mother and Joe were carrying her – muddy and blood soaked – to the car. At the hospital, where everyone spoke Spanish, she was given a rabies shot and her leg was wrapped tightly in thick bandages. That night, she heard her parents talking.

“We have to get rid of that dog,” implored Joe.

“No,” replied her mom, in her punctuated German-English. “He is our responsibility. We will make sure Sigi does not go near him. She needs to go to school. She is not a farmer girl, ne?!”

Sigi never thought of herself as a farmer girl, and she most certainly did not want to go to school. But there was no stopping her mother and soon she wore a navy pinafore and black-buckle Mary Janes to an all-girls Catholic School in Tijuana. “Stand up straight,” directed her mother on her first day. Childhood had officially ended.

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The second time Louis bit her, nearly a month after the first incident, Sigi was home alone. This time she saw him coming for her, and though she shouted, “No, Louis!” from her place at the kitchen table, he didn’t stop. It was the same leg, inches from where he’d last pounced.

Sigi drove herself straight to the E.R. and requested the appropriate antibiotics. The doctor, a trim woman in her fifties, looked at her sideways but didn’t reprimand her. Did she, too, have a beloved pet who sometimes disobeyed? And even if she were reprimanded, what would change? Animals, so quick to forgive us, deserved the same. She felt this on a deep level. Why, then, did she feel she was failing Louis? What did Anne always say? “You’ve got to show him you’re in charge.” Didn’t Sigi do that by feeding him, petting him, saving him? Didn’t she do that just by being human?

When Anne got home that night, Sigi was in bed, her leg hiding under the covers. It was less serious than the first time, and she could already feel the antibiotics at work.

“How was your day?” Sigi asked Anne from behind her book.

“Oh, my elbow’s acting up again, but I shot an 83. How are you?”

“Tired,” Sigi answered.

Anne leaned over to kiss her, resting her hand on Sigi’s bad leg. Sigi winced and before she could take it back, Anne read the situation.

“What happened, Sigi?”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Let me see,” Anne insisted. Sigi lifted the sheets, revealing her bandaged ankle.

Anne didn’t say anything at first, but her expression betrayed nothing. She looked away, out the window into the dark yard, and then, finally, back at Sigi.

“This has to stop,” Anne said.

They slept separately that night, Anne on the couch with her heavy blanket, Sigi in the bed under a cotton sheet. Somewhere before dawn, Louis crept into bed with her. He tenderly licked her nose. She petted his head, and he purred in satisfaction. When she awoke the next morning he lay gently next to her ankle, breathing softly. How she loved him!

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Sigi had met Anne through a mutual friend. Anne was into pool then, and they’d spent their first date at a gay bar tucked into the hills of San Diego, where Anne showed off her skills. Sigi was still recovering from a relationship that had ended badly, and her mind would often wander to her ex. Over time, though, Anne began to take up more of her thoughts, until one day Sigi announced that she was going to Ensenada to visit her mother and would Anne like to join her?



They met the next day at the bus station downtown. Anne carried a sturdy olive-green suitcase as she approached Sigi, her cheeks flush with the summer sun. They bought separate tickets and caught the 1:05pm bus. Anne, thoughtful, made sure Sigi chose her seat first, and also offered to lift her bag onto the upper shelf. Sigi was used to doing things herself, but she also liked being doted on. She let Anne take care of her. They drank beer from tepid bottles as they watched the world speed by, shiny buildings followed by beach shacks, scantily clad sun bathers replaced by heavily clothed beggars. The world shifted when Sigi entered Mexico – was it the color of the sky, or the smell of tortillas and piss? Either way, it felt like home.

By the time they arrived in Ensenada, they were drunk. They'd finished a six-pack of Coronas and had nothing in their stomachs. As they got off the bus, Sigi grabbed Anne's green suitcase along with hers. She felt a kind of Herculean strength and though Anne tried to take her suitcase from her, Sigi insisted on bearing them toward the taxi line. Anne, whose alcohol tolerance wasn't as good as Sigi's, kept trying to pull her suitcase back, in vain.

"Let me carry it, Sigi," she yelled into the busy street.

"I'm fine," Sigi told her. "I'm balanced."

Anne wouldn't let up. "Stop being so stubborn!" she yelled.

"*You* stop being so stubborn!"

"Give it to me!"

"No!"

It was like a girl fight – the kind Sigi had only witnessed at her all-girls parochial school –

without the hair pulling. They'd both cut their hair short, so that really wasn't a possibility.

Finally, as they approached the dented old taxi that would take them to Frieda's, Anne kicked her forcibly in the shin. Sigi was in pain, and she was also newly in love.

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Months passed, and Louis grew into a healthy adolescent. He still enjoyed drowsy afternoons on the windowsill, but he also hunted flies and unsuspecting spiders. His green eyes were clear, even contemplative. When tired, he kneaded the fleecy throw that Frieda had given her when she finally moved from her house in Ensenada to a nearby retirement home. Anne hadn't warmed to Louis, but she seemed to accept his presence. Life continued, and Sigi's leg recovered fully.

Sigi had never wanted children. She'd watched some of her friends bond themselves to their offspring with such blind devotion that she found it cloying. On the other hand, one of her oldest friends, the woman who introduced her to Anne, had shown such resolve when she'd given birth to a boy with a heart defect. Sigi watched once as this friend chewed her son's food for him like a mother bird so that he wouldn't choke himself to death. This friend lived far away now, on an island up north, but her disabled son still lived with her, yelling like a fool for her whenever he needed to use the bathroom. Was that what Louis was to her now – a kind of broken child? She let these thoughts drift into her head and then watched them drift out, like a ferry boat through the fog.

The first day of spring—their magnolia blooming its large cream petals overhead—Sigi spent the morning on her knees, hands working the earth. At lunch, she shed her gloves and went inside, where Anne was ladling soup into bowls, NPR chattering in the background. As Sigi

washed her hands, she felt an abrupt spike of pain in her ankle and dropped to the floor. Anne, soup ladle in hand, kicked Louis with her bare foot, sending him flying. She followed him as he yowled, the ladle raised like a hammer above her head.

“Don’t, Anne!” cried Sigi.

“Don’t you dare,” said Anne. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

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In the early hours of the third day in hospital, Sigi awoke out of a nightmare. In the dream she was in her mother’s backyard. Frieda, long legged and strong willed, held a white dog against her chest. The dog thrashed against her, baring its teeth at Sigi and struggling to break free. Sigi knew, if the dog succeeded, it could kill her. Why, then, did she wake mumbling, “Let him go!” into the hospital pillow?

When Sigi was a year old, her father was dead and her mother had moved back into her parents’ big home in Bremen. The Allies had bombed their town in single plane raids throughout that fall and winter, and there were rations. Her mother later told stories of how she rode her bicycle through the streets, looking for milk to nourish her baby.

What was it her mom had said when that black cat came flying out of the sky? “He will live, ne?” Never mind that this had not been true of her father, who had been blown to smithereens just months into his duty on the front lines, or of Joe, who died of a heart attack at age fifty. And despite her resilience, her laughter and proclamations of life, a sudden stroke had finally taken her mom from her, just weeks before Sigi had rescued Louis.

Around the time the hospital came alive for the day, Anne entered, carrying a familiar paper bag of sweets. Sigi loved them all – donuts, croissants, cookies – but she wasn't craving anything other than water with a little squeeze of lemon.

"How's the patient?" Anne asked kindly.

"I think I'll live," Sigi answered. Her voice sounded weak, even to her.

Finally, Anne showed her the Craigslist advertisement, which Sigi read at first with astonishment, and then again with goose-pimply fear.

*"Handsome young cat must find new home. Lively, indoor only. Would prefer to be placed in a home with lots of attention and strong boundaries. Comes with food, toys and litter box. No rehoming fee."*

Below the ad was a photograph of Louis, his kingly mane belying the depths of his neediness. How sad he appeared, how innocent!

They sat together for a while, Anne holding onto the bag of sweets, Sigi looking up at the ceiling. There is such a thing as a silence between people – a vast energy of knowing – that can't be rushed. When it comes, it must live out its short life, or else it will become greedy and grow into an untamed hatred.

Anne opened the paper bag and offered her a powdered donut, the confectioner's sugar clinging to her fingers like snow. Sigi watched as the donut forged a small circle between them. She was overcome, suddenly, with a desire to taste the sweetness, and in that moment, she knew that though she'd be able to forgive Anne, she'd never be able to forgive herself.