

Little Friends:

Mona Sage's obsession with pets might simply have been an early manifestation of the usual genetic motherly instincts. Or it might have been only some slight biological deviance: chemical imbalances explain all human behaviors. Scientists have said it and they'll keep saying again and again. Her endocrine system might just have misunderstood its work timeline so that at an age when little girls enjoy playing with their friends in the school courtyard, the only activity that would give Mona pleasure was taking care of helpless baby things.

Playing dolls failed to bring her any real emotions: how could it matter whether Cindy was wearing her trendy pink sneakers or her more glamorous (also pink) stiletto for Ken's tea party? While her school comrades got into heated debates about such questions, Mona remained cold and bored. She didn't understand how the other girls managed to find so much interest in which shoe-shaped piece of plastic would be inserted on some other foot-shaped one.

So Mona just stood there, watching, thin and pale with dark hair cut straight in a fashion slightly too strict for her age. There was something odd about her overall appearance but one couldn't pinpoint it to one particular feature. She was doll-like but not in the precious, adorable ways young girls are often said to be. Rather, she had glass dolls' air of passivity, the way they don't seem to notice or care what dress is put on their insensitive cold little body or what kind of wig is sewed to their empty though very round skull. There came from Mona's overall appearance a

sense of disconnection, a mistuning between the dark, piercing and constantly shifting look in her eyes and the pretty fixedness of her navy school uniform.

Her third grade teacher, Miss Pistil, had warned Mona's mother repeatedly about the potentially irremediable damages her daughter's playtime emotional and physical passivity could have on her psychosocial development. Miss Pistil was so bored by her village primary school teacher job that she never missed an occasion to bring up this smartish and progressive side of hers she said she got from still reading so much contemporary philosophy—even after she got rejected from every graduate school she applied to and gave up the idea of becoming the female better-than-Nietzsche Nietzsche.

So when bored Miss Pistil saw that Mrs. Sage cared more about her fancy finance job than about Mona's dangerous lack of interest in others, she decided to act on her own. One afternoon, as the children were leaving the classroom, she waited for Mona at the door and gave her the note she had written the night before, during one of her existential tête-à-tête with the organic red wine bottle she often bought on her way home.

The girl distractedly took the envelope and folded it into her pocket assuming it was some administrative missive addressed to her mother. However, once at home, as she was going to drop it on the kitchen table with the rest of the mail, she noticed that Miss Pistil had written *To*

Mona on its cover. So she brought it up to her room and proceeded to decipher the teacher's drunkenly disorganized handwriting.

Monday February 3

Dear lovely Mona,

I see you constantly alone in the courtyard, playing with your Gameboy or counting the ants. Do you not like your human little friends? Please come to my office after class tomorrow so we can talk a little.

Lisa Pistil

The following day, *Mona* obeyed and had cookies in Miss Pistil's office while the later explained to her how important human relationships were for one's personal development. Noticing that the girl wasn't listening to a single word she uttered, Lisa Pistil stopped and stared silently at her. *Mona's* eyes were jittery, looking down, and her hands seemed to be shaking under the desk.

- *Mona*, what are you doing!

- I'm sorry Miss Pistil but one of my puppies is sick and I 'm afraid it'll die if I don't drive him to the I-Nurse right now.
- Is that what you spend your free time doing? Taking care of puppies in your video game?
- No, I also have gerbils and mice. I asked for the new version where you can have baby cats for my birthday but Mum said there were all the same anyway.
- But why don't you try to spend more time with the other children? They're certainly more interesting than your games.
- No, the stuff they like's boring. I don't care about dolls. I like real things that eat and drink and change all the time.
- What about real puppies then?
- I love them.
- Wouldn't you like to play with a real puppy more than your video games?
- That's for sure.
- Did you ask your mother if you could have one?
- Oh I asked her many times.
- And what did she say?
- She thinks I'm not old enough to have one. She said maybe when I'm an adult.
- I had a dog when I was 8.
- My friend Laura has one too, but mom says it's not that simple.
- Would you like me to talk to your mother?
- Yes, please please do!
- Good. Let's go back in class now. I'll see what I can do.

Friday February 7

Dear Mrs. Sage,

I tried many times to talk to you regarding Mona's social difficulties. You never answered my invitations so I took the liberty to speak with your daughter directly. It seems to me that it might be good for her to have a little animal companion she could interact with. This could help her to become more at ease with the livings and maybe increase her chances of overcoming her difficulties in interacting with her classmates. Please let me know what you think.

Lisa Percil

Monday February 10

Miss Percil,

I would rather you stay away from Mona and keep your educational advices to yourself. We do what we can to help Mona and we know her better than you do. She wouldn't be good to a dog.

Clarence Sage

Tuesday February 11

Clarence,

Would you please think about your daughter? I know that you have a big house with a garden and a maid. I don't think it would be a great inconvenience for you if you bought Mona a little creature that could bring her much needed company. I also know that she is your only child and spends most of her time alone at home while you and your husband are making fancy billions. Refusing her even the joy of having a pet friend is incredibly cruel. So please look at yourself in a mirror for a minute and think about what a good mother would do.

Lisa P.

Miss Percil kept a copy of this last letter to Mrs. Sage. It symbolized a turning point in her life. A new beginning after a slow self-dissolution. She wouldn't stand there and watch society's greedy shallowness destroy the children's potential for social happiness. Or disconnect their soul from nature's creatures and turn them into platonic robot. Nietzsche would be proud of her because he would hate I-pets and video-console and frigid anal finance queens who can't deal with their kids' life force. Lisa hadn't read Nietzsche for years but she felt like he stayed always

here with her and now he was standing up inside her heart to support her in her new quest. Lisa Pistil will shame the video-game industry and write a research paper on the impact the digitalization of emotions has on her children mind. Because even if she was sterile, all her students were her children. All children were her children even. She was a teacher on a crusade for her kids' humanity.

So Lisa Percil on a manic wine-infused mission started. She wrote pamphlets. She drew posters with the class' color pencils. She photocopied her works in hundreds at the school's office. She spreads her printed words around the school. So soon enough all the parents were talking about Miss Pistil's new revolutionary enterprise. *Virtual love kills the ability to love* she would write on the village's main street walls with the chalk the school provided for writing on the class's black board. Or *Give our children the option to be human*. Or *Some ***** should de-screen their kids*.

Most of the village people said she was being too vindictive and anyway she was an alcoholic, as everyone knew. But rather than trying to get her fired, all savored the fact that the Sage family's image was suffering from the teacher's almost fanatic reaction. In a little village like Eguilles, the Sages' arrival as the successful American millionaires had unsurprisingly given rise to some discreet but violent jealous animosity. They were nowhere directly named in Pistil's campaign but many children had come home from school asking for the same expensive videogame this girl Mona played with all the time. So everybody in Eguilles knew the New York City émigrés were the refined technology freaks. And here was the perfect occasion to show them their way wasn't the right one.

A few days later, as Miss Pistil was leaving the school after her day of work, she noticed a handsome blond man waiting for her at the gate. From the way he carried himself in his obviously very expensive suit and tie and shiny leather shoes, Lisa could tell he wasn't the occasional student's single dad that'd try to bring her on a date at the village pub. Intrigued, she walked towards her sexy mystery man. She guessed it might be someone important who heard about her newly started work. It might be the brilliant scholar she always had thought she'd marry and love and co-write revolutionary essays with. Maybe he had read her article in the local newspaper on education. Maybe...

- Excuse me Madam, would you happen to be Miss Pistil, the third grade teacher?
- (Blushing with pride) It is she. I mean I am she.
- Hi, I am sorry to ask for some of your time without having requested a formal appointment. I'm very busy these days and the matter at hand seemed too urgent to linger.
- Oh don't apologize please. All the parents do that. I mean I'm used to it. I mean I don't mind at all. You see I like to live my life in a spontaneous, flexible manner. I mean I'm obviously very busy with my recently started work you must have heard of in the *Daily-Edu* but...
- Yes. This is what I am here to talk about. Should we seat on this bench?

- Oh, we could go and have a glass of something in my office if you'd like that more. Not that I'm trying to seduce you. I mean I don't know you enough to dare...
- No I'm sure the bench will do.

Lisa knew her big moment was coming as she followed her slender stylish Apollo to the tired green wooden bench bordering the playground.

- My name is Clark Sage. I am Mona's father. She is one of your students I believe.
- (Disillusioned confusion then depression invading her voice) You mean...
- Mona: dark hair, thin, unusually reserved and distant...
- I know Mona. I do. I just...
- Good. You see it has come to my attention that you started an audacious educational campaign against video games involving virtual friends' influence on children at your school.
- You mean I-pets?
- I do. And if I understand well my daughter is your main case study?
- I mean, not necessarily... I mean she was my inspiration but I don't mean to attack you personally and...
- I don't feel offended. I just believe you are mistaken in using Mona's case as the basis for your study. And if all your claims are inspired by your observations of her behavior, I don't think you should keep on that theoretical track. It won't lead to anything relevant.
- Mr. Sage, I am sorry if you feel insulted by my critic of the way Mona...

- You don't understand. Mona is not the right model to look at when discussing children's education or social development or whatever you want to talk about.
- I won't ever use her name directly Mr. Sage obviously. I mean how could you believe I would...
- Listen, Mona is special. She never interacted normally with other children. We met with a lot of doctors, and it seems...
- But the doctors are wrong! All they will do is destroy her brain with medications. They are dishonest, profit-driven... I mean... I believe there are simpler ways to help a children like Mona. I suggested it to your wife but she wouldn't listen to me. A pet...
- Please excuse my wife's sometime sharp attitude but you must understand that it is hard for her to be reminded of the difficulties we are having with Mona...
- But it doesn't help to just ignore people's attempts to help. My idea of getting a real pet for Mona...
- Don't you think we tried? Mona has too much love to give, and this makes her unable to take care of a real animal.
- Is this what your fancy shrinks told you because...
- Listen to me for a minute: We got Mona a rabbit a few years ago. She loved it. We were really hopeful it would help her open up a little. Only she spent her day with the thing, and kept petting it and bringing it everywhere with her, and feeding it and cleaning its cage and...
- And what is wrong with that? You think she shouldn't waste her time with such simple activities? You want her to study all day so she can become a fancy finance analyst like you and your wife? You believe...

- The rabbit died after five days. And so did the gerbils and the goldfish, the turtle, the...
- How could...
- We tried to make it work. We gave our maid a raise so she'd put extra care into making sure Mona wouldn't overfeed the things. We had to lock the cages away for some time of the day, for their 'nap-time' we called it, so they'd get some rest. But she'd want to nap and cuddle with them. We tried to get her three gerbils at the same time so that it'd reduce the amount of care given to each. But instead, Mona spent thrice more time with them, to give them all the proper care they deserved. She'd carry the three damn rodents around the house in a basket and never agree to leave one out of her sight! She even became scared that one of them would get jealous of the other if she played favorite.
- But...
- And it was terrible each time we had to find excuses for the why such or such pet was gone. We hired a watchman to make sure Mona would never find one dead. Mimi and Babette the rabbits were recruited as Easter Bunnies. Minnie the mouse went to collect teeth. These are relatively easy but where do you send gerbils? Or turtles? Traditional kids tale are fine but we can't make her believe that pets go off to college or become for Peace Corp volunteer...
- Mr. Sage...
- We spent hours trying to find replacement pets that'd look the same, bringing picture to all the pet shops around but soon they started getting suspicious and called the Animal Protection Organization for an intervention!
- But a dog? I bet a dog wouldn't be as fragile as a gerbil or a rabbit. I don't think it would be a problem. And dogs love attention.

- We thought about that but you see my wife is afraid that if it died anyway, it'd mean we'd have killed it knowingly. And you know, sacrificing a gerbil is fine. But a dog...