

An Obituary For Our Cat Nora



by Phyllis Chesler

Our cat is gone, sudden, incurable diseases took her away, and as I accompanied her on her last journey, her longest journey, from life to death, that champion yowler had no fight left in her. She lay, unprotesting, smaller than I knew her to be, surrendered totally to her fate. I petted her and kept petting her as I told her how much she meant to us and then suddenly, unexpectedly, I burst into hot tears as I remembered her to herself.

The vet came in, explained what would happen next and I told her that I was an old hand at this, that I'd lost, buried, or cremated countless precious cats, those beings that become family members, that greet us when we return, sit on our laps, sleep with us in our beds, sit with us as we read or write or

watch a movie. Both their presence and their companionship may be a city-dweller's only and primary contact with Nature, tamed, with another, earlier, God-created form of life. Observing the elegant eloquent, menacing flick of a tail, I came to regret that human beings have no tail, no whiskers, no soft fur, that we are missing some of our animal parts.

I miss the way Nora would sweetly place her paw on my hand and the way she would turn over on her back to have her belly rubbed.

Some say that Naming is all...

T.S. Eliot, in his poem "The Naming of Cats," writes that a cat needs a "name that's particular/A name that's peculiar, and more dignified/Else how can (she) keep up (her) tail perpendicular/Or spread out (her) whiskers or cherish (her) pride?"

I'd been laid up by a series of surgeries that had me watching old black and white movies and I was very much under their spell. Thus, I named Nora and her sister Nicki, after Nick and Nora Charles, the glamorous, debonair, Hollywood couple, played by William Douglas and Myrna Loy, the impeccably attired twosome who solved sordid murders dressed in ballgowns and tuxedos. Based on Dashiell Hammett's "The Thin Man," the films (1934-1947) were wildly popular.

Both Nora and Nicki were rescue cats from the same litter—or so we were told. They came to us exactly twelve years ago. Nora was white and blonde and gray and her eyes often turned an uncanny and beautiful Siamese blue. Nicki, was the small, black alpha cat. She ruled the proverbial roost and Nora silently followed her every lead—except when she walked all over my sleeping head and awakened us at 5am for her breakfast. I admit it: Sometimes I locked her out of the bedroom.

Nicki, that champion prowler, died five years ago. Afterwards,

something was missing, everything had changed—and that's when Nora began chewing plastic: Telephone wires, headphone wires, chargers of all kinds were her favorite, anxious prey. At some point, Nora began howling in an unpleasant voice: for food, and for attention. She always wanted to be held on someone's lap at night. My partner usually obliged her.

Myths aside, love for cats is not just a "woman" thing. Did you know that magnificent cats were painted over and over again in ancient Egypt, China, and Japan? And that a veritable host of great artists chose to be photographed with their cats? Margaret Atwood, Brassai, Salvador Dali, Ernest Hemingway, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Gustav Klimt, Doris Lessing, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Georgia O'Keefe—just on and on. And so many painters, including Mary Cassatt, Marc Chagall, Edouard Manet, Berthe Morisot, Jeff Koons, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Suzanne Valadon, painted cats? What can this all mean?

That cats are precious to those human beings who are lucky enough to serve their every need. And that artists and writers, both men and women, who often work indoors and at all hours, want to honor their daily, fiercely independent companions, by memorializing them, sharing the joy they brought to each of us.

And so, on the last day of last week we lost our cat. Gloom settled into our bones. A silence gathered. We threw out her soft, worn, beds and her scratching post.

Yes, I asked that Nora be cremated and, perhaps foolishly, I opted for a ceramic paw print. Look: I know people who bury their pets and who buy headstones. Ashes and a ceramic memento seemed little enough to do. But, as John Galsworthy wrote about his departed cat:

"No stone stands over where (she) lies
No. It is on our hearts that (her) life is engraved."