My Cat, Cloyd

I noticed the cat as soon as I arrived at the narrow townhouse on the central coast of Chile, my home for the next three months. I followed my host dad José—a bald motorcycle mechanic in his early sixties—through the front door and into the small living room, where the curtains were drawn closed, shutting the room off from the outside world. The faint glow that entered in spite of the curtains provided just enough light to see. Everything in the room was low and dark—dark tile floors, dark orange walls, dark wood furniture. Next to the sole window, a sturdy wooden step ladder led upstairs. On a flat rung of the ladder was perched a black and white tuxedo cat. It sat completely still, its head tilted to one side, its wide yellow eyes staring directly at me. When José crossed the room to carry my suitcase up the ladder, the cat scampered up the remaining two rungs and dashed out of sight.

I didn’t see the cat again until that night, when I sat in the living room on the faded two-person sofa next to my host mom Marcela, a short woman who sat up straight, both of her slipper-clad feet planted firmly on the floor. She sipped from a mug of coffee, occasionally reaching into a package of Oreos and telling—not asking—me to do the same. José sat quietly in the adjacent armchair, his heavy black work boots propped in front of him, his arms crossed over his polished leather jacket, a silver chain hanging low around his neck.

I held a mug of tea between my fingers, breathing in the hot steam. Even in my sweatpants, a sweatshirt, a hat, and my thickest pair of wool socks, my teeth still chattereded in the unheated space. While Chile’s “mild” winters supposedly didn’t necessitate indoor heating, 40 degrees indoors was nearly unbearable. I silently envied Marcela’s fuzzy slippers and the pink Mickey Mouse blanket draped neatly across her lap.
I devoted my full effort to seeming at-ease despite my shivering, so at first I didn’t notice the cat’s reappearance as it leapt from the ladder to the arm of the couch. But there was no missing it as the cat attempted to climb onto Marcela’s lap.

“¡Bajate Cloyd!” Marcela exclaimed, leaning back and attempting to shoo the cat away from her. Instead of sliding to the floor, Cloyd crawled across Marcela and onto me. It settled in a tight loaf on my thighs, facing away from me. The warmth of its tiny body provided immediate relief to my frozen muscles.

“¡Cloyd! ¡Bajate!” Marcela hissed at the cat again to get down. It stared straight ahead, purposefully ignoring her shouts. “Anna, be careful, she’s mean to strangers,” she warned me in Spanish, eyeing the cat wearily.

“I don’t mind,” I told Marcela, stroking Cloyd’s back hesitantly. “Besides, she’s warm!” I settled into the couch as I continued to pet her, finally relaxing a bit at the soothing act—until the cat suddenly swiveled around and bit my hand. I gasped and half jumped out of my seat, causing Cloyd to fly off the couch and scamper out of the room.

Marcela looked over at me, her eyebrows knit together in concern. I stared back at her, mouth agape. I didn’t have the Spanish words to tell her the cat had bit me. Even the cat knows I don’t belong here, I thought, slumping low into the couch.

From across the room, José laughed at me. Then, he leaned forward and put both of his arms out in front of him, gesturing inward as if to beckon a small child. He simultaneously made high-pitched kissing and cooing noises. Within a few seconds, Cloyd ran down the ladder and bound directly into José’s outstretched arms, burying her head deep in his armpit. José leaned into the cat and wrapped his arms tightly around her, whispering nonsensical words of affection.
I stared in shock at this unexpected display of tenderness. Meanwhile, Marcela continued to watch TV, unfazed.

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Over the next three and a half months, I spent countless nights in the living room with José, Marcela, and Cloyd. Sitting around the coffee table, we ate bread, drank tea, and watched conspiracy documentaries—José’s pick—or the newest episode of a Chilean soap opera—Marcela’s choice. Cloyd continued to use my lap as a heater, and I let her, but for weeks I kept my hands to myself.

When Cloyd inevitably popped onto Marcela’s lap seeking warmth, Marcela would shout and push the cat to the floor—except for those times she didn’t. She told me numerous times that she didn’t like cats. But I occasionally peeked over to find Cloyd perched on Marcela’s lap, the two of them looking oddly similar with their black hair, straight-backs, and wide eyes fixed on the TV screen.

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When Cloyd saw the two street cats that lived outside, she would attack them through the window. This is why Marcela kept the curtains drawn. Each morning, the orange and white street cat would greet me by the front door. Marcela would sometimes have to stand guard between Cloyd and the door as I made my escape. As I walked back up the hill toward the house in the evenings, I would often spot the other street cat sitting on the fence of José’s workshop. Despite these cats’ constant presence, I was surprised when Marcela told me she fed them each day. She was sad to see so many hungry animals on the street, but she couldn’t take them in because, “Cloyd would kill them.”
One day, I went with Marcela to *Petslife Viña del Mar*—a neighborhood pet store that felt pleasantly familiar. We weaved through the narrow aisles to the shelves at the back, where Marcela immediately located a large bag of the cheapest cat food from the wall of options. I thought that was all we would buy, but Marcela continued searching the shelves. When I asked what she was looking for, Marcela said the large bag was only for the street cats. “I buy separate food for Cloyd,” Marcela told me distractedly, “She’ll only eat the salmon flavor.” I tried to hold in my laughter as I continued to follow Marcela through the aisles.

After that, I began to notice the early-morning conversations between Marcela and Cloyd. I’d walk through the kitchen to find Marcela and Cloyd in the midst of a heated, one-sided argument over food. “Eat your food!” Marcela would shout at Cloyd. The cat just stared at her, unbothered. “I won’t give you anymore until you eat everything on your plate. I know two other cats who would be happy to eat your food. Is that what you want?”

Any time I left the door to my room open, Cloyd entered to steal my hair ties. She would play with them until they were ripped apart, then drop them in her food bowl. Marcela was on a mission to save the hair ties. It became a daily theme. I’d be sitting on the couch eating or doing homework when we would hear a thump above us. “Anna, is your door open?” Marcela would ask in a panic. I’d bolt up stairs to find Cloyd on my desk, attempting to pry a hair tie loose from where it lay trapped under a book or wrapped around a hairbrush. “¡Cloyd! ¡No hagas eso!” I’d scold her, feeling a bit silly as I mimicked Marcela’s inflection.

One night, we were all in the living room when Cloyd jumped from the ladder to the couch and proudly pranced across our laps with a hair tie hanging from her mouth. We all stared in silence. Then, José ripped a piece of chicken from his meal and held it out in the air. Cloyd,
drawn in by the food, stalked toward him. In an instant, José grabbed the hair tie and tossed the chicken across the floor. Cloyd chased the chicken, dropping her prized possession in the process. José tossed the hair tie across the coffee table to me. “Anna! Quick, put that in your room before she sees you!”

As time went on, I would find Cloyd in my room more and more often—probably in search of hair ties. Marcela and José seemed to take these thefts seriously, and I tried to play along. But sometimes, when it was just the two of us, I would close my bedroom door and let Cloyd search as she pleased. If she found a hair tie, I’d watch as she pranced proudly across my desk and dresser, throw the hair tie around the room and chase it ferociously, and finally find a spot at the foot of my bed to begin the destruction process. “Marcela would be horrified to know I was letting you do this,” I whispered conspiratorially to the cat in Spanish. I’d like to think that, by the end of my time in Chile, Cloyd enjoyed my company as much as she enjoyed my hair ties.

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At 11pm on the last night of my stay, Cloyd jumped from the banister of the newly-built wooden staircase to the arm of the sofa. She walked along the back of the couch—avoiding Marcela’s lap entirely—and instead beelined for my open arms. At some point in the past months, she had stopped perching on my thighs. Instead, she curled into my chest, burying her head into my elbow as I wrapped my arms securely around her. We had left the chilly winter nights long behind and no longer needed each other for warmth.

Cloyd, Marcela and I sat together in comfortable silence, our eyes trained on the movie playing quietly in front of us. Marcela worked on her new knitting project—having just finished my birthday sweater—as I methodically stroked the purring cat, trying to forget about the suitcase and duffel bag that sat packed and ready by the front door.
As the clock ticked closer to midnight—and my impending departure—Marcela broke the melancholy silence, “I hope you liked it here, Anna.” She said softly, her eyes still trained ahead, her fingers continuing their pattern through the yarn.

I looked around at the dark orange walls and well worn furniture of the living room, then down at the wild cat, now asleep in my arms. “Yeah,” I said, smiling at Marcela with teary eyes. “I liked it a lot.”