

# Ordinary <sup>yet</sup> Extraordinary

The Freedom and Happiness of a Woman Living at the Summit of the Andes in Ecuador



Maya Choi



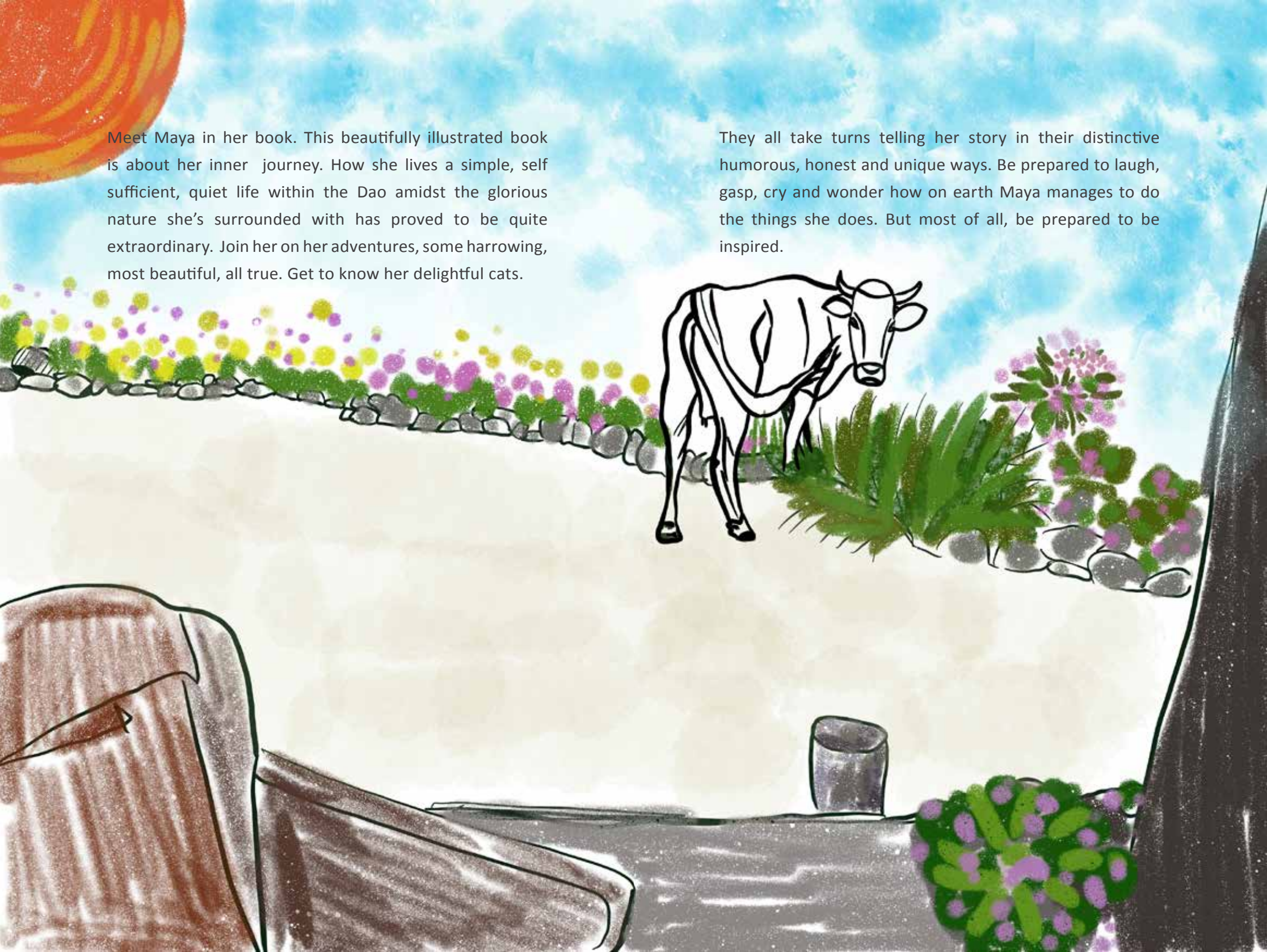
Ordinary yet

The Freedom and Happiness of a Woman Living at the Summit of the Andes in Ecuador

Extraordinary

Maya Choi





Meet Maya in her book. This beautifully illustrated book is about her inner journey. How she lives a simple, self-sufficient, quiet life within the Dao amidst the glorious nature she's surrounded with has proved to be quite extraordinary. Join her on her adventures, some harrowing, most beautiful, all true. Get to know her delightful cats.

They all take turns telling her story in their distinctive humorous, honest and unique ways. Be prepared to laugh, gasp, cry and wonder how on earth Maya manages to do the things she does. But most of all, be prepared to be inspired.



HillTopHut Publication

*Ordinary yet Extraordinary*

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## Maya

I became a country girl in the Andean Mountains in Ecuador, practicing living in 'true freedom.' My teachers are all the sentient beings I encounter, including nature, my cats, and the dharma. How the time flies; I have lived in the same spot on my hilltop for a full seven years now. The stories in this book are already in the past, yet also ongoing. Oftentimes upon hearing my experiences, which I think are ordinary, my friends say they inspire them. So it is my hope that the stories I share with you here may somehow benefit you and others too.

Thank you Dao (Universe), for making this book become a reality. And many thanks to Ramesha and Makoa for the remarkable enhancement on the translation. You brought my ordinary words to the extraordinary. If it weren't for you, this book wouldn't be exist.

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Looked at but cannot be seen.

It is beneath form.

Listened to but cannot be heard.

It is beneath sound.

Held but cannot be touched.

It is beneath feeling.

In its rising, there is no light.

In its falling, there is no darkness.

Follow it, it has no back.

Meet it, it has no face.

unknown

## FOREWORD

Maya is a petite Korean woman in her mid 50's who you can tell is totally at peace within herself, comfortable in her own skin. She has an obvious flare for fashion evident in the customised, colourful clothing she wears and she creates impressive artwork in various guises. And of course she is obsessively in love with her four cats who keep her company here on the mountain top.

At first glance it's hard to comprehend that this rather tiny, gentle woman is capable of all she has accomplished. Then as you get to know her, you realise gentle and calm she may be but she's also a power house in her own right and I imagine there isn't much she couldn't do if she put her mind and heart to it.

In getting to know Maya and her mountain a little better, I have been able to observe how perfectly she melts with the nature she dwells amidst. She is totally comfortable with her solitude. She has developed a unique way of knowing just how to balance all her needs in living a simple and quiet existence.

Sharing in the translation of Maya's book has helped me to appreciate 'the before' of her mountain adventure. It's quite easy to sit here in her tea house enveloped in the utter peace and tranquility of this place, sharing some of her homegrown coffee, to imagine it's always been this way and how thoroughly blessed she is to have this life. But her persistence through all

the sweat, tears, lots of hard manual labour and of course, the many little miracles is what has made this all possible. She greets each new experience with energy and love and just gets on with it. If something needs doing, then do it she must!

Maya accepts each situation she encounters as being a blessing, part of the process, even if it hurts. Her courage, grace, perseverance, generosity, wisdom and heartfelt love for 'her' mountain are truly inspiring.

I can honestly say that living here for a while has truly transformed my entire being. I've experienced a huge healing for my soul. The surroundings are perfect to encourage the searching within, finding the Buddha which is within us all, the inward 'looking for a cow'. This phrase is the original title of the book when translated directly from Korean and it means exactly that - the searching, examining, probing and deep penetrating to the revealing of our innermost self.

I hope like me, after reading Maya's story, as narrated here in the humorous, insightful and totally honest words of her cats, you will feel inspired, realising that the seemingly unachievable is totally within reach and of course that the ordinary is absolutely and without exception always extraordinary!

~ Ramesha ~



  
**THE FLOWER WITHERS AND  
BLOOMS AGAIN**



## Hello and Welcome

My mom calls me Macdol. I am a large male cat and the last addition to the mountain sanctuary 풍운정(Fung Woon Jung), which when translated means a little hut for the wind and clouds where you can rest for a while. People may say that I am quite stocky. I am most certainly not fat! I don't remember where and when I was born, but some years ago I wandered onto the mountain and found mom's hut at the very top of the hill. I totally loved the place and decided to make it my home too. At first my other siblings didn't like me at all, except the little multi-colored girl. She is sweet and the only one who plays with me. You'll get to know them all better a little later. My mom is incredible but not just because she's my mom, although that helps of course. Having a cat like me around is bound to enhance your being! Seriously though, she is a perfect mom who takes care of us well. She is a courageous and creative woman. She often laughs at me because I look silly whenever I jump to catch a butterfly. Anyway I digress, my mom paints, writes and

sings, as well as playing ukulele and growing her own food. I especially love chilling by mom when she works in the garden. So, now you know a little about me I would like to introduce you to my mom's story. Please make yourself comfortable, then we can begin..... The story is about how life makes its own way.





## THE LAST SUMMER IN NEW YORK CITY

It was Spring in the year 2012 and my mom arrived back in Manhattan alone, to clean up a small apartment that she and her husband owned. The apartment had been rented out. However, it proved difficult for them to look after from another country so they decided to sell it in order to focus more fully on their new life in Ecuador. Her husband stayed behind to look after the business they run and attend to other matters. After a painful and bothersome story, the apartment eventually sold. She began counting the days until her return to Vilcabamba, Ecuador.

Summer, especially in Manhattan is choking. Of course, there are parks nearby including Central Park, to cool off and wherever you go the air conditioners run continuously. However, even in the park and well air conditioned coffee shops, mom feels literally unable to fully open her lungs and breathe clearly. She is missing the wind blowing freely in the open nature. The intense desire and longing to return to Ecuador grows ever higher in her mind. Among the other things occupying her mind of course! It has been many years that she has been suppressing the doubts about her



marriage and life. Once again, these feelings rise up strong and persistent.

“Marriage is just a marriage. Don’t fancy about it”. My mom used to say this to herself like a mantra. But this time, the mantra is not enough to lull her feelings. She feels if she doesn’t do something about this now, it will be irreversible and she will be consumed and doomed in this marriage. She wonders what it is that she is so afraid of. She can’t stop thinking of herself as being like a dying flower in a dry pot. “It is an insult to leave the dried flower in the pot without water. This time, this time I have to do something. I will even pull out the dried flower from the pot if I have to”, she promises to herself. Many days pass where she can’t grasp the reins of her confused, fast moving mind. She goes to bed especially early one night, but the heat in the small apartment in NYC is unbearable with or without an air conditioner. “This noise from the air conditioner is stabbing my head just like the noise in my mind”, she grumbles. Eventually, she gets out of bed and goes out intending on a short walk. The summer night in New York City is the same as always, beautiful looking people sitting outside drinking wine or beer, laughing and kissing. After walking 4 or 5

blocks on the streets aimlessly, she stops at a bar where she used to drink with her friend T a few years back. She takes a chair at the counter and asks for her much needed glass of gin and tonic.

Not long ago, she read a novel called 'Call Me Brooklyn' by Eduardo Lago. The troubled characters in the book used to get together in the evenings at a bar called the Auckland. In the sanctuary of the bar the people became like ghosts of the night, escaping, sharing their woes, hugging and licking each other's gaping wounds. They find comfort in this and their comradery. Yet they seem not to grasp how the Auckland actually ties them up inside. They only feel at home in the darkness of the bar - so much so that they can never see the light or blessings of real life beyond these limits. "What's the difference between me and one of those ghosts in the Auckland?" she whispers. She is just one of the characters in the book finding comfort under moderately dark light, sipping gin and tonic, licking her own painful wounds. But... will it be any easier to find the path if she faces the fresh wind in the open nature? She doesn't yet have the answer.

## NEW YORK SENDS MOM ON HER WAY

Mom is so looking forward to going back to Ecuador, the place she now calls home and where she later becomes my mom. However, soon before she's due to leave, her body unexpectedly begins going through a strange and somewhat traumatic experience by night. Icy chills and a high fever consume her. Her entire being becomes trembling, quaking aspen trees in the snowy winds. There's nothing mom can do but suffer all night long. When the morning approaches, she finally loses consciousness and falls fast asleep. When she gets up later, unbelievably the symptoms are gone, vanished into the night. This strange phenomenon occurs the next night and the night after that. Three very long nights and her poor body is utterly exhausted.

She is supposed to be leaving at 4 am the following day. If the same thing happens, will she even be able to get to JFK airport? Mom is understandably anxious and afraid. She sits on the edge of the bed and wonders if she should call the airline to reschedule her flight. She takes a deep breath and hears a voice inside her saying, "All will be okay." Time seems to stand still, not to exist at all. Her body shivers,

both cold and hot with the fever. She lies down on the bed, curled up to the side exactly how me and my siblings lie. She is wrapped up in every single blanket she possesses.

She wonders if she is in a cocoon, like a butterfly ready to transform. The inside is so white, so bright, yet so unbearably cold. But her body is no longer trembling. Incredibly, mom sees she is actually observing her own body inside the cocoon. At that very moment mom hears voices but she isn't sure if she is having a dream or if it is actually happening in reality. She struggles to speak but manages, "I hear voices...who are you?" She tries to listen to what they are talking about, but no words are clear to her ears - only the sense that they are talking about her physical condition. After a while, some people who she perceives to be her ancestral grandmothers, step back. Then, she senses that her grandfather wearing his usual white Hanbok (traditional Korean clothing) comes close to her. Her grandfather and my mom exchange words and then he says "Well, shall we go now? Are you ready?" "Yes," she answers and slowly gets up and sits on the edge of the bed. She looks around the bedroom uttering "What just happened? Where is my grandfather? Did grandfather give

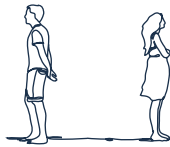
me instructions or was it all just a dream?" She is totally confused. She knows she needs to get ready to leave for the airport, so she slowly moves her body, brings the luggage down from the 5<sup>th</sup> floor to the 1<sup>st</sup>, walking down the stairs one step at a time. Her body somehow appears to be moving motionlessly, automatically, seemingly possessed by its own energy and intent. Sweat completely drenches her clothes as if she was standing in the pouring rain. Again, she experiences that feeling of timelessness. How can she explain it? There is no sense of time at all, almost like being suspended with no physicality, weightless with a buzzing sound all around her, like if you can imagine being in a vacuum. After five painfully slow trips up and down the stairs, she finally locks the apartment door. Her time in New York is over! But Ecuador is still far, far away.

When mom comes out of the apartment building, the taxi driver who she'd arranged for in advance, quickly comes out of the car and opens the door for her, puts all the luggage into the trunk and asks, "Are you okay?" despite seeing that in the eyes of anybody, she appears to be far from okay. On the way to JFK the driver keeps checking on her condition. She doesn't even remember how she

arrives there but when the taxi is approaching the airport, she becomes more conscious. After the driver unloads the luggage from his cab, an airport staff member dashes over to her offering his assistance. The man carries her bags and puts them on a cart. He walks slowly with her to the section of her airline lines. Once he sees her safely there, he leaves. There are so many long lines snaking in front of the auto checking-in machine. Mom slowly pushes her cart over to the back of yet another one but there's no way to know if she is actually making any real progress. The next thing she knows, a member of the airline staff at the front of the line who helps people check in, sees her and makes her way over in a hurry asking if she's okay. She proceeds to take mom to the front and helps her through the process of checking in. The lady even advises her on how to make the flight easier. "How grateful I am! Thank you, thank you," she says. People appearing apparently from nowhere and all to help mom. Are they being sent by someone?

Well anyway, that's how my wonderful mom arrives in Quito, the capital of Ecuador. Although, the journey isn't quite over just yet - she still has to catch an early morning flight the following day to get to Vilcabamba.





## BETWEEN THE KNOWN AND UNKNOWN

“Even here in Ecuador, despite being alone and unwell, I have received miraculous help from many people. Did grandpa arrange it all?” mom can’t help but contemplate. Her body feels like a cotton ball soaked in water, weighty beyond description. The night arrives and she passes into the depths of darkness once more inside her hotel room. She finds herself shivering and shaking. Even with two extra blankets she is freezing. Then suddenly she is walking in a green field. Is she half insane or is she asleep? A river appears and there is an older man in white clothes standing by it. She walks over and greets him, “Hello Grandpa”. She again senses that he is her grandfather who passed away long ago. The river is about 3-4 meters wide and flows endlessly long. The older man stands still and stares at her as he tears white paper and drops it into the river. The river flows at the height of the riverbank, but doesn’t overflow. The white pieces of paper are floating on the surface of the water without getting wet. It is so strange. “Grandpa, why are you tearing the paper and throwing it into the river?” She curiously asks, “and why doesn’t the paper get wet?” The older man doesn’t answer, just stares deeply into her



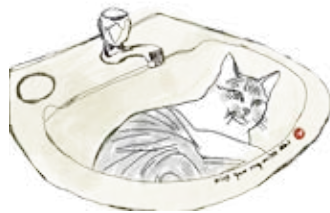
eyes. “What are you telling me Grandpa?” she so wants to know...but silence is the only reply from the old man.

Dawn approaches and she awakens. As she gets up, mom begins to understand “Grandpa is with me...” Her body instinctively begins moving quietly and slowly but surely. And after another flight and taxi journey finally, finally mom arrives in Vilcabamba.

After returning she sleeps continuously for three days between dreams. When mom comes out of this state of unconsciousness, she doesn’t know how to understand all she has experienced for the last few days. She can’t stop asking herself questions about life, how to live, about friends, relationships, marriage, the soulful being and about true freedom. She is totally confused without any clear vision. The one thing though that seems absolutely clear to her during her confusion, is the necessity to review her marriage. The marriage in which no encouragement, growth, or even love can be found, only the ripping apart of each other’s souls, like lions preying for food. At least that’s how she feels about it. So after many mature conversations, day after day discussing each other’s interests, hopes and



intended direction in life, mom and her husband agree to take time off from each other. It seems that's best for now, at least for a while. She recognizes that they are already on separate, parallel roads. There may be an intersection to cross over to each other again somewhere along the line, but right now it seems more likely to lead to a highway, forever travelling in different directions. It isn't an easy decision, but they both believe it is the right one for them. However, mom's heart aches and it is difficult for her to stop her tears from constantly falling. She wonders if he is feeling as distraught as her.



## THE FLOWER WITHERS AND BLOOMS AGAIN

After the decision has been made, mom boldly walks out of the home she shares with her husband truly believing she can do OK alone. But fear of the unknown grips her and she can't ignore her shaking legs. After all, she has depended on him for more than ten years and now she has to stand on her own two feet. This understanding that she has to learn exactly how to walk by herself from scratch, is more than a little overwhelming. She is extremely anxious. She sits day after day alone in the small and shabby house she has rented in town, with just my two brother cats Puyo and Ginger for company. She rarely ventures out. Her isolation makes her feel like she's in a freezing, icy, cold cave unloved and utterly alone despite her beloved cats. How far can she go from this point? She hoped it would be so much easier to recover her spirit, to soar and fly free like an eagle! How much longer will she suffer so?

Mom finds herself habitually staring blankly at the wall, crying what she describes as 'cheap tears'. "Where is my dignity, my pride? Where is the me I know I truly am, who wants to look within, deep inside myself?" she sobs.



Things stay this way for many weeks and after a few months of living apart, mom has to begin preparing for an upcoming exhibition and this necessitates several visits to Cafe Cultura, which is the restaurant and art gallery that she and her husband own. They converted an old farm house to create their own space. Her husband is in charge of the 'reservation only' restaurant there and mom organizes and conducts art events and exhibitions. Until a few months ago, it was the home and workplace they shared, but mom recognizes it no longer feels like home. She's not entirely sure if she is comfortable with this realization.

Whenever she goes there she sees her husband working hard and diligently, as always. She'll say hello to him and he just replies briefly as if nothing has happened between them and all is right in his world. At first seeing him so busy, she feels sorry for him. But rapidly this tender compassion turns to resentment and intense dislike. The memories of him constantly working and putting this above everything else, including her, cuts deep within her being.

As a chef he cares for all those who appreciate his food. He spends all his time in the kitchen and always did, with

no time for mom or the nurturing of their relationship and mom believes this to be the most significant cause of their separation. She senses these emotions and understandings dropping like heavy sediment, piling up at the bottom of her sad and weary heart. She doesn't want these harmful, painful feelings to remain within her, stirring up whenever she sees him and his stubborn resolve to stay exactly as he is and seemingly utterly unaffected by their separation. She wonders if he is actually as unmoved as he appears to be or does he experience an albeit concealed fire within, when in her presence. Will he ever change? Should mom be walking on the road that leads her back to him or in another direction entirely?

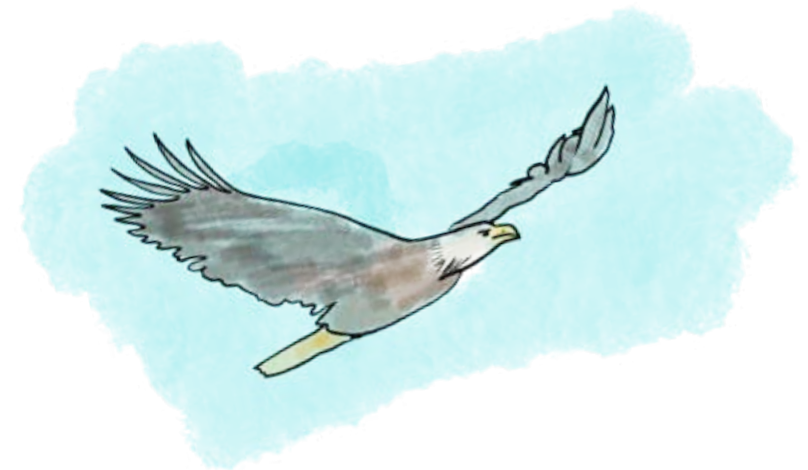
Mom's ego is in shock and her mind has been spinning out of control in these recent months. She used to believe that she and her husband would always be together and that this separation was temporary. So to lose him and experience such nonchalance from him afterwards wounds her deeply, dragging her down towards the choking darkness of the confined basement in her soul. She recalls his words when she left the farmhouse and the life they had shared, "take care of yourself and be well," he said with a cool smile and

no mention of “please come back to me soon,” as perhaps she had hoped. How could he treat my beautiful mom that way? Did he want their break up more than her? Mom begins to suspect this could be the case. The bitterness rises from her darkened heart. She knows his personality and how he would never allow himself to ‘pull out the knife’ first but perhaps he maneuvered things so she would have no option but to do it. Mom’s ever building resentment towards him makes her perceive these possibilities, like movies playing out in her head, dragging her further downwards towards darkness.

The pictures passing through her consciousness reveal how her husband has been doing much better than her in every way possible since their separation. The bitterness of her imaginations creates this tormenting storm in mom. Her sense of reasoning and intense emotions where her marriage is concerned are threads, doomed to be tangled and twisted forever. “It’s withered” she finally admits defeat as she dwells once more within the dark cave of her mind “and there’s no hope for it to bloom again - ever!”

She acknowledges that they may have already come too

far to go back to a life together and she understands that she cannot love him as a lover any longer. She has always known the traditional Korean wifely attributes of absolute and unquestionable subservience was not the kind of wife she was or ever would be. But she is also very aware of the many sacrifices she has and will continue to make now she is on this separate path. She accepts she has to get used to being alone, with no security to fall back on - both emotionally, practically and of course very significantly financially! Despite all this, she begins to appreciate the games of her ego in recent times and how narcissistic she has become. From here on in, she will wholeheartedly embrace her situation, realizing it to be the only way forward. “So be it” she utters resolutely.









## STARTING OVER

Some of mom's friends decide to gather in town at the end of the year 2012 intending to let it go in the Ecuadorian way. They say goodbye to the old and welcome in the New Year by burning effigies they make. It has been a challenging, transforming year for all of them, not just mom. "We all need an Effigy burning" decide her friends. So that's exactly what they make, infusing the sentiments of their hearts and souls into the task. On New Year's Eve the town is full of people dancing and enjoying the music coming from the loudspeakers installed all over the main square. The party spirit is contagious. Mom's friends are dancing, laughing, having fun and mom joins in.

I should explain that here in Ecuador, people actually make their effigies life size. They pour their hatred, anger, sadness, frustration, hardships and any emotion they need to let go of, into the human like figure whilst they are creating it. Then they cast it wholeheartedly into the fire at the end of the year, in fact at precisely the last second of the year.

Ten...

Nine...

Eight, the countdown to the year 2013 has begun..... seven, six, five, four, three, two, ONE!!! Then the excited shouts of people burst forth and the effigy burns fiercely.

This shared experience makes mom determined.

"It is the new year.

I throw my weakness into the fire.

I throw my loneliness into the fire.

I throw my fear into the fire.

Enough. I let go! To new beginnings."

Shortly after new year it is her forty-seventh birthday and time for starting over, enveloping these new beginnings. Mom can't refuse a friend's warm invitation to join her for a birthday lunch. So she forces herself to go out into the town. She squints and frowns as her eyes adjust to the bright sunshine. She's been inside in the dim light of her little house for far too long. It's interesting for her to observe that everyone around seems to be carrying on as usual.

Why this surprises mom, she's not exactly sure. Of course it would be this way! Those who sit outside the restaurant on the corner of the main square and drink beer all day, still sit in the same place, beer glasses in hand. Those who said and at the time truly believed, that the earth would be destroyed at the end of 2012, are still sitting in the same spot, no doubt talking about another doomed planet story. Life is going on exactly as before, despite mom's tumultuous mind and heart.

After having a lovely lunch and coffee together, mom gets up to leave and go home. She makes the excuse that she has some things to do and needs to feed my hungry brothers Puyo and Ginger. Mom has always enjoyed talking and spending time with her friends, but today she doesn't feel the usual joy and wishes to cut their time together short. Her friend insists on walking home with her undeterred by mom's protests. Mom can do nothing but accept, not wishing to appear rude and ungrateful.

They walk in silence towards the house, neither of them speaking. When they get close to home, mom notices that the door to the house is open which panics her, as she felt

sure she locked it when she came out. She rushes full of fear and worry and hears loud, joyful shouts of "Surprise!" She is utterly still and silent, as if suspended from reality - she doesn't know how to respond. No words come out. Absolutely nothing. She is in a suspended state, all her emotions locked tightly inside not quite ready to erupt. She continues to stand very still, not moving an inch, staring blankly at her dear friends. Moments of nothingness pass by and suddenly she breaks down, sobbing without restraint.

As you have probably realized, mom's friends organized a surprise birthday party for her. Aren't they incredible? It was all planned weeks in advance. They went secretly to mom's house, decorated it with balloons and candles and even sprinkled flower petals on the path. Mom can't stop crying tears of pure gratitude and thanks. She is so moved at the precious care being shown by these dear friends, especially as she knows she's not been overly companionable lately.

"The white flower petals signify death, an ending," explains her friend "but remember from death, life usually bursts forth allowing a perfect and new beginning. So let's bloom again, shall we Maya? I think it's time, don't you?" I'm sure

you realize that Maya is my mom. Tears flow unhindered once more from her eyes, softly spilling onto her cheeks at hearing these beautiful, heartfelt words full of love. She allows the tears to run freely, endlessly as if a dam has burst in her soul. She's unaware of how long she cries, but the tears gushing out of her heart do begin to dry out slowly. Much to her friend's relief, I'm sure! She finally acknowledges a refreshing, cool breeze in her entire being and she finds herself laughing at her friend's jokes and begins to truly enjoy herself on her special day. About time too!

At sunset, mom's ex-husband comes to the party with some other friends. This man, with whom mom has shared a life with for over ten years, comes as a friend to celebrate her birthday. She is (perhaps surprising for some) thankful that he has come, revealing the changed relationship for them, from marriage mates to friends. This feels important for mom in her healing process. She laughs with everyone as they gather firewood and savour the birthday feast of grilled zucchinis, meat and of course, beer. No party is complete without beer! Mom takes a moment to pause and search within during the festivities and is happy to see

that the sun is once again rising within her heart after a long and very stormy night. "Now, I think I can walk the path of my life and bring forth blooms of beautiful flowers again," she declares. This she most certainly does, as you will see next time.....

You'll also get to meet my graceful, independent sister Hana as she'll be continuing our story. She will have the exciting task of revealing exactly how our mom came to find and build the mountain sanctuary that becomes our tranquil home. Until then, keep smiling and thank you for listening. I do so enjoy entertaining an audience! Ciao for now.....



my miss Kai 



# 2

## SWEET HOME FOR THE SOUL



Well, hello there. I'm Hana - a female, sleek, elegant, utterly fabulous black cat. Mom named me Hana as in Korean it means 'one' and in Japanese 'flower' depending on where you put the accent when you pronounce it. I am most certainly one of a kind and as beautiful as a flower. I'm a bit sassy too so don't be deceived! I am not one who likes to be disturbed unless I'm wishing to be bothered. In fact I'm quite similar to mom in that way. I'm the eldest girl cat in our home. I did have a sister who was just two months older than me. We were such good playmates but she passed away about a year ago. Mom and I were devastated - it was a very sad time here on the mountain.

I came to live here a few months after Puyo and Ginger left. You have heard Macdol mention them before. How they left will be revealed later but shortly after that happened one of my mom's friends bought me as a surprise gift for her. I arrived in a tiny basket and mom carried me up the mountain inside her jacket as I was so little, a tiny delicate



## A FATEFUL ENCOUNTER

flower for sure. I fitted in her pocket! So that's part of my story, what follows is the continuation of my mom's from what Macdol already shared with you. Let's see how she discovered her place on the mountain and created her sanctuary 풍운정.

As you already know mom bravely left her comfortable, secure life in New York City to respond to the call in her heart encouraging dramatic transformation. This ultimately lead her to the small village called Vilcabamba at the edge of the Andes, Ecuador. Over time and with much effort she and her husband established a successful business which doubled as their home. They renovated an old farm house and created a restaurant and art studio/exhibition space. But once again change was on the horizon for mom. After being here for 3 years she and her husband separate, with mom leaving the marital home.

Looking back, mom remembers perfectly the day she arrived in Vilcabamba, way back in the beginning. She had this chill running all through her body, electrifying her skin to goose bumps when she saw the 'Welcome to Vilcabamba' sign at the entrance to the village. The calling and sounding of the bells in her heart she'd learnt to listen to peal loud and clear once more. "This is the place for me". She intuitively knows it without any doubt. She has an incredibly powerful sense of what mom refers to as fate. This fate may be dissimilar

to what many call it; for mom, it's about being convinced you are in the absolutely perfect place at exactly the right moment for you in your lifetime, a place conducive to you thriving on every level. You know it to be true deep down in your bones. She can be a strange one my mom, but I think if you are blessed and lucky enough to feel similar things, you know what she means.

Anyway, back to the story. After arriving in Ecuador all those years ago and exploring the pockets of villages around the area of Vilcabamba, mom has no idea at all what makes her resonate with this place yet it is undeniable for her. She has such a huge sense of anticipation and positive vibrations pulsating through her entire being. She is utterly enchanted - under its spell. She goes back to New York a couple of months later full of enthusiasm and 'packs up' her life there and just three months later, she returns to Ecuador on a one way ticket. This is it! The adventure can truly begin. She's flowing with the river of life, allowing it to lead her way. Who would have thought she would end up settling in this small village in South America.

I'd like to tell you a bit about the wonders of Vilcabamba.

It is located in the southern part of Ecuador. The climate here is perfect, having just two seasons - dry and rainy. Dry season brings with it a wind mom calls enchanted. It is indeed magical, stirring the soul. Sometimes it's gentle causing the trees to sway and the leaves to lightly rustle. Other times it's so powerful and strong you can't accomplish much outdoors at all! Then rainy season comes (of course) with rain - both gentle and torrential, swirling mist and the most outstanding rainbows you are likely to see in your lifetime. In general, the climate here is mild all year round, like a constant springtime, sometimes it gets really hot and occasionally a little chilly. Mom loves it all. The climate is perfect for growing things too, including your soul to reach to your higher self! Regardless of the season, if you plant a seed then love, care and water it, you are guaranteed to see the seed sprout and prosper. This is one of the many reasons why Vilcabamba has become a haven for people who want to live a simple, low cost, self sustaining way of life.

On October 31<sup>st</sup> 2012 mom stands at the top of what later becomes 'her' home. She is in love with this land and longs to buy it and make it her home. The weather has been

gorgeous all week and this morning too, but as mom stands at the mountain top with the current owner, it transforms suddenly and within a few minutes thick fog covers the whole mountain in white. It is so dense nothing beyond a couple of meters can be seen. It is eerily breathtaking. Mom experiences a strange emotional phenomenon that is difficult to put into words. She is convinced that this surrounding scenery is familiar and her heart aches with yearning. She is home, connected, earthed - she belongs to this mountain. The mountain responds to her in the same way as her, with or without any paperwork.

The amount asked for the land is reasonable and mom voices this opinion. But she goes on to explain that it is simply beyond her budget. However the price she is willing to pay is readily available in cash! "If you drop the amount down some more, I would like to finalize this deal tomorrow" mom negotiates confidently. These statements come out of mom's mouth on their own, moved by some invisible force regardless of her intention. It seems the mountain is quite keen on mom being it's new keeper too. Miraculously the deal is made there and then and the owner happily lowers his price to accommodate mom, even though it was

much lower than he originally asked for. They shake hands to seal the deal. Mom cannot contain her excitement. It has been more than three years since she left NYC, the 'city that never sleeps' to settle in this little village to find the truth and tranquility in leading a simple lifestyle. Somehow she just knows that here, on this mountain she will find her wings and begin flying into the true freedom life offers. She feels her heart beating rapidly in anticipation.

The price for land and properties in Vilcabamba soared in 2012 as many foreigners came here at that time seeking refuge, believing the area to be protected in some way from the impending doom of the world's end. You may know that the Mayan calendar that was created thousands of years previously, by astrologers and other men of ancient wisdom, only went up until 2012. Why stop there if it was of no significance? So millions of people truly believed Armageddon was coming at that time. I'd just like to point out that my mom was not one of them. She was not moved even 1cm in that direction of reasoning! However these 'believers' built bunkers and stockpiled foods, storing them in specially developed containers. It is said that Vilcabamba is a sacred place for many reasons and it is well known



## NEW BEGINNINGS

and accepted that it is indeed geographically close by to a very intense energy portal. All this, added to the world end theories, accounts for the rise in land costs. Of all the times and places for my mom to decide to buy land and build a house! But everything was slotting into place. One night, not long after mom had her offer accepted, she had a dream where she was happily dancing naked in that very mountain like a little girl, totally free and joyful.



Mom climbs the mountain, gasping for breath. She's been climbing for over 40 minutes to see the construction site and yet her hilltop is still a long way off. Just thinking about the construction of her small earthen house makes a smile spread on mom's face. Work will soon begin! This spurs her on to continue her laboured climb.

She still hasn't got the deed to the land despite starting the process almost six months ago. Bureaucracy is delaying as usual. When mom explains her concerns to the previous owner of her land and says how desperate she is to start building, he just tells her to go ahead saying, "Maya, this land is already yours. Why don't you just start building your house now?" Mom was so grateful for yet another act of kindness. So the build will begin even before finishing the paper process.

Of course now the build is imminent mom's head is spinning with all the plans, processes, costs - and it all seems so complicated all of a sudden. Is it really going to happen and within the tight budget she has to keep to? Yet again the complexity of the tangled thoughts in her mind becomes

more and more overwhelming. It reaches the point where she can't think of anything else.

She goes to see a friend one morning - a wise and straight talking man. After mom chats (no doubt for eons) about all her concerns, woes, difficulties and stressed feelings, he tells her to wake up and just get on with it! No one else is going to do it for her, he says - it is her dream and therefore her task to handle. These words initially cut deep like a knife wounding her. She is so hurt but thankfully not for long. This man is a good friend and he's been so helpful as he has some experience with building. When she calms down mom reassess his words and realizes he is of course absolutely right. She quits whining to herself and others, pulls herself together and clears her mind.

Mom is standing on the top of the mountain after a sweaty climb, feeling a sense of accomplishment from the climbing. She looks down at what's below, taking deep breaths in and out slowly. She's back on track and feeling positive and courageous once more. She can do this! One step at a time.

## CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN

April 2, 2013 is the first day of construction and mom climbs the mountain. She will have to do this every day from now on. The heat is already scorching the earth at 9 a.m. so it is with gasping breaths and drenched with sweat that mom approaches. All the thoughts in her head are twice as fast as usual, but conversely mom's pace is twice as slow. She's questioning her decision in choosing to live in such a remote and arduous location and punishing herself in climbing this hill breathlessly. She pauses in desperation to recharge her energy. Mom resumes walking taking one step at a time, noticing that her breath is getting shorter and shorter the higher she goes. When she almost reaches the top, her heart hurts as if it were a balloon bursting. "We're almost there, let's keep walking," she calms herself and soothingly rubs her chest. But her heart won't let go of the tight tension. It is telling her to take a break, to stop putting herself through such hardships, not just this climb on a hot day. Mom is a very proud and determined woman - some may even say stubborn. Not me of course, I'm just mentioning how others may see her! She notices herself being in the mindset where she needs to constantly prove

herself. Oftentimes we all do things to prove to ourselves and others that we can, that we are successful and totally independent. Mom recognizes this in herself right now. She has temporarily lost her balance, has been pushing herself too hard, ignoring her body-mind well being. Her heart is literally taking action making mom listen and acknowledge that she can be strong, powerful, accomplish all she needs to do but also can be kind to herself. Mom recollects that she has always been a person who likes to prove herself capable of doing anything. This started a very long time ago in Korea. She was a huge rebel in Korean society where women are not treated as equal to, or as worthy as men. For sure, there were times when she pretended to be strong, emotionally and physically, to keep up her facade of independence and strength. She would even drink excessively to prove this resilience with her business clients. Now she realizes that this is all just arrogance and egotism. She is a woman and maybe (I'd say definitely) she can do most things as good as, or better than a man but sometimes it's ok to just be still, pause for a while and be kind to yourself. It's not weakness but strength and self love. She is also aware that her arrogance sometimes

works as a medicine in her life, especially at times when her self-esteem has taken a battering or she is feeling a little low, pushing herself to reach out and achieve. Still, when it's overused, as it seems her heart is showing her it is currently, it can eventually devour the soul. "Okay, okay, let's take a break" mom says to her struggling chest. She takes off the heavy backpack that she's been carrying and sits on a clean spot between the dried cow's dung that's all over the mountain trail. As she removes it there is a strong yet gentle breeze stroking her wet, sweaty back. The tension in her whole body melts away. She surrenders. Her heart is happy, as is she.





It's been three weeks since the construction of our new home started. No matter how simple it is, it is still challenging to build a home in such a short time. The original plan was to make a 3m x 4m room, with an open kitchen area and bathroom. However it ended up at a slightly more conventional size with a 4m x 7m room, as the builder insisted this was best. As a result, the budget was being stretched beyond its limits. The construction will have to stop, whether completed or not. There simply is no more money! The roof will be finished later that day and the windows and doors will be fitted next week. At least then it will be better than living in a tent. Let's hope so.

So one week later, after a month of construction, mom moves into her almost completed house. Puyo and Ginger are with her and are the first cats to be with mom as she begins her mountain adventure. I never met them, but it seems that she loved them dearly and they are such a comfort to her at this changeable time. The house is like a big box. It has a roof, walls, basic doors and windows. The open air kitchen has a roof that extends to cover it

and protect it from the elements. However, one door and window are missing as mom first moves in. She has put clear plastic in their place to prevent wind and bugs from coming in. The floor is temporarily just dirt and the only furniture is mom's bed. At the present time there is no bathroom, no toilet, kitchen, cooking stove and of course, no electricity. She makes a little fire to cook and goes out to the wilderness to do her 'personal business' exactly like me and my kind. She wakes up when the sun rises, eats dinner before sunset and goes to sleep when the sun goes down. What a novel lifestyle she leads. My mom rocks, doesn't she? I bet there aren't many people (I want to say especially women, but mom might tap my nose if she hears me) who would embark on such an adventurous new life, totally alone and isolated on the top of a mountain, with just the bare essentials and most certainly no luxuries. I think she's totally inspiring. Go mom, go!





## THE STORMY NIGHT

Last night was like a dream or maybe it is more appropriate to say, nightmare. A huge storm struck the mountain with severe rain, thunder and lightning. Mom placed ten or more buckets and bowls in the room to catch the raindrops from the roof. It didn't take long for some areas of the dirt floor to become muddy puddles. She had to put a headlamp on her forehead and keep sweeping out the water from the porch in the pitch black night. If it wasn't for her and the helpful broom, the inside of the new house would have been a big pond. Mom also shoveled to dig out a trench all around the house to drain the water away. Imagine, all this happened in the middle of the night with no stars even for company. Nobody was around, no one to ask for help. Don't you agree, my mom is phenomenal? She danced with the storm for most of the night. It must have been exhausting and utterly frightening. The raging wind and rain softened as it approached 5 in the morning. She went into the room and changed out of her soaking wet clothes and sat on the edge of the bed staring ahead vacantly. It is a very similar reaction to what went through her body on the night she left New York, her mind stops thinking, but

the body moves diligently. When she becomes more aware of her surroundings, she feels cold. She looks aimlessly around the empty bedroom and feels complete despair. Once again the feeling of dispondancy is crashing down on her and crushing her spirit.

I should mention here that soon after arriving at the mountain home Puyo and Ginger left, one after the other and they are unlikely to return. It was literally a day or two between their departures. Mom felt intensely desolate. It has been a lonesome month for her. She has no idea why they left. Both of them displayed unusual behaviour just before departing. They were very affectionate cats especially at night, but during the days before they left they individually kept following mom around all day long, rubbing and wrapping themselves around her legs. She tripped over them several times as they were getting under her feet constantly playing her shadow. Then the next day Puyo was gone and Ginger followed the next day. It's almost as if they were saying goodbye. I can't imagine leaving mom or this place but I never knew life in suburbia and us cats don't really take well to adjusting to change. I imagine the difference in life up here to life in the village would have



## HOUSE FOR THE SOUL

been tough to reconcile. Poor mom.

“Ah, now I am truly alone. Nobody would even know if I died here..... Puyo and Ginger, live healthily wherever you are,” tearily says mom as she is curled up on the bed. The blanket is wet from the rain leaking from the roof, but still, she soon falls fast asleep. Mom awakens to a vast, beautiful morning with dazzling sunlight. She dances out to the yard in excitement, almost naked. How contrasting nature can be. Then she looks to herself and sees she’s no different. Last night she was powerful and decisive, did what needed to be done to survive. After the adrenaline wore off and the risk passed, she was distraught, vulnerable and utterly miserable. Then she sleeps to recover her frazzled body and this morning she’s excitable, thrilled and leaping about with abandonment. What a beautiful realization. She and nature are connected, entwined so deeply and perfectly.

It’s been several months since that stormy night. In this time many problems popped and mom faced it with a proactive and positive attitude. Mom has made many improvements around the house. It goes without saying that she works all day, busily bustling here and there, making this and that with her own fair hands. She now has a proper bathroom complete with a bathtub and even a toilet. No more wild trips to do her business! It’s positively luxurious. The wall has had to be raised around the outdoor kitchen. But it’s a serviceable one with a clumsy, handmade wooden sink that mom crafted and a propane gas stove that is placed in the middle, out in the open. Most importantly, during these days mom has gained a lot of experience and insights in living by herself and doing things by her own hands. These bring her the almost unexpected but purest, joy of life. Her confidence steadily increased which helps her to deal with the ever-changing life matters.

Currently she is super excited about the new floor she has made covering half of the room. She mixed sand and cement with green and yellow colors to make the unusual

and creative floor. The surface is shiny and smooth. She gazes at the completed task proudly. "I live in a simple hut, but it's cozy enough for me and quite wonderful too. And I have this magnificent scenery which nobody can deny how desirable it is" she sighs, letting her heart sing with joy "Oh, this is my home". As she is speaking there is this deep sensation aroused from within, the sense of beautiful pain.

"Yes, I came and built a small house here for my soul," she cries as tears of joy flow freely.

Next time we'll share stories of the adventures we've had here on the mountain top after life gets more established for us. You'll hear about living in this magical place among nature, deepening the connection with the natural world mom has always felt. She plants her diverse garden here and we'll share some of her accounts about the bounteous yield resulting from her respectful gardening full of love and gratitude. We have some funny, some sad but all truly inspiring stories to tell. We'll look forward to chatting with you again soon.

Farewell for now. I'm off to have a cup of tea and groom myself, to ensure I still look fabulous. Adiós amigos. Hana signing out.





*"I live in a simple hut, but it's cozy enough for me and quite wonderful too. And I have this magnificent scenery that nobody can deny how desirable it is" she sighs, letting her heart sing with joy "Oh, this is my home".*





# 3

## LEARNING TO LIVE ALONGSIDE NATURE



Greetings! Let me introduce myself. I am Ipuni, an exceedingly cute, playful cat who adores to just skip around from place to place. I like to play outside for most of the day and get up to harmless mischief. You can often see me climbing the eucalyptus trees. I like the view from up high. It feels like I'm near to the sky as we're already so high up here. Sometimes I can actually touch the clouds! My name means pretty little girl. I believe it's quite appropriate even if I do say so myself. I am rather beautiful with my multicolored, shiny coat. Mom and I get along wonderfully. In fact, I'm quite an easy-going cat and love being with all my siblings too. I'm not obsessed with mom like Macdol, but we have a delightfully balanced relationship. I admit I do get a little possessive of her when I'm sleepy and it's bedtime. She knows my 'come to bed' whine when it's late. We lie on the mattress and I snuggle up to her chest and pad my paws back and forth (not using my nails of course) and then when I know mom is here to stay, I settle at the





end of the bed for the night. This arrangement is ideal for both of us. Purrrrrrfect!

Anyway enough about me, let's get back to my mom's awe-inspiring story. You're going to hear about the practical aspects of living here on the mountain at our hilltop hut. A few stories of our adventures here are what follows. Enjoy!



## EVEN IF THE GAS CYLINDER IS EMPTY

I truly wonder how my mom coped with living on this hilltop at the beginning of her life here. She survived with very few things. She didn't have a functional kitchen or even a gas stove. She would make a fire to boil water and to cook her rice, which was her main staple diet. And as for the bathroom.....let's face it, even I as a cat detest going to the loo in the rain but 'when you've got to go, you've got to go' and to think of mom having to do the same is a bit sad for me if I'm honest, although she didn't seem to mind too much. She accepted that was what she had to do in the beginning. She'd go to the little hill next to the hut with a small gardening shovel to dig a hole and do her 'business'. We use our paws to dig a hole, but the gardening shovel seems to work just as well. Can you believe my mom thought it was quite romantic? That was in the beginning! My sister Kai who was with her in those days said that they lived like that for over three months.

However, after many stormy nights and days, mom's idea about having an outdoor bathroom and kitchen lost its appeal somewhat. Later, she saw the need to add more

walls and designated an area for a toilet, bathroom and a sheltered kitchen undercover. She even splashed out and got herself a simple gas stove with a cylinder. Such indulgence!

Anyway back to the little story I'm trying to tell, mom has not been able to use the gas stove for the last four days because the cylinder is empty. So this morning, she again goes back to basics and makes a fire to brew her coffee and warms the water to make our milk. She doesn't give us milk a lot, only a tiny bit in the morning which disappears far too soon for my liking - just four or five licks and mine is gone. Hana doesn't like it much, but Kai, Cielo and I love it. It makes a start to the day absolutely Purrrrrrfect! Sorry, I can't resist using that word when it's appropriate. I am a cat, after all!

Mom can afford to pay for a new tank of gas, but the taxi is expensive to our hilltop, so she is waiting for the need for other things to arise so she can bring them all up together. She has become much more conscious and mindful of how she spends her money. I understand how she thinks. It doesn't make sense to use a taxi for only a tank of gas. I'm

thankful she shows such wisdom and respect for money in these areas. It's a good lesson for life. This morning mom is cooking eggs and she'll definitely share some with us. While we are all sitting around the fire she says, "It doesn't take that much firewood to boil water to cook a bowl of rice. Did you all know that? I didn't know before," mom continues, "In fact, you can do this only with a handful of twigs. The problem though, is that the kettle or the pot becomes blackish by the smoke as you see it here. You have to be watchful of the fire, put the firewood in at the right moment mindfully. That's how you control the fire until the water boils and cooks. Otherwise, the fire will burn everything in the pot in a couple of minutes. Now I understand why our kettle which initially was silver, is black on its outer side. Mom often chats to us this way, teaching us about respect and mindfulness alongside these practical things.

I feel that mom won't go down to the village for a few more days, so we will accompany her when she goes for a walk to collect an armful of twigs for the fire later this evening. I like doing this and I totally agree with mom about being respectful in all our activities. I think our lives whether human, cat or any animal are all basically the same. To fully

love life we need to watch, pay attention and be focused on even the smallest things in our surroundings to have full, heartfelt, rich relationships with each other and the nature around us.

Mom continues talking even though I am dozing on and off, “controlling the fire is like having relationships with others. To have a good fire requires paying attention, adding the firewood patiently, not too much at once and always allowing space between the burning twigs. There was a time when I thought I should make good connections with as many people as possible. But for what? I realized it doesn’t help one’s life get deeper or richer, but on the contrary, it often causes you to become entangled in complicated relationships that you weren’t too keen on pursuing even from the beginning. Ipuni, I am glad that I learned this lesson,” she says. That’s why, I think mom’s emphasis is on making her life more simple and uncomplicated. She can give attention to what’s essential with a heart that’s full of gratitude.

Of course, I imagine that if I had so many people I needed to give attention to or take care of, my heart would also

be confused, not always knowing what’s more important in my life. By the way, what exactly is essential in my life, the life of Ipuni? Hmm... I think it is eating, resting, playing with my sisters and cuddling our mom. I love those things and I love my life here on the mountain. I’m lucky.



## MOM NOW HAS A SMALL SOLAR ELECTRIC SYSTEM

Our world is buried again in the white mist this morning. It is a day when the 'solar electric system' cannot function properly because the sun is not strong enough and barely visible. The battery is more than half full so it will last a while, but it's wise to save it in case of an emergency. So mom turns off the power system.

We lived with candlelight for close to one year. Mom also had a headlamp she'd sometimes use outside at night when she looked like a coal miner or a gynecologist. Yuk! Let's not even think about that one for too long! Anyway, recently mom got a little solar panel on the roof and one full cycle battery, exactly like the ones used in a car. She is so excited about it and full of appreciation for them being in our home and making things more manageable as a result. Now she has electric power, mom has installed the internet on the hilltop. This is a huge gift and means that she doesn't need to go to town so regularly to check her email or do other things online.

It seems that the experience of living without electricity

has changed mom in many ways, deepening and widening her consciousness. She realizes that like most humans, she previously consumed and took for granted many things with very little, if indeed any, gratitude. These things not only included power and energy like we are talking about here but also material possessions, which seemed easy to obtain and replace. We live in a disposable society. Whatever happened to caring for things to ensure longevity or repairing them when they break? Mom is keen to learn more about living in among nature and to not continue to be a thoughtless consumer. Even when the sun is strong in the sky if mom isn't using any power, she turns it off. It is nice to have electricity, but she knows that it is unnecessary to have everything others may see as a necessity to live happily.

"Even with inconvenience, if we accept it Ipuni, we can find peace. We can enjoy the process, doing things by hand using ancient methods and techniques. We humans think that everything given to us is our right and given without cost to the earth, but is this true? When we excavate oil from the Amazon, thousands and thousands of living beings are destroyed and the earth is being drained of its vital

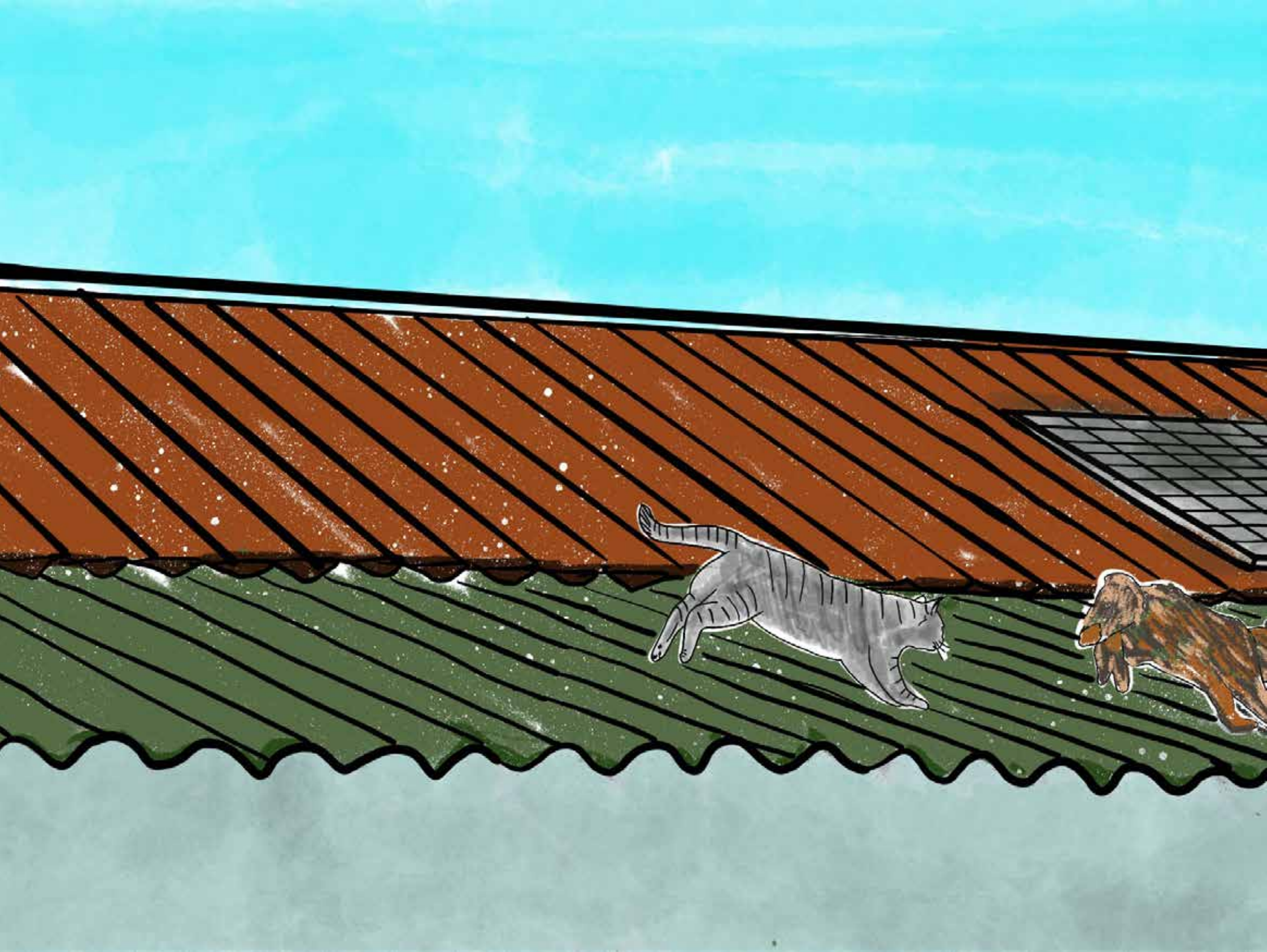
fluids. All this for unthankful humankind's convenience, am I right?" I think we all know this to be the case, even if we choose not to dwell on it. This practice of moms helps her to say 'no' to things and services that she doesn't need. All too often, we devour all things on offer greedily even when they are not required - a sad but honest evaluation of society in general. I feel so glad not to be a part of that way of life. Living here with mom is such a simple, beautiful (I was going to say purrrrrrfect again) way to live.

The whole mountain is incredibly tranquil. Hardly any noise reaches up here. Occasionally, cows can be heard or a donkey or two. It literally feels like its just us four cats and mom, alone in the world. Of course, this being alone is not being lonely - there is no negativity to it but a happy silence of aloneness. The sound of rain repeatedly tapping on the slate roof fills the space with peace, a calming rhythm. This serenity and quietude, which is felt deeply from the inside to the out, is challenging to articulate into words, but I hope you get the gist.

Usually, mom sweeps the dirt yard in front of the house before her Qigong and meditation practice. This morning,

since it is raining outside she cleans our room. She bows down before she begins her practice. "Thank you, Universe, Mother Earth and Ancestors for everything you've given to me. Thank you for allowing me to stay on this beautiful and sacred mountain for a while. Thank you for opening the way for me to find the truth in living a simple life and delight in the happiness, peace and joy within. And for learning to be more humble and embracing my place in nature", she sits and closes her eyes. I love my mom so much, and hearing her utter these heartfelt words makes me so proud she's my mom.

My sisters Kai and Hana, and our brother Cielo, are all dozing off by mom's side. But I am a little concerned about the water dripping down from the ceiling again. About a week ago mom went up to the roof to apply silicone to where the rain leaks in. But as I look up at the slate roof, which is our ceiling, it seems several places are already wet, which means that mom has to put buckets and bowls to catch the raindrops once again. I hope the rain will stop before it becomes too troublesome for us. We are running out of bowls and buckets!







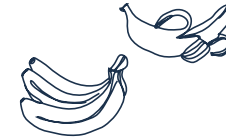
## FELINE INSTINCTS

Mom has been a little blue these last few days. This morning since the sun is bright in the sky, I decide to go out and get something as a gift for her to brighten her mood. In the bushes, I find this colorful little creature about 30 cm long. It moves smoothly in a zigzag fashion and looks so pretty. When I bring it into the room where mom is still sleeping, sister Hana jumps down from the bed and makes this funny noise, waking mom. Upon seeing my gift, she immediately jumps out of bed shrieking, “Oh, no! No Ipuni, it’s not supposed to be indoors”. I can see she is panicking. Her face looks exactly like white paper. She runs to fetch the broom and the dustpan and quickly swipes my gift up and runs outside with it. As she comes back, she scolds me and says, “Ipuni, please don’t bring these creatures indoors, okay?” I am sorry mom doesn’t like my gift. I thought it was cute and had no idea she doesn’t like little snakes. As mom looks at me disappointed, she tries to explain. Although she truly believes that we are equal, whether humans, cats, snakes, spiders, scorpions, rabbits or birds. Nevertheless, when she encounters a snake, her heart stops beating in fear. This fear of course, originates from memories, from the

stereotypical, programmed image that the snake is terrible. These memories have been absorbed by her conscious and unconscious mind for a very long time and control her responses to them. “Ipuni, I am sorry that I didn’t like your gift. But mom doesn’t want it inside. They can be outside happily. We all have our own place to be at the right time, not just anywhere. Please just let the snakes stay outside, okay? Thank you,” says mom.

Later, it seems mom is keen to lift her mood, so she opens wide the windows and the door and starts cleaning the room. When she goes out to put the blankets on the laundry line, I notice Kai is fussing about something. I see my sister is trying to catch a little bird that has somehow flown into the room in a panic. Oh my god, Kai is a jumper. She jumped so high and caught the bird in her mouth. At that moment, mom comes in, “Oh, no! Kai, no, no!” Now mom chases Kai and after much struggling, finally manages to rescue the bird. It is now in mom’s hand, so tiny and fragile, its wings wet from being caught in Kai’s mouth. “Oh, little one, you have already stopped breathing. One moment you were here and the next moment you are gone...” mom cries and feels sad for this unnecessary loss of life. We follow her out





## BANANAS, BANANAS AND YET MORE BANANAS

as she buries the bird in the garden.

It appears that none of us can please mom today. We seem to only be upsetting her. “I know it is what it is. You cats do things by your instinct. The little bird came into the room accidentally and you acted naturally for you. However, mom will be so thankful if you don’t kill for fun Kai, or indeed any of you. I need to find balance in these living conditions and I understand that. But sometimes it’s not easy”, mom sighs.

Mom puts her cushion on her meditation rock as usual. The sun is up, but it’s slightly hidden behind the clouds. It will come out in a minute, I’m sure. “Are you waiting for the sun?” a voice utters from down below. Kai sticks her head out to investigate as Don Marcelo greets mom as he passes by on his horse. What? Waiting for sun? That’s just the right and the perfect expression for this moment.

He lives in a little village called San Pedro just below the mountain and has a small farm further up from our hilltop. “Hola, are you off to work?” mom asks. “Indeed”, he answers. “When you come down later, could you please bring me 20 bananas if you have any to spare?” she inquires. “Okay,” Don Marcelo waves as he passes by.

Later that afternoon, he brings two huge bundles of bananas on his horse. How is mom ever going to eat all of them, I can’t help but consider. Maybe he thinks she needs fattening up! She pays him and smiles with gratitude for this unexpected abundance, whilst wondering how on earth she’ll be able to get through them all. She’d only



## COFFEE BEGINS AS WOODEN CHOPSTICKS

asked for 20 but didn't have the heart not to accept the rest as Don Marcelo picked them and the horse carried them all the way here. It's not an easy task to carry such a cumbersome load. After he leaves, my sister Kai and I inquisitively sniff the bananas to check if they are all good for mom. Needless to say, she has been eating bananas every day - banana bread, banana smoothies and banana soup. Yes, I said banana soup. Using the unripe green ones that taste like somewhat potato, adding some garlic and onion. It tastes delicious.



I feel a bit under the weather this morning, so I stay a little longer in my cozy, cushiony basket that mom made. It is ideal for a tiny cat like me. Hmm..... I smell roasting coffee. Maybe I should get up after all. It smells so good. I love the days that mom roasts her coffee. When I say 'her' coffee, that's exactly what I mean. She harvests the beans from her very own coffee trees, dries them and peels the shells. She roasts them every 4-5 days, then grinds them every morning to drink immediately afterward. The taste is outstanding. Kai told me that mom planted the coffee trees up here about two years ago. That was before my time at the hilltop hut.

Some say that coffee trees that grow at a higher altitude produce a better tasting coffee. But it's challenging to grow in the higher elevations, resulting in less production and making it more valuable as a commodity.

The amount of coffee produced and exported in Ecuador is small compared to other countries. However, here where the climate is diverse, both Arabica and Robusta species

grow. These are the most grown and loved coffee trees worldwide. It is said that only 15 countries in the world have both types of coffee growing - just another gift from nature to be thankful for here on our mountain.

In Vilcabamba, people plant coffee trees between banana trees because they thrive in shady places. Two years ago, mom planted seventy tiny coffee trees that looked exactly like wooden chopsticks, in between nine banana trees on the hill in an area next to her hut. Kai says that the day after mom planted the trees she was thrilled, knowing they would be growing in a fully organic environment with plenty of nutrients from the earth, sun, rain and the wind. About six months later, the first flower bloomed from the tiny, chopstick coffee tree. Mom was almost out of her mind with pure joy. She danced around, throwing her arms out like a crazy woman. She is so funny and fabulous.

Back to the coffee trees. Here follow mom's tips to planting healthy, happy trees. They like the moist ground, so place them well with this in mind. Dig a hole about 60-70 centimeters in diameter depending on the size of the roots of the tree, cover the roots with good, softened soil

and then sprinkle manure on top. Also, and this is super important, the place where the tree has entered must be a little deeper than the rest to capture the water to prevent it running off too quickly and not have a chance to soak into the new plant. This is especially essential here in the dry season.

Kai says that mom used to walk between her coffee trees each morning, greeting them individually. Of course she would water them diligently too. So maybe if you are planting coffee trees, you should do the same. Talking to the newly sprouted leaves that shine a gorgeous green color, she touches them gently with love and whispers, "you have rooted good, good, well done. So far nature has helped you and you are doing great. Now since we are approaching the dry season, I promise I will also help you with regular watering."

Many families in Vilcabamba, like my mom, grow Catimor coffee trees. These are of the Arabica type. The benefits of growing this type are that it grows faster than other species and has a high yield in the right conditions. They especially like more shady places. Although the tree does not grow

tall, the fruits (beans) are larger than other varieties. They are happy in the elevation of Vilcabamba as it's not too high nor too low in altitude. It is very suitable and if our coffee is anything to go by, they produce very tasty beans!

After raining all night, the whole mountain shimmers and sparkles in the morning light. All the hilltop hut family is out in the yard. Kai and Hana roll around in the dirt. Cielo, our brother, walks around sniffing in the water droplets resting on the flower petals. Mom is spreading the coffee beans on the mat to dry. And me? I stay by mom, watching the laundry hanging on the washing line blowing in the gentle wind. I listen to the sounds of the breeze tickling the leaves, the crickets, the insects buzzing and the birds singing their various harmonies. How thoroughly lovely, I feel so privileged to live in this magical place with mom and the rest of the gang. Dragonflies flock in the courtyard. The curtains dance with the movement of the air and the sun is about to go down over the mountains.

“It seems rather sad to me and yet so beautiful. Just look at this beautiful sunset. Everything that exists is so perfect and yet I feel such sadness at the same time, why is that? Do

you know Ipuni? I am sad because I know it will disappear quickly? And there is no way I can keep hold of it for long? I want this beautiful sunset to stay right there at the ridge of the mountain, but it will go away... The teachers say that everything is impermanent. I see it for sure now; nothing lasts forever except that everything is temporary in the cycle of being born, growing old, getting sick and dying. So why not accepting that this sad but beautiful sunset will go, knowing we will see it again tomorrow, right Ipuni? The teachers also say if this exists, that exists; if this ceases to exist, that also ceases to exist. I understand now. There are always other sides to make it what it is; when one side goes, the other side goes as well - like death and birth, beauty and ugliness, light and dark. Death exists because birth exists. The beauty ceases to exist, so too the ugliness. Without one side, there is no other. Neither one is better than the other. Infact without each other the whole wouldn't be the whole at all. Is that it? What do you think Ipuni? It's tough to explain my emotions today.” Mom looks at me with questioning eyes and I blink slowly in response, hoping she understands that I have absolutely no idea.

Although I guess what mom is saying is that it's vital to

understand and be aware of both sides of everything and to appreciate them equally as they are. When you comprehend that and implement it in your life, you can see the beauty because of it and therein the truth lies.





## AT THE END OF THE RAINY SEASON

Mom has been working in the yard around the house and the garden with help from our neighbor uncle P, for the last two days. The courtyard is cool in the open air and now without weeds. We enjoy rolling around on the soft, dried dirt after all the weeds have been removed and collected to go into the compost pit. Everything in the mountain has grown wild during the rainy season. And now, once again, the season begins changing to the dry period.

Even though the earth got softer due to the heavy rainfall, some bushes have taken root deep in the earth and just won't come out. They don't give up their lives so easily. I guess all living beings do their utmost to survive. So mom has had to use all her strength and willpower to uproot them. She feels the violence of her actions in her hands. Even though the task seems to be a necessary one, for mom, it isn't a job she is completely comfortable with.

She has to stop several times, staring at the weeds while doing her work. They have such lovely flowers. Is it a weed or a plant she has to contemplate? These flowers are

beautiful. Should she leave them to continue to grow or pull them out with the other weeds? She can't decide and doesn't know what to do. She will leave them there for now, she thinks. There are also fantastic flower plants that are well established and older but take up a lot of space. She sees that underneath there are newly sprouting plants that look weak due to not receiving enough light from the sun. So, she decides to pull out some of the old ones to make room. It's a tough decision, one she doesn't take lightly. She hopes it is the right thing to do. "What do you think, Ipuni?" mom winks at me and smiles.

She notices within herself that pulling out the weeds in the garden is like pulling out the weeds in her mind. She recognizes the 'dying, dried plants' in her being too, the ones that block the sun from the fresh growing seeds. It's good to acknowledge this similarity with a meditative heart. After all that work mom is exhausted as she sits to eat lunch.

She has steamed corn freshly picked from her garden. She shares it with uncle P and they sit in the shade to eat. I lay by her as my sisters and brother are grooming themselves

next to us. She thinks about the delicious corn she is eating. "I just buried the seeds, then after a while, I get this beautiful food which helps sustain me." This corn mom eats was planted at the end of last year. And now almost at the end of the rainy season, it is ready to eat. They don't look very appealing to me. They've got worms in some parts and the lining is missing. They are so unlike the ones sitting all shiny on the supermarket shelves. But mom simply cuts out the areas invaded by the worms "Some may say that we have to eat the 'best,' but what is the 'best'? Do they have to look perfect? Mine looks the best and beautiful to me. They make my heart smile! What more could I want? I just dug a small hole and buried the corn seeds. They then sprouted by themselves and endured all the weather changes. Of course, the rain helped them not to go thirsty. Nature nurtured and provided this corn. Oh, nature, I love you and am so glad to live in harmony with you. Thank you for all the work you do. You make me full of emotion."







## WHEN WE HAVE LESS, WE BECOME MORE CREATIVE

Mom receives an unexpected call from her friend L wanting to visit us for lunch that day. Mom hasn't been down to the town in a while, so I'm wondering what she will have in the kitchen to cook for us. It seems she's thinking the same thing. She looks around at the shelves where she stores our food. You see, unlike most people, mom doesn't use a refrigerator. She finds beans and quinoa and knows her garden will provide the rest. I follow her as she runs to the garden to investigate what is on offer. She always manages to make tasty dishes to seemingly appear from nowhere. She pulls out a radish and picks radish leaves, which I know are rich in various vitamins and so very healthy as well as tasty. Mom likes to teach me these things. In just a few minutes, her basket is full of lots of greens. Lunch is in the making.

In her kitchen, she busies herself. Here comes one of mom's 'famous' recipes, so pay close attention.....the quinoa is in the pot that has already started boiling. Mom lowers the heat and fills another pot with water, this also goes on the

stove. When the water boils, she puts the radish leaves into it with a teaspoon of salt. Later she squeezes water out of the radish leaves, chops and rubs it with a pinch of salt, panela (sugar cane) and sesame oil. Yum. It's making me hungry thinking about it. She mixes it all together with the quinoa. It is a quinoa salad. Now, she slices the radish and a carrot into matchstick shapes and sautés them with olive oil with a pinch of salt. She finally puts it all on a plate and sprinkles chopped green onion and some crushed walnuts. The sautéed radish salad is ready for lunch. She made it from scratch, including picking the ingredients fresh from the ground, in about 20 minutes. It looks incredible. I bet it tastes good too.

Mom had beans soaked in water since last night, so she boils them with sweet potato and then blends and pours it into a bowl and sprinkles chopped cilantro on top. The bean soup for lunch is ready too. Wow! Not only does mom make the food quickly from fresh, mostly homegrown ingredients, she makes it look so beautiful and her food always tastes delicious without exception - ask anyone!

The garden seems magical to me. It doesn't look like there



## GARDENING NEVER CEASES

is much I can eat there, but when mom goes in, she fills her basket up in no time and cooks up a storm. Magic tricks, I think.

Soon after she is ready with the food, her friend arrives. This lady is nice and strokes my head gently. I find her pleasant, so I let her and I stay a while. This isn't something I often do as I feel under no obligation to entertain mom's guests. I usually leave that side of things to Macdol. He's the social one, but I like this lady. There is a lot of laughter while mom and her friend talk and they seem to enjoy their time together very much.

Mom's gardening continues throughout the year. From early October to June the following year, it is an essential working period. During this time, vegetable seeds are sown every two or three weeks. Then, the leaves of the vegetables grow enough to eat by November. Throughout the rainy season the garden thrives. Mom collects the seeds in mid-May, then from July to October, it is more like a resting time for the garden since the wind blows strongly most days and it is especially challenging to keep the earth moist.

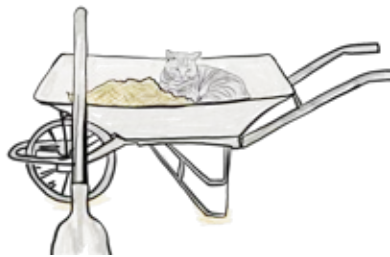
This year mom's lettuce is ready to seed earlier than last year and there's so much chia. Chia seed is a 'Super Food', rich in nutrients, including protein, omega 3, calcium, magnesium, iron and dietary fiber. The chia grows like weeds in mom's garden. She adds it to her lemon water. "It doesn't taste as bad as you think, Ipuni," mom says, knowing it looks far from delicious to me.

The wind seems to have disappeared overnight. This morning the hilltop hut is filled with stillness, a few yellow butterflies and a swarm of dragonflies all flutter in the



## NIGHT WANDERING ON A COSMOPOLITAN SUNDAY

courtyard. The weather is perfect today, gentle and calm. We wonder where the wind has gone. I have never seen it blow so strong in my life like in recent days. We all had to stay inside. My sisters and brother seemed to be okay with that, but I was so bored. Mom said that during the first year of living on the mountain, the wind was even stronger. It raged endlessly, so much so that she was scared, fearful and couldn't help but cry in terror. Imagine there was nobody here but mom and Kai alone, inexperienced and facing the elements. Weren't they brave? I would have been paralyzed with fear in the howling wind if it was anything like yesterday and mom says it was worse. I cannot begin to imagine how awful it would have been.



Mom came back home so late last night I was worried about her climbing the mountain all alone in the dark. But as soon as she came in, she straight away went to the kitchen, so I knew everything was okay. She pulled out some fish I could smell before she even reached home, from her basket, cleaned it, coated it with flour and fried it in oil. She did it immediately to prevent the fish from going bad. This is the way mom lives without a refrigerator. Even if she arrives home late at night, if food needs to be preserved, it can't wait until morning! By the time she is finished, I am hungry, but it is time for bed and I can see she is tired.

Whilst snuggling with her, I again question how she managed to walk up the mountain when it's dark? Isn't she scared of walking alone? I am a cat, so for me wandering around at night is natural, but for mom? It's as if she knows what I'm perusing as she tells me that although she has walked back from the town at night many times, initially she did feel frightened. She pondered and meditated on her reaction to the fear, knowing it is the same mountain



## PRANAYAMA IN THE NEW AGE

she walks during the day but acknowledging at night things in the hill change the way they appear. Seeing different things, a stick, for example, that at night looks like a snake, causing her to see fears she didn't know she had. But later, after more contemplation on the matter, she realized it was all in her head, not reality at all. So she confronted her deepest fears. Only then, did she find the beauty in walking at night on the mountain. I still think it's a bit crazy, but if she enjoys it, that's okay with me.

Coming back to the fish story (I soooooo love fish!), mom had started to miss eating fish as she hadn't had it in so long. So she bought some in town, thinking she could store it in the refrigerator at a friend's store since she had other plans after her shopping and knew she wasn't coming home until late. But mom's friend's store was not open. So, she carried the fish in an ice bag all day long! It went with her to a cafe, a birthday party, a small music concert and finally to a bar for a glass of gin & tonic - what a cosmopolitan way to spend a Sunday. For both mom and the fish!

Oh, I almost forgot to tell you about the famous breatharian mom heard about in town yesterday. I think it is interesting and maybe you will too. Forgive me that I don't recall the name of the renowned expert, but he held a workshop in town, which many people attended. Everyone seemed to be talking about it. According to the breatharian, by fasting, the body receives more cosmic energy and feels better and needs to sleep less. They call it Prana Awakening. I won't go into all the things that were being spoken of, but to some degree, I can understand what they say because, as a cat, I sometimes fast when I don't feel quite right. The fasting removes many unhealthy bacteria and, of course, helps change the bad eating habits you've built up for decades. Emptying the vessel first and then implanting good bacteria by consciously eating well. Yes, that I can understand! But exactly how long are they fasting for? They claim they can live forever by only breathing. Is that really possible? I'm not entirely sure. They also say that they eat only because they want to, not because they have to. They appreciate and enjoy their food and eat it not by habit but by will. How can this be the true path? They can live by only breathing, yet



## A LITTLE TOWN OF LONGEVITY

they appreciate and enjoy food? The whole thing doesn't make much sense to me at all.

After hearing all this fuss in the town, mom was with her friend and arranging to meet her later to have lunch. Her friend suggests they try a 'prana lunch.' Once upon a time in East Asia, Daoists who lived deep in the mountains and caves practiced immortality by breathing correctly and only drinking the morning dew or tea of natural herbs. Is mom's friend one of those immortals, perhaps? Or maybe I'm just theatrical. I do like to create mischief, after all.

It's interesting to note that Siddhartha, the Buddha said, "You cannot starve your body and get enlightenment." We may also recall that Jesus allegedly miraculously fed many hungry people with just seven loaves of bread and some fish. In their days, didn't Buddha and Jesus know that practicing Prana could help people escape the pain of hunger and never have to die at all? It seems likely to me if this practice truly offered salvation, these enlightened masters would have advocated it. But then I'm just a 21st century cat, so maybe my reasoning isn't sound.

It's been raining hard these days. When it rains, my mom is kept busy with organizing the buckets and bowls she needs in order to catch the rain dripping from the ceiling. When this happens, my sisters and I have to jump around to avoid all the water droplets. As a result, I don't particularly look forward to rainy days. I don't like the moisture sticking to my coat either and making me chilly and uncomfortable. But mom likes the rainy season from January to May because the mountains become greener; she describes it as the mountain diving into the vast sea of tranquility. The hill remains in an almost fascinating and mysterious misty fog. There's no strong wind and all the noise from the neighbors working with machines and the barking dogs are buried in the thick mist. The whole mountain becomes a submarine in this sea of obscurity.

This morning after raining briefly, the sky and mountains become like an Asian ink painting. The scenery changes from moment to moment seamlessly. How thankful we are to see this every single day. I see mom smiling as she looks at the peaks of the Podocarpus national park. She

calls it the 'wizard mountain' because of its mysterious look hidden up high in the clouds.

There are two mountain peaks in Vilcabamba that people here have a deep respect for. One we call Mandango symbolizing masculine energy and the other is called Guaranga, representing feminine energy. When you look at the mountains from our hilltop Mandango is on the right side and is handsomely rugged, resembling a strong man's muscular body. Guaranga is directly in front of us and looks just like a woman's body flowing in gradual, smooth curves. Both are utterly beautiful.

Vilcabamba is renowned as 'a village of longevity.' Scientists have found the warm climate, mineral-rich water, low fat, fiber rich foods and active physical exercise in peaceful surroundings of the local people could lend weight to this claim. Here, it is part of daily life to trek up and down the mountains because many cultivate crops on the steep ridges. You can often see the healthy appearance of the elderly, some even claiming to be over 100 years old. We see them in the park in the village, modeling for the tourist's photography. They represent Vilcabamba's longevity.

As the scientists say, the water here is rich in minerals, smooth and hydrating. It's true you don't have that feeling of crisp, dry skin after showering that you experience in the cities and you can leave your hair without conditioner too, the water is so natural. You can also wear white clothes for a few days without the area around the neck discoloring quickly, even in the heat.

It's a little sad for me to observe that these days, like the rest of the planet, even a small village/town like Vilcabamba has become exposed to and embraces the following of world trends. This leads to many, especially among the youth, to abandon many of their old, traditional ways. And they are adopting a new way of life, like youths everywhere in the world these days, which includes fast food, internet obsession and driving cars, unnecessarily causing pollution. It's a shame, but here again, we see a town blending into the others and it's residents disappearing among the masses in following the world trends.

Several rivers flow down from Podocarpus National Park and wind through the many small villages around Vilcabamba. These rivers are a swimming pool for children, meditative

music for those who love to walk along with them, the public bath, the laundry room and much more. They are the life force and the nectar of Vilcabamba.

Mom opinionatedly says that the River Uchima is the very best river locally. It descends from Podocarpus, passes through Sacapo and San Pedro and flows further down to another village. The water is cold, crisp and clean, which encourages the desire to scoop it up in your hands and drink it. Mom gives in to the desire and drinks the water. It is invigorating.

On the weekends, local people enjoy picnics on the river beach with their families. You can see children jumping into the water and adults making the fires to roast something to eat. Later, the whole family does the laundry together in the river, laying their clean clothes on the rocks to dry in the hot sun. Of course, mom has concerns about the use of chemicals in the soap contaminating the river, but the entire scene reminds mom of her home country Korea in the '70s. Remembering these old memories brighten her face when she thinks about it. These scenes are nowhere to be found in current day Korea since rivers are all protected

by the law.

Mom walked down this morning. I can picture her quite clearly getting to the bottom of the mountain and stepping into the river, washing her dirt covered boots and rinsing the sweat from her face. She is filled with wonder in pondering how long the water has been flowing through here as she looks at the large and small pebbles. The stones are smooth, round and shiny in the fast-flowing water.

She understands that in their smoothness, they contain the history of the river and the enduring time of it, which has literally shaped them year after year for generations. Sadly humans are mostly only consumers of nature and wouldn't even care to contemplate the weight of life these stones have carried. Mom touches them with a feeling of deep reverence and awe.







## BOOTS: CLIMBING ESSENTIALS

“You wellie boots, I want you to rest now. For two years and two months, you have worked hard, keeping my feet happy. The slipping, worn out soles reveal how hard you have worked for me. Because of you, I have been able to climb up and down the mountain. This activity has made my knees, heart and body healthier and stronger,” mom says to her old, worn out boots as she plants flowers in them. These boots are still bursting with blooms on the mountain top to this day! Later, my sister Kai told me the full story about the boots. I’ll share it with you now.

In April 2013, when mom embarked on her hilltop hut building project, she came across these blue rubber boots on the shelves of a construction materials store. She bought them and wore them immediately. They were super. At that time, mom was going up and down the mountain every day to manage the construction and oh, how her feet suffered. She tried all the different shoes and boots that she had - all with the same result - tired, swollen, aching and sometimes blistered feet. Then one morning, on her way walking up, mom encountered a young man who was wearing black

rubber boots. “Are those boots comfortable climbing the mountain? Don’t your feet get hot?” mom asked. “They’re okay,” he simply answered. She had seen many locals wear them, but didn’t think they would be comfortable or practical for climbing the mountain. However, mom thought that so far no shoes have been comfortable, so why not try some rubber boots. “I need to get myself some wellies,” she resolved.

Since mom found them, her blue rubber boots became the favorite and most versatile shoe in her mountain life. She soon discovered that they were also a fashion accessory. It seems all clothes can be worn with blue rubber boots! Whether it’s floral dresses, jeans or miniskirts. She wasn’t just reluctantly wearing them either; she genuinely loved them and looked fabulous in her outfits. She often received compliments from friends, “Maya is beautiful and looks fantastic no matter what she wears.” I don’t think their words were bullshit since I agree wholeheartedly.

Those rubber boots have a thin outsole compared to other expensive hiking boots. So, when you step on the ground, it’s almost like your feet feel the energy of the earth. And

your feet get a massage on your soles when stepping on the stones, which creates a slow vibration that rises through the nervous system, allowing mom to pay attention to every step she takes. It is an excellent way to be present in the moment mom thinks, loving her boots more and more.

Whenever mom cleans her wellies in water, she remembers the old white rubber shoes that were popular in Korea when she was young. She used to have the task of washing her grandfather's and drying them in a sunny place. Perhaps people in the early days seemed to appreciate the benefits of the thin soles of these shoes too. Of course, people in the old times were undeniably much more intelligent than people of this modern time.

The more days mom walks up and down the mountain, the frequency of her feet painfully swelling diminishes. She feels her heart and lungs are also strengthened. She can climb uphill to the hut now in about an hour without a break, whereas it took almost two hours before. Progress!

Also, mom's lost a lot of weight with all this activity. She laughs and says that the unnecessary fat attached to her body previously melted away into the sweat and was

discharged out of her body as she climbed. Despite decades of struggling to lose weight, the flesh that she no longer needed dropped off in a little over a month - another huge benefit in living here.

I understand, of course, that it wasn't only because of the gorgeous boots mom wore, but her body and mind aligned and got lighter while going up and down the mountain. I see it that mom was peeling off her skin, like a snake shedding his to make way for the new. Mom shed off her former self. And it all started with the blue rubber wellie boots.

Mom felt that every single cell in her body was functioning in the right place, moving harmoniously, just like the rotating machines in a factory. She feels full of vitality and it shows. She looks wonderful.

Mom's circumstances meant that she had no choice but to walk up and down the mountain instead of taking a taxi. She didn't have the finances available to buy a car, so she was forced to walk, but I do wonder if she would have found this beautiful freedom otherwise. I see that her walking has become a medicine and meditation for her.

Mom used to grumble whenever she climbed up. She fought with her bustling mind until the day she encountered a thunderstorm while walking up, out in the open, with no shelter.

It came suddenly out of nowhere. Heavy rain poured down and soon after thunder began roaring and lightning cracking, seeming to split the earth wide open. There was nowhere to hide, so mom could only keep on walking. In less than a minute her body was totally soaked and thoroughly drenched. I expected her to become fearful as I know I certainly would, but rather than the fear, a strange energy arose from mom's body, she was positively tingling with the power. In the next moment, she felt quite clearly that she was the mountain, the thunder, lightning and the rain. Nature and mom were as one, she couldn't decipher where she ended and nature begun. They had melted into one. They are one.

An incredible, inexplicable excitement was waking up every single cell in every corner of mom's body. The cells that had risen reacted to it as if they had static electricity. Mom experienced pure ecstasy. Since then, the grumbling mind

of mom has disappeared; it is no longer a problem. She has let go. She is free!

Next time you will meet the only sibling you have yet to rendezvous with, Cielo. I would say we've left the best until last, but I know I feel that should be me, but he is rather special. He'll get to share more stories with you. Stories about living intrinsically with Dao (natural flow) and about mom's restless mind finally becoming more settled on an extremely deep level and exactly how this happens and is maintained.

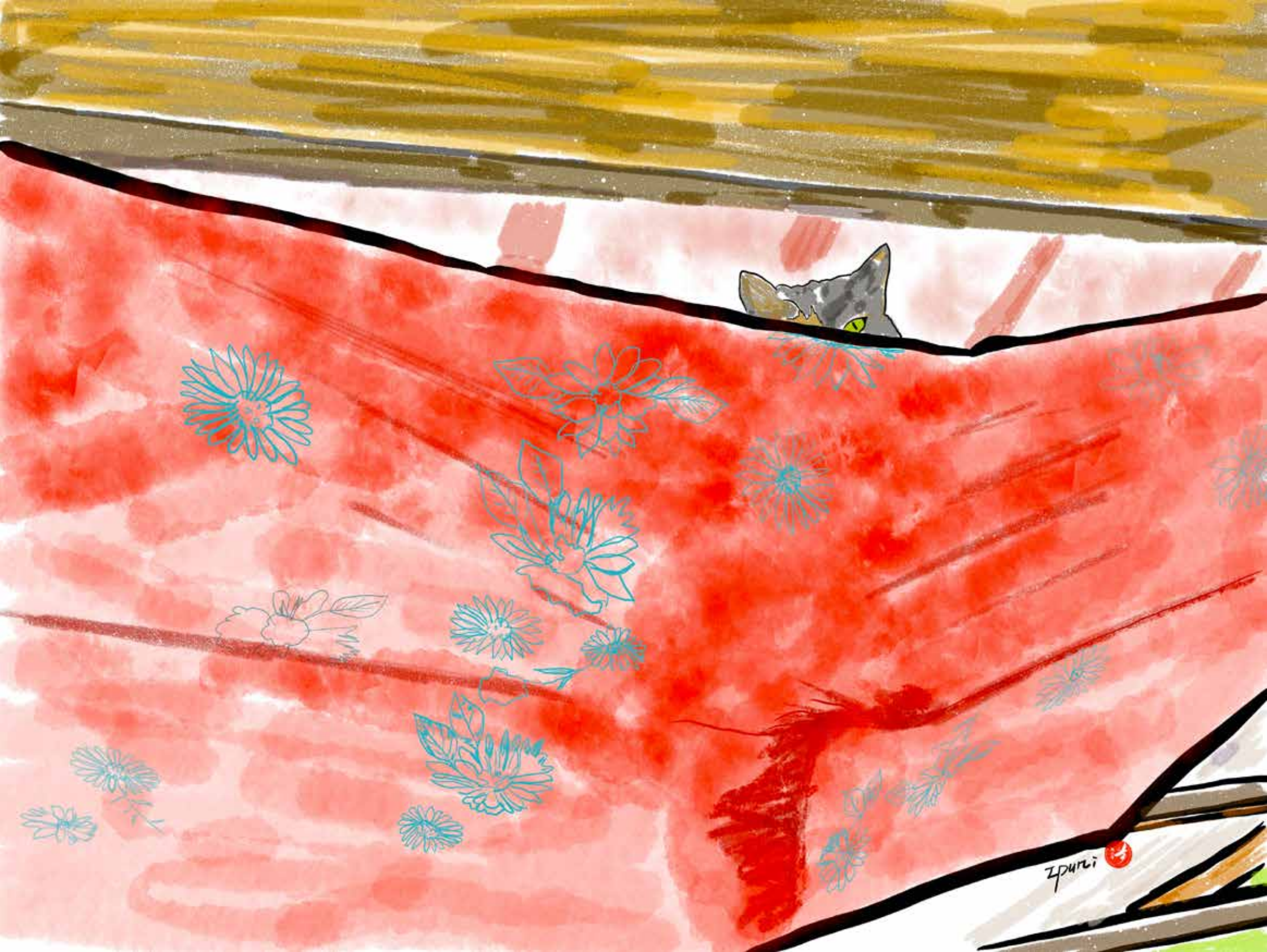
I wish to graciously thank you for following along with me. I've had fun and hope you have too. So long and farewell, for now, I have trees to climb and jumping crickets to play with - Hasta la vista.





my miss Ipuvi ❤️





Зрели 



# 4

## LEARNING TO LIVE WITHIN DAO, THE NATURAL FLOW



Hola, I am Cielo, a good looking (so I'm told) grey, male cat, about seven years old this year, so like mom I'm middle-aged. I am a quiet, shy and gentle soul who just wants an easy life. Oh, yes, and I love food! Previously I lived with mom's ex-husband and came to the hilltop hut about four years ago when he moved away. I used to love being in the garden following mom wherever she went. These days though, I spend most of my time indoors. I don't have either the desire or the curiosity to check out what's going on in the hilltop around our hut anymore or anywhere on the mountain for that matter. Perhaps I am depressed? My mom looks at me with tender eyes. I know she worries about me a lot as I seem to suffer and get sick more often than the others too. I'm sorry she is so concerned.

I do accept that I am a bit 'blue' and I know it's mainly because of Macdol. He came out of nowhere and invaded my domain. When he arrived, I tried to assert myself and



we had big fights a few times. Every time I came away injured and defeated. As you already know, mom loves our kind, so she tried to encourage us to get along. But we cats have different rules we follow. I can't deny how frustrated I get as being inside all the time prevents me from enjoying the beautiful (especially up here) morning sun, which I like very much. I know I should change my ways. I am trying. Mom says that one's life consists of relationships and these encounters can enhance or disrupt our lives. It's up to us and our responses to them. Somehow Macdol coming to the hilltop shattered my ego completely, I was devastated and have yet to recover. When he turned up, mom tried to reassure me that I was still her special boy and asked me to relax and see what he would add to our lives. I know she is right, I should accept him as my brother and give him a chance but...

It's tough for me as I believe he has done more than just invade my territory. I won't go too deep with the story of us because it hurts my pride. Things are getting a little better now, but one thing I can say for sure is that he crushed my self-esteem. It vanished and sunk to the bottom of the sea. Him being here has changed me in so many ways. I don't

like being outside much at all anymore. He's always there as large as life. I can't seem to avoid him.

Of course, not going outside has meant I've had to adjust my behavior and habits - all habits. Things I used to do outside, had to begin to occur inside. Comprendo? To be more specific - we all need to go to the loo, so if I can't do it outside, that leaves inside, doesn't it? What can I do? Mom gets so annoyed. Sometimes, because I am ashamed, I try and find new places to go - hidden places, but then mom has to follow the smell and she gets even more upset. It has become a huge battle for us and I hate making her mad, but I can't bring myself to go outside anymore. She has eventually given up and accepted the days of me doing my business outside are over. She had started to buy cat sand for me to use indoors in a litter tray. Everything had become okay; even my sister Ipuni began to use it too. But in recent days, mom is not able to justify the expense of buying the sand. As things have got a little better with Macdol and me, she keeps telling me to do it outside again. But I have found a better solution - mom's bathtub. I'm not sure she's as happy with this solution to our problem as I am.





She cleans it thoroughly every day after I finish my morning ritual. And this morning, I was rather proud of my efforts. After many tries, I finally perfected doing it right in the plughole where the water runs down. You could say I scored a 'hole in one!' Mom does not look impressed. "How the hell did you manage this? Your poop is stuck in the hole! How am I going to get it out?" she shouts. She storms off to the garden and returns a bit later with two twigs, which she uses expertly like chopsticks and scoops up my poop and deposits it in her toilet. My mom is so innovative - much like myself, I think! Well, this is what happened this morning and I think it was pretty funny. I caught mom laughing about it when she was telling a friend what happened, so I know that she did too (possibly not at the time but eventually). My mom is very patient with me and loves me very much as I do her.

Now I shall end my story here as I appreciate I've got quite carried away chatting about myself and my antics. Please do forgive me - cats have egos too, you see and I did think what happened this morning was a funny ditty to add. I hope you agree. But we should get back down to 'business' (haha) and continue to share stories of mom's

other spectacular adventures you've yet to hear. I'd like to point out that the following stories are not chronological - my brain is just recalling them as and when. Thank you for understanding that this sometimes is the only way to recount actual events.







## INTRUDERS OR NEIGHBORS

Back in the days before we had power up here, mom used to go to the town to access the internet. On one of these occasions invaders came up to our hilltop hut yard. First, a donkey who lives freely in the mountain belonging to nobody in particular, wandered in and attracted by its sweet scent, tore apart mom's treasured tea bags that she got as a gift from Spain. Mom loves that tea and it won't be easy to replace! Then a little later, a whole family of seven cows came and trampled all around the garden and are now all dozing in our yard. Kai and I did our best to chase them away, but they didn't even blink an eye, just continued their inquisitive destruction mission.

"Mom is coming back! She is here", my sister Kai shouts as she runs to reveal what has happened. "Mom, mom, there are a bunch of cows in our yard." On seeing us, mom hurries, running up the hill towards the corner of our hut. She sees the scattered tea on the ground, the cows, the donkey and the devastation they've caused. She cries out, "No, no, no! My tea!". I knew she'd be gutted about that and then she looks further and sees the mess that used to



be to her garden. Now she screams in distress, "Nooooooooo, my garden is ruined!!!"

Mom finds a long stick and uses it to tap the cow's behinds and yells at them, "Time to go back to your home!" Thankfully the cows do get up and slowly move out of our yard. Mom is painfully aware that they may come back since there is no fence to prevent them from entering. After they've gone, she sits by her garden, looking frustrated. She is understandably gutted. All her little vegetable seedlings that had just begun to establish themselves have been uprooted or trampled upon. So much effort, time wasted. Kai jumps in mom's lap and rubs her head on mom's chest and I join them. We do our best to try and comfort her.

After a little while of sitting in silence, mom speaks up, "They are more than a bit annoying, but they are funny too, especially the donkey. When he greets someone or something, he makes that loud, annoying noise that makes you jump out of your skin if you are close by. Now I've got more used to hearing it I find the sound has a warm feeling to it". She has definitely calmed down and is in a more relaxed mood. "Remember the day when the donkey stuck



his head into our window to peek at what we are doing in the room? How funny was that?” She is laughing now as she recalls the occasion and it is true that it was hilarious, he moved his teeth as if he was saying hello to us and that made his whole face look silly. I remember it well. I’m glad mom is feeling better about what has happened now she’s got over the initial shock of it all.

“It seems like this is what it takes to live in nature, right guys?” mom continues chatting to us as she gets up to tidy the mess away. “They are our neighbors, as well as those little bugs that appear each morning around my kitchen sink. When I lightly touch the funny little things, they roll their body and look exactly like a tiny armored ball. If that bug is in the garden, it is good and works hard in the soil. So I remove it from the kitchen where it is unwelcome and return it to the coffee tree field where it belongs! What can I do? We are all creatures who try to survive and live life. Yes, for sure, we are all neighbors. The mountain is the home of all these - donkeys, cows, birds, rabbits, trees, grass; they are the locals. These living beings were on this mountain before me and shall continue after me, so I can’t complain too much. Still, I have to find a way to protect

my vegetable garden. That much is clear!!! “And of course, that’s exactly what she does.

Some days later, uncle P is removing weeds from the yard with a shovel and mom is doing similarly with a rake. Mom likes the clean dirt yard. I love it too because I can feel the warmth of the earth when I walk bare paw, that’s ‘cat speak’ for barefoot! I like feeling connected to the earth and mom does too.

It’s lunchtime and uncle P sits down in the shade beneath a cool eucalyptus tree with his lunch box. Today he has rice, yuka (jungle potato) and beans. Mom offers him a bowl of pumpkin soup as she sits down next to him. He seems to appreciate the offer even though his packed lunch looks good. He has a good appetite after all his hard work, so I’m sure he’ll manage to eat both!

A loud, deep and very lengthy cry comes from the cows nearby. It doesn’t sound painful or unpleasant to my ears, but mom doesn’t seem to be comfortable with the sound. “Uncle P, why do the cows cry like that? Are they sad or in pain?” she asks. “No. Not at all. They are simply telling us that it is going to rain”, he replies nonchalantly.

So, it's going to rain. I think the cows are right since the clouds are hanging low and humidity is in the air for sure. After lunch, uncle P takes a nap under the tree and mom relaxes in the hammock.







## KAI AND MOM

As mom gently strokes my head, she tells me that she hasn't always been a cat lover. It seems that she used to be prejudiced about us without having her own experience.

However, ever since mom settled in Vilcabamba, her perception of cats changed. So, what to mom initially seemed to look like an arrogant and indifferent animal on closer examination became sweet, tender and absolutely the best company for her. I'm so glad. If she continued not to like cats, I wouldn't be here snuggling on her lap today. "Cielo, do you want to know about your sister Kai?" mom softly asks as she continues stroking me lovingly. I know Kai and mom had an exceptional connection with each other, so I'm happy to hear the story.

It was September 2013 when mom met Kai. It was about two months after Puyo and Ginger left. One day a friend of hers visited her at the little art space in town that she used to run. She asked mom if she was ready to have a new family member join her on the mountain as she knew that there were kittens ready to go to a new home in the beauty

salon just around the corner. Mom considered the idea for just a minute and excitedly agreed - she was ready.

So off she went to the beauty salon. The lady at the shop brought out a tiny kitten who looked so weak and fragile in comparison to the others. She appeared to have been suffering from diarrhea and didn't look healthy at all. Still, mom didn't reject her but loved her immediately. She asked the lady if she was a male or female cat and was told, "It's a boy." I know, it's a bit confusing, my sister is supposedly a boy. All will be revealed as you keep reading! Anyway, immediately after holding the little kitten mom named it Kai. In Japan, Kai is a boy's name and it also means seashells. She looked so delicate, just like her namesake. On the way home, mom stopped at the vets and got a parasite, flea and diarrhea medicine. Very quickly, despite being sick and weak in the beginning, Kai grew healthy and playful after arriving at our hilltop hut. She would wait for mom at the gate each time she returned from town. During the day, Kai would always stay around mom, working in the garden, going out for a walk in the evening and sleeping in her arms at night. On observing them together, people used to say that Kai seemed to be mom's guardian deity. She



most certainly kept mom's heart warm while going through many new experiences on the mountain, which all sound very tumultuous to me.

There are lots of lovely and funny stories about Kai, but I think this is especially good. See what you think.

Remember, this is a few months after she arrived. One day mom noticed there was bleeding from between the little kitten's legs. She panicked and couldn't understand what was happening. She took a photo of Kai's very private area and sent it to her friend, who knows a lot about cats. "Hey, are you blind? This one is female!" her friend replied. Silly mom, she clearly didn't know how to distinguish male from female cats. Only then did she realize Kai was a girl and in the menarche, menstruating for the first time. This is how my sister ended up with a boy's name. I think it suited her though.

Mom always has a gentle smile on her face when she tells me about her time with Kai. I love it when she smiles like that. I came to the hilltop hut about two years afterward, so I didn't get to see how cute Kai was in the beginning when she was tiny. Mom does love babbling on about her

though and she was a good sister to me, so I don't mind hearing about her so often. She accepted me quickly as her brother when I was brought to join them here and we had lots of fun playing together. So, last year when she passed away, I felt lost, sad and depressed too.







## CLOSING THE GALLERY

Kai told me about how life was after mom had to close her art space: they had to eat very little for some months but managed to keep healthy although they did get quite skinny as a result.

It sounds to me like mom had mixed emotions when the gallery closed. She shared some good times with other people in that space. Laughing and chatting about finding their 'inner selves' without having any idea what that really means and all while doing what comes naturally to mom - creating art. But she couldn't ignore the growing feeling of suffocation, fear and negative emotion she had begun experiencing moment by moment. She felt she was panting like a dog, unable to breathe deeply, just taking exhausted, shallow breaths. She was utterly fearful of not knowing where she was headed. She states, "A dog manages to stay happy in the present - even while panting, but I just can't! Somehow I have to find a way to release this restless anxiety of mine".

One moment she was happy, next she was frustrated, sad



and lonely despite being surrounded by people. Eventually, mom was weary of it all. One day, she woke up with the firm determination to get over these tiresome, endless struggles with her emotions and take the necessary action required.

She recalls the words of many teachers concerning becoming involved in public matters. She must learn to stand alone before she can even contemplate helping others. The melodious stringed instrument plays harmoniously, perfectly in tune, but each of its individual strings alone has its own unique sound. Consider also the trees in the forest. The same is true for them. Each tree stands upright and alone but when necessary the neighboring trees support and assist each other through their root systems - this is the harmonic independence she is keen to learn.

I am just a cat, so I can't claim to know much about human affairs, but it seems to me that when they think of something that they want to do, own or even wear, they are unaware of the many illusions they create around themselves. They do things because someone else is doing it or they do it in order for others to notice how special they are. They wear



clothing only because someone else is wearing it and it is seen to be fashionable and popular. And of course, they are keen to make lots of money - it may make them miserable, but having money is seen to be of utmost importance. As far as I can see, people do so many crazy things for various reasons. Are they good or bad? I have absolutely no idea - as I mentioned before, thankfully I'm just a cat!

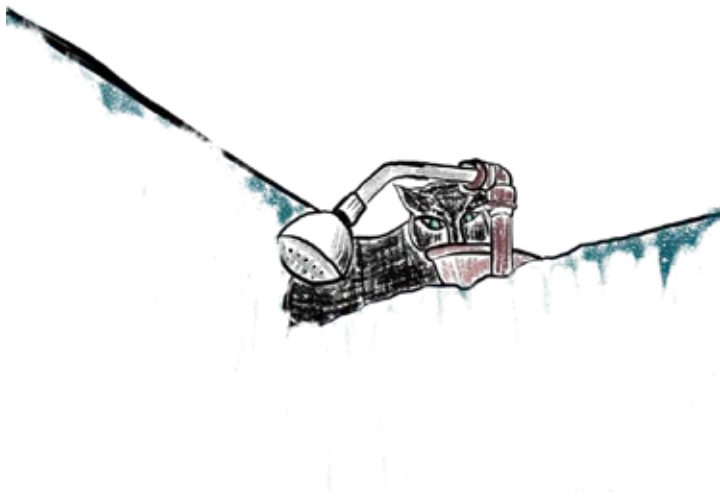
My personal feelings and thoughts are that mom had her art space for a couple of different reasons. I think she thought it would be good for the community and that she would have a fun time too, along with supporting herself and us. I know that she will agree because she's candid, that her ego also enjoyed all the attention she received. She was proud of herself when people complimented her on the things she was doing within and for the community. Although she genuinely enjoyed creating art and organizing exhibitions with others, she became aware of her increased ego and that she was enjoying 'showing off.' Sometime later, she recognized that whatever was going on was part of her continuing journey in life and that the time in her gallery was coming to a close. The reality was that despite being popular and well frequented, mom wasn't able to

sustain the costs of running the art space. You would think that if you do something good, with positive intentions and results to benefit others, that support will automatically follow. Unfortunately, in this case this didn't seem to be so. Despite some generous contributions, mom wasn't able to cover the expenses. Even as a cat I know that money doesn't grow on trees, no matter how hard we wish it to, so she had no choice but to close. As you can imagine this resulted in her feeling like she had failed.

She had to figure out how to deal with this feeling of detrimental loneliness in her heart, which she often struggled with. It's interesting to note here what mom means by this. You see, she found she was more lonely while busy working, connecting and chatting in the gallery. Like dried leaves falling, blowing in the wind, she was just drifting in her day to day activities. Even though she acknowledged she was having fun with the other people, it wasn't helping her to find the inner peace that she was searching for. It didn't help her forget the lonesome feeling of existing. These times and conversations were not fulfilling any need at all within her.



Anyway, the gallery closed. Then came the time for mom to cut out all the nonsense from her life. At least this is what she hoped to do. She intended to withdraw from the public altogether and enter a period of self-seclusion and see whether the loneliness was going to die or if she would! So, since mom no longer had any income and no work Kai and she had to eat less and cut off all unnecessary expenses. Mom made a deal with Kai that they would support each other through this challenging time and that they would play together every day. It sounds like a good deal to me. I'm sure my sister agreed.



## SHANGRI-LA

Kai rubs her head against mom's face whilst she asks, "Why should I get up Kai? I wake up every morning, yet there seems to be no reason for me to get out of bed." It's not like mom to be lazy, so something else is going on. Kai insists, while continuing to nudge mom, "lazy mom, we need our breakfast, so get up and feed us warm milk." Hence, she eventually drags herself up to feed us.

While she is preparing it, she can't stop thinking. Her mind is whirling around and around with dark, despairing thoughts. She seems in the depths of darkness itself, drowning in her sorrows. "What is the meaning of my life? What am I looking for? Why does my life seem to be on pause?" She feels like she is nothing, totally pathetic. She continues thinking aloud. "Without my work, how can I gain validation?" Poor mom, she begins wondering if she's lived alone too long, knowing the flow of the days on the mountain, the monotony of a week, or a month going by in the same routine. She moves slowly and without enthusiasm as she puts down the milk plate in front of us. We quietly lick it. Mom's melancholy is contagious.



She squats by us and monologues, “It is said that there is nothing permanent in this world. One day I will die and so will we all. I feel it’s just too hard to carry on in this way. I feel so totally alone. I know you are here with me, but I feel worthless. This hardship in life, this loneliness of being human, you wouldn’t understand, of course. The weight of my relationship with others seems to be lighter than a feather. I’m untethered. I feel that I am forgotten by everyone. I feel so empty and it makes me sad. I intended to let go of my many unnecessary relationships, so the emptiness is something I should accept with gratitude but still, I feel sorrowful. What is this resistance within me? Is this my ego that doesn’t want to let go of my past? I should be a bird joyfully flying freely, without anyone holding me down, flapping my wings in the morning sunshine...”

Mom of course, voluntarily chose this path of solitude to conquer her loneliness. She now questions if loneliness is actually conquerable after all. She wanted so desperately to attain freedom, but freedom from what? Freedom to live a real, authentic life. She needs to pull herself together yet again. During these dark, emotional days, she has only spoken a few words out loud, whereas she often chats

away. “It seems that I have even forgotten how to speak. What do you think Kai? Am I still speaking okay?” mom laughs as she tickles her. It seems that she finds comfort in my sister’s soft and warm coat. They cuddle together for some time and it is just what mom needs.

Kai begins to give Mom some advice that she hopes she can understand: they are deeply connected so I like to think she hears her. “Mom, take long, slow strolls. Do it every day. There are so many tiny, intriguing things to observe as you look intently all around you. As you know I can spend hours just watching things. So you should try it too like me. Perhaps then you might find what you are searching for?” Kai continues as she purrs softly nestled on mom’s lap, “Stop being overly concerned about the wind that we’re seeing so much these days, the wind is just the wind. It’s supposed to be blowing. If you run to hide in fear whenever it gets strong, you will miss out on the extraordinary stories the little things are telling you. You should listen to the sound of the tiny bugs in the sunless place. You should see the small flowers that bloom by the side of the narrow path where nobody sees it. You will learn from them about simply just ‘being.’ The existence itself is beautiful and purposeful.



Sometimes the wind blows too strong to bear. When that happens we just need to stay under the bush and wait for it to pass by. And it will soon enough. So too your loneliness will pass. It will come and go and no doubt, come and go again. When it comes, say 'hello' to it and greet it like a friend, when it goes, say 'goodbye' and let it go freely on its way". Kai's purring is like a lullaby for mom and she is now fast asleep. Kai joins her in slumber soon after.

We have many beautiful, warm days with bright sunshine. This morning is especially gorgeous and us hilltop hut cats share the happiness that is felt by all the beings on the mountain. We all come out eagerly to the front yard and greet the delightful morning by stretching our bodies and rolling around in the dirt. Oddly mom copies us, stretching and turning in the dry mud. Ipuni finds this hysterical. She goes to mom and pushes her head right into mom's mouth while it is wide open as she's copying us yawning. It is really amusing. We all laugh so much. What a perfect start to our day.

Sometimes mom has her camera alongside her when she sits on the meditation rock facing 'La Guranga'. This

morning the sunshine is incredible. As is her habit, Kai sits just a little in front of mom. Sometimes she just stays there until mom gets up and other times she quietly walks around. Today she is walking and the way the light catches her is so beautiful that mom endeavors to capture it on film. She grips her camera tightly and begins taking photos.

The light and Kai come into the camera viewfinder. The contrast between them and the background is intense and the resulting beauty is heart aching. The light makes Kai stand out incredibly. The darkness in the background accentuates the contrast with the dazzling sunlight. I have never seen that overwhelming contrast between light and darkness until I witnessed these moments. It seems to me that the light and the darkness cannot be beautiful by themselves. They need to coexist to be complete. It reminds me of mom's enhanced understanding mentioned previously of contrasting polarities. Love and pain, beginning and end, no freedom without letting go, no filling without emptying - all existing together. Should we choose one side only or embrace both without judgment to compliment our lives? This morning mom sits on her rock longer than usual in silent contemplation.



As mom opens her eyes, there are beams of sunlight breaking through thick clouds to the East, at the end of Podocarpus National Park, exactly where we see what mom calls the 'wizard' mountain. It appears that heaven is opening up right into the earth. My heart sings, observing this idyllic moment.

"The light makes the whole mountain glow. I'm glowing too. What about you Cielo?" mom asks as she playfully tickles me. Kai comes and greets me by rubbing my nose. We both sit on mom's thigh while she is still in her lotus position. As mom gently rubs our necks, she says, "Look at those mountain peaks, do you see that they appear briefly in the sunlight where the cloud lifts in the distance. It makes me think of Shangri-La." The Shangri-La of Heaven features in the book called Lost Horizon by James Hilton, which she read while learning English in New York a very long time ago. The story was about a heaven on earth found high up in the Himalayas. "If Shangri-La exists in this world," she carries on, "perhaps it's over that peak near the wizard mountain. However, it seems far away, unreachable and a tad unrealistic to me". "In Daoism, it is said that heaven is 'here' within every living and non living thing, not over

'there' beyond our reach. For me too, my heaven is here on this hilltop with you ", mom tickles us repeatedly. Kai jumps out of her lap when she can't stand the tickling anymore but not me, I am a relaxed cat, so it doesn't bother me much. I quite like it when mom gets a bit more playful. "Wait for me, Miss Kai" mom skips off to chase her, laughing. I love times like this. I suppose I should get up too. But first I'll have a long, slow stretch and then go to join the others. "Wait for me, you guys, I'm coming too."

Mom looks up the meaning of Shangri-La and according to Wikipedia, the story is based on the mysterious city of Shambhala (Chambara). It is described as a Himalayan utopia of eternal happiness in a mysterious and peaceful valley at the western edge of the Kunlun Mountains - a secret place disconnected from the outside. As the novel became popular over time, this became a commonly used phrase for a heaven somewhere on earth. It is said that people can live an almost immortal life far beyond the average life expectancy in Shangri-La. For many Westerners, the phrase conjures images of the exoticism of the Orient, also Tibetan Buddhism embraces this ideal within its teachings.



Ordinary yet Extraordinary



## LIVING WITHIN DAO

Mom is still in bed. She doesn't look likely to laugh with us today. It is the 98th day of the 108 days of self-seclusion she has been observing. Everything seemed to be going well up until now. She appears to have lost her motivation. My sisters and I are all worried. We try to cheer her up and get her attention by jumping up and down on the bed. We really want to see her laugh. It must be around 8 am and yet she looks far from enthusiastic about starting the day. The morning sunlight is coming through the window, creating a long beam like a tunnel of bright light. We've disturbed the dust by our running around. Mom stares at the dust motes sparkling in the light aimlessly for a while and soon silent tears cascade relentlessly from her eyes. We stop running about. She is crying. Oh, mom is crying.

"What has happened to my vision, Cielo. I can see everything. My sight has sharpened, sensitized, brightened. I can see the individual specks of dust, like little freckles, dancing and floating in the light. The tears stream forth from the well of my heart in sheer appreciation of the beauty. I can't stop it. I don't want to stop it. Oh, is this it?" murmurs mom



Learning to live within Dao, the natural flow

rather profoundly. "I see it, I see it. Even something as ordinary as a speck of dust is extraordinary." Mom seems to have grasped a significant truth. "Every single particle is glittering, sparkling and exquisite. I understand it now. The existence itself is the shining star with a brilliantly bright vitality. I don't need to search anymore for my fulfillment, because it is in my existence itself! And it is already complete and fulfilled! Perhaps, perhaps...is this the truth I've been seeking?" mom utters.

"Accepting that I am an ordinary human being with nothing special or outstanding about me has allowed me to perceive how extraordinary I am. The truth is that whether there's light shining on me or not, I am a glittering being already, by natural order at one with the existence. Just as you are, my dear Cielo. How extraordinary is that? I see it so clearly now! I don't need to hear an astrologer saying who I am or where my future lies. I don't need to follow all these spiritual paths people urge me to. It's already here - within me".

Mom says she feels that she has just come out of a never ending dark tunnel. She's being welcomed by all the beings





on the planet, all animate and inanimate beings. The trees, the chi of the earth, us cats, our kin, worms, plants, weeds, stones, rivers are enveloping mom with the warmest, mighty, earthy, joyous hug she has ever felt. Her heart is uplifted, light, even weightless. Her mind is a calm, restful, deep sea. How wonderful! She lifts me up and rubs my nose to hers. She has a huge smile on her, oh so beautiful face.

We cats are simple, straight forward creatures. We understand that a flower is simply a flower wherever it blooms. The tiny petals of the flower at the roadside are just the same as the ones on the mountain or the ones with the large petals in a beautiful, manicured garden. They are all pretty flowers. We don't differentiate them by their size, color, or the place they inhabit. They are all delightful to us with their differing, sweet fragrances. But humans seem to like to complicate things, separating themselves, judging the differences. It's no wonder the vast majority find happiness and peace within their own existence escapes them.

Mom continues to share her experience with me, "I have been longing to know who I am, what I am. I have asked for

the answers many times. Nothing satisfactory was found. I wanted to see it, to hear it, to touch it and most of all, I wanted to possess it. But the more I tried, the more I found myself in the hazy shade of Winter. Now when I have given up, stopping, exhausted with the effort of it all, suddenly there the answer is. I was looking so intently it prevented me from seeing what was right in front of me - and always has been! That's why I'm crying, Cielo. Thank you existence, Dao for answering me!" It seems clear to me that mom has just peeled off another layer of her very own onion skin. Yes, even as a cat I believe that the authentic experience with your whole being is utterly powerful and life transforming.

In ancient times, the wise teachers in East Asia said that if you want to find something, don't go looking but be still and silent. Listen to the sound of your own breathing. Then perhaps, you will find what you are searching for! Could this be what has happened to mom? How do I know? I don't even know how I ended up being a cat here in Ecuador with her, but I do know that I'm delighted I did.

What mom has come to appreciate is that the extraordinary lies in the ordinary. And in turn, the ordinary lies in the

extraordinary. However, this truth is challenging for most to accept as they yearn and struggle to be unique and despise any ordinariness they see within themselves. Again, I'm so thankful to be a cat and not have to concern myself with such things. People cannot and most will not embrace the ordinary. As a result, they continuously look for stimulation, techniques and teachings to achieve those extraordinary and amazing feelings about themselves. All of which unfortunately are short lived.

It's now around 9 a.m. and the sun is shining - it's a marvelous morning indeed. Mom hangs her blanket on the laundry line and makes her morning coffee. Her face glows as she smiles, I can see the weight on her shoulders has lifted with this new lightness she has experienced. Everything is as it should be and as perfect as the day is lovely.





## HARMFUL CHEMICAL SHOWER

Another day begins and when mom opens her eyes, she sketches 'today' on the white drawing paper in her mind. It is something she does each day upon waking. The window of opportunity to do this most effectively is when the consciousness is not fully awakened from the dream world. You can make a practical 'to do' list for the day or just observe your feelings. Maybe you feel sad, maybe someone you care for is unwell or has passed away, send them love and maybe later you will burn some incense. Perhaps you have a feeling of gratitude or tenderness for someone on the other side of the globe? Send them good vibes with a full heart. Mom describes this practice as sketching the creative inspiration or filling the details of some ideas she has been considering. Sometimes she draws on a feeling of love, then she thinks about what love means to her during the day and sends it to us cats, to her friends, to her family. Other times she draws on her feelings of generosity or beauty. She practices it throughout her day, depending on what comes into the 'drawing paper in her mind.'

This morning she drew the encounter she will share with

the silvery full moon floating in the clear darkened sky this very night. She will dance with the warm feelings of abandonment she experiences after drinking the delicious rice wine she has made. The East Asian poet, Lee Tae-baek, who often admires the beauty of the moon in his poems, would be jealous!

So mom starts her day with excitement; she walks barefoot, holding her coffee mug in her hand. However, just one moment later, everything changes. She sniffs the air, I copy and we both smell an unfamiliar scent here on the mountain but one instantly recognizable - weed killer!

We both wonder where this awful smell of chemicals is coming from. It smells so strong and repugnant. Mom rushes inside to put her pants on and runs down the hill. A neighbor who raises cows on the hillside of the mountain is with a young man spraying chemicals on the bushes just below our hut.

Mom asks them what they are spraying and why. They can see she is upset about it. They explain that they are spraying weed killer to destroy the thorny bushes that interfere with the grass the cows graze upon. The neighbor shows



no embarrassment about his actions. Mom is shocked. She hopes he will see reason, so goes on to point out to him that if he sprays chemicals, the poison will travel. The cows will eat contaminated grass. The people who eat the meat (including his children, mom hastens to highlight) will also ingest the chemicals. The man begins to get annoyed and insists it's such a small amount and not worthy of all the fuss mom is making. She tells him she's unhappy about it for all those reasons and also because it is being sprayed directly under our hut, so we're inhaling the poison without a choice in the matter. "It's in the air," she persists. "Okay, okay, I'll only spray a little more, I promise," the man says as he walks away from us, spraying as he goes.

The owner of the land on the mountain below our hut lives in a big city in Ecuador. Instead of leaving the land natural as he had done previously, about two years ago he let out the area to the man mom has just spoken with, who now farms his cows there. The many different bushes he is spraying include the overgrown raspberry bushes that mom loves. In the raspberry season, she used to go out and easily fill a basket in no time at all and then eat them fresh and make delicious jam. But since the man came up with the cows,

mom's luxurious seasonal activity has ended.

When viewing the hillsides, the two sides are very different. It is immediately apparent which side the cows graze on. One side is noticeably lush with small and large trees and various brightly colored shrubs exactly as you would picture the beauty of the Andes mountain. The other looks like the farmer's bald head, rather depressing if one loves the diversity of nature - nothing but grass, grass and more grass (and cows of course). But when the sun goes down, it is hard to deny the beauty of the reflection of the sunset as it lands on the bland, bald landscape. It glows a deep purple color, a sharp contrast but undeniably different type of beauty to the other side of the hill. It is stunning in its way. In fact, it's quite a challenge to say which I prefer. Anyway, the excitement mom had in the morning has faded away, and I can see her heart is troubled.

Mom thinks about the little tree that has rooted and been growing on an older grandmother tree for about three years now. Joa is the name mom has given it. The first time mom saw him, he was a tiny stick with a few small leaves sticking out of the hollow part of an older tree's trunk. Somehow



the seed of Joa as a pip landed in this kind grandmother's arm and dried leaves covered it, protected it and sometime later, the seed germinated. How amazing! The miracle of life always finds its way. Joa and the grandmother seem to be one, harmoniously coexisting.

Mom greets Joa whenever she passes him as she walks down the mountain on her way to town. She always stops and gently strokes his leaves for a moment saying, "Joa, you are daring and quirky. I am proud of you and how you are growing. How are you, my friend?" He was growing so well now he had become established in his unique position.

Then one morning, mom finds that someone has intentionally chopped Joa's top off. His whole head has gone! Mom is so hurt, feeling his needless, physical pain - she rubs her chest in tears.

But she knows, in time he'll recover. Nature is like that. Even if people spray chemicals to kill the roots of the bushes, even if they break a branch for fun, the trees and bushes continue to exist. They cast their roots deep into the earth, draw out the needed nutrients, recover, build their limbs again and rise to the sky. Nature doesn't hold

onto the hatred or resentment for the people who have caused harm either. It just continues to exist.

Soon, the small trees and bushes who received the chemical shower will wither and turn yellow like autumn leaves, fall and die. Still, eventually they will raise their heads towards the sky again. But for how long will they continue to be able to do that if they are repeatedly poisoned?

On reflection, mom understands that the farmer feels he is justified in killing the bushes. He is raising cows to support and provide for his family. He needs grass for his cows and the bushes choke out the grass. It is as simple as that. Mom is also justified in her concerns and has reason to nag him. But who is looking out for the earth? Why does she have to endure the chemical showers, not only once but time and again? Is it because the earth is the mother of all, so being a mother, has to accept all the mess her thankless children make? I just don't have an answer for it and it makes me deeply forlorn.

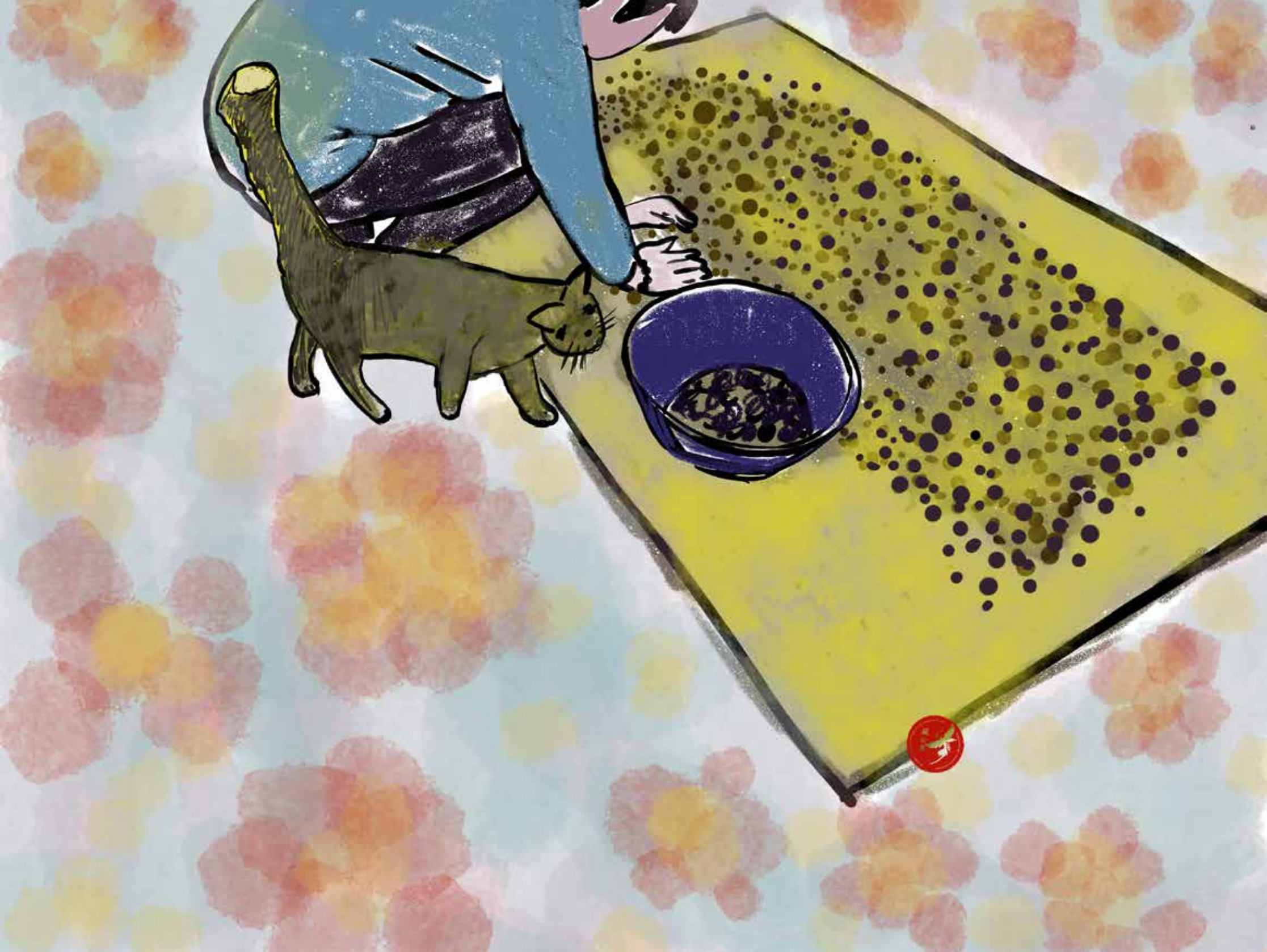
It would seem that in the end, it is all about harmony, balance and acceptance. The harmony and balance of giving and taking between nature and humans. The compatibility

of planting and cutting with humility, respect and gratitude. When it is necessary to cut, see the need to balance this with planting something new to compensate.

Thinking of Joa brings mom's heart slowly back from her earlier despair. I think she'll say a toast to him with her glass of rice wine under the full moon later.













## INSPIRATION RISES FROM THE ASHES

A fire has been raging on the other side of the mountain since mid-morning and is destroying everything in its path. Currently, it is climbing the ridge burning the tall, dry grass and the small trees. All the little animals and insects living in the ground don't stand a chance. It is an emergency situation for all involved. Very soon, in fact in no time at all, if it continues at its current rate, the fire will also engulf our hilltop. Mom receives a few calls from her friends, urging her to come down right away. Mom thanks them for their concern and patiently informs them that she won't leave. She can't leave. This mountain is her place and home. She will care for it as she promised when she first found it. She's staying whether she lives or dies... and so are we!

Mom doesn't have a water hose, but she collects together all her buckets in preparation and uses them to wet all around the house to soak the area thoroughly. She then fills them with more water and positions them around the house for use if necessary. She is as ready as she can be. We sit on the meditation rock, where we have a good view of the fire burning right in front of the other side of the hill.

It is so close we can feel the hot air heating our skin and black ash is flying all around us. Kai comes and sits with mom seemingly undisturbed. "I feel the pain of all that is burning in the fire. Please fire, stop now..." mom employs out loud.

At this critical time, mom is surprisingly calm and centered. "I feel the fire won't come to us," she confidently says. The flames and ashes are filling up the night's sky. At around 9 p.m., the firemen come up to the other side of the hill and fortunately, the direction of the wind changes. The fierce fire starts to calm down and is finally under control at a little after midnight after burning all day. Mom stays in the same spot on the meditation rock for a long while after the crisis is averted. The next morning, we all come out to see the mountain is black, covered in ash. Everything is dead and silent. It is painful to witness the utter devastation.

Here in Ecuador, locals are accustomed to setting fires on the mountainside towards the end of the dry season to aid cultivation in preparation for the coming rainy season. They do it intentionally and are supposed to supervise their efforts. Often though, the fires get out of control and end



up burning across the whole mountain. It is sad to hear that what we have just witnessed on our hilltop is not a rarity and has been known to happen every year here in Vilcabamba.

As mom was watching the fire being extinguished below, she had a moment of clarity, a dream, a thought, an inspiration to create a space for reflection on our hilltop for herself and others. This astonishing idea is planted in such a strange moment with destruction and devastation all around. How peculiar!

When mom first revealed she would live in the mountains, her friends were worried and thought she wouldn't last long and would come to her senses and return to the town soon enough.

Mom surprised them all and stayed year after year. Now her friends have acquired respect for mom's persistence, courage and love of life up here. They sometimes come to our hut to have lunch and to spend time chatting with mom. This mountain appears a healing balm for them too, albeit briefly. Perhaps if visitors stay for longer the effects could be life transforming...

Mom has a plan. So one afternoon, an Ecuadorian man visits us to help her begin building a cabin for a meditative, reflective artist residence next door to our hut. "The moon is crescenting almost at the end. If you don't cut the trees today, you will have to wait a few days more", he says. He follows the ancient ways to cultivate the land. He is aware that in the days leading up to the new moon and in the subsequent darkness, the insects burrow into the bark of the trees. So when the tree is cut down, the insects come along too. They will later eat the wood, weakening it and therefore making it unwise to use for construction material.

It is always surprising to see how this man works. M climbs up the tall eucalyptus trees, high up in the vigorous wind without any fear whatsoever. I am a cat so I can climb the trees easily too, but I get dizzy watching him go so high so fast. M cuts down two trees after mom respectfully bows and explains to the trees the use to which they will be put. These two trees will be enough timber for the small cabin.

"Do you have a Korean flag or something similar, Maya? If you do, I could hang it up there", says M as he points to the top of a tall tree.



“That’s a great idea! I don’t have a Korean flag,” says mom, “but I have something even better - a flag that symbolizes my freedom.”

Mom finds a long piece of cloth that was given to her by her friend Virginia. She throws the rolled material to M, who is already high up in the tree. It looks lovely, billowing in the breeze.

Virginia was a wise Argentinian woman who lived in the United States before she came to Ecuador. She and mom were good friends. About two weeks before she passed away, Virginia appeared in one of mom’s dreams and said, “Come with me, I have a place to go with you.”

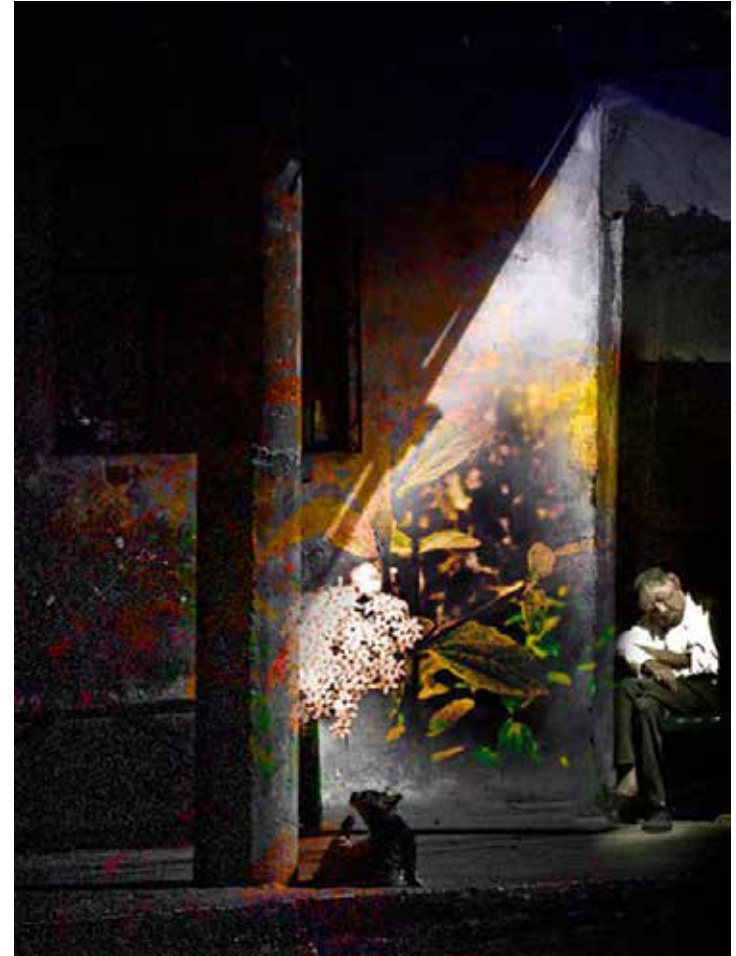
Virginia grips mom’s hand and leads her to various places. At the last one, Virginia opens a door. There’s a street that looks like it’s in ancient Greece with a long canal running alongside. After passing by the canal, Virginia and mom encounter another door. When they open it, they see a cow barn. The next door Virginia opens leads to a wide open space filled with nature in all its glory. There are tea fields spread out widely on the ridge of a lush hillside and cows grazing happily in green fields. Virginia and mom

continue to walk up to the mountain and in time, reach the top still hand in hand. Then Virginia let’s go of mom’s hand and starts to collect some small pebbles and throws them down to the bottom of the hill. “Why do you throw stones? People can get hurt.” Mom says in surprise. “It’s okay. We are now in an invisible world. They don’t even notice it, look... they don’t get hurt”, she replies in a giggly voice like a little girl. After mom woke up from the dream, she somehow intuitively knew that it would soon be time for Virginia to leave her body and pass on... and she did just two weeks later.

Thinking back, it still gives mom goosebumps. About one month after Virginia passed away, mom came to see this mountain and the contract was made on the top of the hill. Surprisingly enough, there are cows peacefully grazing and a river flowing around the hill, all so similar to what mom saw in the dream (although there were no tea fields). Virginia had revealed in the dream where mom would live some months later.

Before she died, Virginia visited mom’s art gallery. They had tea together and spent time catching up. She liked mom’s

piece of art called 'An Old Man's Dream.' She said that the image reminded her of herself, having a feeling of ease and acceptance and being ready to leave this life as we know it. Virginia, thank you for showing mom this place where we are all so content. Are you well where you are? I do hope so.



An old man's dream



## CALM FEELINGS

Mom makes a soup from a radish picked freshly from the garden and some dried fish that was recently gifted by a friend. When it's boiling, she adds a handful of sweet potato noodles for her gluten free friend. When mom is ready with the food, her friend C's car enters the yard. Perfect timing! C comes out after parking. I don't know how she drove through the crazy, bumpy road to our house with that slim, skinny body. She appears weak due to her stature, but looks can be deceptive as she obviously has the strength. Mom and C spend the afternoon together, eating lunch, drinking tea and telling stories back and forth. C has a distinctive wit, a dry sense of humor where every joke she tells has depth to it. They look at each other, laugh and sit on the meditation rock, gazing at La Gauranga, talking about the shape of the mountain. They are happy, doing nothing in particular - just enjoying the silence together. I don't know how they do it!

Just before mom's life on the mountain began, mom had dinner with C at Cafe Cultura. Back then, in her confusion mom used to question many things, "If meditation is to

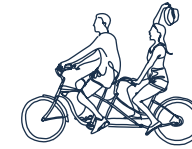


stop feelings and thoughts arising in me, then what's the point of being a human being without these things? How can we say that an emotionless human is even human at all?" Since C is a leading, new age spiritual teacher mom is eager to hear her response.

Mom continues to question with no patience, "It is said that there is only perfect peace in Nirvana, have you experienced it? If the perfect peace continues without feelings rising up or down, what does it mean to exist, wouldn't it be rather boring?" C answers without being concerned by mom's outburst. "Feelings are not lost or boring." This simple answer was somewhat frustrating for mom.

Many years have passed since then and mom still doesn't know about Nirvana. But she's learned how to practice freedom. She knows what meditation means to her. Observing and witnessing her conscious and unconscious thoughts and living calmly and quietly is not dull or emotionless. It is more like being able to ride on her own emotions in the gentle breeze, rather than being pulled or swayed in one direction after another. She also notices that her wild and 'woolly' ways of feeling up one minute and

down the next just don't make any sense to her anymore. She used to perceive this as passion, but is thankful she is now much more level and balanced as a result. These experiences feel like mom is 'born again.' How wonderful! Maybe that's what C meant.



## FLYING WITH THE WIND

The whole mountain is filled with noisy wind. I am not sure if it's festive and playful, or relentless and angry. One thing for sure is that it is very loud. I am sitting by mom, watching her practicing Taichi and Qigong. A large bird comes into sight. It's close enough for me to see its wings of maroon feathers. The bird has a hard time flying toward the oncoming wind. It pauses in the air for a while and then, in the next moment dramatically falls vertically. How far has it fallen? I search for it hoping it is okay. I soon find it and follow it as it goes upward again and finally disappears from my view.

Mom looks especially lovely this morning practicing her Taichi. Her clothes are billowing behind her in the wind. I can almost see the Qi flowing through her whole body. She looks like one of those masters in the martial arts movies, except much prettier.

As the strong wind continues to blow, it strips and shreds the bark of the majestic Eucalyptus trees. As a cat, I don't see how these trees endure the fierce wind. Their bodies



twist and turn as if they are at risk of being torn in two. Although on second thoughts, maybe the trees enjoy taking a 'wind shower' to remove the leaves, branches and dry skin from their body. They might even look forward to the windy season for that very reason!

This morning sitting by mom observing our surroundings as I've described, I notice a few phenomena. The birds fly towards the wind knowing full well how vulnerable they become. The trees allow the wind to shake their bodies, knowing it may be so strong it could uproot them. Mom practices her Taichi outside, even in the strong breeze. I notice these things, but what do they mean? Maybe nothing - just my thoughts floating by!

That reminds me, I know of a lady who will fly towards the wind, free like a bird today and she'll do it on a bicycle! She is going to continue on her epic journey. Her name is Ruth and she is a fabulous woman from England. She came to Ecuador by bicycle from Colombia. She then cycled all the way from the north to the south of the country. Her body and mind must be extremely strong and determined. She came up to our hilltop hut to have a well deserved rest for

three or four days and ended up staying with us for ten. It's been lovely getting to know her and hearing about her cycling adventures. Today she leaves to continue on to Peru. She will again fearlessly pedal her bike towards the wind on the road, stop to catch her breath for a while when she gets weary and then continue on just like the bird I watched this morning. Mom gives Ruth a big hug and says goodbye and wishes her luck. We will pray for her to have a safe journey. I have come to appreciate that there are many courageous women in this world. I bow to all these women who fly towards and with the wind, just like my mom and Ruth.





## LEARNING FROM THE FOREST

Around dawn somewhere under the ground, deep within the earth's crust, something moves again. The earthquake spreads to the top of the mountain here. Our bed shakes. Us cats, although alert don't believe it is severe, so happily continue dozing, snuggled up to mom.

She wakes up of course, feeling the vibration of the mountain. She feels uncomfortable too, since Ipuni and I are on her legs. I love to use mom's leg or arm as my pillow but I guess it's not always so comfortable for her, especially if we're all on the bed together! It must be before 7 am as she wakes, stretches and yawns before finally getting up.

Mom goes out to the kitchen to make herself her morning coffee. Macdol and Hana hang around in the courtyard. Ipuni and I wait to be given our warm milk. Mom sings and moves her butt from side to side while making the coffee, "Good morning bug, good morning water, good morning coffee." We stare at mom, wondering if she's insane. "Good Morning Cielo, good morning Hana, good morning Ipuni, good morning Macdol," She shakes her butt again and

laughs. I seriously hope she is okay. This is odd behavior - even by mom's standards!

After breakfast we go for a walk with mom's lively mood bringing great joy to us all. The clouds have gathered along the ridge, making the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds blend together. The dry season has just begun, but the clouds have not surrendered their moisture completely. The air feels heavy. My heart rate I notice is also a bit slow. I can tell mom is feeling the same. She walks into a side road, where the vines of some plants have formed a magical tunnel. We follow her. Inside the tunnel the air is even more intense and the silence of it is overwhelming. It expands our consciousness. Our bodies and awareness become one. We listen to the silence, the whole body becoming the ears. We can feel the energy of this little forest reaching deep under the ground and yet high above the treetops. The essence of it creates a mysterious atmosphere. At that moment our perception of our body disappears. It is the moment when our being and the natural world are connected and have become one. The scattered dried leaves greet us, welcome us with joy into their cycle of life. Everything in the forest is alive and



## QUESTIONS

interacts with us physically and mentally. We perceive quite clearly that the entire wood exists in harmony, assisting one another and living as one, but each tree with its own unique personality and story. There seems to be no life present in the fallen leaves that crunch beneath our feet as we step on them. However when the first rain falls they will gradually become the soil that supports the future growth of new shoots.

There is a lot of activity in what seems to be the most dormant state. The fallen leaves and other debris become soil, the rich compost from which other beings can burst forth into life once more. All in the forest go about their days quietly, without making a fuss, despite the extraordinary work they are accomplishing.

“I learn the great harmony of this dry and ordinary forest once more,” mom says as she looks around in awe. Wow! What a privilege it is to share this experience!

Many people feel that mom is so lucky to be surrounded by nature, every moment of every day. They express their envy saying that they can only enjoy such things infrequently and at great expense. They seem to appease themselves by voicing their concern about how she copes with being alone with no one around in case she needs help. They can't seem to accept that mom just isn't caught up in these fears.

I think it's important to remember that as far as I am aware, mom has intentionally conducted her life in the direction she wishes it to go. It hasn't happened for free for her either. It has come at great cost both physically, emotionally and of course financially. The process of getting to where she is now has meant lots of learning. She seems comfortable but this comfort has only come after learning to accept her surroundings fully. She remains calm in any crisis that arises - many have as you have read. And she adapts, is flexible and flows with her way of life. She curls up on a cold night, confronts the scorching sun, embraces with respect the howling wind and pouring rain without giving



these things undue concern. Living this way has deepened and quite literally expanded mom's being both emotionally and spiritually.

"Yes. I am full of gratitude for the life that has been given to me. I feel that I have been rewarded in abundance for making the decision to live up here alone on the mountain. As you know it hasn't been easy facing the elements, going through the many hardships, especially in the beginning and still now from time to time. I've shed so many tears - tears of frustration, sorrow and despair but also of happiness and indescribable ecstasy. I thank the myself for choosing this path in life. I am so grateful to no longer be in the painful clutches of fear, knowing that it doesn't exist but is the creation of the mind. I have become an adult who is no longer afraid of life or of living it," says mom.

Another question people ask her is why she lives so isolated and apart from other people. Is it because she dislikes them? I feel I can answer this with confidence as I know and love mom so well. She likes people very much. But she enjoys living separately to most because this allows her space with herself. Then when she does associate with others, she

better appreciates the people she spends time with. She cultivates genuine, quality, authentic relationships.

Mom has been living in the hilltop with us for many years now and it's been a huge adventure for us all. After reading her story, I'm sure you will agree that she is a courageous woman, who has carved out a way for herself to be happy and content living a simple, uncluttered, balanced life. I think she will continue to live in this way here with us for many more years to come.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you for reading our story with open minds and hearts. May I take this opportunity on behalf of Hana, Ipuni, Macdol, myself and our dear mom, Maya to wish you all peace. We pray you to find deep joy in continuing to live your own extraordinary yet ordinary lives.

If like us, you enjoy silence and tranquility and feel inclined to take some time to be alone, meditate, heal and simply be among the glorious nature here, please come and visit us on our mountain. As I mentioned, we have a beautiful residence just next door to the hilltop hut where you can stay and rest for a while, taking time to simply just be. To

relax and breathe in deeply the unpolluted, crisp, fresh air whilst gazing at the breathtaking scenery of the majestic mountains you'll behold all around you. We would welcome you.



감사합니다.

Thank you.

Maya  
6/12/2020