

Among the Blooms

by Brady Rhoades

It begins with my neighbor Bala, an old man with a high, singing style of speaking. He's from Romania, somewhere around Galati near the Black Sea. His yard is dense with trees—orange, lemon, pomegranate, apple. Dense, come to think of it, is an understatement. It's a maze of stalk, stem, and bloom, dwarfing his small home. He grows homeland grapes. He's proud of them, brings me bowls full, too many to eat before they go bad. He also brings store-bought chickens.

I know four things about Romania: Dracula, Nadia Comaneci, Bucharest, and the phrase *Nu mai bea mâța oțet*. The last I learned from Bala in the early years of our acquaintance.

I greet Bala every morning at the fence separating our properties while he shuffles around in his robe, checking on all the life he parents. Lately, I've noticed his eyebrows have designs on his temples and forehead. His eyes peak out like wood mice in a forest. His fingernails are black, and I wonder why his daughters never visit.

In return for the grapes and chickens, I buy him cat food. He makes a home for what looks like three or four Siamese and tabbies, and feeds strays. When any of his brood wanders off, he stands on Pico Road, calling their names, moaning, "Oh, nooo, ah, no, no, no..."

He serenades all the wild creatures and pets in the area, including my dog, who adores him.

One morning, during another Southern California heat wave that promises a one-hundred-and-five degree high that day, he tells me one of his cats is pregnant and can't deliver.

"She does not look good."

I'm heading out and he is, too, so the exchange is brief. Neighbors roll their trash

bins to curbs, assess their gardens, drive to the 91 Freeway, or the 5, or the 57, to get to where they're going and do what must be done. Lacy, a Brooklyn native who's made a luxuriant ecosystem of her plot of land, is filling the bird bath and putting out shelled peanuts. An egret she named Lenny is there, as usual, having made the three-mile flight from Laguna Lake. Next door to Lacy, two women, one a heartbroken judge, the other a county clerk, both addicted to painkillers, have started their hysteria; by afternoon, they'll be brawling. The neighborhood is like a klatch of third cousins. There are more unknowns than knowns; we want to know more and don't want to all at once.

The sun is going down over Fullerton Airport. Banking planes look like silhouettes against a peach sky. After a nine-hour day in the newsroom, I pull into my driveway and see a portly cat who won't budge, which reminds me for the first time since dawn, of the pregnant cat and I make my way to Bala, who I find in his garden.

"How's she doing?"

"She does not look good."

"There's an animal hospital that did a good job on my dog."

"How much does it cost?"

I ask if I can see the cat. I don't know why; I have no special affection for cats and wouldn't know what to do. He's reluctant. He tells me his home needs cleaning. "It's okay," I say.

"No, no," he says. He wants to clean up first.

Some journalistic instinct kicks in and I keep pressing, walking toward his place to gin up momentum. Behind me, I hear muttering. He's got another gear, it seems, because now he's at my side, then edges ahead. Fifteen feet from his door, he says, "I have more than twenty cats."

The front of his home is crowded with trash bags as tall as a half dozen preschoolers. Friskies cans everywhere, to lure in outsiders. Flies, like tiny fighter pilots, zoom up, nosedive, crisscross.

I can't compare the smell to anything I have ever encountered. I foot-shove the

trash out of the way. Through a shut window the size of a 1960s TV and secured on the inside by chicken wire, I see four cats peering out.

Inside, it's sauna-hot, and there's feces, urine, cat food, curdled milk. One room and a bathroom. Four hundred square feet at best. Fungi grows from pizza boxes. Insects feast like poor kids at lunch, more competitive than cooperative. Cats zoom up walls and across the littered hardwood floor. Siamese, tabbies, Siberians. Dozens of eyes on me.

Some are kittens. A handful are approachable, but don't allow touching, their curiosity losing out to their fear.

The gal who was front and center at the window is prominent again on a dresser. One ear is tipped, meaning she's spayed, meaning further that she's probably missing from her owner. She's white with a gray streak on her forehead, big paws, big eyed. She jockeys for position. Bala tells me her name is Katarina.

The pregnant one burrows on the highest shelf in the bathroom, with a foot of space between her head and the low ceiling. I can't tell what kind of shape she's in, and Bala can't get her down.

I hear faint meowing and track down the sound. Three newborns are curled up in a cardboard box. One is hairless, skeletal, a nub of umbilical cord stuck like a scab on his pink belly. They're all cold to the touch.

Bala doesn't know who the mother is but she's in the house because the animals are never let out—not evenings, not in the afternoon heat. I'm later told that a sick mother feline will forgo a newborn if it's diseased, fearing it will spread the illness. Mothers with mastitis—an infection of the mammary glands that causes extreme pain during nursing—might abandon them all.

The situation could be worse. There are news stories and agency reports of cats stacked on one another in cramped cages, stories of skeletons grave-yarding rooms or entire homes.

Inter-aggression is common among cats in close quarters. So is hypersexuality. Bear in mind that female cats give birth in about two months and can be impregnated again and again, putting them on a wheel of birthing three, four, five times a year.

Agents at the national Animal Humane Society open twenty-five or so cases of

hoarding annually. About two hundred and fifty thousand animals of all kinds, including rats and reptiles, are hoarded every year.

Even when seized, cats are a long shot for re-homing because they're unsocialized, unfixed and, often, sick. Hoarders are known to kidnap fixed, healthy cats from their rightful homes, too, and those cats devolve in every way.

You've heard of the so-called cat lady, and it's not untrue. According to the Humane Society, most cat hoarders are women in their fifties.

Hoarders suffer from anxiety, depression, delusions, impulse control problems, obsessive compulsive disorder, and something called attachment model, according to International Cat Care, a cat welfare charity. In the past few years, "Hoarding Disorder" has been added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Model of Mental Disorders (DSM-V). The recidivism rate is almost 100 percent.

Bala is not malicious. He fawns over his cats. But he is isolated and, it seems, neglected. Who lets an eighty-year-old man go out in public in such a moldering way? But who knows the family dynamics.

"In my experience, all hoarders feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility to protect their animals from society," Ashley Pudas, an agent for the Humane Society, tells me. "So removing animals from someone's home can be an extremely difficult event to get through. It requires a lot of reassurance and patience."

Six neighbors agree to intervene. On a Thursday. At 8 p.m. With three requests: 1) Clean up; 2) Run a fan and open a window; 3) No more tuna outside to lure in more cats.

"How do they exercise?" asks my physical therapist friend.

"Do you have air conditioning?" asks another woman.

Bala says he does.

"Where is it?"

He says it's broken.

Everyone is talking at once. Two of the neighbors slide past Bala, reach his front window, and take photographs. One removes the food tins. Bala is upset, defiant.

It happens that a cop is tending to an issue down the block. It takes ten minutes,

but we convince him to call Orange County Animal Care and to confront Bala, if only to shake him up. Bala intercepts him on the street. There isn't much the cop can do, apparently. We thank him for the effort. He makes the finger-circling-ear gesture. *Cuckoo*.

By then, we know. During the fray, Bala claimed he'd worked for the CIA and personally saved the lives of presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump. He leaned in and squinted, as if to say, *Don't you get it?*

About a month after neighbors initiated the intervention, Animal Care confiscated twenty cats. The pregnant one was euthanized. Her kitten did not make it. Four who were also sick died in the kennel. Fifteen were transferred to a no-kill shelter, where they were adopted out. Katarina was one of them.

It's been more than a year. No more morning hellos, no more Romanian grapes, no more chickens. I feel sympathy and anger. Increasingly, anger prevails, an anger that might well harden, like that of a journeyman boxer.

After the cats were taken, Bala began locking the gate at the front of his lot and he installed lights. I'm smelling that smell again, and I hear serenading. An uninvolved, unnerved neighbor said the "old guy" had asked about trapping techniques. Bala used to walk north, past my home, bag in one hand and a stick in the other. Now he walks south.

"Nu mai bea mîța oțet" translates from Romanian to English as, *The cat won't drink vinegar anymore*, meaning someone who's been tricked once will be very careful the next time around.



Brady Rhoades's work has appeared in *The Los Angeles Times*, *Orange County Register*, the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, *Black EOE Journal*, *U.S. Veterans Magazine* and other publications. He lives and works as a news editor in Fullerton, California.