

Conversations with Max

“What’s it gonna be, Max? Turkey Dinner with Gravy? Or Ocean Whitefish Feast?”

Max looked up at the old man expectantly, but didn’t offer an opinion. So the man opened the Turkey Dinner, spooned it into a bowl, and set it on the floor.

“There you go, buddy. It’s the chunky kind. I know you don’t like the pâté.”

The man took his bowl of soup out of the microwave and sat down at the kitchen table. His daughter had chewed him out once for talking to the cat, during one of her infrequent visits.

“It makes you look old and pathetic,” she said.

“I am old and pathetic,” he had replied. “Besides, if I don’t talk to Max, who am I going to talk to?”

He thought about that as he ate. Before he met Max, he sometimes went for days without speaking. Sometimes when he walked to the store he worried he might get there and discover he couldn’t talk. What if he’d had a stroke and didn’t know it? Or what if he’d just forgotten how to speak? Was it like riding a bicycle? Something you never forgot? Or did you need to keep in practice? All in all, he felt it was best to talk to Max. No harm in that. He thought he could probably still ride a bicycle, too, but he didn’t want to try. He bones weren’t as forgiving as they used to be.

Max hopped on the table beside him.

“How was the turkey?” he asked. “Good?” There was still a little soup left in the bottom of his bowl, so he pushed it toward the cat. “Finish this up, if you’re still hungry.”

Max licked the bowl contentedly while the man sat lost in thought. Then Max rubbed his head against the man’s hand to get his attention.

The man petted the cat and rubbed his knuckle against the cat’s cheek.

“Not much happened today,” he said. “Did I ever tell you about the time I got robbed? That was before I met you. Some kid pulled a knife on me while I was walking to the grocery. I took the money out of my wallet and offered it to him. He wanted the wallet too, but I said the ID wouldn’t do him any good because he didn’t look like me, and the credit cards were maxxed out. He shrugged and took the money. ‘Course I was lying about the credit cards. They were still good, but I didn’t want to go through the hassle of getting new ones. He washed his dishes and put them away. Then he walked into the living room and sat down in his easy chair. Max hopped onto his lap.

“Punk kid,” he said after he sat down. “He wouldn’t have tried that when I was a Green Beret. I might not look like it now, but I was a pretty tough cookie in those days.”

The man stopped talking, lost in his memories. Then he spoke.

“We thought we were doing the right thing,” he told Max. “You know how that preacher we watch on TV says when you do something nice and don’t expect anything in return, you’re doing God’s will? Well, we really thought we were doing God’s will. There was nothing in that stinking jungle that we wanted, but we were trying to protect the people from a communist invasion. Near as I could tell, though, they didn’t want protection. They didn’t want a communist invasion, either. They just wanted to be left alone. So, Nixon worked out a deal with the North Vietnamese where they agreed to leave South Vietnam alone and we agreed to leave. Except they broke their word. After we left they came charging across the border with tanks and gunships. If we’d had a president like George Bush he’d have stood up and said ‘This will not stand!’ and rallied the United Nations stop them, but we didn’t. We just sat back and let them do it. All those American lives lost, and all those millions of dollars for nothing.”

He was quiet for a moment, deep in thought. “I meant the older George Bush,” he said as an afterthought. “The World War Two guy. Not his son.”

He thought for a while longer. “But I guess that would have just caused more death and suffering. It seems to have worked out in the long run. From what I see on TV, people seem to be happy in Vietnam now. I don’t think they’re communist any more, though. I can’t think of anyplace where communism has succeeded. Eventually things work out, but that doesn’t help the people who get killed while it works out. Not just the Americans. The Vietnamese, too. On both sides. And the tens of thousands who disappeared in the ‘re-education camps.’ And the millions who were killed in Cambodia when the Vietnamese tried to impose communism there. What do you say to all those people? ‘Oh well, I guess communism just didn’t work out? Things got better in the long run?’ That’s not much consolation to the ones who got killed in the short run.”

Max curled up in his lap and purred while the man petted him.

“You know, Max. My mother used to tell me that human nature doesn’t change. She was pretty smart, she was. I remember reading years ago about a teacher whose class didn’t see why communism was a bad idea. It does sound like a good thing when you’re young and idealistic. From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs. So the teacher told them he’d use that strategy to grade the next test. If someone needed some extra points, he’d take them from someone who had more than they needed. You’d think everything would average out to a ‘C,’ right? Well, it didn’t. Everyone flunked the test. The kids who were already struggling figured they didn’t need to study because the smart kids would pull them through, and the smart kids thought ‘why the hell should I knock myself out studying if I’m only going to get a C anyway?’ It’s human nature. But people don’t seem to believe in human nature anymore.”

The man stared off into the distance until Max nuzzled his hand to keep petting.

“It’s not just communism, you know. Any time some idiot gets a wild idea that the world would be better if only everyone did things one way, they try to force everyone to do it that way. My mom used to say more wars have been fought over religion than over any other cause. As far as I know, all the

world's religions claim to want peace, but they only want peace with people who believe the same thing they believe. If you don't agree with their religion, they'll kill you in the name of peace. Religion's not so big anymore, so they've turned politics into religion. Immigration. Gun ownership. Abortion. Global warming. Systemic racism. If you don't agree with what one group believes about all of these issues, you're evil and must be silenced. And if you do agree with them, another group thinks your evil and must be silenced. Whatever happened to individual rights? Or live and let live?"

He stopped petting the cat and held his arms out in a questioning gesture as he said this. Max gave him a quizzical look. He dropped his arms and started petting Max again.

"You're lucky you're a cat. Cats are solitary creatures. Cats don't get together in groups to kill other cats. Maybe cats are smarter than people. Hitler started a war that killed millions of people, but he also killed six million people who weren't in the war just because he didn't agree with their religion. Stalin killed twenty million people who didn't agree with him, and Mao killed fifty million. And these were their own people! Germans killing Germans, Russians killing Russians, and Chinese killing Chinese! I know you don't understand these numbers. I can't comprehend them myself, but what makes people kill other people? You'd never kill another cat, would you Max?"

Max rolled onto his side and stretched out his neck so the man could scratch under his chin.

"Well, maybe you'd try," the man mused. "You hate other cats. My daughter brought over your sister once. You hadn't seen her since you were both kittens, but did you run up to greet her? No. You hissed at her. Your own sister!"

He gave another gesture as he said this. Max opened one eye and looked at him accusingly. There wasn't a hint of remorse on his face. The man started stroking Max's chin again and Max closed his eye.

The old man chuckled. "Of course, my daughter hissed at me before that visit was over. Maybe cats aren't much different than people after all."

He sat lost in thought for a long time. Then he struggled to his feet and gently carried Max into the bedroom.

"I'm tired," he told Max. "I think I'll skip the news tonight and just go to bed. Remind me tomorrow and I'll tell you about the time my parents took me to Florida when I was a kid. We took a train. Have you ever ridden in a train, Max?"