

Angels and Kittens

(The Meaning of Love Essay)

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By Gregg Milligan

It was the first night with my new kitten – the first night in what was to become an endless succession of falling in love, for the first time, with something that would love me in return. All day I had kept the kitten concealed. The time would come when Mother found out, but the kitten was far too young, and I was far too lonely to care. She had no idea I had talked a neighbor into letting me take the runt of her cat’s new litter. While over visiting, I peeked into the litter and saw a hairless lump cast off from its mother, which lay shivering.

As the other newborn kittens greedily sucked at their mother, I became increasingly upset. I knew this kitten would die if I did not do something. Carefully tucking the kitten in my front pocket, I walked home, ducked inside, and found my brother and sister. We turned a shoebox into a makeshift bed laced with tissue, newspaper, and torn fabric. The kitten’s new home was complete. My siblings promised not to tell Mother. We lied for each other all the time. It was a buddy system based on survival.

Inside the shoebox, the kitten was buried in shreds of tissue, and the paper wrapped around his tiny head exposed only purple, puffy eyes and a small, pink mouth. With an eyedropper borrowed from the neighbor and a few easy feeding instructions, I gently held the tip of the dropper against his mouth and squeezed out one drop of milk. The drop traced along the slit of his mouth, but the mouth did not open. I tried again, pushing a little on the eyedropper, just enough to get one drop down his puny throat.

It worked! The kitten took to the eyedropper as if it was his mother. He drank about a quarter of the milk. I was elated to have something to care for that would love me back.

A few days later, his eyes opened. It was then I named him *Sam*. Later, I would add “*birdio*” at the end of his name after watching him chase birds in the backyard.

Most times, there was a terrible feeling in my gut that had been there for a long time. At least since I realized what kind of home I had. Poor. Drunken parents. Abused. Neglected. Hungry; always hungry. But when I was with Sam, I felt different.

I spent the summer tending to Sam, and it was wonderful. I was there when Sam grew a brownish-gray whisper of downy hair over his little body. I was there when Sam began to walk, at first with great difficulty and later when he strode with the agility of a lion. I was there when Sam drank all by himself from a saucer and didn't need the eyedropper anymore.

Sam grew to be playful and loving. I was happiest when strolling around with him darting in and out between my legs – or as we walked through the backyard, while Sam explored the edges of the fence, with the wind blowing on us.

We would often sit under the apple tree. Sam would be on my lap while I combed his soft fur with my fingers. His breathing would slow – his motor trailing off to a low rumble as he fell asleep. I stole cat food from the corner store to feed him – and the occasional fruit pie for me.

Like me, Sam loved the smell of the lilac bush near the back of the yard. With him nestled in my arms, I would lean into the bush. My face would hover above one of the pudgy groupings of bright pink flowers, sucking in the fragrant air. Sometimes, I'd glance down to see Sam doing the same thing.

Sam possessed sharp claws that had never been trimmed, yet he would not scratch me – not even when I buried my face in his belly and made mumbling sounds. The soft pads of his paws would only paddle my cheeks.

Sam was everything to me. I could, and often would, weep while holding him – allowing the tears to roll down my cheeks and disappear into his soft coat. I was never too smelly or dirty for Sam. I was always welcomed and good enough. I was there for him, and he for me.

About a year had passed since I had first brought Sam home. My overall environment had not changed. As a matter of fact, it had become worse. Still, I had Sambirdio. The more difficult my life became, the more I clung to Sam. I couldn't imagine my life without him and rarely gave this terrible possibility much thought.

It was summertime again, and Sam and I took full advantage of it, spending our time outside. But something was happening to Sam. He was growing weak and thin. When I picked him up, he would twitch and gasp for air. And when I gently stroked his body, I felt the ripple of his ribs more each day.

I soon realized that Sam was truly sick. He lost a significant amount of weight. He began to have convulsions where he'd shiver uncontrollably. There was no money for medicine or veterinary care. Hanging on to Sam was all I had; it was clean fear that I would lose him. Without Sam, I had only the slow gutting of what was left of me, and the long nights where I quietly wept in desolation.

Months passed and Sam's illness grew worse. Wrapped in an old blanket, Sam and I would sit together on the loveseat in the living room for hours. I would occasionally lick my finger and touch his mouth to be sure the air was moving in and out. And I would plead inside my head with a God I hoped was listening, "*Please don't let him die.*" But Sam still lay wet and

shivering. I'd pull him closer, tucking him under my ragged shirt. I couldn't bear the thought of being without him.

The summer days passed without notice. Every waking moment was spent touching Sam, kissing his face, whispering in one of his tiny ears how much I loved him. I loved stroking the downy hair under his chin.

Fall was approaching, and with it, school. The thought of being away from Sam filled me with terror. Hope was growing faint. By now, Sam's mouth rarely opened. His head was limp wherever it lay. His belly would move rapidly up, in, and out. When I put my finger to his small chest, his heart was pounding as fast as mine.

After school started, I rushed home every day to take care of Sam. While holding him, I delighted in the warmth between us compared to how cold and lonely I usually felt. Sometimes, late at night I would quietly sing to Sam. "Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb – Mary had a little lamb. Its fleece was white as snow." While singing, I would look at Sam – watching for some sort of movement. Some sign of the life he used to have. I suppose it was hope I was looking for.

I knew he was dying. At the very least, I wanted to be there when he did.

On the day I lost my only friend, I ran into the house and saw the blanket he normally was wrapped in was there on the loveseat, but Sam was not. Mother sat on the couch, drinking. Before she spoke, I said the words aloud, "Sam's dead." Forgetting Mother's rule about showing emotion, I wept until my chest ached. Mother just stared at the floor, sipping her wine.

I walked past Mother and the now empty blanket to my room. Lying on my bed, I cried, wishing desperately it was a cruel joke and Sam was hidden somewhere. He was not. It became difficult to keep Sam in my thoughts. Several nights were spent closing my eyes and concentrating – daydreaming about what he once was. I would hold the image of him for a few seconds, and then it would disappear, but not before I glimpsed his small face slipping slowly away in front of mine.

Sam was more than a pet, he was my miracle. A gray tiger cat I once saved and the favor returned. He had emerald green eyes with gold flecks and a small mouth that always looked like it was smiling. Downy fur, soft as cotton, covered his body. Long sharp claws that never scratched me and a meowing that sounded like a musical mumble.

When Sam came along it was almost too late. I had been running out of hope. My Sambirdio taught me the meaning of love. The type of love that falls all the way from heaven –so desperately needed for a boy who was already nine. Sam also taught me something else. There is no difference between angels and kittens.