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Eastern European Cartoons

Creatures of Habit

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This story is my submission to the Soaring Twenties Social Club's Symposium on the topic of "Habit".Creatures of Habit0:00/679.681×On the one hand, the life of dogs is strange and unfathomable to my delicate feline nature. Yet, on the other hand, it is precisely this suspiciously simple mysteriousness that has always piqued my genuine interest. Every morning, even on a bloody weekend, I would see my neighbours Martha and Roscoe doing the same thing. Imagine: there I am, swaying in an armchair on the terrace, basking in the morning sun, sipping tea with a smidgen of valerian for relaxation, whilst perusing the latest issue of *Le Révolté* (a jolly good read, I must say). Martha and Roscoe bolt out of the house in their sporting attire, salute me a good morning, to which I lazily salute back, and, wagging their tails, they jog away down the pavement to the park. Now, why would one engage in such an activity at so ungodly an hour? Pray tell, where are you running off to? Pshaw! I sit there for an hour, managing to finish the gazette and take a sweet catnap. After a while, they return home, panting, tongues lolling, but happy as larks. I see their silhouettes flickering in the kitchen—preparing breakfast, laughing, sometimes even snogging. It's all well and good—I myself wouldn't mind a bite to eat, a biscuit or two to go with my tea. Precisely half an hour later, they

step outside, now in their daily clothes, stop in front of the house, kiss, and before they part ways for work, Martha tells Roscoe that he's a good boy. Every single day—I'd swear on my tail.

But I must admit, he was indeed a "good boy"—always clean and tidy, pleasantly dressed, a smile on his face, a twinkle in his eyes, ears perked up, tail wagging. He never forgot to say hello, ask how I was doing, worked diligently, came home on time, paid his taxes (as far as I know), didn't make a racket, mowed the lawn, and trimmed the bushes—an exemplary citizen, in short. Both he and his wife were two peas in a pod, so exemplary that it aroused suspicions. Were they foreign spies, perchance? Where is Labrador, anyway—in Canada?

They had everything on a schedule: jogging, breakfast, work, home; on weekends—cleaning, gardening, barbecues. I thought to myself, how can one live like this? There's so much about dogs that's odd, a tad coarse, simple to the point of predictability. So much that they lack, too. You could take all of this and cram it into one immense tome (the bookest of books), which would take the reader all of their nine lives to finish. Ah, yes, they don't believe in nine lives either! No wonder they are so fussy, always doing something, always going somewhere. It's even frightening, mind you. Do lie down already, get some rest. What's that hammock in front of your house for? Bask in the sun, allow yourself to forget what day it is. I'm not asking you to stop paying taxes or to write a column about the tragedies of modernity caused by our government, but could you at least refuse to do the dishes, just this once, eh? Where's your anarchistic spirit? Where's your rebelliousness? Where's the chaos,

the wildness, the... I don't know... *the zest*? They all are far too domesticated, too subservient to routine and habit, unlike us cats.

Take me, for instance. What do I do? If I want to sleep, I sleep. If I want to eat, I eat. If I want to go for a stroll, I do—day or night, whatever and whenever I fancy, I fancy. Complete freedom of choice, total independence from time. Your world would crumble, dear friends, if you started setting your clocks by me. Of course, one has to go to work—can't do without it (shame!). "A cat's got to eat", as they say. I live peacefully, not scurrying about, savouring life, its slow, unpredictable flow—an ocean of uncertainty around every bend. Maybe I've got eight lives left, maybe just one, but what does that change for me personally, at this very moment? Let's assume it's just the one, so what? Do you really want to do the same thing day in, day out? For what? I'm not judging anyone, mind you. Everyone is free to manage their own destiny as they please. But wouldn't it be nicer to manage it freely, without all these contrived rituals? What are you, a soldier? Oof, even thinking of it makes my fur stand on end...

But I digress. Such a rabid... ahem, pardon me... structure must have some advantages, mustn't it? Otherwise, what's the point, eh? It's hard for me to imagine, but theoretically, if one were to ponder, to try and envisage... would it be pleasant to have certainty about tomorrow? You wake up in the morning, groom yourself, brush your coat, your tail, clean your teeth, eat the same breakfast, knowing it will always be tasty (I'm not even going to mention jogging—if I were you, I'd spare my knees). Right then, your better half approaches you, looks you straight

in the eyes, kisses you, says lovely things. And so it goes, every day. Oh well... hmm... it's difficult for me, with my individualistic self-sufficiency, to imagine such a thing. My own better half resides only in the mirror, and even then, I'm not too fond of looking at it. It's not that I need someone to call me a good boy every morning—I know that already, thank you very much. But would it be a delight to hear it? Probably, yes. Why not? It certainly wouldn't make things worse.

However, the disadvantage of order compared to chaos lies precisely in its fragility. In this sense, there's even more order within chaos. You can't destroy it; it will always remain chaos, true to itself. But order? Mother of cats, one puff and the whole house of cards comes tumbling down, as if it had never existed. The old world crumbles; and there's nowhere for the new one to come from yet. It needs to be built, brick by brick. If something like that happened to me, I'd prefer to move on to the next life immediately. Maybe that's why dogs so often experience these two states—uncompromising, almost naive happiness, and deep, bottomless melancholy, *ennui*.

For a long time, I only saw Roscoe in the former state. In that sense, he was the most Labrador-ish of all the Labradors I've ever met. Happiness suited him like a bespoke suit, like a second skin. It wasn't even a state, but his very essence; being Roscoe meant being exactly like that, defying definition, but that's not even important. There he is—Roscoe—and there can be no other. If life were radiation, Roscoe would be made of radioactive isotopes from head to tail. That's how it was. He radiated happiness, and I must admit, I even grew fond of it. No, I wasn't

envious, don't get me wrong. I simply began to enjoy observing them two, as if I found some warmth for myself in that radiation.

But suddenly, on one of those thousands of identical days, when the same gentle morning sun was shining, the same breeze was rustling in my whiskers, and I was living that very same life of nine, Roscoe went for a jog alone, which itself was unbelievable; I even thought I was dreaming. Something was amiss; it was as if he were someone else, for he no longer had that something that made Roscoe Roscoe. Instead of emanating magical energy, it seemed he was absorbing it from the surroundings. His fur became duller, his ears drooped, his tail no longer wagged. He raised his paw wearily to greet me. I nodded and cautiously raised my paw in return. An hour passed. He came back from his jog, ate breakfast for half an hour, went to work with a crookedly tied tie and unironed trousers. A day later—the same thing. He was alone; Martha was no longer there. I didn't need to ask anyone to understand what was going on, even before I saw all those figures wearing black coming to their house.

Morning, jog, breakfast, work, home, evening, sleep... Horrifying in its new monotony, days flew by until Roscoe stopped going for jogs, plummeting into that very bottomless melancholy. He left for work all rumpled, returned later than usual, exhausted, his tail tucked. I only saw how, in their house, behind closed curtains, a tired light flickered until late at night. As if they had gone away together and someone else had moved into their house, someone uncannily similar to Roscoe.

I realised we had barely spoken to each other until that moment. You see, I'm not much of a conversationalist. Chit-chat is not my thing. I love solitude and silence, preferably so quiet that not even a fly buzzes and the air itself holds its tongue. Letters on paper and measured speeches in my head are my interlocutors. But watching Roscoe every day, seeing what had become of him, the speeches in my head turned into a hornet's nest, gained weight, and began to nag at my temples. I wished everything in this life could be as it was before—Martha and Roscoe running to the park in the morning, seeing each other off to work, planting flowers together, washing windows, chasing each other, watching telly in the kitchen, picking up parcels, greeting guests, trimming the lawn—all that silly stuff in which they were trapped doing every day and week and month and year.

Early in the morning, having donned the sportiest clothes I owned, having drunk a bit more valerian (to calm the nerves, that's all), leaving a fresh *Le Révolté* on the armchair, slightly dishevelled, I crossed the road and rang Roscoe's doorbell. I didn't know what to say, and frankly, I didn't understand my own actions. During that one minute, I even thought of fleeing back home to read my gazette and drink my tea, and perhaps sniff some catnip (the nerves, damn them). The door opened, and there he stood before me, tired, a bit sleepy, the same old Roscoe. Seeing me, he perked up a little and raised one ear in surprise. We mumbled some clumsy greetings to each other, and then I asked him, "Roscoe... I, erm... See, I've grown a bit of a belly. And I thought... I was wondering... Well, I just wanted to ask you what if you and me, erm...

two old-, well, two all-round good boys, go for a jog today?”

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