

## My Cat and I Arrive in Eilat

Sylvia Apter



Who said that moving to a new place was easy? The first draft of a story is already lost somewhere in the notebook. Pity, it had good rhythm, but, that was then, and, this is now. “Now” is a very noticeable thing in Israel.

Cash first, rental payment for one month was duly executed as soon as I placed my cat and luggage in our room. Doblin and I moved into temporary lodgings, pleasant, a bit small in a lovely little enclosed patio, wi-fi, but a huge sheepdog that was hell bent on killing my cat! Doblin had to relocate to the next-door neighbour’s tree for four days and nights. I was so fretful even though told ‘don’t worry, let them sort it out’. Three times I tried to bring him inside and each time he fled back up the neighbour’s tree. Food and water I placed on the wall near him. I visited him constantly – ‘hello Dobbbers I’m here and am looking for an alternative temporary place for us’. On the fifth morning after our landing in the land of milk and honey I captured my cat in the dark and quiet crescent at four am. I had found a place within walking distance and hurriedly carried the loaded cat carrier to the safer place. This is where we are now and from where I make our next move. Again, cash up front for one month.

I love Eilat, especially this area. Moroccans (from Fez?) settled here and adapted their old style of living to new building materials. For people on foot, it is ideal as there are many walkways that zigzag between large blocks of flats and little house fronts providing shade. This last Saturday I was invited to lunch and saw for the first time the layout of these homes. Inside the courtyard were fruit trees, a veggie garden in planters around the exterior wall, hanging baskets with herbs and flowers with a sukkah in the centre.



My hosts are from Morocco and do not speak any English. I have about twenty words in Hebrew which made conversation very frustrating with hands and arms gesturing as we ate the variety of salads, sauces, fish and a type of stew finishing the meal with fresh fruit. Now I must rush as my host who lives across the little park has offered to show me the swimming beach near here.

For a moment I thought everything was settled, Doblin managed to get out of the courtyard onto the roof and seemed content with that. Last night I realised that this was not so as he attacked my legs while I was sleeping, something he has done twice now, so move we must. I love the area due to convenience and also that we are not on a road.

Everyone of a particular age has internet connection. Today I discovered at what price. I have a “dongal” on loan from a cell-phone company for one week to see if this is what I really need. The downside is the service providers want a one-year contract.

A month later and we have moved to bigger, newer snazzier digs closer to the library, night school and a large park where occasional concerts are held. In my studio flat I have a good size table, a couch, bookcase, tv, aircon, queen size bed, lovely 'bath'-room and walk in closet. Outside my door, a bamboo couch, two matching chairs and coffee table. The "apartment" is more expensive than the last place. Two more apartments are being built, and I have been given first choice. Naturally I chose the one next to the only living climbable tree in the courtyard which is already occupied by a mother cat with three kittens, so last night there was a fight at our window as Doblin was chased away. He will have to sort himself out eventually!

Creating my art is a different matter and hopefully will come soon after I finish working. I am working for minimal wage half days for a friend who is renovating her home. My job is sanding and varnishing all the wooden windows, doors, bookcases, tables and other storage units. It is a lovely semi-detached house up town with views to the Jordanian mountains and a tiny piece of sea; a real garden with an olive tree laden with shiny fruit. It's a pity I can't stay there as her rental is way too much for me. Doblin would love it.



About ten days ago I heard a familiar sound. A barking gecko which was later carried into the studio proudly by Doblin, who due to his training last year made straight for the bathroom. Since then, Doblin has eaten a few others plus two fat-tailed, colourless lizards. He can't help his nature, yet I feel such remorse when he catches them and leaves evidence of limbs lying about. I keep feeling that he will be found out and we will be asked to leave. Guilty as charged.

The same questions are asked each time I am introduced. "Where are you from? Are you a tourist? How long have you been here?" Last night I went to a party in the industrial area. It was the first party at this venue which is going to be used for creative workshops. Musicians, poets, sculptors, artists, writers hope for a revival of the arts here in Eilat. I felt privileged and free to ask, 'speak in Hebrew only'. The guests tolerated my answers spoken slowly in faulty, halting Hebrew.

Moshe was acting barman, so I chose the opportunity of having a heart to heart with a fellow artist about "making it" in Israel. It is most challenging in that one has to prove the ability to survive and thrive before being accepted by the locals. His wife had called the day before asking me if I had anything to bring to the gallery for "approval" and my answer was "not yet". I now have the name of a good hardware store (given by Moshe), a list of things to buy and am grateful for having the foresight to bring items for making small art works.

I got back around two-thirty am and fell into bed. It must have been around four that Doblin woke me up with a bang and sliding sounds coming from the bathroom. My head came up a fraction to see a large rectangular shape moving across the floor. I watched in fascination as the large white

plastic basin slid upside down from the bathroom towards the walk-in cupboard. When it got within arm's length, I flipped it over happily to release Dobsville.

So, first thing this morning I had plastic basins and plastic sheets in mind as purchases for working in an immaculate, confined space.



Studying Hebrew four nights a week plus the hours of homework is now full time. The restoration of wooden fixtures and furniture came to an end three weeks ago which freed me to explore the city a bit more and meet new people. Unfortunately, most of them are English speaking – I try practicing my Hebrew on them until they start correcting my mistakes thus stopping the flow of thoughts which brings me to a halt. The Israeli's just prefer talking in English, they do not have the time – 'ein zman!' Thus, my Hebrew is not as good as it could be as I talk slowly. I try whenever and wherever I am, starting with one Hebrew sentence/question, getting a speedy reply and when I look blank, they continue in English!

Yesterday afternoon the boys and I had a conference call on skype. One of the topics that came up was Doblin. He is no longer a happy cat. It's too hot for him to venture out and about, not that he can actually get 'out' as the property is completely fenced in with timber to the height of two and a half to four meters. Marc suggested that I take Doblin back to SA and give him away. While I type, he is sleeping on my bed. Now I feel we are both marking time as we wait for our return home. Yet, something holds me back.

We learnt a new word in class this week. To take care of. Hebrew. Le – tapel – past tense, tipalti. The question my teacher asked 'Mi m'tapelet shelag?' Who takes care of you? Indeed, who will take care of me in South Africa when I am an old lady? My answer was a blank look as the reality set in. I must register for a social worker here. And Doblin? He is no Israeli cat, doesn't know about fighting for small territory as it is not his, so any cat that wants to venture into our apartment has right of way. This is costing me extra in cat food. I often forget to put his food away before I go to sleep. The window stays open for him to come and go at night. Some nights there's fearful yowling going on near the bed as they come past in search of food. Doblin has been in one fight. He got bitten under his chin by a black and white bully/survivor.

A few nights ago, around one am, I heard the sound of water falling to the ground. I ran out to find a soaked Doblin coming through the door. I grabbed him and put him in the bathroom while I went out to investigate the cause. Outside was an enormous patch of water on the tiles. My landlady put her head through the gate with a smile said 'Doblin just went into the Jacuzzi. He must have thought the cover was on.' 'Did he get out easily?' I asked before I rushed back in to dry him off prior to letting him back onto my bed. He luxuriated in the towel drying and brushing and loved being damp and cool, purring all the time.

## **Sylvia Apter**

Eilat 2012

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**A bit about me:** I was born in Cape Town, schooled in Kimberley, studied Industrial Design in Johannesburg, worked for Interior decorating firms in Johannesburg, got married (husband deceased) have two sons, book keeping in Jo'burg, Unisa Fine Art majoring environmental sculpture and drawing, started own business, bought small holding in North West Province maintained an orchard and vegetable garden, offered disabled-friendly weekend guest accommodation. In 2011, I made Aliya, worked odd jobs, volunteered International Birding Station Eilat, I live in a multicultural building in Eilat, do occasional small gardens, balconies, have been writing since high school.

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