



LLAMA DEARA RANCH

The Life and Times of Earl Spaulding Grey

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© Hannah-Leigh Bull, Llama Deara Ranch: December 2005

*Earl Spaulding Grey
Rotund Body Gone Away
Vigil Keeps Your Hannah-Leigh
Your Sweet Spirit Weaves Each Day*

A little less than three years ago, a scrawny Russian Blue kept circling my house in late October, looking around, calling in. I'd answer, and he'd run off. Then one day I invited him in in just the right way, and he became my feline companion for three years—3 the number of creative expression, both his and mine!

Spaulding, as I call him, was named by my dear friend Richard Voss after Spaulding Grey, the late dramatist and monologist, because Spaulding would often recite his views and feelings about many circumstances of this here planet. The "Earl" was added because of his regal flair and my preference for Earl Grey green tea. He was an observant and attentive friend, seeing me through many life events and challenges, as I did him.

In the early days of our relationship, he didn't know how to use the kitty box, so when I was gone, outside he would go. Inevitably when he would hear my ancient SAAB roll in, he would run up to share the adventures and woes of the day, complain about my absence, and encourage me to get on with feeding time. Like all companions, we had our rituals for eating, sleeping, playing, and working—most of them charming and sustaining. His scrawny frame soon developed a rotund exterior indicative of the good life.

Volunteer companions often come with quirks, and his was to occasionally attack my ankles, or arms, both in the casita and when I was working in the gardens. Living on the streets, so to speak, in the country, likely had its fair share of traumas before he arrived at Llama Deara, which may account for his momentary acts of violence. These attacks and his tendency to go into territorial fits with my semi-feral cat Shadow—hanging here for long before Spaulding or I came to these parts—were the major sources of reprimand for this very much loved feline.

One night when I came home, he didn't come running up as usual. Instead, I found him on his bed on the kitchen portal, moaning. The moan signaled so much pain that in the twilight I didn't recognize that it was Spaulding on the portal. On his gut, he had two

large punctures about a half-inch or so apart, which had developed into abscesses. This was a Saturday evening, with no vets readily available, and I decided to keep him close to me and watch him. He wouldn't let me pick him up, but wandered into the house and planted himself on my altar. I was up and down with him all night, and finally Sunday afternoon took him outside to sniff the country air where the abscesses broke. On Monday, he continued to baffle us all, including two vets and a handful of assistants. This was the first time I left him in the hospital overnight, as the doctors x-rayed and assessed him, determining a way to proceed. In the end, no serious surgery was required and he healed slowly at home. To this day, I believe he was bitten by a non-venomous bull snake, when he unconsciously walked over or disturbed her on a wood pile.

Spaulding liked humans, and when I would have Winter Solstice celebrations, he would be in the center of my small casita on the lap of whoever seemed the coziest or most convenient. He took well to his birthright of a safe place to live and satisfied needs and shared his well being with others.

Each year my life got busier and busier in the business of keeping a roof over our heads and doing meaningful work with the local community. By the last year, I was working in five different locations and not home as much as he would have liked. He learned to use the kitty litter, and wanted to stay inside more than roam outside. Last summer I spent as much time with him as possible in the moments I had off. He didn't like when I was bustling around, and preferred when I sat on the couch and called him up for his loving and communion. In many ways, he was like a human child in that if I didn't first give him my undivided attention for 10 or 15 minutes before proceeding to chores, his behavior would reflect the neglect. Like my other animals, he taught me a lot about human family dynamics.

He wasn't too keen on my tendency to help dogs and didn't seem to like them. Last summer, we had a blind Australian Shepherd staying at the ranchito and it took Spaulding a while to observe him closely and discover he was not a threat. Then I decided to help some female dogs at the post office who seemed to be having litter after litter. I didn't bring them on the property, but again was getting distracted from him, which was not something Earl Spaulding Grey relished. But he endured, happy for the attention we gave each other alone in the casita or the stolen moments in the garden when no other animals were around.

The night before Spaulding disappeared I stayed up late with him, dancing to Bob Marley, and stopping periodically to give him pets. He kept raising his head wondering about me as I would join in with Marley on his rendition of *No Woman, No Cry*. This was atypical behavior for me as I usually went to bed much earlier, and this was 1 AM. His behavior too had been odd, sitting in the kitchen during a family dinner that night, without reacting as a mouse scurried by, without playing the typical cat-and-mouse game.

Finally, I did go to sleep, and at about 2:30 or 3 that morn in mid August. Spaulding wanted out. This was his normal time for catting and didn't worry me; only this time Spaulding did not return.

For days, I searched all the properties in my vicinity, on the Chama riverside. The usual sign postings, calls to shelters and vets, and alerts to neighbors. It was two months before I put away his bowls, litter box, and bed, hoping he was just out on a walk-about and would return. Now four months later, I still have dreams of my feline friend, still think I might be seeing him from the corner of my eye, still missing his companionship, but coming far enough in my grieving to know I cannot control his journey or life. Whether he wandered out of my life by choice, as he had wandered into it, or whether a raptor or coyote decided he was a tasty morsel, I cherish the time we had together, the camaraderie and support, the complaints and quirks, the joys, especially on the last night when I stayed up late and engaged him in my delight of life and him.

Llama Deara has been a home to many different species, from my wondrous toad friends—my first volunteer pets, to the semi-domesticated llamas, to the coyotes and countless bird species who feed on this lush jungle-like land. All of these creatures made themselves all the more known after Spaulding's disappearance, when I would find myself tripping over toads and mesmerized by the bats whose greater numbers and glorious flights in unison seemed designed to distract and give me hope. Even the local bull snake who comes out for water when I irrigate, was around much more, taking sunbaths on my front door step, slithering on the portals, occupying the entry spaces to such an extent that I had to shoo her away, reminding her that Spaulding might not want to return if he saw her sitting on the front step.

All the creatures great and small seemed to come out of the garden woodwork to attend to the loss of Llama Deara's Earl Spaulding Grey. It was a unique contrast, to have lost my engaging cat and also be enchanted by the other creatures on the land. Perhaps my senses were all the more heightened because of the loss, perhaps I could actually see and hear more because of Spaulding's disappearance and the deep feelings I had about that. Perhaps his spirit was there all along reminding me that beauty and life exist beyond the death of one striking and effervescent Russian Blue.

Perhaps. But know, my dear companion, your pillow and rocker in the Storyteller's Garden remain. I still look to where you lounged, watching and listening to all the activities of the wildlife and the farm. I still talk to the resident guard cat, who even in spirit, continues to focus his watchful eye on all Llama Deara's people and happenings. I still bless and thank you for your presence, my soulful feline.