

## Tom

I suppose the driver was hurrying to some appointment, now forgotten; sealed inside a metal box knowing nothing of the hope and despair along the road. Tom was knocked aside and hopefully killed instantly. A fraction of a second was the difference between life and death.

Tom was crazy, notorious, vicious. When the men came to install double-glazing, we told them to watch out for the grey cat. "He's already had one of us" they said. On another occasion, three builders were constructing an extension to the house and they used to keep their materials in the garden shed. But Tom had a 'bed' in the shed - he would sleep there if he decided to stay out for the night. If Tom was 'in residence', the builders always asked us to get him out before they would go in to retrieve their stuff. Rosie, our labrador, would never pass Tom in a narrow passage as she had learned from experience that he would always whack her. She would wait nervously, avoiding any eye contact until Tom had moved on. Whenever Karen, a friend, came to call, she would always ask if 'he' was around, because Tom would invariably give her a belt sooner or later. I made the mistake of being drawn in to 'tickle Tom's tummy' and received a three-inch gash across the palm of my hand, so deep that it looked like a failed suicide attempt. When my wife, Esther, told her mum that Tom had been killed, she said: "Lord help us, poor Tom ..... but, you know I was scared of him".

As a young cat he was trying to open the living room door with his paw, but not having much success, so I sat with him and showed him how the handle worked. I opened the door very slightly, then closed it again and repeated the

demonstration. He sat there unmoved apart from an occasional swish of the tail. At the start of the third demo., he made a lunge for me but I saw it coming and leaned back so he just missed me. I ran down the hall with Tom in pursuit and he got me by the kitchen door. Tom would always get his man (or woman).

*When Richard, our son, was still at home, his* Tom was a short-haired grey cat. He had large 'thumbs' attached to his front paws and an extra pad on the rear paws. Apparently, Portsmouth Dockyard has a community of such cats. The crown of Tom's head was much deeper (a double crown) than a normal cat's and you could feel a distinct ridge at the back. And, of course, his behaviour was rather unusual too. He would sit or lie on you and then for no apparent reason would dart off as if he had forgotten an important appointment. On one occasion when this happened, Esther said that just before he jumped she felt some kind of pulse racing in his neck, like a palpitation.

*lose control and almost hit a parked car.*  
We had lived at number 6 Springfield Close for eighteen years and when we decided to move in 1993, we held a party for all our friends and neighbours. It was a good 'do' and we have lots of memories of it; one of the best involved Tom. It was 4AM and the party was winding down. Michael, a neighbour, was well-oiled and because our cats were around and he also had cats, he was rabbiting-on about how he 'knew' cats and 'loved' cats and so on and so on. We were humouring him and wishing he would belt up and push off. Anyway, the last couple decided to leave and we saw them to the door leaving Michael 'alone' in the living room. We were walking back down the hallway when Michael appeared with blood on his face and his right hand. We asked him what had happened, he mumbled something about Tom and said he was leaving. While we were away,

he must have decided to show Tom how much he loved him. We were very sympathetic of course, showed him to the door, watched him stagger off into the night, closed the door and fell about laughing. We have chuckled about this on and off for the last nine years.

When Richard, our son, was still at home, his friend Stewart would often call in. Stewart didn't like cats at the best of times and so Tom unnerved him a bit. After one late drinking session, he stayed the night and awoke to find Tom lying on his chest staring him in the face. He was too frightened to move but Tom was quite comfortable and sat there for quite some time. Relief only came when Tom remembered one of his urgent appointments. Stewart once made a quick call, leaving his car door open and engine running. Everything appeared normal when he returned to the car; he drove off and was getting up some speed when Tom appeared at his shoulder causing him to lose control and almost hit a parked car.

Each week or so, I would return home from work late on Friday night. I parked the car on the drive and would do a bit of fiddling about - putting on my shoes, tidying up the rubbish on the front seat and so on. As soon as I opened the door, Tom would jump in to greet me. He would purr away, so pleased to see me. Then came the problem; after the greeting and the fussing, he would wander around the car and usually end up on the rear parcel shelf. We would spend some time unloading the car of its bags and shirts and beer and wine and then came time to lock it up. However, from experience, we knew that there were times when you could approach Tom and times when you couldn't. Tom-on-the-parcel-shelf was a time when you couldn't. An oft-used solution was to entice him out by offering a shoulder. He

loved to get close to your face, so would often jump onto your shoulder, and become a grey cat stole. In earlier years, he would jump on to my shoulder straight away and so I would walk into the house with a bag in each hand and a cat wrapped around my shoulders.

Each night, we would go to bed and then Tom You were quite safe when Tom was on your shoulder, but he would lash out if anyone else tried to touch him or take him off. He would make the decision when he wanted to jump off. Tom liked to get close to people at other times too. He was my number one apprentice in the garden (Maisie, our other cat, was his second-in-command). Wherever I went in the garden, Tom would be there, back garden, front garden, back garden again, in the wheelbarrow, and if I bent down to do some weeding or planting, up he would jump onto my shoulders. Doing the garden with a cat on your shoulders is quite an art.

We have an ancient two-seater settee and I would often lie on this for a mid-afternoon nap or when watching the television. The most comfortable position was on my back with my head on one arm and my legs dangling over the other arm. This was always a cue for Tom to jump on top of me and do a nose-to-nose. As with many cats, he loved being stroked around his neck and so would lie there for ages - long enough anyway for me to miss complete episodes of Coronation Street. One of the things which would get him off was if someone took cheese, especially strong cheese, from the fridge. As soon as he smelled cheese, he would appear at your feet with eyes blazing, looking as if he would kill for it. He would turn up his nose at cat food or chicken or any meat, but cheese.....

Tom came from a litter of one of Esther's sister's cats. He arrived at the tender age of eight weeks looking like any other kitten, apart from his paws. However, after some weeks he started to demonstrate some of the unusual behaviour that characterised him in later life. Each night, we would go to bed and then Tom would arrive, jump up on the bed and start to attack my forearm, not playfully, but quite viciously. It wasn't possible to stop him, if I pushed him away or told him off, he resumed even more forcefully than before. I thought it was quite amusing, but in the morning my arm looked as if it had been pulled through a bramble hedge backwards. Anyway, after some time, we became a bit tired of these nightly attacks, so we decided to shut him out. We didn't completely close the door, but just pushed it as far as it would go without 'catching'. It wasn't possible to open it easily as the carpet was so thick, it formed a good seal with the bottom of the door. We couldn't believe it, but within thirty seconds, Tom had opened the door by pushing hard against it with his nose - and he was just a tiny kitten.

We already had two cats when Tom arrived, Monmer and Sam. Monmer was always quite cantankerous and hated Tom from the moment he arrived. Things never improved, Tom would chase her and jump on her and she would spit and yowl - oh the pleasures of having cats. Sam was a beautiful black long-haired lad. He didn't like Tom either; Tom would occasionally 'have a go' at Sam but generally they tolerated each other. Eventually, Monmer died at the grand old age of twenty and Sam never really recovered from the dual effects of metaldehyde poisoning (from slug pellets) and being badly savaged by a German shepherd.

So unloved Tom was left all alone. Maisie arrived before too long - tiny, fluffy, long-haired and grey and white. Tom was quite fascinated by this new arrival; Maisie would do the cat 'attack' on Tom, running up to him sideways-on with her back arched, and fluffed-up tail in the air. She would repeat the attack again and again and Tom would just sit there mesmerised. This is what Tom had been waiting for all these years - someone to play with. They became the best of pals; there was lots of rough and tumble, but they were each as bad as the other. Sometimes one would 'start it', sometimes the other. Tom was always much rougher, but Maisie didn't seem to care too much - if she was feeling a bit devilish, she would hit him when he was asleep hoping that he would chase her and Tom would look up with a big scowl on his face. Maisie has been quite lost since Tom's death. She gives the impression of suffering from depression even now, eighteen months on, and if Tom's name is mentioned, she will look around for him.

When we lived at our old house, we had two neighbours who remembered Tom for different reasons. Ann had a large aviary in her garden and she said she would frequently look out to see Tom hanging from the cage about six feet off the ground. Grannie, our next-door neighbour, had a little dog called Bennie who normally hated cats, but for some reason he liked Tom. Whenever Tom appeared at his gate, instead of barking he would wag his tail. Tom would follow Gran and Bennie on their walks around the block. Ann and John, current neighbours, woke up one night to find Tom in bed with them.

Taking Tom to the vet was quite an experience. Once when we were away, Tom developed a problem, so mother-in-law, who was looking

after the house, asked a friend Margaret who then volunteered Robin her husband to take Tom. Robin duly arrived wearing his motorcycle gauntlets, such was Tom's reputation. Tom was never a good patient. Even if he managed to behave himself whilst under treatment, he would always have a final swipe at the vet before being returned to his basket, which prompted one vet to say "Ooh he is horrible isn't he!". At one time, he was diagnosed as schizophrenic - I don't know about schizophrenic, but he was certainly claustrophobic as one night when he was shut in the dining room by mistake, he wrecked the place (including Esther's Swarovski crystal collection).

Some years ago we were watching a David Attenborough programme on TV about bat-eared foxes. It was a nice summer's evening so I don't quite know why we were being such couch-potatoes. About half-way through the programme I looked out of the window only to find a fox sniffing around on the front lawn. Tom and Sam were both out and I was a little concerned that the fox might have a go at them, so I went to shout them in. However, before I reached the door, Tom also appeared on the front lawn and went charging after the fox who turned on his heels and went scurrying off up the road (dozens of horses and riders and a pack of hounds not required). Neighbours said that Tom used to march up and down the road as if he owned the place - the fox was probably seen as an intruder on his 'patch'.

If he wanted to go out, Tom would swipe the keys dangling in the lock, but if we didn't hear this, he would scratch the carpet (no cat-flap for various reasons). As he was such a powerful cat with very large paws, the carpets suffered badly. At night, if he decided he wanted to go

out, he would scratch the stair carpet. No amount of 'telling him off' would make any difference - he knew that if we heard him scratching the carpets, we would be moved into action. It was Tom's nature to be naughty and vicious, but also, like most cats and dogs, very trusting and forgiving. If I told him off, he would soon jump up onto me to ensure we were still friends.

We were depressed for a long time after Tom was killed and I suppose we still are. I'm sure if Tom had gone to first-time cat owners, they would have had such a shock and been glad to see the back of him. But we gave Tom ten years and he gave us ten years. Tom was so full of life; he was a link with the past; to our children, our other cats and to our other house. But apart from these things, we learned a lot from him. The forces driving Tom were too strong to be influenced by anything we could do. We had to learn to accept Tom as he was. People indicated to us that they would not have tolerated his bad behaviour; they would have 'kicked him out' or 'punished him' in some way. We learned that vindictiveness is one of the worst human traits. We couldn't tell much of a story about the wonderful condition of our carpets, but we have lots of memories of Tom.