

BEANIE



A few days ago, my wife and I had to make one of the most distressing decisions we have ever made: to have our lovely cat put to sleep. There was no option, really, as she was very ill by then. The tumour on the left-hand side of her lips, which had grown rapidly in the last three months or so, now covered most of her lips and made her go blind in the left eye. The blindness was only noticeable for a couple of days beforehand. During this time, she must have scratched her nose with one of her claws and dried blood now covered the lower part of her nose, and she had to

breath through her mouth. We thought at first it might just be hardened mud or soot. But on closer inspection, we came to think that it must have been congealed blood. She did not like us to wipe it with a cloth, being so close to her mouth, so it was hard to know what it was.

Up until these last few days, we were playing things day by day. The pain-killer we had to squirt into her mouth three times a day - something she struggled to resist with all her might - seems to have worked well and it prevented her from pawing at her mouth so much. When she did this, we interpreted it as a sign that she was in pain, or perhaps lumps of food had got stuck in her mouth.

Yet oddly enough, the tumour did not put her off her food. In fact, she was much less fussy than normal and did not hesitate in devouring her food, as well as knocking quite a lot of it off her dish, which then had to be put back again...and again. She was not able to chew her food anyway, as she had previously had most of her teeth extracted. She was highly skilled, however, in licking up her food which we had to mash up thoroughly beforehand.

The final few months were mostly given over to sleeping and being cuddled. She demanded cuddles most of the time when she wasn't asleep, and the cuddles themselves sometimes ended up in her sleeping in our arms. As soon as I had taken the napkin off my lap after eating, she jumped up for a cuddle. Sometimes, she jumped up onto my lap before I had finished eating. Years ago, I would have just

put her down on the floor, but in her sorry state I did not have the heart to do so.

She also retained her ability to jump up to the top of a compost bin in the garden at a height of nearly three feet, as well as jumping up to the worktop in the kitchen in front of the sink, in which she sat or curled up, even if it was not always dry.



Two days before she died, she jumped from our dining-room table onto the piano, walked along the keyboard to the other end, and then made a flying leap onto a nearby armchair, totally avoiding the arm of the chair and a cushion that was placed beside it. This was quite a feat considering she was very poorly by then.



She deteriorated fast soon afterwards and on her last day she was completely lacking in energy. I picked her up and carried her around the garden showing her the places

where she had liked to stretch out or crouch down, only days beforehand. A previous cat of ours had walked into the garden to take one last look at it a day before he had had a heart attack and died. This was in my mind as I showed her the blackcurrant bush which she used to sprawl under, the runner beans in front of the garage wall behind which she liked to catch the morning sunshine, and the hypericum bush in the front garden under which she sunbathed or sheltered from the sun at different times of the day, as well as myriad other places.



She clung on to me tightly as if to say: "You will look after me and protect me, won't you. As long as I've got you, I know that no harm will come to me." Knowing that we had already made an appointment at the vets to put her to sleep, I felt a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes, even though I knew we had no alternative but to her out of her misery.

The vet was very kind and sensitive to our feelings and did the deed in a very discrete, kind and respectful way. It was the same lady who put our previous cat, Sophie, to sleep over ten years ago and afterwards presented us with a packet of Forget-me-not seeds which still come up each year. It is somewhat ironic that Beanie often liked to sit amongst clumps of these flowers, planted in memory of Sophie.

For those of you who have had similar experiences, you can probably empathise with this. Losing a pet is like losing a member of the family or a very close friend. The grief you go through is no less and in some ways and for some people, it can be more intense. A pet is totally dependent upon you. In return, the love you get back from a pet is totally unconditional and knows no bounds. For many people, a pet is a wonderful companion, especially to elderly people and people who live alone. For others, a pet might be a valuable source of help, such as a guide dog or an animal which can detect signs that you may not be well and can alert others to your situation.

Of course, if you do not have a pet yourself, you may say: you cannot compare the loss of a pet to the death of human beings, and to the plight of so many people who die from terminal illnesses or through accidents, or are caught up in natural disasters or wars. That is certainly true. However, what is usually ignored is the effect upon people who lose a pet during such these catastrophes. There have been

accounts of people entering houses that are on fire to rescue their pets. It must be traumatic to people too when animals die in an area that gets flooded or is subjected to a volcanic eruption, an earthquake or a tropical storm. So please do not dismiss how devastating it can be to lose a beloved pet.

But I do not want to dwell too much upon the demise of our cat, Beanie. I would rather think of the happiness she brought us over many years.

We first encountered her when we went to an animal rescue-centre close to where we live. We had lost our previous cat, Sophie, about 6 weeks before this. We wanted a kitten, but for some reason there were none available. But there was a tortoiseshell and white, 6-year-old cat called Beans. When she was introduced to us, she wasted no time in demanding a cuddle from me. When we drove back home to think matters over, both my wife and I agreed without any doubt that she was the one to fill the gap left by Sophie. We often wished that we could have seen her as a kitten. She must have been so cute. But there were no pictures available to show us and we knew next to nothing about her past. Her sweet-natured temperament led us to believe that she must have had a happy upbringing and was very much loved.

Before we could have her at home, though, we had to be inspected by someone from the rescue-centre, in spite of

having had cats for the previous 34 years. The woman who visited us was not happy that we did not have a cat-flap. Whenever Sophie had wanted to go out - day or night - one of us would open the back door for her. I remember one night when she was outside and the sound of a cat-fight woke us up. I hurriedly ran downstairs on my way to call her in, and in the dark went headlong into the glass panel of the living-room door, breaking the glass and giving me a nasty cut on the nose which bled onto the carpet. As I was not wearing any clothes at the time, my only consolation was that things could have been a lot worse!

We therefore made arrangements to have a cat-flap installed which, after my gory experience, seemed a very good idea. But in order to work, the cat had to be present for the chip embedded in her to activate the flap. For this to happen, we had to wait a couple of weeks before we were given the cat while they had her checked over and given her a feline flu injection by the vet. I have to add that although she could quite easily come inside through the cat-flap by herself, if she saw anyone through her 'porthole', as we called it, she would wait patiently until we had opened the door for her once we had noticed her face in the window. She also made it clear to us when to open the door for her to go out. At other times, the cat-flap really did come in very handy.

Pretty well the first thing we thought of doing was changing her name. I just could not bring myself to stand at the back door and call out: "Beans". The neighbour might

have followed suit and called out: "Peas" while another might have called out: "Asparagus", and so on. This could get ridiculous. My wife had the brilliant idea of simply changing it to "Beanie" which we thought was far more suitable for a mature lady pussy cat. For a time, it was Beanie Beans until she got used to the change of name and we could leave off the Beans.

Come the day when, on the 11th February 2011, she arrived and immediately set about exploring this new place - every nook and cranny, on the books in the bookcase and in an open cupboard which held stationery and board games. There was a gap at the bottom of this cupboard which she discovered early on and on a few occasions, we could not find her, so I had to seal it up while she was having a meal in the kitchen. After spending a long time exploring on that initial day, she came over to the sofa where I was sitting and curled up on a newspaper beside me. She had accepted her new home.



We were instructed not to let her out for the first few days, as she might make her way back to the animal-rescue centre. She had to have a tray with cat litter in it during this time. She was used to this. But what upset her was not being able to go outside, and she would sit in front of the locked cat-flap looking outside and trying desperately to open it. I took pity on her and picked her up and showed her around the garden. I underestimated her strength and determination, and she managed to escape my grip and went off to explore her new surroundings. Cats have a way of becoming invisible and I looked everywhere, afraid that she might have already set off on her way to the rescue-centre. We need not have worried as she was only a few gardens away.

"Oh, she is so beautiful," the neighbour said. "I could kiss her." After that, we were very careful about her trying to get out, but we soon relented and she always stayed close to home.

Her initial feelings of insecurity did take a time to settle and she made a big fuss over everyone who came to the door, thinking that they were going to take her away to their own house. This included plumbers and double-glazing salesmen as well as the postman. It wasn't long though before she realised that this was not going to happen and our house was well and truly her new home.



Beanie loved people, in particular, children and men. The general idea that cats are independent and stand-offish when they want to be, did not apply to her. She was always affectionate to everyone and never tired of being fussed over. She let children play with her, stroke her - even though they were not always very skilled about it - and pick her up, rather awkwardly at times. She never complained and they all adored her. She always kept her claws in and never tried to bite them, even when they pulled her tail, which many children are tempted to do, however much you insist that they should not do so.

She had a strong bond with men and, because she was so good-looking, they all fell for her. A good friend of ours was once asked how he knew how to hold a baby so expertly. He told them that he had had good practice in holding Beanie.

Beanie did not ignore women either. After coming for a cuddle with me she would walk over to my wife so that she could also hug her. She didn't want anyone to be left out.

That included a woman we know who was afraid of cats. We did our utmost to keep Beanie away from her, but Beanie wanted so much to be friends with her too. She even posed in the loo window in case our friend ever had a bout of constipation when she visited us.



Several people we know who have never had anything to do with cats have told us that the first cat they have ever had on their laps was her - the original laptop, you could say!

One of these people was a lady who stayed overnight with us at Christmas one year. At breakfast time, we noticed something running around on the kitchen floor. It was a tiny mouse which Beanie had brought in, very much alive. We had a job catching it and putting it outside. Beanie, however, was no longer interested in it. To her credit, the lady was not at all shaken and later on that day held Beanie on her lap.

Being a cat, she was naturally conditioned to catch mice and birds - not many birds, she preferred mice and shrews and would spend what seemed like hours in stalking them. Like other cat-"owners", we were sometimes presented with dead mice as gifts. I suppose it's the thought that counts.

Proper (tinned and packaged) cat-food somewhat curbed her enthusiasm for catching her own and in the last few years she hardly bothered. Cats, however, are very fussy over their food and they can often go off certain food and demand something else. Beanie knew the cupboard where it was kept and danced on her hind legs in front of it until she was given some food that she liked. This meant that the cat-food that was uneaten ended up on the lawn where the birds devoured it. But cat-food on the lawn is often much more enticing than food in a dish to cats, although if we had thrown all of her food on the lawn as a matter of course she would not have eaten it.

I am sure that some of the left-over food on the lawn was eaten by hedgehogs. Beanie turned a blind eye to them, as she did with frogs which sometimes appear in our garden. She also kept well away from the seagulls which sometimes visit us - probably a wise move as they are much bigger than she was.

When she was outside, she did not confine herself to our own garden. Our immediate neighbour who was a single elderly man was much taken by her and used to invite her into his house - if she didn't invite herself in first - and feed her bits of cheese. There, they would watch television together. He was extremely fond of her, even though she sometimes used his garden to do her toilet. She also went into other people's gardens and houses too. The neighbours two doors over used to laugh at the way she would come into their house and parade around and then look at them as if

to say: "I'm ready to go now. Would you mind opening the front door for me?"

She also sometimes went into the garden on the other side of our house. The elderly lady who lived there would then bring her back to us, saying that she had got lost - hardly likely, as it is just the other side of the adjoining fence. But Beanie enjoyed being "rescued". Indeed, she thrived on it.



There were times when she got on to the flat roof of the garage or on top of the fence, or in a tree, and miaowed to be rescued, although she was quite capable of finding her own way down. She thrived on being a damsel in distress just to get our attention. And we could never resist coming to her assistance, even if it was sometimes hard to discover where she was.



Another time we had to try and coax her out of someone else's house (a complete stranger's). For a while, she would like to follow us when we went an evening walk, and if she was lying about in the garden somewhere and saw us leave, she would come after us. She was sometimes side-tracked by other neighbour's cats, and would wait for us to return under the safety of a nearby hedge. We always had to ensure that we came back by the same route, otherwise she would remain there and we would have to retrace our steps to find her when we got home.

One day she was especially fortunate not to encounter any other cats and followed us for quite a long distance up the road. Although she had a lot of energy, it came in spurts and she was sometimes diverted by other things en route. After going for quite a distance we happened to look around and saw her a few feet behind us, looking exhausted but still trying to catch up with us. I picked her up and she started to purr instantly as we made our way back home. She always enjoyed being held and stayed in my arms for a time until she saw something which needed to be

investigated. I put her down and off she darted down the path of a house and went inside the open door, disappearing up the stairs. We furtively tried to get her to come out again which she eventually did, but not before we had some strange looks from the people inside who had not seen Beanie fly up their staircase.

Many are the times in which I have had to carry her home when she followed me. The only thing that seemed to work, when I simply had to go out, was to put her in the front door and close it quickly, and hope that by the time she had walked into the kitchen, squeezed through the cat-flap and gone around the garden, I would no longer be in sight. This usually meant I had to run up the road until I was out of sight of the house.

Unlike human beings, cats do not go in a straight line from A to B but choose to go by way of a circuitous route. This applies indoors as well as outside. To get from an armchair at the far side of a room to the kitchen where she was fed, she would go all the way around the wall beside the skirting board, and under the piano to reach the kitchen door. Of late when the top of the sofa was the favourite place to sleep, she would come out of the kitchen, go under the dining room table to an attaché case and stand on that to reach a small table which is kept behind an armchair. Then she would go from this table to a small round table and climb into the armchair and jump up to the top to cross over onto the sofa beside it. That is a lot of effort, but she obviously had her reasons for doing it this way.



There are various other things I do not understand about cats: why, as animals who love their creature comforts, do they choose to go outside in the rain and the cold after being asleep in a warm comfortable spot inside; why do they have a preference for sitting in the dead centre of a rug; why do they change their favourite places to sit or sleep so frequently; what is the attraction of sitting in a box or in a drawer of a cupboard or curling themselves up in a flower-pot? And why do they adopt such ungainly, awkward positions at times which do not look at all comfortable?



Perhaps they just like the mystique and doing things they know we humans will never understand.



Like all cats, Beanie was very conscientious in grooming herself. The brown and black patterns on her head, back and tail remained unsullied throughout her life to the very end. The markings were a work of art with a distinct black cross on her back. I used to joke with my Red Cross colleagues that that signified that she was a volunteer for the Black Cross - the animal equivalent of the charity.



Her tail consisted of black and brown circles with a white tip. The carers at the cattery where she went when we were away on holiday were captivated by this.



On her face were thin black lines going horizontally from her eyes to her cheek bones, not unlike pictures of the make-up used by Egyptian goddesses. The white fur which went from the lower part of her face to her tail and included all four paws was kept immaculate. It was so sad that after having some fur shaven off her front paws when she was anaesthetised for her operation to try and remove the tumour, the white fur was replaced by black fur which just made her look as if that paw was dirty. (The operation was successful up to a point, but the cancer rapidly grew back again.)

What was her main role in life? To give unconditional love. There is no other way of putting it. Whenever we were not feeling 100%; whenever we were feeling low or sad; whenever we were tired or annoyed or distraught; or had work we really had to get on with; or whenever we just enjoyed holding her for the sake of it, she was there.



Now she is no longer here, the house seems empty. We find ourselves looking around the house and the garden expecting to see her, but in vain. Then it dawns on us: she has left us and the world behind.

I would like to think of her looking down on us from cat-heaven and purring loudly. She is no longer here, but she has left us with many happy memories about her which will never leave us. Thank you, Beanie, for sharing at least part of your life with us.

Postscript

Today we received a lovely card from the vet with a really thoughtful, touching message and a new packet of Forget-me-nots along with it.

She wrote: "I know how special she was to you both. She was a lovely cat and it must be quiet without her. She had a really good life and the best possible care from you both and I'm sure that's why she carried on as long as she did. I know you will miss her."

We do. We certainly do.



