

LOVE AND LONELINESS ~ Errol's Story

By Richard Corfield

On the Richter scale of disastrous Christmases it was a nine. The phone had rung half an hour before we were due to serve the turkey with the news that my wife's brother had suffered a massive cerebrovascular haemorrhage and was clinically dead. The intensive care unit in Palm Beach were requesting permission to turn off Andy's life support. In an act of courage such as I have seldom seen, my father-in-law gave it.

It took us several days to regroup as the snow fell more-or-less continuously from a leaden sky and turned our small village in West Oxfordshire from a generally pleasant place to live into something as magical as if it had been conjured from the pen of C.S. Lewis. The snow lay in thick drifts, our neighbours slid and skidded on a road that had been turned into a skating rink and the cosy pub opposite us did a roaring trade in mulled wine. It also meant that the airports were shut – there was no way we could get to Florida to attend to Andy's affairs until the thaw.

By New Year's Day it was clear what I had to do. By the time the thaw came and the airports opened, it would be time for Julie to return to her job as a teaching assistant and our children to go back to school. My father-in-law, aged 75, had my disabled mother-in-law to look after. Clearly there was only one person in the family who could rearrange his schedule to accommodate a trip to Florida and perform the heartbreaking work of tying up the loose ends of a loved one's life. We had no idea who Andy's friends were, all we knew was that his wife had left him ten years before and in that time Andy had become something of a hermit, dutifully calling his family once a week, but refusing to come home to start a new life in Europe. He had told us endlessly of the paradisiacal climate and the rolling greens of the PGA National Golf Club in Palm Beach Gardens on which he lived. And yet, it was clear that he was not happy, the financial crash of 2008-2009 had halved the value of his house and he was out of work.

We knew that he had kept fish and that these had already been transported to new homes with fellow enthusiasts. And then there was Errol, Andy's cat. Errol had once been one-half of a dynamic duo with a Persian long-hair named Greebo after the feline anti-hero of Terry Pratchett's celebrated Discworld novels. But Greebo had himself long since passed on into the sky beyond the sky and Errol – a pedigree Birman with a list of awards as long as the line of first edition Pratchett's I was later to discover in Andy's house – had been my brother-in-law's inseparable companion for these last five years.



Errol, we had been told, had been taken into the veterinarians that Andy used for his beloved cats where the proprietor, Dr Tate Posey, was a personal friend. Beyond this, we had no more knowledge except the strong feeling that an elderly cat was a distinctly complicating term in an already intricate equation: how to sort out Andrew's estate four thousand miles away. Perhaps, we thought, such a beautiful cat (for we had the pictures Andy would regularly email us) would be immediately snapped up by one of the wealthy blue-rinse madames of West Palm Beach and whisked to a fifteen bedroom pool-side mansion.

Soon after my arrival in Palm Beach Gardens, I made my way to the veterinarians where Errol was quartered. I introduced myself and was eventually led into a sterile, soulless examination room dominated with a metal table and posters proclaiming the dangers of rabies while the nurse went to collect Errol.

The door opened. Cuddled in her arms was a beautiful Birman male, a seal point with ears, masks and legs of a brown so perfect it would make a Swiss chocolatier break down and weep with joy. His whiskers were long and droopy and white. His mane was the pale yellow of the sun breaking through early morning mist, while the rest of his body was covered in fur the colour of the finest honey. Front and back paws were of the purest white. From the exquisite triangle of his mask two large eyes of the deepest blue peered at me gravely. I wanted to dive in and swim in them forever.

Here was a prince amongst cats, a masterpiece of lissom loveliness and a feline to warm the hearts of the fussiest of cat fanciers. But Errol merely came up to me, sniffed me for a second then settled down and started washing my hand. For a second I thought a distant jet was taking off from Palm Beach International and then I realised that the rumble was his; a deep contended purr with subsonics Pink Floyd would have given their Stratocasters for. I stood there while he washed me and time stood still. I could feel the tectonic plates of my resolve sliding and rearranging themselves within the sea-bed of my soul and within a minute I knew what had to be done.

Errol was not going to a blue-rinse madame in Florida. Errol was coming home with me.

Let me tell you that there are very few places bleaker than the loading dock at Miami International Airport as the sun goes down on a January day and the wind from the Caribbean whips up. Dervishes of dust humped and skittered among the vast metal containers and the pages of old newspapers - the corpses of last week's news - rattled listlessly along the high wire fences.



Errol and I stood among the concrete loading ramps cuddling each other for mutual support. There was nothing to stop him running away except my encircling arms and his innate sense of self preservation, and nothing to stop me running away except an intensity of love for this little cat that could never have imagined even a week before.

So we clung to each other - a overweight middle-aged man and a beautiful but elderly pedigree cat – as Errol's cage slid into the rubber-ringed maw of the industrial sized X-ray scanner that was the only link between the freight yard and the airport. Far away we could see the lights of the control tower, while from time to time the scream of Pratt & Whitney turbofans ripped the night air with a screech like tearing metal. The stench of aviation kerosene was everywhere, irritating my nasal membranes and making my eyes itch. Goodness knows what it must have been like for Errol.

Getting this far had been, to put it mildly, something of a trial. The vet had phoned me the day after my fateful decision to tell me the good news that Errol's vaccinations were completely up to date and that there was nothing to stop him going straight into the United Kingdom without having to spend six months in quarantine. I was buoyed by this news, in fact I was ecstatic.

Even so, getting Errol's documentation sorted out had been a trial. I'd had to change tickets and airlines to get a fast, direct flight into Heathrow. I'd had to organise a flight-safe cage that confirmed to Virgin Atlantic's strict standards and I'd had to borrow an American scanner for Errol's microchip. I carried with me a pile of his medical records an inch thick.

It had been a rush right up to the last minute. Miami was a three-hour drive from West Palm Beach but as I stood on that loading dock in the thickening gloaming cuddling Errol I reflected that it was the second time I'd been at the airport that day. I had been there seven hours earlier to get his export licence from the US Department of Agriculture, something that could only be done in person. Then I had driven back to West Palm Beach, dropped Andy's car off at his house, picked up Errol, got a friend to take us to West Palm Beach airport where I could pick up a rental car, and then driven both Errol and me back to Miami International Airport.

So here I now was, dropping Errol off at the cargo area and hoping that worst was behind me.

Right?
Wrong.

Just two minutes ago I had been summarily told that the cage Errol was in did not conform to Virgin Atlantic's criteria. I produced the picture from their website showing that the cage was identical to the one that they showed in their photograph. They shrugged apologetically, and told me that the criteria had been changed and that they would be updating their website soon. I bit my tongue and asked if there was somebody who could help me.

Eventually I met a sympathetic member of staff. He told me that they did have an approved pen on the premises and that I could purchase it there and then, or if I wished, travel twenty miles up the road in the gathering dark to try and find a pet store where I could get the same thing. All I had to do then was bring it back, wash it out, dry it, transfer Errol's rug and toys into it, get Errol into it and then hand him over in time to board a flight which was now departing in less than four hours.

By this time I was punch drunk with adversity. It had taken me five days to get Errol prepared for his transatlantic journey and the one thing I was now sure about was that either Errol and I were going together or that neither of us was going at all. The old Motors song *Love and Loneliness* spun through my head as I contemplated the options. "You used to think that love was worth the time, When love was all we had." Well, love was worth the time and it was all we had. I looked at the young Hispanic in front of me. How much was the cage?

"\$150," He said, without batting an eyelid.

"I'll take it," I said.

Thereafter the paperwork, if not the money, was a formality. \$850 to transport the cat, \$150 for his pen (which seemed large enough to have local weather systems – what kind of a cat had it been designed for? A Sabre-toothed Tiger?), and then 500 more dollars to get him through British customs. One last chore before Errol could be handed into his cage was to have it X-Rayed, by the same shipping company who had just

sold it to me to make sure that I hadn't packed it with Semtex in the thirty seconds it had been in my possession. I suppose I should be glad that they didn't charge me for that as well.

Eventually the cage was declared safe. Errol, mercifully, was not X-rayed and I handed him through a tiny gap in the mesh whereupon they put him in his cage. I watched as they made sure that his water bottle was securely fastened.

And that was when things started to take a turn for the better. The young Hispanic told me that he would make it his personal business to come and find me in the Virgin Atlantic departure lounge and let me know for sure that Errol was on the same flight.

I was grateful but it was with a heavy heart that I said goodbye to Errol and left him at the loading dock.

I wondered miserably if I would ever see him again. So black was my mood that I drove around Miami for half an hour in the dark and the newly falling rain before realising that I was completely lost. Eventually though, I reached the car rental drop-off, got rid of my SUV and with my luggage in tow checked in at the Virgin desk and happily paid the additional \$100 for a seat with additional legroom.

Having bought my enhanced ticket. I then went to a bar and dove straight into one of the largest margaritas I have ever seen. It was like a swimming pool and as I glugged it down I could practically feel it doing me harm.

I had another one.



Love and Loneliness at the loading dock at Miami Airport



Then it was time to go the boarding gate. As the young Hispanic had promised, he was there to tell me that Errol was on board, was safe and sound and that the captain had been alerted to the fact that he had a VIF (Very Important Feline) travelling in the hold.

As we flew across the Atlantic that night I dozed fitfully. I knew Errol was probably only about a dozen metres away from me, but he might as well have been on Mars for all the access to him that I had. I asked the Purser to remind the captain that he had live cargo in the hold. She told me that all should be well because he was a new captain, anxious to impress and therefore bothered about such things. I was left contemplating what that said about Virgin Atlantic's more seasoned flight crew but decided, on balance, to be optimistic.

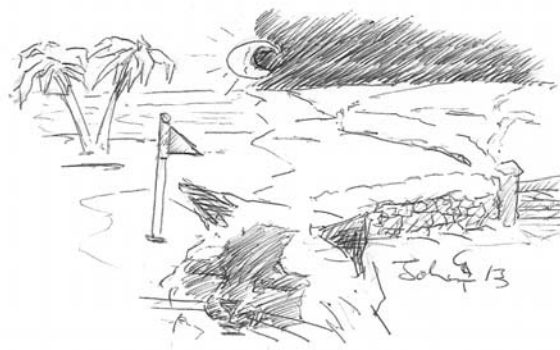
Six hours later, we landed at Heathrow. I walked through Customs and there was Julie, my wife. We have been married twenty years and I don't know if I was ever more pleased to see her than at that moment.

After about three hours cooling our heels in a nondescript building amongst the warehouses at the edge of Heathrow an animal immigration official arrived to tell us that there was a problem. My eyes rolled and spittle flecked the corners of my mouth. I had spent almost a week making sure that the paperwork was correct and after a six hour-flight I was feeling a trifle tired. It turned out that dates concerning Errol's rabies inoculations didn't match. I pointed out that some of the

dates were in American format. "Oh," he said, smiling brightly, "Well, that's all right then."

This time, I almost bit through my tongue.

Half an hour later and a meowing Errol was delivered to us in his Arnold Schwarzenegger-sized chariot. He looked completely unfazed by his journey. We put him in the car and drove him the hour and half up the M40 to our little slice of West Oxfordshire which is worth all the Palm Beach golf courses in the world to us.

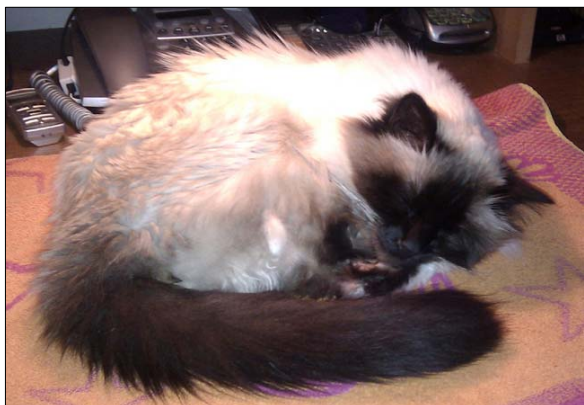


Indoors and our children and our cats welcomed him eagerly. Amazingly, our ginger tom Stanley – normally 7 kilos of heavily muscled bad-attitude – sniffed him over once and proclaimed him fit to join the tribe. The other two cats – normally very territorial – were similarly welcoming. Then Errol had a bite to eat and went upstairs and found himself an alcove underneath my youngest daughter's bed where he spent most of the next two weeks. He would come out for meals and then go back and lie under the radiator. Perhaps it reminded him of the Florida climate that he had now left behind for ever. As the weeks went by, it became clear that Errol was integrating well with his new family – human and feline.

This Christmas we have had Errol for two years. We are grateful for every day that we have together.

Out of adversity and loneliness love triumphed. For both of us.

Richard Corfield



Errol at home in Oxfordshire December 2012

MY CAT

You're lovable, playful, intelligent, bright,
 sleepy by day and active by night,
 gracefully beautiful, impeccably groomed.
 No need for fine feathers, expensive perfume,
 sultry, provocative, seductive and more.
 You're the one that my heart will always adore.
 When the day has been bad and life feels flat
 I return home to you

MY DARLING CAT

Anon

