

## **What Can You Do? By Louise Wilford**

There's this cat, see, comes round once or twice a week – has done since it were a kitten, which was the middle of the first lockdown. In my opinion, he shouldn't've been let out on his own so young, but that's people these days. What can you do?

It said on the news that people were buying pets right, left and centre during the lockdown, and that's just not right, is it? They get fed up with them once they go back to work. The RSPCA have been run off their feet apparently. The problem is, young people have been brought up to get what they want, when they want it. Mavis used to say they were all spoiled, and she was right. They think they're entitled to anything they take a shine to, and they've no resources. In my day, we didn't even have a TV, it was just the wireless, but we didn't moan about it. We'd have a pint down the local, keep pigeons mebbe, go to the footie match, put the odd bet on. Read the paper. We knew how to entertain ourselves. And the women had their stuff too – cooking, ironing, knitting. Gossiping. People never got bored in them days. We didn't have time. And we didn't have the money either. We didn't go out and buy a pet whenever the urge took us, I can tell you that for nowt.

Anyway, this cat comes round regular. First time, I were polishing me backgammon counters – I don't get to play much these days. Nobody to play with. Anyway, this cat, he likes the look of the counters and starts pawing at them, like, made one roll along the carpet, chased it. You know what cats are like. He made himself at home.

1990 words

Anyway, I usually give him a bit of me tea, maybe a bit of bacon or tuna. I don't buy proper cat food because I'm on a pension and he's not my responsibility, is he? But he's a bit of company of an evening.

He's a funny cat, bit stand-offish, does as he pleases. Black with white feet like those socks little kids wear. Independent little chap, he is. I suppose that's what cats are all like, but there's something about him that I like. Not that he cares whether you like him or not. He just pushes himself into your life because he wants to. Doesn't matter what you think about it.

Anyway, a few weeks back, I was in the kitchen washing the pots – not that there's many these days – and I heard a mew. The cat's in the hall. Normally, it'll mew like nobody's business till I give it some snap, but it wasn't its normal self. It fell over on the hall rug – that one Mavis bought before she died – and just lay there, looking pathetic. It felt hot when I stroked it and its fur looked sort of dull, not shiny like it usually is.

'What's up, boy? Has't 'ad a bad mouse, eh?'

It just stared up at me with them big yellow eyes, looking like it needed help.

I didn't know what to do. I could see he needed a vet, but I can't afford vet fees and anyway it isn't my cat, is it? Nearest vet's up Penistone way and I can't drive these days, since they said me eyesight's going. Fat lot they know, bloody doctors, messing you about then taking your driving license off you. What good's that supposed to do? This is a case in point. If the cat died, they'd have that on their consciences, wouldn't they? Telling me I can't drive when I've been driving longer than most of them have been alive!

Anyway, I thought the best thing I could do was to find out who the real owner was.

I walked up to the houses round the back and, sure enough, there was a cat flap in one of the doors. Stupid things, them cat flaps. Security risk. I knew someone once whose wife locked him out of his own house after he'd had a few, but he managed to unlock the door by laying on the ground, sticking his arm through the cat-flap and reaching up to get the key from the inside of the door. He had long arms, mind. But the point is, if *he* could do it, any long-armed burglar could too. It's not worth the risk, is it? But you can't tell young folk anything.

No one in. Typical. Their cat's half-dead on my hall rug and they decide to go out gallivanting! I wrote 'em a note and stuffed it through the cat flap, then I went home and waited. I was just settling down to watch the St Leger when the cat crept up onto the settee and then onto my knee. He moved really slow, like he was in pain or feeling bad. He curled up on my knee and I stroked him behind the ears. What else could I do? Sometimes, you feel so bad that all you want is for someone to soothe you, take your mind off it. Like when Mavis was suffering and I used to stroke her hair when she was in bed, because it distracted her from the pain.

He barely had the energy to purr, poor lad.

I waited two hours. The cat was just the same. He'd lapped up a bit of water but that's all. I was getting worried, to tell the truth. As a rule, I'm not sentimental about cats – don't get me wrong, I wouldn't harm 'em, but after all they're only animals, aren't they? Our Mavis used to be dead soppo over animals, putting bits of bacon rind out for the birds and bowls of milk out for next door's tabby, before it got run over.

I used to tell her, ‘Tha’s not doing t’birds any favours, yer daft bugger – yer just settin’ a trap for ‘em, lurin’ ‘em into t’garden so’s mangy beast can gerrem’. She never understood the laws of nature, Mavis. Too soft-hearted. Wanted everything to be friends.

Course, first time a robin corpse turned up on the lawn, it were tears and upset. You can’t tell some folk anything. It was the same with mice. I used to tell her, me dad used to clobber them with a shovel. I mean, that’s what you did in them days. None of this messing about with humane traps, like now. They’re vermin. But people’ve got soft. She used to beg me to shut up when I told her about me old dad and his shovel! I mean, she hated mice, terrified of ‘em she was, but first time that cat from next door brought her the back end of one for a present, she had ten fits.

I mean, you can’t have it all ways, can you?

But this cat was different. He’d got under me skin, I suppose you might say. And anyway he was really poorly. He was breathing heavily, sort of wheezing, his chest rattling as he breathed out. Bit like me in winter. They tried to get me to have a flu jab again this year, but I keep telling them, it does no good. I’d already had three jabs for Covid. I felt like a flipping pin cushion. What I need for my chest is a good course of antibiotics. That’ll shift it. And an onion. Me mam used to swear by onions when we were kids and got colds. I was lucky that I never got Covid. Anyway, you can’t tell doctors anything. Might as well talk to the cat.

I catch myself sometimes thinking how lucky it was that Mavis wasn’t around when the pandemic started. She’d have hated the lockdown. She liked to go out shopping, did Mavis. Staying in the house day-in day-out would’ve killed her.

Then I remember.

Anyway, finally, this bloke turns up – early forties, shorts and trainers. Says he’s called Malcolm (‘Call me Malc,’ he says – must be at least forty-five. Call me Malc!) and he understands I’ve got his cat. I thought he looked a bit casual, but then they all do these days. Sheffield Wednesday tee-shirt. Bit of a beard.

‘He seemed fine when we left him this morning,’ he says. I sniff. He’s not fine now, I think. In fact, I might’ve said it out loud.

Anyway, ‘Call Me Malc’ takes him to the vets in his car and drops by on his way back to let me know that the cat’s got an infection and he’s been injected with antibiotics. Typical! They’ll give them to a flipping cat but if I ask for some to get rid of a cold, I have to listen to all the ‘They don’t work on viruses, I’m afraid!’ guff. I mean, I remember the Hong Kong flu, me.

Then, next day, there’s another knock on the door, softer this time, not so much like the Stazi coming round to drag me off to a gulag for not paying me poll tax. It’s Malcolm’s little lad, only about ten, standing on the doorstep with a great bunch of daffs in his hands to thank me for looking after Fluffy. That’s the cat’s name. Fluffy. Just about as stupid a name as you could think up for a short-haired, bad-tempered black cat, if you ask me. I’ve been calling him Asbo.

And I’ve never seen the point in cut flowers, myself. Seems daft, chopping ‘em off at the knees and sticking ‘em in a jar. Been better off with a few tins of beans and a loaf or summat. Mavis was always bringing flowers home. I remember when she came out of hospital, I got her a new set of saucepans – real good ones, a bargain off the market, the man said they were selling ‘em for twice the price in Marks and Sparks –,

1990 words

and she burst into tears. Said she'd been expecting flowers or chocolates, not saucepans.

Women! Who can fathom 'em?

But the daffs were nice, though. I had to find out that old cut-glass vase Mavis used to use. I finally found it under the stairs.

And then the little lad starts coming round regular, checking up on Fluffy if he's been missing for a few hours.

'Is Fluffy here, Mr Reid?' he says. 'Mum's sent you round a few scones. She's been baking.'

'Would you mind looking after Fluffy when we go on holiday, Mr Reid?'

'I thought you'd like to see our photos. I've brought you some humbugs back.'

Gets on me nerves a bit, really, always knocking on the door. But what can you do? I'm lumbered with both of 'em now, the cat and the lad.

Malcolm and his wife must take me for a mug. I mean, baking an occasional scone wouldn't salve my conscience if half me family were being looked after by the neighbours.

But he's a bit of company, I'll give him that. Neil, he's called. He's turning out a right little backgammon player, too. Got the knack. We often have a game, using that old chess table Mavis brought back from Blackpool that year Bert broke his ankle getting off the coach. Asbo – I mean, Fluffy – sometimes gets in the way, trying to knock the counters off the board, but we put up with him.

I told him about me old dad whacking the mice on the head with a shovel. He said it was 'cool'. What sort of word is that? They don't teach them how to speak

1990 words

nowadays. It's all National Curriculum and Jamie Oliver making them eat cheese straws and curry. It's no wonder they turn into delinquents, is it?

Anyway, Neil can't be that daft, can he, if he can play backgammon?

We keep a running total, paid in boiled sweets.

I'm currently down three pear drops and a butterscotch.

1990 words