

Prologue

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“Oh no, not again,” these were the words that came to mind the minute I opened the front door. There, as far as the eye could see were hundreds of chewed up pieces of toilet roll. A thin layer of Andrex Super Soft completely covered the hall and stairs.

My wife had returned the night before from doing the weekly shop on her way home from work, and ever the one to keep an eye on the pennies, she was extolling the virtues of shopping for a bargain.

“Look, I saved nearly a pound by buying a twenty four pack rather than the usual four pack.”

“How many of us live here?” I asked her.

“Two,” she replied.

“And how many rolls do we generally go through in a week?”

“Two,” she mumbled. She already knew where I was going with this.

“Mmmm, twenty four rolls at two rolls a week, at least they won’t go off. So what should we do with this week’s eight pence you’ve saved?”

“How about we go to the pub?”

“Get your coat, at least if I overdo it on the Guinness there’s enough toilet roll.” I said laughing. (If you drink Guinness, you will know what I mean).

“You little bugger!” I shouted at the dog, and what was a happy tongue lolling face suddenly did a handbrake turn, and shot down the

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hall, leaving a blizzard of white toilet roll flying in the air behind him. He only stopped when he thought there was a safe distance between us. Kopek was standing legs wide apart, halfway down the hall, with his head on one side. He seemed to be unsure whether to make a run for safety, or jump into my arms for a cuddle.

Decision made, he turned and ran, creating a bow wave of Andrex as I chased him into the kitchen. Kopek jumped, madly pawing the kitchen door handle. Success, he shot out into the back garden as if there were a dozen gerbils gnawing at his tail. After hurling one last vociferation after him, I locked the door and started to survey the size of the clean up job. Tiny strips of toilet paper, all about 1 inch square, and a lot of it still soggy with dog saliva, completely covered the kitchen, the hall, the stairs, the landing, and even the bedroom. Of the original twenty-four rolls there was but one half-mangled damp one left, my coming home just as he was finishing that one off had obviously interrupted him. I hadn't owned a puppy for a long time, and had forgotten just how much hard work they were. We had bought this puppy two months previously, and we were starting to wonder whether we were completely sane when we made this decision. The puppy was a replacement for the hole left in our lives, after our previous dog had left us for the big field in the sky.

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Two rabbits, a dog, another rabbit, yet another rabbit, then a cat. It was starting to feel like the ark.

To understand how and why we ended up with this wonderful destructive ball of fur with long floppy legs, it's necessary to go back to when my then future wife and I first started dating. We had both met late in life, in our mid to late thirties (that is she was 'mid' and I was 'late'). Apart from some very brief periods, I had always had at least one dog in my life. However, Ronnie at that time was very much a rodent person or more specifically, she was into lagomorphs. No, this was not some form of sexual deviancy. As rabbits are not strictly of the rodent family, this is the correct name for them. Of course, we simply referred to them as rodents, for us this was a term of endearment; although I'm not too sure how happy they were about this. Ronnie had no experience of keeping any other type of animals, except rabbits and guinea pigs.

When we first met, it was one of those brief periods in my life in which I was without a dog. However, Ronnie had two rabbits she had adopted from a rescue centre in Essex. Being an aficionado of 1970s films, she had named them Donald and Elliot, after Donald Sutherland and Elliot Gould. Despite the oddness of this naming convention, it was a vast improvement on her previous rabbit's name; she had called that one Brown Bun. Now I love all types of animals, especially ones with fur on. However, I had never gone in for rodents too much, as I wasn't sure how much they gave you back. I did learn to love those two rabbits though.

Actually, I did have a rodent once. I had a hamster called Miss Otis (as in Miss Otis regrets, the title of a song some older readers might remember), but I was not overly impressed with her. Apart from doing a Tarzan impression along the top of her cage, she didn't do too

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much as far as entertainment value went. If anything, she was a real pain in the butt. Once she had learned how to open her cage, she was always escaping. Otis had her cage in the box room, and there was many a time I had to spend hours searching, making sure that I did not leave the door open lest she escaped to the rest of the house. Searching for a hamster is not the easiest task in the world at the best of times. I had to make sure that anything I lifted up, I did so very carefully, just to make sure no squishing occurred. She once disappeared for three days, and to be honest I thought she had escaped out of the room and I would never see her again. It was only when my printer stopped working I found where she had disappeared to. She had managed to worm her way inside and build a nest in it, she had nibbled all the internal wiring and it was a small wonder she didn't electrocute herself. I had to take the printer apart to get her out, and then had to go and buy another printer. Thinking about it, this episode did nothing to endear me to rodents, and it's probably the reason I never got another one.

Now rabbits are not without their quirks, such as the time Ronnie thought all her friends had sent her to Coventry. It was only when she discovered that one of her rabbits had taken a fancy to her telephone line, and eaten about two foot of it three days previously, that she then understood why nobody had rung her for so long. Then there was the time she had some friends round for dinner, only for one of her guests to fall through the seat of the chair. This was because one of the rabbits had taken a liking to the raffia making up the seat, and had pretty much chomped its way through it.

Ronnie had made up for her rabbit's lack of personality by inventing a fantasy life along with a language for her rodents. Rabbits were called 'booners', and guinea pigs were referred to as 'piggies'. She had even extended these names to other furry rodents like squirrels, these were known as 'squirrelies'. The collective name for all these

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animals was simply rodents, or even 'rodentia' as in some sort of mafia style family. In her mind, when she was out at work, she could quite happily picture her rabbits playing poker, watching the television, and getting up to all sorts of mischievous things. I wouldn't want you to get the impression that she was completely crazy, but it's just that she has an extremely fertile imagination.

There was one time, when I had lost patience with Donald; it was whilst I was trying to get him into his hutch for the night. He refused to co-operate, and I ended up prodding him in the rear end with a bamboo cane. Ronnie admonished me saying, "If you're not careful, you'll get a visit from the Rodent Council. They don't take too kindly to that sort of thing." This council was an imaginary group of animals that looked after the interests of all rodents, and according to Ronnie, they also enforced rodent law. Apparently, if any rodents were caught stealing carrots from the local Co-Op, the rodent council would sentence them to some sort of punishment. This was generally community service cleaning up the fallen acorns from the park, or some such thing. This imagination was not limited to live furry animals. We had a large collection of stuffed toy animals, every one of which Ronnie has given a name, along with an occupation and a complete life full of activities. For instance, there was Merv' the Magician, a white furry bear with a black top hat, whose hobbies included stamp collecting and was a member of CAMRA, as well of course performing magic tricks. Mmmm, thinking about it, I think Ronnie could well be certifiable, but then, as I enjoy playing with imagination so much I'm probably just as barking mad.

My future wife and I dated for a couple of years, before we made the big decision to get married. A year prior to the wedding, we decided to move out of the rented house that we shared, and start looking for a property to buy. We spent a few months hunting for just that perfect house, one that ticked all the boxes. Finally, we found our

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new home, a decent sized semi-detached property, in a large town in Suffolk. We bought it for a very good price at the time, but it was a bargain for a reason. Whilst there was nothing structurally wrong, it did need some major cosmetic renovation. It was a three bedroomed 1930s house, so it had large rooms with high ceilings, and a seventy-foot garden with a garage at the end of it. Every single wall needed at least painting, and a few needed a good skim over with fresh plaster. Apart from the lounge, every floor needed something doing with it, so we decided to carpet the hall, stairs, and landing, then sand down and varnish the rest. The one thing that made this house such a good one for me, was that it had a dining room. As the lounge was almost 30 foot long we could put a dining table in there, so this meant that I could convert the dining room into my big boy's playroom.

To say Ronnie is house-proud is a slight understatement. She is not as extreme as to enforce living in a show-house environment, but cleanliness and tidiness are never far from her mind. My attitude to housework is typically mannish, 'there's always room for one more plate in the washing up bowl'. I always have to be careful I don't leave anything lying around for any length of time, unless I have finished with it. Or else she will whisk it off, clean it, and put it away, even if it's my unfinished mug of coffee. There are common conversations between us that go along the following lines.

"Fancy a cup of coffee hon?" Ronnie would ask

"No thanks, I haven't finished the one in my room"

"Ah, I'll get you a fresh one."

"You did it again, didn't you."

"Sorry."

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With her eye for neatness, and her desire for everything to be 'just right', it took us nearly six months to bring the house up to a condition that she would be happy living in, I say 'she' as her standards are considerably higher than mine. We could have finished a lot sooner, but we did most of the work ourselves apart from the electricians. I'm colour-blind, and due to this I have had some bad experiences with electricians, so I've vowed not to touch them except in emergencies (rather, I have been told not to touch them). The kitchen with its very nice original quarry tiles on the floor came up a treat, but the tired old cupboards, which whilst not perfect, we felt we could live with for a while. The bathroom was fine, except that we felt it was a little too small for the size of the house, but as there was only the two of us living in it, we thought it would keep as it was for the time being. These two rooms were the only ones we did little work on, the rest needed a major overhaul. I think those six months were the hardest I had worked for a long while. I'm not averse to physical labour, but I tend to go a long way to try to avoid it. No, actually truth be told I am extremely averse to physical labour, and my idea of exercise is walking to the car, lifting pints, or if absolutely necessary walking home from the pub.

When we had finally finished work on the house, and everything was in its proper place, it was not long before the subject of getting a dog came up. "You know what's missing in the house?" I said. "A dog?" Ronnie answered. Perhaps I hadn't been quite as subtle as I had thought. I had been dropping, what I considered were, obscure hints for the last couple of months, about how much I missed having a dog. "Well, actually, that's exactly what I was thinking." Because she had never had a dog before, Ronnie was understandably a little apprehensive. However, with her being such a big animal lover, it didn't take too much to convince her. As it would be her first time, my thoughts had been to get an older dog, maybe a three or four year old. House training a puppy can be a long and painful experience, and with

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an older dog, this shouldn't be necessary. I was not sure how my house-proud wife would take to a puppy messing up her nice clean floors, irrespective of how cute it was. Perhaps we could even find one with a quiet demeanour, and one that already had some basic training so it would be fairly easy to look after. I knew this was probably asking too much, but I was hopeful, as that would help to ease Ronnie into the canine ownership club without too much upset to the easy routine, and cleanliness of the house.

After a bit of discussion, with me telling Ronnie what we should be looking for and why, we decided we would first look into getting a dog from a rescue centre. As we are both very sentimental as far as animals go, we wanted to give a rejected dog another chance of a happy life. There is a Blue Cross animal rescue centre in Felixstowe, which is not too far from where we live, so we thought we'd try there first. Arriving at the centre one Saturday afternoon, a cacophony of dogs howling and barking had us quite excited. We went up to the main desk, and told the woman sat behind it that we were looking to adopt a dog. A few minutes later, we were shown into an interview room. The manageress then started asking us questions as to what we were looking for.

After listening to our requirements, the manageress said, "I don't think we have any dogs in that are exactly what you are looking for. But, as you have a lot of experience with rescue dogs, there is one I think you would make perfect owners for." Our heads, which had been drooping at that point, lifted up with interest. She proceeded to pour out such a sob story that we were both nearly in tears at the end. "He was brought in almost eighteen months ago, unfortunately his owners were splitting up, and neither could keep him. He wasn't in a very good state I'm afraid, and he's taken a lot of patience to get him to trust us" She explained "Once, we did manage to find him a lovely home, but he

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wouldn't get on with the adopter's other dog, so we had to take him back after only a month." She then started to extol the virtues of Tim.

"He's such a lovely old chap, very docile, but needs lots of love."

"He's house trained, and knows quite a few commands."

"He's also used to being left on his own, so he won't be any trouble with regards to that."

"There is one problem we have with him, and that is he doesn't really get on with the other dogs and tends to bark all day, that's the reason he's kept in my office, but he should be perfectly happy if he's the only dog in the house"

What a sell job, I tell you the manageress of the Blue Cross could have made a fortune selling shoes to dolphins. She knew exactly which strings to pull on our hearts, and by this point we were well and truly suckered, we couldn't wait to see poor old Tim. She then led us to her office and we were introduced to an eleven-year-old scruffy grouch of a Border Collie. Now don't start feeling sorry for Tim, because this old grouch was nobody's fool. I think because he had been around the block a few times he was able to put on such a sweet front. This was how Tim had somehow managed to wrangle his way into living in the manageress' office. This meant that he received special treats, and lots more attention than the other dogs. He graciously allowed us to pet him, tickling his ears, and giving his tummy a rub, all with no sign of what was to come in the very near future.

The Blue Cross has certain rules that prospective adopters need to comply with before an animal can be taken home. One of these is they have to take the dog that they think they might want for at least two walks. We had both fallen for Tim, so much so that we took

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him for those two walks that same week. Tim had been at the centre for so long, and so many people had walked him so many times, he knew the route off by heart. When we arrived for the first session, he pretty much took us for a walk. He seemed such a nice quiet dog, and was no trouble at all during those walks. When in the middle of the second one, we sat down to have a chat about whether he was the right dog for us; he sat quietly near us simply snuffing his nose into the grass. It didn't take long for us to make up our minds, and decide that Tim was the dog for us. So, after finishing the walk, we arranged for him to come home with us the following week. This would be after a home visit by the centre, to check on the suitability of our house and garden for Tim.

Although I would have no hesitation in recommending the Blue Cross, I would have to give a word of warning if you ever intend to go there looking for an animal to adopt, and that is to be very careful to try to avoid the manageress. Otherwise you will end up with what she thinks is the best match, irrespective of what type of animal you went there to get, and that may not be quite what you were expecting. However, I do have to say, the manageress was spot on, Tim was the perfect dog for us and we would not have swapped him for anything.

We loved Tim with all our hearts, but he was an awful lot of hard work in the first year of his life with us. He was such a bad tempered grouch, and he did not like strangers in the house at all. During those first couple of months, he managed to bite each and every one of our friends. He didn't have a nasty bite, but one of those nips that just pinched your skin with his front teeth, and then left a large bruise. It was a testament to how good our friends were that they carried on not only speaking to us, but also continuing to come round. Most of our friends soon took to bringing large supplies of dog treats with them when they called, they would then slowly feed these treats to Tim whilst chatting away. When the treats finished, so did the visit.

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I think it was a hard call for Tim whether to go in for a nip, or eat the treat. The indecision was written all over his furry face, “shoe, or food? Shoe, or food? I suppose I can always take the food and go for the shoe later.” Luckily for us, and our friends, the food won out more often than not, but not always.

Believe me, Tim didn't spare us the nipping, and some days my legs were a mixture of blue, yellow, and black, from the bruising of his ministrations. Tim would try to stop either of us leaving the house through the front door by continuous circling round our legs. He would dart in with a sharp nip for encouragement; it was as though he was trying to herd us back into the house. It took almost a year of hard work and patience, to give him the confidence that we were going to keep him and not send him back to the Blue Cross. He did eventually learn that we didn't need herding with nips, although he never did stop completely, but I think this was just to keep us on our toes and keep his hand in. On the subject grouchiness, there was only one person Tim never nipped, and unbelievably, that was the mother in law. We never could quite understand this. Did this mean that he liked her? On the other hand, was it perhaps that he was just as afraid of her as the rest of us?



Tim turned out to be the perfect dog to introduce my wife to the joys of canine ownership. He was such a great dog, with a unique character and outlook on life. Ronnie grew to love and appreciate just what it was to have a dog as part of the family. It was during this period we came to know our local Pets at Home store very well. What with dog food for Tim, and feed and hay for the rabbits, we tended to spend a fair bit of time there. When it comes to furry animals, I have to admit I am a total sucker. I just cannot resist touching, stroking, or playing with them, and Pets at Home is a perfect place to satisfy this affliction.

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However, I'm also rather impulsive, and this along with my love of animals is a dangerous combination. I really should never be allowed to go to a pet shop on my own. You know those signs that read 'All children must be accompanied by a responsible adult.' Well in my case, they should read 'Do not enter unless you are feeling responsible today.'

It was because of this combination of impulsiveness and love of animals that we ended up with another addition to the family. One day, I was out shopping at Pets at Home for the usual animal supplies, when I passed the enclosure for the rabbits, and guinea pigs that they have for sale. I could not resist having a peek in. Bad move, very bad move. There on one side of the enclosure, was the sorriest looking black rabbit you were ever likely to see. He was all on his own, with no friends to play with or keep him company. That was it, how could I leave him there.

I stood in the store for a good fifteen minutes deliberating. "Should I, shouldn't I? Should I, shouldn't I?" Well, I crumbled. I couldn't bear the thought of him there all on his own, especially at night, so fifteen minutes later I was back in the car with a small cardboard box containing a rabbit. As I was driving home, it slowly dawned on me that Ronnie just might have some objection to a new rabbit. I desperately started to think of what excuse could I possibly come up with to explain what had happened. By the time I had driven up to the house, I had discounted all the reasons I could think of as being either a) implausible, or b) just not logical. I realised there wasn't much I could say that would make sense, so I was going to be grown up, and simply go in and announce that I had decided to buy another rabbit.

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When I entered the house, I put the cardboard box on the kitchen table, and went into the lounge to see Ronnie, who was stretched out on the couch, reading a book.

“What do you think is a good name for a rabbit?” I asked

“What do you mean?” she asked, with a confused frown

“Well, if we were to get another rabbit, what would you call it?”

“That depends; I think I’d have to see it first. Where is this going?” She asked. The wrinkles on her forehead had deepened; this was not a good sign.

“Err... Well..., I may have done something a bit daft.” It was time to come clean and own up to what I had done. “Come and have a look.” I tried to put my innocent face on.

“Oh he’s lovely,” coo’d Ronnie. “But how come we’ve got him?”

“I just couldn’t help it, it’s not my fault” I whined. Out came a story of how miserable he looked, and how all the guinea pigs were ganging up on him.

“They were extorting carrots off him.” I exclaimed. “They were making him pay protection.” I had started to get on a roll.

“And..., and..., and he’d run out of carrots, and they were going to beat him up tonight, so I just had to get him out of there before it was too late.” A masterpiece of storytelling I thought. I was quite sure she didn’t believe me, but she was sympathetic. As she loved this sort of story and this was the first time I had done anything like this, she gave me an odd look, but let it go.

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“Well, what are we going to call him?” I asked, hoping the deal was done.

“How about Steve McQueen?” she said, and that was that.

It was pretty much the same story concerning Wayne the guinea pig. This time she was not quite as understanding, or sympathetic, and to be honest the story was not quite as good the Steve one. However, as she feels the same as me when it comes to furry animals, she soon came round, and we made accommodation for Wayne. Wayne was named after John ‘The Duke’ Wayne, one of my childhood heroes, it’s sad I know. This impulsive behaviour of mine has resulted in Ronnie always being on tenterhooks whenever I venture out alone to anywhere where there may be furry animals, of any kind. Usually she wouldn’t let me go to Pets at Home alone, or indeed anywhere where there might be furrries, but there was the odd occasion when she didn’t have a choice but to let me go and take a chance. Still, I’m not the one who nearly bought a goat from the local farm. I still like to remind her of that sometimes.



Left to right – Donald, (a small furry toy, Pip), Elliot, and Wayne hiding behind Elliot

One morning, when I went to give the rodents their food in the hutch, I found Elliot lying on his side. It looked like he had passed away overnight, it seemed as though he had gone quietly in his sleep,

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and I was thankful for that at least. Ronnie was very upset, she had had Elliot for several years and had grown very attached to him, and to my surprise, so had I. Obviously we had to get another rabbit, and I don't think we even discussed getting one or not. It was a no-brainer of a decision really, if only to keep Donald and Wayne company. Well just Donald really, as Wayne was a grumpy old so and so, almost as bad as Tim.

We had discovered a rabbit rescue centre close by to where we lived. So rather than go to Pets at Home, we thought we would go and visit to see what they had available. The centre had many rabbits, guinea pigs too, but Ronnie wanted another rabbit so the pigs were out. This was a shame, as I had quite taken to guinea pigs, generally being grumpy things I found I could empathise with them somewhat. Anyway, a rabbit it had to be. Enter Ali McGraw. Ali was a pure white rabbit, who took to the rest of the family within a short period, and she soon settled into the family routine. We had somehow now accumulated three rabbits, a guinea pig, and Tim. Quite a growing family, but it did not stop there.



One day, a good friend of ours called Chris asked me to help him move his daughter between flats. Chris was one of my oldest friends from Suffolk, and he was my drinking buddy. So when he asked for help, despite my natural aversion to physical labour, I of course said yes. We set off mid-morning to get to the flat his daughter was moving out of. When we arrived Chris began to organise things, he started to sort the boxes in the order that we would be moving them. Chris is a great organiser, a lot better than I am, so I left him to it and had a wander around the flat.

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There in the corner of the lounge, was the cutest kitten I had ever seen sitting in her pink travel-box. Of course, I couldn't resist, and was over to the box like a shot. She looked so cute, and at the same time miserable in her little pink prison.

"Who's this?" I called out to Chris.

"That's Gucci," He said, "I know, a really awful name, but then that's my daughter. She likes the finer things in life you know," He laughed.

His daughter then came into the lounge, and she was quite upset because the flat she was going to didn't allow animals. She said that as Gucci couldn't go with her she was going to have to take her to the RSPCA.

Now I have the utmost respect for the RSPCA, they do a lot of fantastic work for animals in need, but I do have a problem with some of their rules. Sometimes some of the rules seem to be a bit on the extreme side, and they will not bend them for anyone, or any circumstances. I once read a story in the paper regarding the vet at one of the RSPCA centres. He had half a dozen dogs I think, and when one passed away, he asked if he could take one of the rescue dogs home. The centre refused, as they would not allow more than one male dog in the same home, this was despite the fact that he already had more than one male dog. This was the same vet that they went to for advice on re-homing their animals! Now I know there are probably good reasons for this, but surely, it would be better to evaluate each case on an individual basis.

So I was not happy about Gucci going off to the RSPCA. Mmmm, I wonder, my mind started to work overtime. I had an idea that I thought was worth a shot, I wasn't quite sure how I was going to play it, but 'nothing ventured, nothing gained' as they say.

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Ring-ring, ring-ring.

“Hi babe, how’s the move going?” Ronnie answered

“Oh you know, hard work, but we’re getting there. We’re just started to pack the cars for the first trip.”

“So what time do you think you’ll be finished?”

“It will probably take at least two or three hours, we’ll have to make at least three trips, and then there’ll be the obligatory pub break of course.”

“Well don’t strain anything; you know you’re not used to physical work.” (This was very true. The only exercise I did at that time was lifting my pint of Guinness).

“OK, I’ll do my best. Oh by the way, do you like cats?” (Despite being married nearly two years, and both of us being mad animal lovers, for some reason this subject had never come up).

“Why?”

“Oh, just asking. You’re not allergic to them are you?”

“No, I’m not. Why?”

“Just curious. How do you think Tim feels about cats?”

“I don’t know.” *Short pause.* “What have you done?” (She knew me far too well, and by this point she was getting extremely suspicious that I had done something impetuous.)

Time to come clean, so I told her the sorry tale about Gucci, and this time I told it as it was, with no storytelling.

“So, what do you think? Do you think she could come and live with us?”

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“Oh.” *A bit of a longer pause.* “Well only on the condition that Tim gets on with her.” (Truth be told, she is as big a sucker when it comes to animals as me, and just cannot say no to an animal in distress).

And that was how Gucci came to join the ever-growing family. As it turned out, Tim didn't seem to mind Gucci at all. Gucci soon learned that Tim didn't move very fast due to his arthritis, so she had nothing to worry about either. Tim was very good with all the animals in the house, as he just did not seem to care one way or the other. Once, when Ronnie was giving Wayne his monthly brush, he jumped off her lap and ran across Tim's nose. Tim just looked up, stared at Wayne, and then went back to sleep. Gucci on the other hand had a lot of devilment in her, and was forever teasing Tim. I remember her once sitting on top of the coffee table in the lounge, with Tim in his usual position, asleep half underneath with just his head poking out. She raised a paw, seemed to think about something, and then whacked him on the top of the head. He leapt up looking around for something, or someone to nip. Gucci just continued to sit on the table looking as if she was laughing like a drain. Cats can be very cruel sometimes, but they can also be very funny.



Apart from the nipping, Tim only had one other fault, he took an intense dislike to a wooden rabbit that we had. One year I was really struggling to find a present for Ronnie, and I happened to be in town when I saw this wooden rabbit in the window of a shop. With her predilection for rodents, I thought that this would make an excellent present. So in I went, and bought it. It was not cheap, priced at thirty-six pounds, but it was so beautifully carved that I was sure she would love it. I was right, she thought it was brilliant, and promptly named it Joey; I think this might have been after the character from Friends. The problem was that Tim loved it as well, but not in a nice way. I

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came home from work one day to find that Tim had chewed the ears off Joey. Maybe he simply took a dislike to him, or it might have been that Joey was a better poker player than him, and after losing a whole week's supply of Bonios, he took it out of his ears.

What to do? Ronnie had not yet become used to the peculiarities of owning a dog, and I thought that she might be a bit upset. So I decided to go straight into town and buy a replacement. Thirty-six pounds and half an hour later, 'Joey' was back in his rightful place on the floor in the lounge. I didn't even think twice about this, as in the year that we had had Tim, he had never chewed anything before. You can imagine my disbelief, when arriving back from work one day the following week, to find that he had had another go at Joey. This time he had chewed not only the ears, but the legs as well. It looked like another poker session had not gone well for Tim. Well there was nothing for it, I had to make another trip back into town and spend another thirty-six pounds, Joey was proving to be one of the most expensive presents ever. When I arrived home from work a couple of days later and found that Tim had done it again, I gave up and told Ronnie. As it turned out, she was most understanding, and we both went back into town to get another one, but this time we put 'Joey' on a shelf out of Tim's reach. I think they still play poker together, but either Tim has got better, or maybe one of the rodents adjudicates, either way, he never chewed him again.

Well, we had Tim for four years overall, until he finally gave up the ghost and passed away peacefully in his sleep. He managed to reach the grand old age of fifteen, which is pretty good going. By this time though, he was suffering with arthritis in a bad way, and was having trouble getting down, as well as up. If it were not for the fact that he still seemed to enjoy life so much, we might well have had to make that difficult choice that no dog owner likes to make. I really don't know whether it was better or not, but Tim passed away whilst

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we were on holiday in Turkey. Two days before we were due to come home, I received a phone call from the Kennels with the bad news. We were both distraught, and feeling just a bit guilty. One small consolation was that the place we were staying had three cats and a dog that belonged to the owners. We spent those last two days giving a lot of attention to those animals, and in their own way, they helped us deal with the immediate grief. The owners, animal lovers both, sat with us well into the night drinking and sharing stories about our animals. Would we have rather been there when he passed away? I don't know to be honest, in some ways, it would have been better, but in others, it would have been a lot harder.

We considered ourselves very lucky to have had Tim to share our lives. He may have been the grouchiest dog in the world, but he was such a character, and gave so much back, he was impossible not to love. Ronnie had by then become a true dog person. She had really taken Tim into her heart, and she was as devastated as I was when he left us. We decided not to get another dog at that time, it just didn't seem right somehow. This seems to be the same with most animal lovers, I know it doesn't make sense, but that's seems to be the way it is. However, we could not keep from missing that love that a dog gives. Both Ronnie and I were miserable, there were so many things in the house, and in our routine, that kept reminding us of Tim. He used to sleep at the bottom of the stairs at night, he couldn't make it up them easily, and every night when we went to bed, we would automatically look down the stairs, half expecting to see him there looking back up at us. We managed to last a whole month, before one of us was brave enough to bring up the subject of getting another dog. We felt as though we were being a bit unfaithful to Tim, but something was missing in our lives, and that something was a dog. We just had to start looking for another chap to share it with us.



Tim in his favourite spot (aged 13 years)