

A Street Cat Named Bob

JAMES BOWEN





A Street Cat Named Bob

JAMES BOWEN



H
HODDER &
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

1

Copyright © James Bowen and Garry Jenkins 2012

The right of James Bowen and Garry Jenkins to be identified as
the Authors of the Work has been asserted by them in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored
in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without
the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and
without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 73709 7
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 73710 3
eBook ISBN 978 1 444 73713 4

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable
and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable
forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to
conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

To Bryn Fox . . . and anyone who has lost a friend



Contents



1	Fellow Travellers	1
2	Road To Recovery	15
3	The Snip	39
4	Ticket To Ride	49
5	Centre of Attention	57
6	One Man and His Cat	73
7	The Two Musketeers	93
8	Making It Official	107
9	The Escape Artist	115
10	Santa Paws	127
11	Mistaken Identity	137
12	Number 683	153
13	Pitch Perfect	169
14	Under the Weather	177
15	The Naughty List	191

A STREET CAT NAMED BOB

16	Angel Hearts	211
17	Forty-eight Hours	221
18	Homeward Bound	233
19	The Stationmaster	249
20	The Longest Night	257
21	Bob, The <i>Big Issue</i> Cat	269
	Acknowledgements	277

Chapter 1

Fellow Travellers



There's a famous quote I read somewhere. It says we are all given second chances every day of our lives. They are there for the taking, it's just that we don't usually take them.

I spent a big chunk of my life proving that quote. I was given a lot of opportunities, sometimes on a daily basis. For a long time I failed to take any of them, but then, in the early spring of 2007, that finally began to change. It was then that I befriended Bob. Looking back on it, something tells me it might have been his second chance too.

I first encountered him on a gloomy, Thursday evening in March. London hadn't quite shaken off the winter and it was still bitingly cold on the streets, especially when the winds blew in off the Thames. There

A STREET CAT NAMED BOB

had even been a hint of frost in the air that night, which was why I'd arrived back at my new, sheltered accommodation in Tottenham, north London, a little earlier than usual after a day busking around Covent Garden.

As normal, I had my black guitar case and rucksack slung over my shoulders but this evening I also had my closest friend, Belle, with me. We'd gone out together years ago but were just mates now. We were going to eat a cheap takeaway curry and watch a movie on the small black and white television set I'd managed to find in a charity shop round the corner.

As usual, the lift in the apartment block wasn't working so we headed for the first flight of stairs, resigned to making the long trudge up to the fifth floor.

The strip lighting in the hallway was broken and part of the ground floor was swathed in darkness, but as we made our way to the stairwell I couldn't help noticing a pair of glowing eyes in the gloom. When I heard a gentle, slightly plaintive meowing I realised what it was.

Edging closer, in the half-light I could see a ginger cat curled up on a doormat outside one of the ground-floor flats in the corridor that led off the hallway.

I'd grown up with cats and had always had a bit of a soft spot for them. As I moved in and got a good look I could tell he was a tom, a male.

I hadn't seen him around the flats before, but even in the darkness I could tell there was something about him, I could already tell that he had something of a personality. He wasn't in the slightest bit nervous,

FELLOW TRAVELLERS

in fact, completely the opposite. There was a quiet, unflappable confidence about him. He looked like he was very much at home here in the shadows and to judge by the way he was fixing me with a steady, curious, intelligent stare, I was the one who was straying into his territory. It was as if he was saying: 'So who are you and what brings you here?'

I couldn't resist kneeling down and introducing myself.

'Hello, mate. I've not seen you before, do you live here?' I said.

He just looked at me with the same studious, slightly aloof expression, as if he was still weighing me up.

I decided to stroke his neck, partly to make friends but partly to see if he was wearing a collar or any form of identification. It was hard to tell in the dark, but I realised there was nothing, which immediately suggested to me that he was a stray. London had more than its fair share of those.

He seemed to be enjoying the affection, and began brushing himself lightly against me. As I petted him a little more, I could feel that his coat was in poor condition, with uneven bald patches here and there. He was clearly in need of a good meal. From the way he was rubbing against me, he was also in need of a bit of TLC.

'Poor chap, I think he's a stray. He's not got a collar and he's really thin,' I said, looking up at Belle, who was waiting patiently by the foot of the stairs.

She knew I had a weakness for cats.

A STREET CAT NAMED BOB

‘No, James, you can’t have him,’ she said, nodding towards the door of the flat that the cat was sitting outside. ‘He can’t have just wandered in here and settled on this spot, he must belong to whoever lives there. Probably waiting for them to come home and let him in.’

Reluctantly, I agreed with her. I couldn’t just pick up a cat and take him home with me, even if all the signs pointed to the fact it was homeless. I’d barely moved into this place myself and was still trying to sort out my flat. What if it did belong to the person living in that flat? They weren’t going to take too kindly to someone carrying off their pet, were they?

Besides, the last thing I needed right now was the extra responsibility of a cat. I was a failed musician and recovering drug addict living a hand-to-mouth existence in sheltered accommodation. Taking responsibility for myself was hard enough.



The following morning, Friday, I headed downstairs to find the ginger tom still sitting there. It was as if he hadn’t shifted from the same spot in the past twelve hours or so.

Once again I dropped down on one knee and stroked him. Once again it was obvious that he loved it. He was purring away, appreciating the attention he was

FELLOW TRAVELLERS

getting. He hadn't learned to trust me 100 per cent yet. But I could tell he thought I was OK.

In the daylight I could see that he was a gorgeous creature. He had a really striking face with amazingly piercing green eyes, although, looking closer, I could tell that he must have been in a fight or an accident because there were scratches on his face and legs. As I'd guessed the previous evening, his coat was in very poor condition. It was very thin and wiry in places with at least half a dozen bald patches where you could see the skin. I was now feeling genuinely concerned about him, but again I told myself that I had more than enough to worry about getting myself straightened out. So, more than a little reluctantly, I headed off to catch the bus from Tottenham to central London and Covent Garden where I was going to once more try and earn a few quid busking.

By the time I got back that night it was pretty late, almost ten o'clock. I immediately headed for the corridor where I'd seen the ginger tom but there was no sign of him. Part of me was disappointed. I'd taken a bit of a shine to him. But mostly I felt relieved. I assumed he must have been let in by his owner when they'd got back from wherever it was they had been.



A STREET CAT NAMED BOB

My heart sank a bit when I went down again the next day and saw him back in the same position again. By now he was slightly more vulnerable and dishevelled than before. He looked cold and hungry and he was shaking a little.

'Still here then,' I said, stroking him. 'Not looking so good today.'

I decided that this had gone on for long enough.

So I knocked on the door of the flat. I felt I had to say something. If this was their pet, it was no way to treat him. He needed something to eat and drink – and maybe even some medical attention.

A guy appeared at the door. He was unshaven, wearing a T-shirt and a pair of tracksuit bottoms and looked like he'd been sleeping even though it was the middle of the afternoon.

'Sorry to bother you, mate. Is this your cat?' I asked him.

For a second he looked at me as if I was slightly mad.

'What cat?' he said, before looking down and seeing the ginger tom curled up in a ball on the doormat.

'Oh. No,' he said, with a disinterested shrug. 'Nothing to do with me, mate.'

'He's been there for days,' I said, again drawing a blank look.

'Has he? Must have smelled cooking or something. Well, as I say, nothing to do with me.'

He then slammed the door shut.

I made my mind up immediately.

FELLOW TRAVELLERS

'OK, mate, you are coming with me,' I said, digging into my rucksack for the box of biscuits I carried specifically to give treats to the cats and dogs that regularly approached me when I was busking.

I rattled it at him and he was immediately up on all fours, following me.

I could see he was a bit uneasy on his feet and was carrying one of his back legs in an awkward manner, so we took our time climbing the five flights of stairs. A few minutes later we were safely ensconced in my flat.

My flat was threadbare, it's fair to say. Apart from the telly, all I had in there was a second-hand sofa bed, a mattress in the corner of the small bedroom, and in the kitchen area a half-working refrigerator, a microwave, a kettle and a toaster. There was no cooker. The only other things in the flat were my books, videos and knick-knacks.

I'm a bit of a magpie; I collect all sorts of stuff from the street. At that time I had a broken parking meter in one corner, and a broken mannequin with a cowboy hat on its head in another. A friend once called my place 'the old curiosity shop', but as he sussed out his new environment the only thing the tom was curious about was the kitchen.

I fished out some milk from the fridge, poured it into a saucer and mixed it with a bit of water. I know that - contrary to popular opinion - milk can be bad for cats because, in fact, they are actually lactose intolerant. He lapped it up in seconds.

A STREET CAT NAMED BOB

I had a bit of tuna in the fridge so I mixed it up with some mashed up biscuits and gave that to him as well. Again, he wolfed it down. *Poor thing, he must be absolutely starving*, I thought to myself.

After the cold and dark of the corridor, the flat was five-star luxury as far as the tom was concerned. He seemed very pleased to be there and after being fed in the kitchen he headed for the living room where he curled up on the floor, near the radiator.

As I sat and watched him more carefully, there was no doubt in my mind that there was something wrong with his leg. Sure enough, when I sat on the floor next to him and started examining him I found that he had a big abscess on the back of his rear right leg. The wound was the size of a large, canine-like tooth, which gave me a good idea how he'd got it. He'd probably been attacked by a dog, or possibly a fox, that had stuck its teeth into his leg and clung on to him as he'd tried to escape. He also had a lot of scratches, one on his face not far from his eye, and others on his coat and legs.

I sterilised the wound as best as I could by putting him in the bathtub then putting some non-alcoholic moisturiser around the wound and some Vaseline on the wound itself. A lot of cats would have created havoc if I'd tried to treat them like that but he was as good as gold.

He spent most of the rest of the day curled up on what was already his favourite spot, near the radiator.

FELLOW TRAVELLERS

But he also roamed around the flat a bit every now and again, jumping up and scratching at whatever he could find. Having ignored it earlier on, he now began to find the mannequin in the corner a bit of a magnet. I didn't mind. He could do whatever he liked to it.

I knew ginger toms could be very lively and could tell he had a lot of pent-up energy. When I went to stroke him, he jumped up and started pawing at me. At one point he got quite animated, scratching furiously and almost cutting my hand

'OK, mate, calm down,' I said, lifting him off me and putting him down on the floor. I knew that young males who hadn't been neutered could become extremely lively. My guess was that he was still 'complete' and was well into puberty. I couldn't be sure, of course, but it again underlined the nagging feeling that he must have come off the streets rather than from a home.

I spent the evening watching television, the tom curled up by the radiator, seemingly content to be there. He only moved when I went to bed, picking himself up and following me into the bedroom where he wrapped himself up into a ball by my feet at the edge of the bed.

As I listened to his gentle purring in the dark, it felt good to have him there. He was company, I guess. I'd not had a lot of that lately.



A STREET CAT NAMED BOB

On Sunday morning I got up reasonably early and decided to hit the streets to see if I could find his owner. I figured that someone might have stuck up a 'Lost Cat' poster. There was almost always a photocopied appeal for the return of a missing pet plastered on local lamp-posts, noticeboards and even bus stops. There seemed to be so many missing moggies that there were times when I wondered whether there was a cat-napping gang at work in the area.

Just in case I found the owner quickly, I took the cat with me, attaching him to a leash I'd made out of a shoelace to keep him safe. He was happy to walk by my side as we took the stairs to the ground floor.

Outside the block of flats the cat began pulling on the string lead as if he wanted to head off. I guessed that he wanted to do his business. Sure enough he headed off into a patch of greenery and bushes adjoining a neighbouring building and disappeared for a minute or two to heed nature's call. He then returned to me and happily slipped back into the lead.

He must really trust me, I thought to myself. I immediately felt that I had to repay that trust and try and help him out.

My first port of call was the lady who lived across the street. She was known locally for looking after cats. She fed the neighbourhood strays and got them neutered, if necessary. When she opened the door I saw at least five cats living inside. Goodness knows how many more she had out the back. It seemed that every cat for miles

FELLOW TRAVELLERS

headed to her backyard knowing it was the best place to get some food. I didn't know how she could afford to feed them all.

She saw the tom and took a shine to him straight away, offering him a little treat.

She was a lovely lady but didn't know anything about where he'd come from. She'd not seen him around the area.

'I bet he's come from somewhere else in London. Wouldn't surprise me if he's been dumped,' she said. She said she'd keep her eyes and ears open in case she heard anything.

I had a feeling she was right about him being from somewhere far from Tottenham.

Out of interest, I took the cat off his lead to see if he knew what direction to go in. But as we walked the streets, it was obvious he didn't know where he was. He seemed completely lost. He looked at me as if to say: 'I don't know where I am; I want to stay with you.'

We were out for a few hours. At one point he scurried off into a bush to do his business again, leaving me to ask any passing locals whether they recognised him. All I got was blank looks and shrugs.

It was obvious that he didn't want to leave me. As we wandered around, I couldn't help wondering about his story: where he'd come from and what sort of life he'd led before he'd come and sat on the mat downstairs.

Part of me was convinced that the 'cat lady' across the street was right and he was a family pet. He was

A STREET CAT NAMED BOB

a fine-looking cat and had probably been bought for Christmas or someone's birthday. Gingers can be a bit mental and worse if not neutered, as I'd already seen. They can get very dominant, much more so than other cats. My hunch was that when he'd become boisterous and frisky he had also become a little too much to handle.

I imagined the parents saying 'enough is enough' and - rather than taking him to a refuge or the RSPCA - sticking him in the back of the family car, taking him for a drive and throwing him out into the street or on to the roadside.

Cats have a great sense of direction, but he'd obviously been let loose far from home and hadn't gone back. Or maybe he'd known that it wasn't really home at all and decided to find a new one.

My other theory was that he'd belonged to an old person who had passed away.

Of course, it was possible that wasn't the case at all. The fact that he wasn't house-trained was the main argument against him having been domesticated. But the more I got to know him the more convinced I was that he had definitely been used to being around one person. He seemed to latch on to people whom he thought would look after him. That's what he'd done with me.

The biggest clue about his background was his injury, which looked nasty. He'd definitely picked that up in a fight. From the way it was leaking pus, the wound must

FELLOW TRAVELLERS

have been a few days old, maybe even a week. That suggested another possibility to me.

London has always had a large population of street cats, strays who wander the streets living off scraps and the comfort of strangers. Five or six hundred years ago, places like Gresham Street in the City, Clerkenwell Green and Drury Lane used to be known as 'cat streets' and were overrun with them. These strays are the flotsam and jetsam of the city, running around fighting for survival on a daily basis. A lot of them were like this ginger tom: slightly battered, broken creatures.

Maybe he'd spotted a kindred spirit in me.