

1. Cats and Dogs

It all started with the cat. Although, one could argue it started with the dog but, in the end, I don't suppose it matters one way or the other. As the first incident I remember, the tale bears telling.

We lived in a pretty rough housing scheme; the kind of place where you would walk into the local pub with a jacket and leave with a waistcoat. With burglary rife, lots of families owned a dog that was not to be messed with. Our choice of canine protector was a very big Rottweiler called Bub - short for Beelzebub, which my Dad, who named him, considered quite hilarious. Close up and riled, he was probably scarier than his namesake.

Bub spent almost all his time outside. Partly due to the small size of our house and partly for reasons of security. Our enclosed back garden was not overlooked by any neighbours or other buildings, which potentially left the rear of the house vulnerable to attack. However, with Bub in situ, we never found ourselves molested by the junkie housebreakers that so plagued others.

For such a big, scary-looking animal, his temperament, at least as far as our family went, was placid - I can't recall any biting incidents. Unfortunately, this equable disposition did not extend to strangers, therefore he could not be allowed the option of jumping the fence. To avoid any unfortunate accidents befalling passers by, my Dad secured him using a chain tethered to his kennel. This gave him access to the majority of the garden, but left the last few feet just out of reach. Somehow, the cat managed to figure this out.

I'm definitely not a cat person. To be fair, I'm not a huge fan of dogs either, but I really don't care for cats. This particular mangy moggy belonged to some equally mangy neighbours about two houses down from ours. They called it Gordy. By all accounts they were big on Motown and the rumour was a mangy partner called Berry also lived there, but I never saw it near our place. Quite understandably, Gordy spent a lot of time avoiding said neighbours and their foul nest, which helped him become streetwise, tough and sassy. If you could consider a cat a smart ass, then this cat was both smart and ass.

Awake stupidly early one morning, I happened to spend a few moments looking out of my bedroom window; taking in the sunrise; baffled as to why going back to sleep was proving difficult. I never usually found myself troubled by insomnia.

Absentmindedly, I watched Bub pacing up and down, waiting for my Mum to go out and feed him. At the bottom of the garden, on the fence, licking his paw

nonchalantly, sat Gordy. The dog appeared agitated but had yet to lose his temper completely. That soon changed.

Gordy dropped from his perch and walked forward a couple of paces. Bub, reacting as if someone had wired his nether regions to the mains, charged headlong towards the interloping feline. Seemingly unperturbed, the cat stood his ground. In fact, the cheeky little bastard sat down. No druggie burglar, no matter how desperate for their fix, would have dared be as bold.

The dog raced to within a matter of inches from the cat, then let out a startled yelp. Running out of chain, he found himself yanked upwards and sideways, before crashing to the ground in a rather undignified heap. Legs flapped comically as he tried to regain his footing. Gordy remained impervious and immovable. Once back on his feet, Bub gathered himself: snarling, barking and slobbering in rage, straining at his bonds with every ounce of strength in his muscular frame. Unfortunately for him, even this titanic effort failed to loosen the bolt my Dad used to secure the chain to the kennel, which in turn was dug into the earth for a good couple of feet.

Gordy regarded this display with disdain, hissed like a rattler, and swiped Bub across the muzzle. The claws delivered a comprehensive raking; tiny, retractable, razor blades, drawing thin crimson lines as they sliced through the dog's fleshy face. For such a big dog, the wounds were only superficial. Nonetheless, the blow caused a yelp of pain and surprise, and induced a redoubling of effort to swallow the cat in one gulp. I could swear Gordy smirked before he took a second swipe. Evidently, satisfied with his morning's work, the cat coolly jumped the fence and disappeared over the other side.

Mum came out to see what all the commotion was about and noticed me looking down from my window.

'What the hell's gotten into the dog?'

I shrugged and turned a circle with my finger next to my temple.

She fetched Bub's food and peace was restored.

For the next three mornings this continued. Gordy would taunt Bub into attack then administer his rebuke before sloping off. The dog appeared too stupid to fathom he couldn't actually reach the cat. It reminded me of Wily E Coyote and the Roadrunner - I half expected Gordy to shout "Meep! Meep!" each time he climbed back over the fence. This situation puzzled me and fascinated me in equal measure. I grudgingly admired the cat for its balls and its remarkable spatial awareness. At some point, it must have sat on the fence working out just how far the chain would reach and judged the safe distance accordingly. On the other hand, I didn't like how smug it appeared. If the cat had taunted the dog once, revelled in the glory of his superior intellect, and then moved on, I would have admired him more. Even twice would not have bothered me too much. As

it was, the continual mocking over multiple mornings seemed to spark something in me. I felt the need to intervene.

It wasn't only for the dog's sake; it was also for mine. With hindsight, it may have been an absurd conclusion to reach, but somehow it felt like a sleight on me. I imagined the cat looking up to my room each morning and actually saying to me, "Hey loser, look what I'm doing to your dog. There's nothing *he* can do about it, and nothing *you* can do about it!". Well, the cat in the ass-hat was wrong. There *was* something I could do about it.

The next day, on the way back from school, purchases were made. Once home, I went out to see the dog and made the adjustments. I was pretty happy with my work but would have to wait until morning to enjoy the fruits of my labour. I slept well.

Wakening to the growling preamble I'd grown accustomed to over the past few days, I took up position at the window, ready to enjoy the show.

As expected, Gordy was stationed atop the fence. Bub prowled, disconcerted, but perhaps a touch warier than on previous occasions. Anxiety gripped me: could it be the stupid mutt had finally worked out the cat held the upper paw and, therefore, ruin my surprise. I needn't have worried.

The moment Gordy dropped to the ground and took up his carefully calculated position a few yards from the fence, Bub went ballistic, hurtling towards the gloating cat for the fifth time that week. Just as had happened on all four prior mornings, the cat sat on his mat, totally unconcerned. At the point where the dog would normally have been pulled up short, nothing happened, and before Gordy could react he found himself impaled on Bub's colossal canines, being shaken about like a bean bag. The dog could hardly contain his glee, or his viciousness, at finally getting hold of his tormentor.

I am reminded in the telling of this tale about a t-shirt from my student days. The design featured the Coyote holding the Roadrunner by the throat while administering a thorough rodgering with an outsized penis. The caption read, "Meep, Meep now you bastard!"

The cat was dead within seconds. Once Bub realised this, he dropped the lifeless corpse to the ground, and strode off back to his kennel where he sat panting; emanating pride in a job well done.

My own self-satisfaction matched the levels previously shown by the cat. Sauntering downstairs, out into the back garden and over to the giant guard dog, I felt good about righting a wrong, defeating a bully and allowing Bub to restore his pride. At least that's what I told myself. Carefully, I removed the length of rubber tubing inserted the previous evening and re-attached the chain to the collar as before. The last job was

to take a spade and bury the cat at the end of the garden, beside the compost heap. All of this accomplished in time for Mum coming out to feed Bub.

‘What are you doing out here at this time of the morning?’

‘Came out to see what was bothering the dog.’

‘And?’

‘Oh, I think it was a cat. It ran off though.’

‘Stupid dog! Right, come inside and I’ll make you some breakfast.’

‘Ok Mum.’

A few days later the mangy neighbours called. Turned out they actually did give a shit about the cat after all. Oh well, that would teach them to look after the next one more carefully. I, of course, pleaded ignorance and gushed with false concern, promising to let them know if I saw the cat around anywhere; even helping to put up some posters on telegraph poles and lamp posts around the area. Somehow, this subterfuge seemed to increase my enjoyment of the whole episode.

Yes, now that I’ve thought about it, it definitely started with the cat.