

# CATACOMB

Richard Barr on how an unusual family pet escaped death



I gave Ivan to my wife for her birthday some years ago. She had been reading about Turkish Van cats, the ones with white bodies and splotches of ginger and with characteristic ginger tails. They also have an un-catlike predilection for water. Coinciding with her discovery of this species of cat, an advertisement appeared in a local newspaper inviting offers to purchase one Turkish Van Cat by the name of Ivan, low mileage, one careful owner, full MOT etc. He set me back £100.

Ivan arrived the following day. Within hours he had taken a swim in the pond and scooped all the water out of his drinking bowl. It was not long before he had established himself at the top of the pecking order, terrorising the two docile Labradors we had at the time.

If I walked the dogs Ivan would run ahead and hide in the undergrowth. He would then ambush the hapless canines until they became so traumatised that they took advice about bringing a claim for PDCD (Post Dogmatic Cat Disorder).

He would also, when he chose to, be the conventional cat, dismembering small rodents and

distributing their entrails throughout the house, and defeathering plump pigeons which he somehow managed to squeeze through his cat flap.

He was both feared and admired. He grabbed your legs in a miniature attempt at a rugby tackle if he wanted feeding. Yet he also found time to show restrained affection and would sit on the laps of the children as they struggled with their homework.

Then one day he died - ironically while I was on the way to Catford. I was contacted on my mobile and told that Ivan had been killed on the road. Would I please bury him when I got home? Bad news punches you in the stomach. The death of a cat is not something you shrug off as you would a broken plate or a dent in the car. I had a lump in the throat all the way home.

The cat was lying in a cardboard box in the garage, curled up and looking as though he was asleep. I lifted up his body, gave it a last hug and placed it carefully in the hole which I had dug. I watched for a long time for any movement before I began to replace the turf. As I stared, I fancied I saw a faint twitch of the fur; but that could not have been. The cat was cold and very still.

The wake followed with affectionate

reminders of the cat we had once known, and tearful speculation about the mayhem he was already causing in Cat heaven (also known as Catford?).

At the end of the evening I was putting the house to bed when my eye caught a flash of white on the window sill. The flash of white was making a loud meowing noise, of the kind made by a cat which has not eaten for an eternity.

I opened the window and in crept - Ivan - very much alive and very much wanting his supper. I have written before in Places&Faces® about our ghosts, but the cat which was now in my arms was far from spectral, and also far from dead.

The pining children agreed. This was not a late cat; and reports of his death had indeed been exaggerated. While the jubilation continued and the astonished Ivan was hugged almost to death, I sneaked out to the grave. It was intact. Nobody had moved the stone. If he had risen from the dead, Ivan had carefully covered his tracks.

So what had happened? The only natural explanation is that our neighbourhood had two Turkish Van cats. The cat which died was Ivan's double which just happened to be run over outside our house, and is now buried in our garden.

The supernatural explanation was that Ivan did die but came back very visibly to haunt us, no doubt with the ghosts of the furry and feathery creatures he dispatched in his terrestrial life. But if that was the explanation, surely he should have had the decency to stop devouring cat food. The natural explanation therefore prevailed.

That did not solve the mystery of the cat that is still entombed under one of our trees. We enquired of the neighbours, and put up notices, but nobody came to claim the body. We could not even accuse Ivan of sewing his wild oats and producing sons of Ivan: the vet had seen to that before he joined us.

Ivan went on to live for many more years but much later in life had another brush with death when he became trapped in a farmer's barn and was missing for nearly a month. He survived that too, but old age eventually did what other challenges could not and he ran out of lives.

The memory of his kind lives on. Some years ago our female silver tabby became pregnant and with some difficulty gave birth to seven kittens. The kittens are tabby but they all have many of the characteristics of a Turkish Van cat. Now explain that.