

Missing

‘I like to wander.’

It sounded like the voice of an older woman who knows her mind and is going to share it with you, the sort of voice that would remind you to be quiet in a library, not that we have quiet libraries any more.

‘I was wandering down the big street,’ she continued without waiting for my acknowledgement. ‘I then turned left into Cluny Gardens.’

I’d had a few strange phone calls already, so I was nonplussed by this unusual opening gambit.

My cat had gone missing during the week. It was mid-summer with the days stretching out and nature in full bloom. Mungo, a long-haired ginger with an obstinate disposition, had failed to return home and I was getting worried. He never missed a meal. I called up a friend who arrived the next morning with torch, binoculars and a magnifying glass.

I made up the usual MISSING! notice with the cat showing his best profile and my landline number underneath. I ran off multiple copies and retrieved a reel of tape from the back of the kitchen drawer.

We set out to scour the streets and gardens in the vicinity, sticking notices to lampposts at regular intervals. We turned up no clues.

The first phone call had seemed promising.

‘Are you the person with the missing cat?’ It was a husky male voice.

‘Yes.’

‘Is he the big ginger one?’ There was a tremor as he said it.

‘Yes. Have you seen him?’

‘I’ve got him here.’ The cadence was rising. ‘I’ve got him here ...,’ his voice soared, ‘but I don’t know how long I can hold him ...’

Sounds suggesting a kerfuffle ensued then the line went dead. Now here was this caller telling me about her weekend wander.

‘I proceeded along the road for half a mile,’ she informed me, ‘and then took a right turn.’

Where would it end? I wasn’t holding my breath.

Mungo liked the good life and made sure he secured it, so it was unlike him to make himself homeless. I’d encountered the new neighbour on my stair a few weeks previously. He looked like a corporate financier in his expensive suit. But he could just as likely be a menswear salesman in George Street.

‘Is that big ginger cat anything to do with you?’ he asked. The question was familiar.

‘Yes, that’s Mungo. He lives with me on the ground floor,’ I clarified politely.

‘Ah, well that explains it.’

He doesn’t look like a pet-lover, I thought, as I prepared to apologise for any bad behaviour on Mungo’s part.

‘He stops me on the stair and gets me to open up the door to the back garden for him when you are at work.’ He smiled a winning smile.

Mungo, it seemed, had employed a certain eloquence in establishing his relationship with the newcomer.

‘He also lets me know when he wants to come back in,’ Mr Smarty-Pants added as he took his leave and disappeared up the stair clutching his laptop.

‘I know your cat.’

A woman with a wild look in her eye appeared at my door. It was drizzling; typical June weather. A bunch of chrysanthemums drooped from her left hand. I suspected she’d gathered them from the beds maintained by the council over by the public toilets.

‘Do you? Have you seen him?’

‘Aye. He was up the road near the red van.’

‘Oh, thanks,’ I smiled as I pulled on my jacket and made to leave the house to collect him.

She stood her ground and I had the distinct feeling that it would be unwise to cross her path.

‘He’s not there now. That was the day before yesterday.’

‘Oh.’ I paused.

‘He was down the way in the garden with the yellow roses last week.’ She looked me up and down before continuing. ‘I spotted him yesterday outside Waitrose.’ She gave me a knowing look and touched her nose with her right forefinger. ‘I know that cat.’ She nodded and left.

I hung my waterproof back on its peg.

Of course, it was in his genes as a ginger tom to spread his goodwill around the neighbourhood and take advantage of whatever hospitality came his way. I noticed that people out on the back green and in the street would stop and greet him as an old friend while slighting me as a stranger.

He had acquired different names. He was Marmalade to one, Tiger to another, Big Cat to yet another. I’d speculate on his adventures outside the home where he answered to Mungo.

There was a spell where he would return with his fur reeking of cheap scent, as if he’d spent the afternoon in a ladies’ boudoir. His manner on those occasions was smug and silent. He took his secrets to the grave.

He boasted a litany of nicknames fit for a tombstone. He was the boy Mungo, cat boy slim, the real slim shady and cat-sputin. More formally, he was Big Chief Long Paw; His Imperial Majesty, King of Siam; Red-Head Viking, King Canute; Saint Mungo, the holy feline.

Mungo had a brother called Bob. They were bonny kittens who jumped on each other, ate side by side and curled up together for hours of sleep. Bob was black and white and had an easy-going approach to life. He was chummy. He would sit beside you on the sofa to enjoy the telly of an evening.

Mungo was always the one in trouble. He would strut precariously around the edge of the bathtub, miss his footing and fall in. He would sneak into the drum of the washing machine and escape a full spin cycle only by the skin of his teeth.

But it was Bob who ended up in serious trouble. They were about six years old. Bob went missing for days which turned into weeks. There was no sign of him. It was winter. The temperature had dropped below zero and snow covered the ground. Mungo and I were disconcerted by the silence inside and out.

Then came news. A neighbour had gone to his shed to find a shovel to clear the snow and found a starved black and white cat shivering in the corner. After some asking around, he'd eventually been directed my way. I went with a blanket and box to fetch poor Bob who was still with us but only just.

He was never the same. Although I coddled him back to life, he remained a shilpit cratur with thin fur and a grateful but fearful attitude. Worst of all, though, was the change in Mungo. He didn't recognise his brother. Bob looked different. Perhaps he smelled different and offended Mungo's cat sensibilities. Or perhaps Mungo was spooked by what had happened to him. But for one reason or another, it brought out the worst.

Mungo became top-cat. He lorded it up over Bob. He wouldn't give him an inch. Bob followed obediently behind his brother trying to win his affections but it made not a jot of difference. Bob died a couple of years later. His spirit surrendered.

Mungo became my only cat. We sometimes fell out but mostly we rubbed along without either of us making a show of the affection we felt for each other. He outlived his brother by many years.

He was a big-boned boy with a fox-like brush of a tail. As he grew older, his frame became more angular, his face more set, his fine coat a touch grizzled. But his tail was ever a thing of pride, a flag that he flaunted.

His time approached and I had a holiday booked, up near Glen Lyon. He couldn't be left so he came along, dozing patiently in the passenger footwell, good as gold, as I headed up the A9. He had no fight left in him and no interest in exploring what lay beyond the door of the cottage. At night, I'd scoop him on to the bed and lift him back down in the morning.

His sense of humour was undiminished. Returning from a ramble up the river, Mungo greeted me with a Salvador Dali lookalike face. He'd given himself a moustache by dipping his head in the coal bucket. I was duly amused.

I cut the holiday short by a day. He wasn't doing well. Back indoors, I made the appointment with the vet and braced myself to do the right thing by Mungo. I fetched a tartan blanket to wrap him securely in my arms rather than put him in his cat-carrier. I

was ready to go. The time was now. But where the heck was Mungo? I thought he was in the kitchen. Now he'd disappeared. Then I saw him. He'd made his own way to the front door and was waiting there for me.

Even now the mention of his name makes my vision swim a little. But I am getting ahead of myself in the story.

It was Sunday morning. The sun was shining. All was well with the world but not with me. The phone calls, the searches, had been inconclusive. I cooked myself a full Scottish and sat down at the sturdy pine table in my kitchen.

As I tucked in, I recalled a time some years ago when Mungo and I lived next door to a guest house.

'Does that big ginger cat live here?' I'd answered the door to the pernickety landlady who always made a point of ignoring me in the street and refused my friendly waves over the garden fence.

'Yes, that's right,' I smiled in response, emanating pride in my distinguished and well-kent cat.

'Well, he's been in my kitchen again, stealing sausages straight from the pan.' She poked her finger accusingly at my chest. 'You need to keep him under control.'

I thanked her for letting me know and closed the door. Well may I smirk at the vision of Mungo stealing her sausages but I knew fine how skilled he was at purloining food. I'd had to buy a child lock for the fridge after a cold turkey episode the previous Christmas.

A tear formed and was threatening to fall on my black pudding when the phone rang.

This was the call from the woman who was taking her time to set out the route map of her weekend walk for my benefit.

'And have you seen a cat on your wanders? A big ginger cat?' I attempted to draw her to the issue at hand, but in vain. She brooked no interruption.

'As I say, I like to wander and, having walked the length of Cluny Gardens, I found myself at the crossroads by the Braid Hospital.' There was no let-up in her brusque monotone.

'The vet hospital?' I persisted in coaxing her to some kind of destination in this tortuous verbal journey. She paused to allow the weight of the conversation to rest with her again.

'There was a banner advertising the Open Day. Finding myself at the door of the building, I went in.' There was another pause.

I gave up trying to move her on more quickly. It was probably a shaggy dog tale but I was desperate, so I hung on just in case.

'There was a cat there went by the name of Germaine Jackson.' Germaine Jackson?

'I took a different route back, and along the way I saw your notice, the notice on the lamppost about your missing cat, so I took a note of your phone number. I always carry paper and pen with me.'

She finally arrived at the conclusion of her narrative.

'I believe Germaine Jackson is your cat.'

An unlikely story if ever I heard one, but I made a swift bid for something more before she put the phone down on me.

'When was this, please? Was it today? Did you see him this morning?'

'The Open Day was on Saturday. That was yesterday. That's when I saw him. Cheerio.'

I abandoned my breakfast, the fork and knife lying akimbo on the plate where I'd put them down to answer the phone. I dialled up my friend, the one with the torch and magnifying glass. We arranged to meet at the vet hospital within the half hour.

To cut a long story short, there was Mungo, indeed, posing as Germaine Jackson, just as the inscrutable caller had told me. He looked in good shape and well he might. Having convinced the duty vet that I was Mungo's owner, I was permitted to take him home but not until I had settled a hefty invoice detailing fine cuts of chicken, a number of overnight charges and surgery.

'Surgery? I don't understand. Was he injured when he came here?'

'Oh, no injury as such,' replied the softly spoken young woman in her green scrubs. 'He had a lump on his head which we have removed. It turned out to be benign, you'll be pleased to hear.'

Actually, I knew that already. He'd been at the vet a good year ago and we'd made the decision that it wasn't worth the trouble of removing. I just wanted to get Mungo home so I didn't stop to explain, or protest, that she had, in effect, performed unnecessary cosmetic surgery. My friend and I simply exchanged a glance with raised eyebrows.

Mungo looked handsome, well fed and pleased with himself. I guessed he'd been particularly happy with his new rock-star identity and his five-star accommodation. So, I left it at that.

'Just out of interest, how did Mungo come to be here,' my friend ventured as the vet held the door open for us.

'Oh, he was brought in as a stray by a woman during the week. She didn't leave her name. She seemed rather strange. She brought us a bunch of flowers along with the cat.'

Dedicated to the boy Mungo and with warm acknowledgement to Janice Irvine whose fine raconteurship inspired the story.