

Home Gardening

Rewards and hazards

about November 1990

They were a present from her father. When they arrived in the post, I remarked the little Yates Kiddie Starter Packs, with images of Bambi and Thumper on the front. It seemed Dad had again forgotten that his elder daughter was already 17, so I didn't think much more about it: his grip on reality wasn't always as sure as you might have wished.

Weeks later, Ophelia, who was already showing an interest in a career in environmental science, showed me her school project, consisting of eight mini planter pots, each with tiny green shoots becoming evident through the potting mix. Later, as the plants became more recognisable, she pointed out that they would make excellent Christmas presents for her friends. The two most voluptuous she kept for her personal use.

The plants demurred in what was close to plant heaven: Ophelia's room, at the north-west end of the apartment, glazed floor to ceiling on two sides, was about as effective a glass-house as you can imagine. Months passed and the plants grew lustily, reaching nearly 1.8 metres in height.

As January approached, she asked me to take care of them while she and her friends went camping up north. All I had to do was water them every day or so.

I'm not much of a gardener, but after a week or so, it became apparent that they were losing leaves at the bottom. Nothing much unusual about that: plants often shed their old leaves to generate new ones. What was odd was there was no sign of the shed leaves, and in fact, the leaves seemed not to have fallen off, but to have been torn off.

I'm not a smoker, and there was nobody else in the apartment. Or was there? No intruder would stop at a few leaves: surely they'd take the whole plants. Pondering this little mystery, I remarked Villeneuve, a large red Burmese cat normally of lively disposition, contentedly immobile with his front paws tucked under, staring intently at the carpet and purring loudly.



Sharing this bounty with a cat such as Villeneuve¹ posed no difficulty to me, especially as he seemed to enjoy it so much, though his (already healthy) appetite did increase noticeably. Ophelia took a different view: "THE CAT??!!" The bedroom door was kept closed from then on.

More months passed

¹ Not only perennially good-humoured, Villeneuve was brave, as we will see in a moment.

One day I returned from the office earlier than usual to see that the apartment had been burgled. The burglar must have taken hours to penetrate the two consecutive doors, one of which was of two sheets of heavy iron, and both with tempered-steel Abloy locks (which any lock-smith will tell you, cannot be picked). I later estimated that it took him between five and six hours, and must have made a shocking noise - though none of the neighbours would have intervened: a rule of Bondi living is to keep to yourself.

I assumed that, by that time (about 17.00), the burglar must have been and gone, so crept around the slightly-ajar doors to find Villeneuve, not stoned, sitting on the back of the sofa waiting for me. From his eyes, I could see he was terrified: pupils fully dilated and looking anxiously, alternately at me and along the corridor leading to the five bedrooms. Vanderbilt, who didn't chew weed, was under a bed somewhere, which is where you expect a cat to be.

Villeneuve clearly was alerting me that the burglar was still there, and must have been dangerous, given the size of the crow-bar he would have needed to get through those doors, and the noise it would have made. Had I proceeded along the corridor, as I would, without his warning, have done, I would necessarily have cornered him, with dire consequences.

I slipped out of the flat, careful not to touch anything, and went downstairs to a neighbour to ring the police. Thinking there was the possibility of catching a criminal in the act, two young uniformed officers arrived in three minutes, inviting me to go into the flat ahead of them. I pointed out that they were the ones armed and with heavy insurance cover, so were better placed to lead the way. On their instruction, I noted of what was missing: the video-recorder, which had never worked properly since it got left out in the rain (another story) now would be replaced by the insurance. The 1978 vintage Rank television (which had survived the rain amazingly well²) was left behind, which I was also pleased about.



To be truthful, there wasn't all that much of value that could easily be taken away. I wasn't very attached to any of the jewellery I had, and used the insurance money to buy a pretty pearl necklace that I did really like. A cheap camera went.

But bemusement turned to "bdah, bdah, bdah ..." or something like that, as The Law entered Ophelia's room. The (slightly) older of the two officers turned to me and remarked something about modern permissiveness versus illegal substance. I kept to my line: "bdah, bdah, bdah ..." They looked around them and asked, (rhetorically) if this was my daughter's room: articles of feminine accoutrement littered the floor; walls adorned with Led Zeppelin posters partly adrift from blobs of blue-tack. In the corner was a bong fashioned from an old plastic lemonade bottle. Straight faces were kept only with effort. "Is this room always like this?" It was indeed impossible to determine if it had been ransacked or not. "Yes". "How old is your daughter?" "She turned 18 a few weeks ago." "Then we really should press

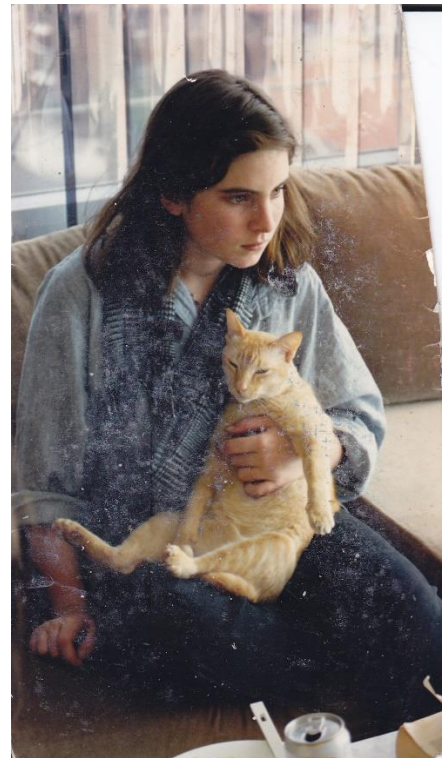
² Though the repair-man was perplexed when I came to pick it up. "It was full of wet cat-hair!" he said.

charges.” “Of course, Officer, you have a job to do, which I respect. But should you decide to press charges, I will sign a statutory declaration that the plants belong to me.” “Yes, we understand your position. But, our visit was not about drugs, so we don’t really need to press charges.” “Your judgement is best, Officer.” “Perhaps we should simply confiscate the plants.” “I of course respect your decision.” The younger of the two now grinned forgivably, but unprofessionally, which elicited little chuckles from us. The senior officer rallied his forces to regain control of the situation. “No, that would cause us more problems than it would solve.” “I can see how that could be the case, Officer.” “My problem is that I now have to send finger-printing experts to the flat, and if they find the plants, then I’ll be in trouble, so I need you to assure me that you will have them destroyed by the end of today.” “I can assure you that I will do that, Officer. Certainly, I don’t want to cause you trouble when you are exercising leniency.”

No finger-printing people came, but I took no chances. Unable to make contact with my daughter, I rang a friend of hers I didn’t like much and told him to come and get them. He was there in ten minutes.

Ophelia, it turns out, had decided she didn’t like him either³. She bolted to his flat and returned with several brown paper bags charged with newly-harvested leaves, indignant that I could even consider handing vulnerable weed to such a little prat.

That was the last we saw of the plants. Which was a shame for Villeneuve: after all, what are a few dope leaves for the manifest enjoyment of a cat (and all who loved him) who risks his life to save one he loves?



³ Apparently his gaffe was to threaten suicide unless she married him.