

1 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, sometimes tells me it might have been his second chance too.

I first encountered him on a gloomy, Thursday evening in March.

2 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 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.

3 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 soft spot for them. As I moved in and got a good look I could tell he was a tom, a male.

W 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, 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.

5 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 see 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.

6 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 very 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 If this going to become a regular thing I really am going to have to get you a proper lead, 'I said quietly to Bob, suddenly feeling a bit self-conscious.

But for every person that gave me a dirty look another half dozen smiled and nodded at me. One West Indian lady, weighed down with bags of shopping, gave us a big, sunny green.

'Don't you two make a pretty picture', she said.

No one had engaged me in conversation on the streets around my flat in all the months I'd lived here, it was odd, but also amazing. It was as if my Harry Potter invisibility cloak had slipped off my shoulders.

I'd barely been playing for more than a few minutes when a group of kids stopped. They were obviously from Brazil and were all wearing Brazilian football shirts and speaking what I recognised as Portuguese. One of them, a young girl, bent down and began stroking Bob.

'Ah, *gato bonito*', she said.

'She's saying you have a beautiful cat', one of the boys said, helpfully translating her Portuguese.

They were just kids on a trip to London, but they were fascinated. Almost immediately other people were stopping to see what the fuss was about. About half a dozen of Brazilian kids and others passers-by began fishing around in their pockets and started raining coins into the bag.