

A good neighbour

The new neighbours moved in on a rained-out day. It was the neatest move I'd ever seen. The white furniture removal truck bore the crisp red legend *ExecuTransport*. The movers wore black rain jackets with hoods and they moved fast as if there was a schedule to stick to. By teatime the belly of the white truck had shrunk to darkness.

The Dutch couple were younger than the Brazilian couple. The Brazilians were lovely hospitable people - they invited me over for sundowners occasionally and I kept an eye on things when they went off to their ranch in Argentina. They were the best kind of neighbours.

This young woman wore an Indian scarf and held a miauling cat basket; she looked arty. The young man introduced himself and called his wife over.

'This is Marcella,' he said.

The next morning I was eating a bowl of cereal and taking in the view when their front door opened. They stood in the cold, the man in a leather jacket leaning against the car, the woman in a track-suit hugging herself to stay warm. The husband suddenly pulled his wife towards him and kissed her full on the mouth.

Life went on. One night there was a cat fight. My first thought was for Sumatra. Sumatra who could vanish into a pitch black night. When he first came he hid under the furniture. Some past trauma. I'd coaxed him out with titbits and a toy mouse. Lately he'd taken to staying out overnight. He'd stopped using the cat box preferring the great outdoors. I couldn't blame him for that. It wasn't like him to fight. He preferred the security of nearby drain pipes.

The next day the Dutch woman claimed that Sumatra was involved in a fight with her two cats who had had to be taken to the vet. I snorted at the thought of shy Sumatra causing so much trouble. A cat was a cat that was true, and cats did fight, but two against one? Anyway how could she prove it? There were other cats on the estate. But the woman was insistent, flashing electric blue fingernails and talking fiercely in broken English that hissed like steam. Later I heard caterwauling and I checked on Sumatra but he must have gone for a walk. I no longer opened the door to the woman who now shouted foreign words.

One night I came home to a collage of photographs and vet bills on my front door; intestines spilled out of a half-stitched belly, claws dangled off a cat foot, an eyeball hung on a litmus blue thread. A litany of cat sins. But was it my cat? It hardly seemed to matter. As far as my mentally unstable neighbour was concerned Sumatra was culpable and I was responsible. Sumatra was having a catnap on the sofa. I ran a hot bath while I closed the windows and locked the doors and jammed the cat flap shut.

After breakfast I marched over. I lived on the estate, they were just tenants, I'd get them kicked out. With their cats. That's the way I let the Dutch woman have it when she opened the door. She started to cry softly and babbled something about 'two dead'.

'Your cats are dead?' I wasn't sure I'd heard her right.

'No, no, no!' She wiped her nose with one hand and made flapping motions with the other.

It was only when she patted her flat stomach and repeated herself that I understood.

'Number three baby, two dead.'

The number three baby made it through winter and part-way through summer but gave up just short of six months.

The hardest thing was sitting waiting for the ambulance to arrive. As the white towels turned cherry red Marcella murmured, 'We are good neighbours now, yes?'