

## Tom and Jaime

*By Geoff Brown*

Neat names for the two pets we bought in 1974 when our kids Matt and Emma were small. Our town house had a postage stamp sized garden which limited our pet options as did Emma's extreme allergic reaction to hair and fur. What to do? The kids' favourite TV programme Blue Peter provided the inspiration. We bought two tortoises.

Amazingly, we became very attached to these strange, antediluvian creatures. They accompanied us during several house moves. They were treated with love and respect as demanded by the Blue Peter code and always had a large outdoor pen. When we were outside to supervise them they got time off for good behaviour and had the full run of our increasingly substantial gardens. Occasionally they escaped and search parties were mounted to find the absconders.

There were two things I didn't look forward to. In winter we put them in a straw-filled box in the garage to hibernate. Rummaging in the straw in the early spring to check they were still alive was always scary. Neither will I miss the constant syncopated clacking sound of shell on shell during mating season.

A couple of things may surprise you. In the summer heat they developed a creditable turn of speed. If you took your eyes off them they would have travelled twenty yards on their stumpy legs. They also liked to be tickled under...I was going to say the chin, but of course they didn't have a chin, more a scaly telescopic neck. Nonetheless, their beaks responded with beatific smiles in response to this light caress.

On to the traumatic finale. Jaime lost a leg. Not sure how but the neighbours' vicious cat was the prime suspect. The kids spent many hours trying to fashion a prosthetic from Lego bricks which they vainly attempted to sellotape to her shell. Ironic really as we named her after the Bionic Woman, the contemporary TV heroine. A few years later Jaime wasn't moving around much so Annie took her to the Vet. "She doesn't seem very well," Annie reported, to which the Vet replied, "I'm not surprised, she's dead!"

Emma was just about to take her GCSE's and was highly stressed. She loved Jaime so we decided to withhold news of her tortoise's demise. Early each morning I moved Jaime to a different spot in the pen and she put a few nibbled

salad leaves in front of her. Fortunately, the exams were over before the corpse started to decompose. Once we had imparted the bad news, Emma insisted on a full ceremonial burial under the oak tree.

Tom still seemed healthy enough but without his partner we were concerned he would be lonely. We decided to take him to a tortoise sanctuary in Essex. On arrival a wonderful thing happened. He approached another tortoise and I swear they kissed and toddled away together.

During her undergraduate days in Cambridge Emma visited the sanctuary several times to make sure Tom was still living the good life.

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