



About Lizzie - A Tribute
by Kathryn Flatt

"If you're looking for a lap cat, how about Lizzie?"

That simple question changed three lives.

After years of pursuing college degrees by night and building careers by day, Steve (my husband) and I had reached a point where we were ready and able to add a pet to our family of two. Because both of us had grown up under circumstances that often left us feeling isolated and lonely, we knew we would be adopting a pet from a shelter, and we decided on a cat rather than a kitten thinking an older cat might have a tougher time finding a home.

At the local humane society, we filled out an application and went to see the cats ready for adoption. I really wanted to take them *all* home, but we were a little nervous about what sort of parents we would make. Many of the kitties were very forward and exuberant, reaching paws through their cages to get our attention. One of us (I don't remember which) remarked that some of these characters seemed a little too rambunctious for us, which prompted the volunteer to ask the question at the beginning of this piece.

And there, in a cage partially hidden by the door, was Lizzie. Curled in her fuzzy pink bed, she looked up at us with eyes at once fearful and hopeful. Later, Steve and I discovered we had the exact same thought at that moment: she needs us. Her name seemed to fit her so perfectly, we decided not to change it.

Our family of two became a family of three.

But not without a period of adjustment. Lizzie emerged from her carrier and immediately hid under the bed in the spare bedroom we had set up for her introduction to our house. Eventually, she came out and followed her natural curiosity to explore. At first, we questioned if she would ever make any sound, but after a couple of days, she eked out a shyly tentative meow.

The folks at the shelter had guessed her age at nine or ten months, but we will never know for certain. Lizzie had been rescued as a stray and came to the shelter with a host of health problems--ear mites, a urinary tract infection, worms, a respiratory infection. She had been in foster care from time to time, and I believe that contributed to her shyness. On a check-up visit to the vet, we also learned Lizzie was a rare occurrence, a female orange tabby. Most orange tabbies are males, the odds of a female only one in five.

She also proved rare in another way: her intelligence. Not long after she started coming out of her shell, I was sitting on the floor of the bedroom with her and watched her work her claws into the carpet a couple of feet away from her brand new scratching post. I wondered how I could persuade her to use that device instead, knowing mere words would not suffice. Finally, I sat on my haunches before it and imitated the desired activity. Lizzie simply sat watching until I stopped, and then she walked right over to the post and followed my example.

The shy kitty we brought home bloomed into a playful youngster as befitted her age, the cat equivalent of a human teenager. She loved to play both with purchased toys and anything else she could bat about and chase, like plastic balls, her brush, and even a pecan in its shell. When she was up for some playtime, she would call attention to her wishes by lying belly-up in the middle of the floor, positioned so we could not miss seeing her.

Another of her favorite games was "Jump Mom." A double doorway separated our dining room from a finished breezeway-turned-study, the doors left open most of the time. I would go to the study for something and catch sight of Lizzie slinking behind one of the doors to watch me through the crack between door and frame. Then, as I emerged into the dining room, she would dart out from behind the door and raise her forepaws in the air, lacking only the ability to yell, "Surprise!"

Contrary to her early designation as a "lap cat," after some weeks went by, we began to wonder if Lizzie ever *would* sit in our laps. Gentle urgings in that direction usually resulted in her making herself scarce for a bit, and we knew she would have to take her own time. Her first big step was to settle in between us on the sofa, followed by accepting an invitation into a lap with a pillow on it. Finally, on a chilly evening, Steve and I were watching television in our customary position: on the sofa, me sitting with my feet on an ottoman, Steve reclining with his legs across my lap, a blanket covering us. Lizzie suddenly jumped up on the sofa, walked over Steve, and planted her forepaws on the peak formed by his knees. She raised her head, let out a hearty meow, and then settled into the blanket-lined "bowl" formed by our legs. It was as if she was declaring her dominion over both us and the house: she had found her home.

Her behavior was never less than exemplary, so we allowed her free run of the house. She did not climb the drapes or claw the furniture or break from her litter box training. She showed no interest in going outside (open a door and she would scamper deeper into the house), but she loved to relax at a sunny window and watch the birds and squirrels beyond it.

In the first two or three years, she had some additional health issues such as a bladder infection and the final stubborn remnants of her worm problem. The worst was the discovery of a polyp in her ear, and although the surgery to remove it proved simple and routine, we were terrified at the thought of our baby undergoing anesthesia. Lizzie came through that without a hitch, however. In succeeding years, we would hold our breath when we took her to the vet for her annual checkup and vaccinations, but each time the doctor gave her a clean bill of health, we heaved a sigh of relief. Her health issues seemed a thing of the past.

Pampered with the best, most luxurious cat food, she put on weight and her coat grew thick, glossy, and silken soft. Dad insisted she be offered a sniff and/or taste of anything we had to eat which might interest her. And she loved Pounce cat treats. She would sit on an ottoman and gently touch a hand with her paw to indicate she wanted some. When she had had her fill, she would wait patiently until we assumed our customary TV-watching position and then settle into our laps for a nap. At bedtime, Lizzie preferred a spot on Mom and Dad's bed to her own. Far from being silent, she vocalized often and joyfully, and we loved petting her and hearing her purr. A leisurely combing by Mom became a nightly ritual. She pretty much took over both the house and her hapless parents, knowing exactly how to manipulate us to her every whim.

Years passed, fifteen in all, with our family happy and devoted to one another, through ups and downs, thick and thin, hard times and good times. Careers went through changes, we moved to a new

house, we did the things people do. Throughout, Lizzie was a constant. When we came home, she greeted us, sometimes even watching out the window for us. Whatever sort of day we had, she was there, glad to see us, ready to offer comfort and support through her calm and adoring demeanor. We adored her in return, lavishing attention on her, talking to her, catering to her needs and wants. We thought it would always be that way.

Spring, 2011. Lizzie began scratching liberally at her left ear. On closer examination, it also had an unpleasant odor, and Steve took her to the vet who said she had an infection. Eardrops were provided, and we dutifully applied them although Lizzie did not accept the treatments with enthusiasm. A follow-up appointment produced a new diagnosis: ear polyp. Surgery was recommended, and although she had come through the earlier surgery with flying colors, we were all too aware that she was now around sixteen years old. On May 13th, a Friday of all days, we took her to one of the country's finest veterinary hospitals to have the polyp removed. She came through anesthesia and surgery remarkably well for a cat her age, and we nervously awaited the results of a biopsy of the mass the surgeon removed.

A few days later, we got them: cancer. A second surgery was needed to ensure removal of all the cancer, and chemotherapy would give her the chance at one or two more years of quality life. Once again, Lizzie got through the operation, and she patiently endured the additional drug regimens and wearing her "cone" collar.

Then she stopped eating. We did research on how to get a cat to eat and tried anything which offered a fragment of hope. The doctors provided advice and a drug to stimulate her appetite, but nothing worked. More frantic phone calls and trips to the hospital where one of the emergency center doctors found a mass in her abdomen. She was battling a second cancer, lymphoma. He suggested the steroid drugs she had to take to prepare her for chemotherapy would also improve her appetite, and we continued to try anything we found to tempt her to eat but to no avail.

Monday, June 6: While Lizzie had grown weaker, we held out hope that her first chemotherapy session really would turn things around. But in the exam room with the oncologist, Lizzie collapsed to the floor, barely able to breathe. Back to the ICU where they put her on oxygen and admitted her for observation and insertion of a feeding tube. Later that night, they had to put a "tap" in her chest to remove three ounces of fluid from around her lungs.

June 7: We learned Lizzie had a tough night, and we went to see her, hearts heavy with dread. Machines were keeping her alive, and two blood transfusions had failed to improve her condition. She lay on a heated cot, struggling for each breath, her misery heartbreakingly obvious. She could no longer get up and could scarcely raise her head. Even if she could rally enough to get through chemo and then radiation treatments, her chances at beating two kinds of cancer were slim. We would have done anything, given anything, spent anything to save her, but we were forced to acknowledge that our baby was not going to recover, would never be coming home. We made the hardest decision of our entire lives, and she died humanely through euthanasia while we stroked her and told her we loved her over and over. Arrangements for her cremation were made; the urn with her ashes would be returned in about three weeks. We went home with our grief to wait for the call.

Our family of three was a family of two once again.

We put Lizzie's things away in a closet and later moved them to a cedar chest. All the medicines and syringes and other evidence of her decline went in the trash. We looked at the photographs we had taken of her over the years, hoping those images could replace memories of how she looked at the end. We took comfort from the words of condolence from the doctors who tried to help her and from our friends. As I put away her cat climber, I found some of her fur, a whisker, and a claw sheath shed years ago. These I placed in a ceramic dish with a cat hand-painted on its lid, which assumed a place of honor next to framed pictures of her on the fireplace mantel.

Two weeks after her passing, on a Wednesday night, we came home during a strong summer storm and suddenly could not find Steve's cell phone. We called its number repeatedly in hopes of hearing it play its tune while retracing every step we had taken.

The next morning, I was awakened from a sound sleep by a meow, and I opened my eyes utterly certain I would see Lizzie striding through the door. Of course, I quickly realized that could not be and assumed I had been coming out of a dream of which the meow had been part.

Friday morning, Steve reported that he thought he had heard two meows early in the morning, but he knew they had not been part of a dream. Yet the windows had been closed overnight, and the fan we usually leave on to mask outside noise should have made hearing a neighborhood cat meowing impossible. Again, we chalked it up to wishful thinking or part of the grieving process.

Saturday morning, Steve played back the messages on his cell phone which a neighbor had found and returned. He expected them to be from our repeated attempts to find the phone on Wednesday night, but one of them turned out to be from the vet hospital telling us Lizzie's ashes were available to be picked up. We dashed over there, and Lizzie made her final homecoming. Her urn on the mantel bears a picture of her as she once was, happy and healthy and beautiful. She is that way again, now and forever.

But what about those mysterious meows we both heard? Some people will say that our grief invented the voice of our beloved little cat. We like to think it really was Lizzie trying to tell us to come get her and take her home.

Someday soon, we will visit another shelter to find Lizzie a little sister (or two!). No one will ever replace her or completely fill the void of her absence. She was a true member of our family and always will be. But we still have love to give to another abandoned soul who deserves the same chance at the good life Lizzie had with us, and we look forward to a new homecoming.

We know in our hearts that Lizzie approves.