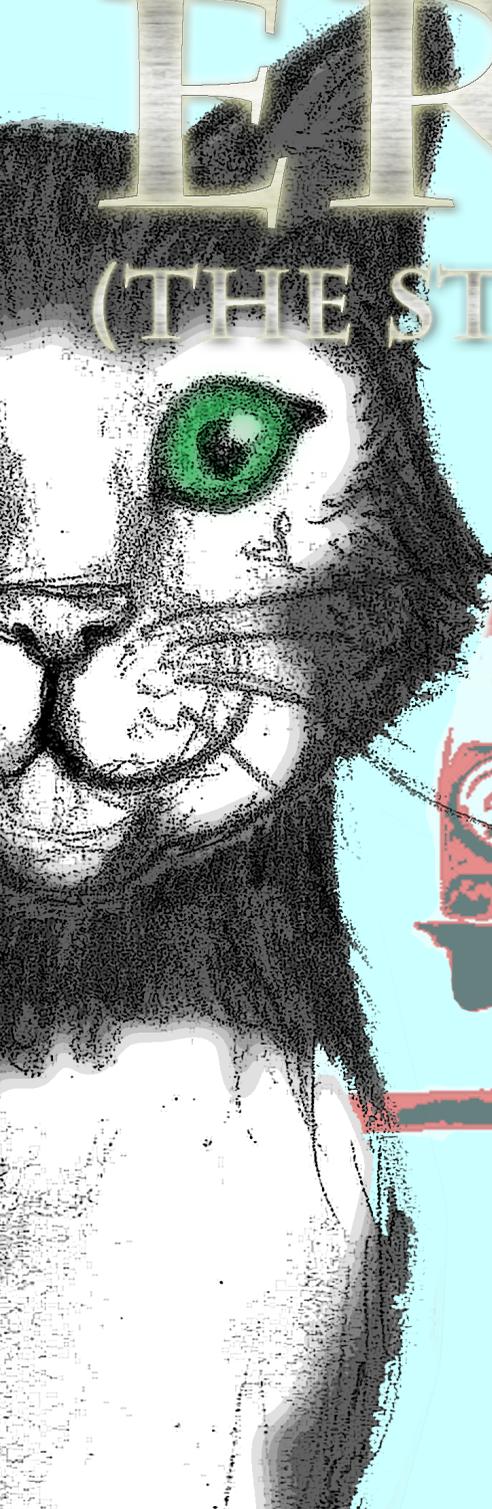


ERIC

(THE STUNT CAT)



Roy Williams

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Roy Williams

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*For Arron and Charlotte, who have never met Eric, but
may yet bump into him*

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Chapter 3 - Water



The Karping Koi

As Eric lay on the cushion in the armchair, warm and cosy, fondly dreaming about sausages and ways of liberating them from refrigerators, Ben was huddled, shivering. on his old towel in the utility room outside.

“It’s not flippin’ fair,” he thought. “All I’m doing is trying to get out of the way and what do I get? Not ‘good boy Ben, never mind’, it’s ‘get out’. Flippin’ cat.”

He brooded further and wriggled himself deeper into the towel. "I'm sitting there minding my own business and suddenly, he's flying through the air like a what-not, smashing into things on tables, knocking them over, digging his claws into the chairs, sitting on the cushions... And where am I? Outside, freezing while it's getting dark. It's not flippin' fair."

He lumbered up sulkily and poked his nose through the doorway to sniff the air outside, where the sky had long since turned a deep and slightly dirty purple.

In the distance he could hear a faint blubbery sound. It was the sound of his tormentors.

"Flippin' fish" he mused. The Karping Koi seemed to be holding a meeting at the surface of the pond and the more he listened, the more his curiosity turned to anger as it became clear that tonight he was the main topic of discussion.

"Thlown out, he was," said one. "Made to rook a light chump by that cat," said another, "Stooo-pid dog," added a third, at which point they all giggled with a unanimous blubbery, bubbly high-pitched giggle.

Ben was shocked... Shocked and angry - and becoming more angry by the moment. He lurched through the door, down the path and up the steps in four or five bounds until he stood beside the pond.

The fish heard him coming and, as he reached the edge of the pond, they thrashed their tails at him, splashing water

into his face before disappearing into the black-wet depths. If the dog was angry before, cold, humiliated, but at least not wet. he was becoming ferocious now. Insulted and soaked by the fish, he planted his legs four-square beneath him and started barking furiously down at the rippling surface of the water.

“Flippin’ fish!” he barked. Flippin’ flappin, cowardly, slimy slippery fish! Come up here and say that. Come on, you you you rotters!

He had a feeling straight away that ‘rotters’ was not exactly the word he should have used. Somehow, it lacked authority, but though he was angry, he was not by nature a bad-tempered dog and had been brought up with the best of manners.

The fish, however, obviously had not. From beneath the surface bubbled up a sneering “Ooooooh.. he called us lotters. The frippin’ stupid dog called us lotters. What a big blave dog... What a pirrock, - followed by another bubbly burst of thin giggling.

Ben became even more angry. And the more angry he became, the more agitated he was and the louder he grew.

“Rotters, you slithery, slimy, swimmy...”

At that point. the back door of the house swung open and a swathe of light a garden wide leapt across the grass, catching the dog full in its beam.

Although he had been barking at full flow, he stopped

almost immediately and looked up, the last really nasty thing he could think of to say about fish trailing off to a sort of low yawn. He opened his mouth again. Nothing came out, so he closed it gently once more.

The beam was broken and he looked up to see a huge black shadow standing in the doorway Ben squinted at the shadow, which was surrounded with a bright light that hurt his eyes. Even so, he could make out the shape of the shadow and that it belonged to The Man. Who was ready to do some barking of his own.

“Ben,” he shouted. “What are you making all that row about?... Come away from the pond... Come in.”

“Oooh er, he’s still angry,” Ben guessed without too much difficulty. “I don’t think I’ll go back in there until he’s calmed down a bit.”

Ben lowered himself down back legs first, then stretched his front legs out and rested his chin on his knees, as though he was trying to make himself as small as possible.

That didn’t work, either. “You stupid dog!” shouted The Man. “Come in here... NOW!”

In Ben’s mind, he had clearly not made himself look small enough. He had another go. If he could have pressed himself into the ground he would have.

Even then, he wasn’t confident. He was just beginning to weigh up the consequences of not doing as he was told at all when another sneer bubbled up towards him from the

depths of the pond.

“Frippin’ stupid dog,” it said.

He snapped. Ignoring the shadow in the doorway he leapt back to his feet, madder than ever and began shouting furiously at the fish once more.

“I’ll get you fish!” he bayed. “Even if I have to come in there after you I’ll get you.”

“Frippin’ stupid dog can’t swim” chorused a wash of bubbly voices. “Forr in and ddown if you want. Frippin’ dog can’t swim. He’s learry dim and he can’t swim,” they began to chant in an exceptionally annoying sing-song fashion, like the Karping Koi Chorale.

It was more than even a mild-mannered and respectable Border Collie could stand.

“Right, that does it, I’m coming in after you,” he barked. And with a final snarl he dived into the water.

There was a great splash as he bellyflopped into the middle of the pond and sank so far that his feet touched the bottom.

Even in the dark he caught a glimpse of one of the Karping Koi as it flashed slippery in front of his eyes, frightened witless and making a desperate dash for cover behind an old pipe at the bottom of the pond.

Amid the swirling and gurgling of the bubbles babbling around his ears. Ben could still hear the fish, but by now their singy-songy chanting had turned to panic.

“The frippin’ dog’s gone roopy. Swim for your rives,” they screamed.

Another fish wriggled across the dog’s vision and, instinctively, he opened his mouth to bite. Unfortunately, instead of swallowing fish, he merely gulped a mouthful of foul-tasting water and stringy weed which caught in his teeth and round his tongue and began to choke him.

Ben spluttered again, now struggling for breath. He shook the weed out of his mouth, but his mind was racing. He tried to find a firm foothold, but slipped on the muddy side of the pond and plunged downwards again, swallowing another great gulp of water in the process.

He felt as though he was filling up with water. His long coat was soaking and the weight was beginning to pull him down, sapping his strength.

He struggled and kicked, thrashing his legs about beneath him and all the time he could hear the cowardly Koi screaming and yelling as they tried to avoid the flailing paws and swooshing tail.

Suddenly, his paws found a firm footing and he pushed hard, his sheer terror shooting him upwards out of the water until he hit the night air again. He scrambled with all his might up the smooth sides of the pond until his front paws rested on the grass bank.

Slowly, he pushed his back legs down and hauled himself out onto the lawn. He was about to flop exhausted onto the grass when a firm hand grabbed the loose fur at the back of

his neck and propelled him across the lawn and patio and down the steps.

He was still not thinking clearly and stumbled on the bottom of the three steps, falling over and then yelping as the extra weight of his soggy fur pulled against the hand that held him, burning pain down his back.

Ben whined sharply in fear and anger.

The hand let go. It was The Man. He stood high above Ben, glowering, his legs astride the dog, set firm and threatening. Ben could see by the light of the kitchen window that The Man was angry.

The dog's heart battered a pounding beat on his ribs. He coughed more water out of his mouth and retched as he began panting for breath.

His anger subsided, though he was still shaking and frightened. More than anything, he began to feel an overwhelming tiredness.

He shut his eyes for a second and rolled over onto his back with his hind legs stretched out and his front paws held in front of his chest, almost begging.

He opened his eyes again to see The Man bending down, coming closer stretching out a hand. Ben flinched and turned his head away, sure that he was going to be beaten.

He shut his eyes again, tighter this time, until the muscles on his cheeks began to pull.

He waited for the blow. But it didn't come. Instead The Man touched his muzzle with the back of his hand and rubbed it gently backwards and forwards.

"You daft dog," he said softly. "What on earth did you do that for? You'll have to stay away from those fish you know. You shouldn't go into the pond, you know that."

Slowly Ben turned his face towards the voice and gently licked The Man's hand.

"You daft dog," The Man repeated, though this time Ben detected a smile in his voice. Then, more sharply, he said: "Come on, lunatic, let's get you dry."

The dog rolled sideways a little and pushed himself up on one front leg before finally rising to all fours. He stood cold and dripping. He coughed more water out of his mouth, stood still again, then sneezed violently, shaking water everywhere.

The Man laughed and motioned him towards the utility room. He switched on the light and reached down for the towel on which Ben had been lying earlier.

He began to rub the dog vigorously up and down his back and legs. Then he wrapped the towel over the dog's head and began to dry his ears.

Ben began to struggle, because he didn't like having his ears rubbed. Tickled, yes, but rubbed with a wet towel, definitely not.

The Man stopped his wriggling with a firm "ah, aaahh"

and Ben decided it would be better to sit patiently as the soothing hands rubbed down his fur, taking away the cold and the wet and making his body feel glowing and warm.

As he lost himself in the motion of being dried down, his thoughts drifted back to the fish.

It was difficult to hear properly, because The Man was murmuring and making little baby sounds all the time, but he strained his ears for any sound from the pond.

The fish were saying nothing. The pond surface was glassy smooth but for the occasional water-boatman skimming across. It seemed as though there would be no more problems with the Karping Koi tonight.

Ben smiled as The Man continued to dry him down. Through the door and across the passageway from the utility room he could hear The Lady pouring dog biscuits into an earthenware bowl and then opening a can of dog food.

He sniffed the air. "Mmm, food," he thought. "Blimey, I'm starving!" He stood up sharply. "Eh! Eh, hang on," shouted The Man.

But Ben wouldn't hang on. With a leap he was through the door, across the passageway and pushing open the kitchen door. The Lady had just put his bowl down on the mat in the corner. next to his bowl of water.

As he put his head down towards the food, he caught a sniff of the water and thought of his earlier ordeal in the dark

wetness of the pond. It made him shiver violently for a few seconds.

The last droplets of water, hiding in his long coat where they had escaped from the towel, were shaken free and sprayed the walls and cupboards around him'

"Ben!" shouted The Lady and The Man together.

He turned his head sheepishly to look at them in turn, "Sorry," he grumbled in a voice so low that the vibration tickled his nose. He sneezed once more.

The Lady and The Man laughed as he nosed again into his bowl.

He was having beef and heart for tea. "Better than one of those slippery, scaly fish," he thought.