

*Earl the Dead Cat™ ...Alive and well
after all these years*

by B. Cat Stone

illustrations by Richard Axtell



**Cat Writers' Association
MUSE™ MEDALLION WINNER**

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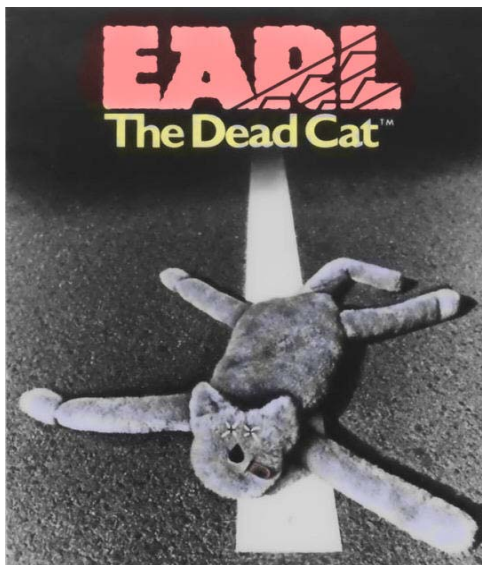
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First publication, e-zine Our-Happy-Cat.com, June 2009.

Introducing Earl

This is a true story about the adventures of Earl the Dead Cat™. It follows his origins, rescue, resurrection, and rebirth, and it chronicles his struggle to find his true purr-pose in life.

The idea for Earl the Dead Cat was born in 1985. He was created to represent a deceased cat. Marketed as a novelty "plush" toy ("The last cat you'll ever need"), Earl was the size of an average live kitty. However, unlike normal plush toys, he lacked most of the stuffing. Earl basically consisted of gray faux-fur fabric shaped like a flattened feline. This road-kill representation of the family pet was clearly one of the tackiest gifts of the decade.



Earl represented a cat that had crossed over; one that might have lost a road race with a steamroller. Pathetic as the concept might be to pet lovers, Earl the Dead Cat did sell as a gag gift to people who thought it was funny. He even arrived with a mock paper "death certificate."

Poor Earl -- his body resembled a furry oval pancake with just a hint of batting. His arms and legs splayed out at odd angles, as did his tail, which appeared broken at the end. His face was shaped like a spatula, and small flat cat ears perched atop his head. His eyes were "X's" stitched from white thread, his nose a teardrop of black fabric. For a tongue a thin bit of round red felt stuck out at the side of his mouth. This strange combination of features produced an inscrutable mien. What could Earl be thinking behind that strange visage?

Having started out dead, Earl clearly had a lot to overcome. He'd begun as a cat with minus nine lives, created and marketed as a gag gift by demented minds. Earl had to live with that, but he didn't have to take it lying down. (Well, maybe he did, but he didn't have to like it!) Let's face it, Earl had nowhere to go but up.

Earl's fleeting fame

Earl's early career was meteoric – a fast blast to fame. Considering his condition, Earl managed to really get around. His travels took him around the country and the globe. Earl was on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson twice. He was also in the tabloid paper *Weekly World News* twice. He was featured on British television as a "must have" fun toy. The rock group Poison sent him to radio stations to publicize their album "Look What the Cat Dragged In."

Earl was photographed in many countries of the world; he was caught by the paparazzi in New York reveling at the ringing in of the New Year at Times Square.



Comedian Gallagher said during an act that Earl is the only cat you don't have to open the door to let in or out, because he can fit under it!



Earl briefly became a movie star and stuntman when a company named Bizarre Arts made a short film entitled "How to Hit Your Head" which featured him. The movie was about exotic ways to inflict a skull fracture upon oneself. The end product wasn't long or funny enough for a run on cable access, so it was screened for a few people then quietly laid to rest. Trying to recoup their losses, the company tried to market Earl in a garage prop auction, but he didn't sell.

Despite all the travel and attention during his early years, Earl felt frustrated, negative and used. He needed a new start. He had so much more to offer, if only someone would recognize his true talents.

Earl a prisoner in corporate America

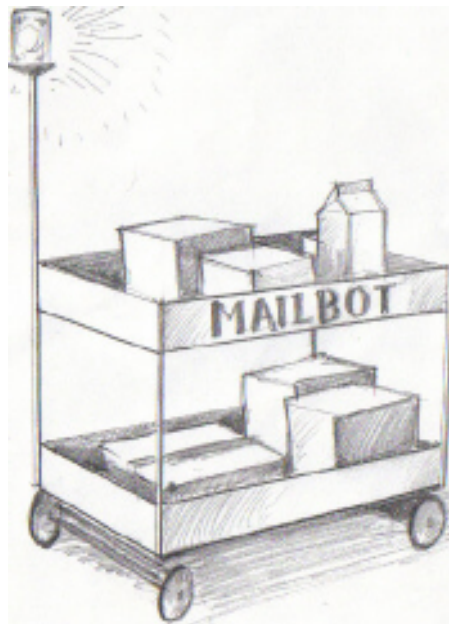
Earl sightings became less frequent after the early years of his existence. He had dropped out of the limelight once the novelty wore off. My first encounter with him was after he'd migrated inland to Arizona.

In the fall of 1990 I started a job with a Fortune 100 technology company as a contract technical writer. A few months after I arrived, I spotted Earl at the office where I worked in Chandler, Arizona (south of Phoenix). It was a bizarre experience, to say the least.

The robot mail cart

One day as I was walking down a hallway near my office, I saw what appeared to be a wheeled cart moving several feet in front of me. The weird thing was it had no driver! As the cart reached an intersecting aisle it made a perfect left turn. My eyes strained in their sockets. I may as well have sighted the Lunar Rover, I was so shocked. I'd heard about this robotic technology being used, but had never seen it up close and personal.

I recovered from my amazement and, at the risk of being branded a “newbie,” asked one of the administrative assistants about this ghostly gurney. She told me it was the robot mail cart, which came by our area of the building on workdays at 10:30 A.M. The cart held the departmental mail – stacks of envelopes and boxes. It was programmed to stop at pre-designated coordinates at the offices where the admins worked. Each worker would pick up their group's mail, then the robot would move on to the next stop. Corporate efficiency meets NASA.



Similar in size and shape to a restaurant busboy cart, the robot mail cart was made of gun gray colored metal. It had two rectangular levels -- one at the top, one at the bottom -- each enclosed with a six-inch metal lip to hold the mail. A pole at the front protruded about two feet above the top level. Perched atop it was a flashing, cylindrical yellow caution light. The cart rolled up and down the aisles separating offices on four rubber wheels, almost noiselessly except for a soft, distinctive electric hum.

I wondered what might happen if I jumped out in front of it. Was it programmed to stop, or instead to run down contractors in its path? I conservatively stayed within the safety of my cubicle walls as it glided silently by.

Meeting Earl in drag

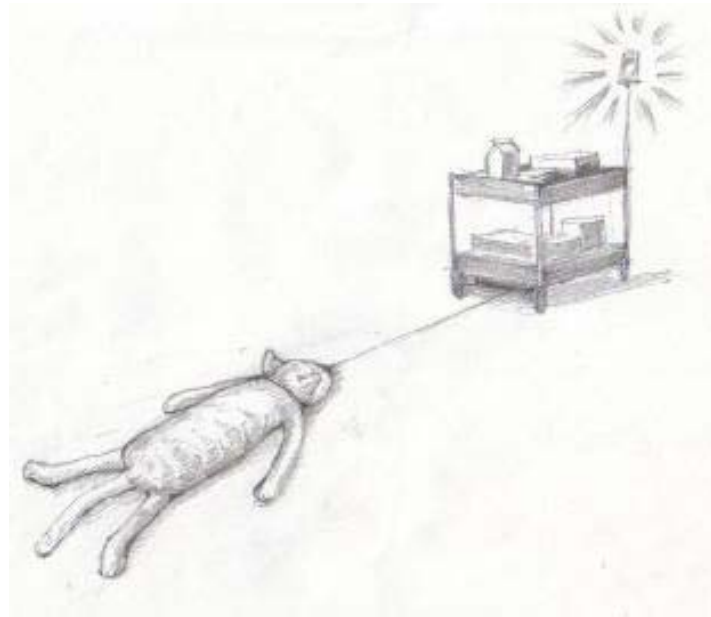
As days stretched into weeks on the job, though the robot mail cart became a familiar sight, I was still fascinated by it.

One day around mail time, as I sat working in my cube, I heard a strange murmuring. A chorus of whispered exclamations and laughter from my office mates caught my attention: "What's that?... (giggle)... that thing on the string!" Those tall enough began *prairie dogging*⁽¹⁾ for a better view of events. "...It's a cat!" That key word moved me from curiosity to action. As I exited my cube and approached the main hallway, I saw the source of the commotion.



⁽¹⁾ *prairie dogging* - In an office segmented into work spaces shaped like cubes, the act of standing up and looking over the walls (like a prairie dog emerging and perching above its hole) to see events unfolding beyond the partition.

The mail cart had just passed by. Dragging behind it on the industrial carpet was a toy plush cat, which was attached to the cart by a long string tied around its neck. The robot cruised the hallway on its preprogrammed journey, oblivious to its captive passenger or to the reaction it elicited from surprised bystanders.



As I stood watching, a blush of indignant anger rose from my neck to my face. What insensitive jerk had created this mock torture of a cat using an inanimate object? Clearly someone was demonstrating an underlying distaste for felines and a warped sense of humor. It had to be the employee in charge of the building's postal service, whom I'd seen a few times as I walked by the mail room. I dubbed him the "Evil Mail Clerk." This was a real scratch in the face to the cat lovers and to all the pet people in the company.

Naturally the toy cat "in drag" was the topic du jour at lunchtime in the company café. As I walked through the lunchroom selecting my meal and locating a seat, I picked up various snippets of related conversation. "I can't believe someone would have the nerve to do that...It's disgusting and totally inappropriate...Someone ought 'ta do something."

I decided to be the “someone” to “do something.” I was more than your average cat lover. I shared my home with multiple cats and had, for several years, been active in animal rescue. But this was a unique situation; it was at my job site. I was a contractor, not a full employee (a bridesmaid, not a bride). So this mission would have to be conducted as a stealth operation.

Earl’s great escape

Two days after my Earl sighting I was in my office, plan in place, on the lookout for the mail cart. Most employees in my department were in a mandatory meeting. Contractors like me were not invited, which presented my opportunity. As the robot cart glided by on its rounds, Earl in tow, I dashed out of my cube after it, a pair of scissors in hand. When the cart arrived at its next delivery stop, I rushed up behind it, snipped the toy cat free of its bond, and scooped it up. Then I scurried back to my office, watching to be sure no one had seen me. All clear!

I placed the purr-loined prize on my desk. Intrigued, I took a moment to look at the toy I'd rescued. It was like no plush cat I'd ever seen. Gray and flat, it looked as if the stuffing had been removed from it. I read the tag: Earl the Dead Cat™ it said. Ah, I thought, hence the flatness. Wondering who in the world would market such a strange thing, I removed the string that had bound him to the cart and threw it away. Then, to avoid anyone seeing Earl, I quickly buried him in the back of one of my desk drawers for safekeeping. Fortunately, because the toy was flat, it took up very little room.

The next day, I overheard people around the company talking about this latest development. “The cat's gone...Who do you suppose took it?” Although my friends at the company who knew my feelings about felines would have understood my action, I was reticent to tell them. I feared word might spread, and I might face the wrath of the Evil Mail Clerk for taking his plaything.

Have you seen me?

A couple of days after Earl's rescue, as the mail cart made its usual trip, I heard snickering and tittering near my office. What now, I wondered? I looked out to see the mail cart gliding by. On its top shelf, a 1/2 gallon milk carton was fixed in place. I moved closer for a better look. Like the ads for missing children that often

appeared on these containers, the sides of the carton had a picture of the head of a cat with these words under it: "Have You Seen Me?" Clearly the Evil Mail Clerk wanted his catnapped toy back. Tough luck, you postal pervert, I said under my breath with a smirk.



The milk carton stayed on the cart for about a week, until the joke soured. But no one came forward to return Earl. Soon the incident was forgotten.

Sneaking Earl home

Earl stayed hidden in my desk for several months. Whenever I opened the file drawer where he was stashed, I'd see his head sticking up in the back and smile.

After six months on the job, my contract work was complete. It was time to hit the corporate trail and find another tech writing gig. At the end of my last week at work, I packed my personal things, mainly books and work samples, into a box. As I rifled through my drawers for personal items, I spied my filed feline and wondered: How was I going to sneak him out of the building? The company had a strictly enforced rule which required everyone to have their belongings searched by a security guard as they left the building.

I was more concerned about the embarrassment of explaining Earl to Security than anything else. So I folded him up and hid him inside a large three-ring binder of documentation, which I placed at the bottom of the box. As I left the building at the end of the day, the guard gave contents of the box a cursory look-through, but fortunately didn't open the binder holding Earl. Yes!

I took Earl home that night and pulled him from the box. Knowing my male cats, even though neutered, would want to "christen" him by peeing all over him, as they did with almost any new item in the house, I decided to spare Earl this further humiliation. I found him a cozy spot on the top shelf in my bedroom closet, where he stayed, incognito, for some months.

Earl comes out of the closet

Several months later, I answered a call for help from a neighbor lady who had found a litter of four orphaned kittens in her back yard. She had watched and waited, but the mother was nowhere to be found. I asked her to bring them to me as soon as possible, not knowing how long it had been since they had eaten.

I had some experience with orphaned kittens like these. When the woman dropped them off, I examined them and guessed they were no more than three weeks old, eyes still shut. They cried and squirmed, poor babies, but appeared in pretty good health.

The most urgent task was to feed them. I mixed up some powdered feline mother's milk replacement that I kept on hand for such emergencies then fed it to each of the kittens with a dropper. Next I rubbed below their tummies with a warm washcloth to stimulate them to urinate, as mother cat would with her tongue.

After their meal, I set up a large box to serve as their new home. I lined it with newspaper then added a heating pad set to low, a large fluffy towel, and a wind-up clock to simulate mom's heartbeat. I placed the box in a quiet closet area where my crew of curious cats wouldn't bother them, and gently put the kittens inside it. After some squirming, I was relieved to see them fall asleep.

But as anyone who's cared for orphaned kittens knows, all quiet on the western cat front lasts only a short time. Within a few hours, the orphans were mewing up a storm. Though I fed and bathed them every three hours and cooed and cuddled as much as possible, it just wasn't enough for them. They were desperate for their mother. After spending a nearly sleepless night worrying and wondering what more I could do, I jumped out of bed with an idea: Earl!

I ran to the closet where I'd put him and grabbed Earl from the top shelf. After so much time and inattention, he was a bit dusty. I threw him in the washer with a load of clothes on gentle cycle, including a little bleach for disinfectant. After his bath, he went into the dryer. Once dry, Earl was clean, warm, fluffy and ready for action as a surrogate mother.

I hoped and prayed it would work as I lowered him into the box and placed the kittens around his belly. After some jockeying about for position, all four kittens began kneading on Earl's stomach and purring with contentment. I could almost hear them saying in unison, "Momma, you're back!" Laughing at their pleasure, I softly backed away and left them to their happy reunion.



The kittens continued to accept Earl as their adoptive mother until they were weaned and could eat on their own. I was excited about Earl's success as a surrogate parent and called several friends also involved in cat rescue to tell them the story. They thought it was funny as well as a great idea. Soon after, I received a call from one of these friends saying she had taken in a litter of orphaned kittens that were distressed. Could she please borrow Earl? Of course, I told her. Earl to the rescue!

Earl served as pseudo-mom to a total of five litters of motherless kittens over the next several years. He never returned to the closet. In addition to nursing kittens, Earl volunteered as a toy for rescued adult cats, letting himself be dragged around the house as prey by various parts of his anatomy. The transgender and play-toy roles never seem to bother him. He never complained; in fact I think he relished his ability to help with the rescue effort.



Earl finds his purr-pose

Through his service to rescued animals, Earl had finally found the positive purpose he'd been searching for. He was able to overcome his handicap of congenital death, as well as the abuse and humiliation he had suffered in his early life. And, best of all, he had earned the right to live out his remaining nine (positive) lives in happiness.

Today Earl is semi-retired. His years as a rescue helper have taken a lot out of him. After all the suckling, kneading, dragging and laundering he's been through, his stomach is practically threadbare, and his tongue is down to a few red threads.



He still serves as a drag-about toy for some of my cats, but he spends most of his time quietly resting and reflecting as he lies on his sofa in my office. Once in awhile as I pass him, something will flash in my peripheral vision. (Was that a twinkle I just saw in Earl's eye?)

About the author



B. Cat Stone (Barbara) is an award-winning author, training developer, pet rescuer, animal communicator and groomer. A member of the Cat Writers' Association, she lives in Arizona with her animal friends. She welcomes feedback from readers by email at bcatstone@gmail.com