

Dear editor, having read some of the testimonials by other Birman owners I thought I might add Gertie to your list of veteran cats. Gertie was bred by Mrs J Luscombe, Horrbridge, Devon and was born 21st October 1999. Whilst the breeder gave her a very grand sounding name on the lines of Maschenka Princess, Isis of the Blue Nile, to us as a delightful blue, tabby kitten she always looked like a Gertie.

She has had a remarkably accident and health scare free existence for all of her near 19 years. With her two half brothers she has always had the freedom to roam all over our estate here in Devon, always accompanying us on our two hour walks around the land. With hind sight I wished I had videoed these daily excursions, my husband and I with our sticks and the three cats running on ahead, climbing trees, investigating holes & warrens, and running, running, running across open fields and meadows. All three were prolific hunters, catching rabbits and always dragging them indoors through the cat flap where we spent the next two hours in absolute chaos pursuing cats pursuing bunnies!

Sadly both her brothers (same sire different dams) have now died, one at 16 y.o and the other last year at 18 y.o. leaving just Gertie who will be 19 on her next birthday. Along with us she grieved for both of them, even Wallace who was her nemesis and took delight in ambushing her at every opportunity. It is strange how she misses what was to her a hostile relationship. As far as Wally was concerned he thought chasing Gertie was the second best possible use of his time. The best being stalking and chasing the year old prickets from our fallow deer herd.

The last few months has seen a definite slowing down for Gertie who is a little wobbly on her back legs now but still enjoys our daily walks around the garden and can still make short work of a flight of stairs. She is very affectionate, needing a lot of company now 'the boys' are gone. Like all old folk it takes her a while to get going in the mornings and she's always grumpy, a bit stiff and slightly dolally. I look at her at these times and think she is failing and my heart breaks. By mid afternoon she is sunning herself in one of her favourite spots, batting bees and flies and purring away. She then might decide to climb half way up a tree and I revise my ideas and think she's going to go on for another five years.

Health wise, apart from being a bit deaf and minor arthritis, her only real problem is FARS - Feline Audiogenic Reflex Seizures. This is a responsive epilepsy rather than a spontaneous one and was only recently discovered by two veterinary specialist neurologists working at the renowned Davies hospital. They began to collate data about seizures in cats which had no apparent cause and it became clear that old, female, deaf or partially deaf cats were susceptible to FARS and way out in front of all the breeds reported were Birmans. The triggers are different for each cat - some began to have fits when the owners rumbled kitchen foil. Some had fits when the owners tapped the side of their feed bowls. Some when owners were typing on computer key pads. For Gertie it is the crumpling, rustling sound of a packet of crisps or peanuts.

Once the seizure has been triggered the usual course is a fit lasting 30 seconds to a minute, followed by circling & disorientation. With Gertie she recovers well albeit she is quite tired the following day - her muscles have, after all, almost run a marathon. Once we put two and two together and realised what was triggering these fits we

stopped making the noise and she stopped having the fits - simple as that. She hasn't had one for over a year.

FARS makes it a bit of a tall order getting her looked after if we want to go away so we have made the decision to just stay put whilst she is still with us. Not a difficult choice or one we object to given how much pleasure, affection and love this little cat has given us for all these years. We intend to care for her though old age as lovingly and compassionately as we can and do the right thing for her when it becomes obvious it's time for her to go and meet up with her brothers once more.

Yours sincerely,

Marthe Gomer.