

I'm not that keen on pets, but my mum and dad have always had them.

At the moment, they have a rabbit, and a cat called Lucky who must be at least 100 in cat years. I suppose Lucky is lucky to get to be so old. He was called "Lucky" out of irony, because dad ran him over when he was a kitten. They took him to a vet who saved his life. They tried to find out whose cat he was but nobody claimed him, so they took him home.

The rabbit, Sooty, isn't so lucky. He's lived to a ripe old age too, but he has a problem with his teeth. Rabbits' teeth are incredibly sharp. Sooty's teeth grow in a strange way, so that a spike of tooth grows too fast and starts to press into his mouth. When that happens, he stops eating. A rabbit that stops eating doesn't last long.

Whenever Sooty's teeth get too long, dad takes him to the vet. She gives Sooty a general anaesthetic and while he's unconscious, she files down his teeth so that he can eat comfortably again. He doesn't like going to the vet - at least it's hard to catch him and put him in the basket. When he wakes up from the anaesthetic, he's a bit groggy for a while. But when he gets back home, he's soon jumping around, eating well and seems quite happy.

At first, his teeth only needed to be done every six months. But it's getting worse, so that now it's every four weeks. It costs £80 a time, so if he lives another year, he'll cost £1000.

That's a lot of money. You could buy 50 new rabbits for that (though you'd have to be a bit crazy to do so). Or if you gave the money to charity, you could help a lot of humans rather than one rabbit. My dad is normally very careful with his money but he splashes out on things that are important. Sooty is important to him, though I don't think any rabbit would be to me.

I wrote that you'd have to be a bit crazy to buy 50 rabbits. I have a relative I've never met who was a bit crazy like that (and now I'm thinking that crazy isn't at all a nice word to use). He kept lots of animals in a house that didn't have much space. And I mean a lot of animals: geese, goats, a pony, dogs and a cat. He didn't do it to be cruel. People who look after more animals than they can really manage usually do it because they think the animals need them. It's as if they do love animals, but too much and it gets out of control.

I can't say I really love animals very much myself. I do think they are amazing and beautiful. I like nature documentaries. I love the New Forest, where you feel the place belongs to the wild ponies and horses and that you are just lucky to visit. I live on a boat and I love it when I see a kingfisher. I enjoy seeing the cygnets grow into swans.

So maybe I do love animals after all, or at least wildlife. But I don't love particular animals. One rabbit to me is as good as another. I couldn't love Sooty like my dad does. He loves him because he is his rabbit. Not "his" because he owns him, but "his" because he knows Sooty and he thinks Sooty knows him. Similar, maybe, to how I love my dad because he's my dad, not just because of the sort of person he is. Although I do think it's very lovable that he loves his rabbit.

This is a bit of an experiment with using a “Musing” as a stimulus rather than a dialogue or a story. It is a story of sorts, but it’s more a series of thoughts on a theme. What it has in common with anything that aspires to be a good stimulus is that it makes a variety of **offers** – invitations to further thought that are implicit or explicit in the stimulus, which the readers can choose to pick up.

I didn’t have much of a plan for the piece, I just started writing and kept going. So I was surprised by how many offers it made. But perhaps it was precisely because I didn’t have a plan that there were lots of offers to be discovered rather than one being pushed on the reader. Here are the ones I’ve seen, working through the text from top to bottom:

How can we become very different to our parents?

Is it lucky to get to be old? What would make it unlucky?

Was it my parents responsibility to look after the cat they hit in an accident? Was what they did a good thing, or just what anyone should have done?

Is it right to keep a pet alive if it needs repeated medical treatment? What’s the trade off between the distress the treatment causes and the presumed benefit of extending its life? And how is it different or similar for people?

Is it right to spend lots of money on medical treatment for animals near the ends of their lives when it could make a big difference elsewhere? Again, how about for people?

More broadly, what’s the trade off between quantity and quality of life? Can you judge the quality of an animal’s life? Or another person’s? Or your own?

What are the important things to spend your money on? What’s the difference between being careful with your money and being stingy?

Is “crazy” an OK word to use? How does using it or avoiding it change the way you think about someone who does very, very strange things?

If you never meet a relative, are they still family?

Can you have too much love – for animals, or for a person?

Is there a right amount of love to have? Or a right attitude towards money? (Aristotle’s Golden Mean comes in here).

What the difference between liking and loving? What’s the difference between liking/loving a pastime and liking/loving a person?

How is enjoying wild animals different to enjoying tame pets?

Is it better to love animals in general, or to be attached to particular pets?

How much is a pet “yours”? How much is a parent “yours”, and what makes them so?

What is or should be the bigger factor in loving someone – the relationship you have to them, or their character?