

Night & Day

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CUTE AS HELL

The pets that
drove this
man to the
brink, and
set fur flying
in the cat world



BY JONATHAN MARGOLIS

FUR AND LOATHING

Esmond Gay breeds cats that look like leopards. He sells them to the rich and famous. And he's doing very nicely, thank you. If, that is, you discount the death threats, the legal letters, the whispering campaign and the suicide attempt ...



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL MASSEY

Three weeks ago, in the middle of a humid Friday night, a 28-year-old man in a Buckinghamshire village took a shotgun from its cabinet and, sobbing, put it to his temple. It had been a long and tortured journey which brought Charles Esmond Gay to the point of wanting to blow his head off in his plush sitting-room. What he was about to do appeared crazy. He was, it seemed, a successful man. There was a brand new Lamborghini on the drive of his modern house. He was good — outstandingly good, some say — at what he did for a living. He was becoming famous for his professional skill, too, with 16 television appearances in two years, and admiring articles about him published around the world. His business brought him into contact with several famous and titled people.

Esmond Gay, the oddly florid name by which he prefers to be known, had still more persuasive reasons not to want to kill himself that evening. There was no scandal, either financial or personal, threatening; no skeleton about to clatter out of a cupboard. He was heir to a £500,000 estate and on the best of terms with his mother. His personal life was fine; he lived with a pretty and loyal younger woman, Sarah Bignell, who was at this moment gently pleading and cajoling him to put the gun down. Somehow, this time, she succeeded; but Gay's friends and family worry that he might try again. What had brought Gay to this point was, to an outsider, bizarre, almost laughable. The cause of Gay's distress was cats.

Gay is a cat breeder; his speciality is a rare and expensive new breed, the Bengal, an exotic blend between an Asian leopard and a domestic cat. *Felis bengalensis* was developed in California 13 years ago, and has existed for five years in Britain. Breeding Bengal cats is a skilled and expensive business. Every breeder needs an Asian leopard to found a new strain, and the patience and skill to encourage it to mate with an understandably reluctant domestic cat (the leopard is about double the size and weight).

The tabby cat-sized offspring are highly intelligent, demand walks on a lead, insist on sharing baths with humans and will even retrieve game. They do not come cheap; prices vary according to the cat's coat and pedigree, but they normally cost £600-£2,500. There are some 10,000 Bengals in the US, and 700 registered in Britain, but the breed is growing exceptionally, and competition between breeders is becoming ever more fierce.

Esmond Gay only came into Bengal breeding less than three years ago, but has rapidly established himself as Europe's most successful and renowned breeder. Being a latecomer to this world, and having considerable wealth and a history of mental problems were just three of his difficulties.

It should be explained from the outset of this strange, contorted story of British obsession, that, despite appearances to the contrary, Esmond Gay was in some ways a classic candidate for suicide. He had an especially rotten childhood, and as a result has for years been under the care of psychiatrists for depression. He was peculiarly ill-equipped to deal with the notoriously bitchy world of cat breeding. (It is not unknown at cat shows for competing breeders to

physically attack one another's prize cats — a favourite sabotage being vandalising a cat's prize white fur with dye.)

What he lacked in temperament he more than made up for in talent, love and boundless enthusiasm, but these qualities were not sufficient to earn him acceptance by his fellow breeders. For he committed the cardinal sin of bringing money, and stacks of it, into a society fiercely proud of its amateur status. For this apparent contravention of the gentleman ethic, Gay has become a hated player in the Bengal cat world, loathed, gossiped-about, the subject of countless solicitors' letters, hysterical meetings of Bengal cat clubs (to which the police have twice been called), schisms, plots, allegations of corruption and sharp practice, anonymous letters to the Inland Revenue alleging secret bank accounts in Switzerland, death threats, the suspicious death of Gay's dog, the installation by Gay of 15 security cameras around his semi-detached house, and, ultimately, Gay's attempt on his own life.

Let me appear entirely the defenceless victim of a malicious hate campaign, let me explain that, by his own admission not the most balanced of men, Gay has pitched into the fray with gusto. He may have been driven to the edge by the furore raging around him, but he has often been his enemies' equal in the dishing out of venomous letters and faxes, and has contributed his fair share to the general politics and paranoia currently suffusing the Bengal cat world.

There are dozens of allegations, some more plausible than others, against Gay from people who readily admit to detesting him. His opponents say that he has little idea of how to breed cats. His kittens, they say, are diseased and his prices are too high. He is, they claim, a demonic character, a troublemaker who is single-handedly destroying the Bengal breed.

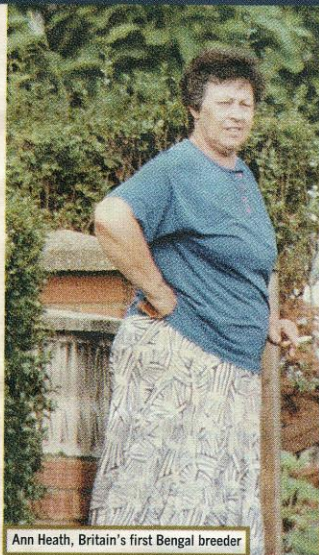
Gay's supporters admit that he can be tiresome, but they like him. He is, they say, eccentric, a brilliant, meticulous breeder; his cats are among the finest in the world, his prices are too low, and his skill way up there with St Francis. He is an angel, and has single-handedly established the Bengal breed in this country. There seems to be no middle ground between the camps.

Let me explain how Esmond Gay got into this mess — or started it, as his detractors say — and how, inadvertently, I lit the fuse which turned a simple hobby into a battleground. Two years ago, I was looking in *Loot*, the small ads magazine, for a kitten for my children. Under the advertisement for the street moggy we eventually bought, was one for a far more rarefied beast. It offered a new breed of 'miniature leopard' with the looks of a wild cat and the size and temperament of a domestic pet. As a freelance writer, I wondered if there was a little story to be done on these kittens.

I phoned the number in the ad. The well-spoken, excited young man who answered was delighted to talk about his Bengal cats, and keen for me to see them. He had more than 50 living in his house with him, he said. They sold for between £1,000 and £2,500 per kitten. They really did look like little leopards, were entirely safe as pets, and — most importantly for me — had never been written about in Britain outside of the specialist cat magazines.

Esmond Gay was as appealing in person as he was on the phone. A slightly camp young man, his passion for the cats was infectious. He had only been breeding for ▶

THE OPPONENTS: GAY IS A DEMON, A TROUBLEMAKER WHO HAS DESTROYED THE BREED



Ann Heath, Britain's first Bengal breeder



Geoff Ward, ex-chairman of the Bengal Cat Club of Great Britain, with Betty



Irene French, a dissatisfied customer

GEORGE JAWORSKI/GARY MOYCE/BOURNEMOUTH NEWS

► a few months, and had yet to sell more than a handful of kittens, but they were spectacularly beautiful, as were the luxurious conditions in which he and Sarah housed them. It was plain that Esmond Gay loved his cats, was knowledgeable about them, and that he also had the wherewithal to indulge his fascination. He had spent £45,000 on the original kittens he bred from, and a further £20,000 on custom-built exercise equipment from the United States. The exquisite cats roamed around the externally modest house under crystal chandeliers, and preened themselves while perched atop a rack of vintage champagne.

I liked his insistence on vetting prospective buyers to ensure Bengals were only looked after by suitably caring owners. He was very open, explaining that he had become interested in the cats following a severe breakdown, and breeding them had been his form of therapy. To be honest, I didn't imagine I had made a friend for life in Esmond Gay, or that my acquaintance with him would be anything more than a passing one, but the story worked out very well.

He put me in touch with the originator of the Bengal, a Los Angeles breeder, Jean Mill, who told me how it had become the cat of choice among Hollywood stars. I subsequently wrote about Gay and his cats for the Daily Mail.

During the coming months, the still ebullient Gay would phone and write to me about the success he was enjoying as a result of the original Mail piece. Rolf Harris had brought a film crew to the house, at Piddington, near High Wycombe, and bought a kitten. Esther Rantzen had interviewed him on her show and admired the cats. The pop star Mica Paris had been down to buy one. Sir Martin Nourse, a Lord Justice of Appeal, had become a customer, Jeffrey and Mary Archer had bought two, the Sultan of Brunei four, and there were several celebrity customers who preferred not to go public.

Then, last summer, the trouble started. Gay was having difficulty persuading his local council to grant him a licence to keep one particular stud cat, which was technically a wild animal. (Bengals are several generations removed from wild leopard cats, and to succeed at the process of producing a Bengal, a breeder has to keep a wild cat in his team.) And Gay had started to come up against opposition from other breeders, and from neighbours in his village. They said he was keeping his cats in poor conditions, and

Gay asked if I would write a letter to the council supporting him. Although I could not judge how good a breeder Gay was, it was clear to me that his cats were superbly looked after, and I wrote as he requested. The licence was granted.

What Gay was not yet revealing was the extent of the opposition to him in the Bengal world. Last autumn, his calls became more frequent and frenzied. I have to confess that it all sounded a little ridiculous as he told it. When he is stressed, Gay has a rather ingratiating manner and unbelievable persistence. He would leave up to 10 messages a day on my answerphone. He'd describe meetings of the Bengal Cat Club of Great Britain at which the police had been called to keep order. He'd tell of factions within the Bengal world that were staging walk-outs, coups, power struggles. There were absurd, kaleidoscopic rifts and re-groupings. Gay left the club and formed a rival called the Friendly Bengal Cat Club, to stress the difference from his opponents.

Gay told me nightly of anonymous calls urging him to kill himself, of death threats and densely typed faxes, feet long, going this way and that, of solicitors' letters and poisonous notes. Rival breeders hated him, he said; his neighbours hated him. He would read over segments of the poison pen letters as the temperature of the vendetta rose: 'It is a shame to all of us that you did not kill yourself in the mental hospital,' wrote one rival breeder. He was distraught when a rumour swept the Bengal world that the cats Lord and Lady Archer bought had died (they had not yet been delivered) and that Rolf Harris's Bengal had also dropped dead from disease (it hadn't; I checked).

Last month, the day after Gay took delivery of his Lamborghini Countach, he found his beloved bulldog, Sampson, dead. He believed it had been poisoned, and called the RSPCA. One of his neighbours in the modest close, where A-reg Fiestas are more common than Lamborghinis, had also called the RSPCA. Convinced that Gay had maltreated the dog, the neighbour had videoed the animal's death throes in the garden at 4am. The RSPCA's post-mortem was inconclusive; they could find no evidence of poisoning, but said that some poisons escape forensic detection. Gay put the gun to his head two days later.

I have reported on several rumpuses within hobbies such as radio hamming and leek growing, but the civil war in the Bengal

cat world surpassed anything I had seen. I wondered if Gay truly was a persecuted innocent, or the self-pitying publicity hound as depicted by his critics.

I decided to investigate further. Perhaps I was wrong for thinking Esmond Gay was a decent soul. I resolved not to get bogged down in technicalities; the question of who knows how to breed Bengals and who does not would drive the world's dullest person insane. How much they know about cats, I wouldn't like to say, but Bengal breeders all seem to be experts on Esmond Gay.

First stop was Gay's solicitor, Bridget Wheeler, a corporate litigator at a big City firm, who had bought a kitten from him and taken to the man. Cool and measured, she is not one to take on a lame duck case or write a heavy warning letter (as she has now done to seven of Gay's opponents) without just cause. She told me that initially she had suspected much of what he said was a fantasy, but had now satisfied herself it was not. She believed Gay had antagonised other breeders by selling cats too cheaply. His pricing policy is indeed a little unsteady. Some of his cats sell at the top end of the scale, around £2,500, making them the most expensive in Britain. Others go for as little as £300, making them the cheapest. And if Gay likes a buyer but they aren't well-off, he often gives them kittens that other breeders would sell for hundreds of pounds.

Next I called the Hon Miranda Rothschild, a member of the banking family and the owner of two Esmond Gay Bengals. Her brother, Amschel, recently committed suicide, and she made it her business to help talk Gay out of doing the same. She had told him that he was 'a very, very good breeder, and an important breeder', and that it would be an act of selfishness against his kittens to kill himself. 'He has a mission. He's in it out of a passionate love for animals. He's a romantic... passionate, studious, gentle and persecuted,' she told me.

I unearthed more witnesses for the case for the defence. Call Mary Cuckson, of Borehamwood in Hampshire, manager of a day centre for autistic children: 'Esmond always puts his cats before anyone else as far as I can see. I like him. I think cat people are very much nastier than dog people, with

more back-biting, more secretiveness. They phone round a lot and get together in cliques to say nasty things about one another.'

Call Dr Terry Moore, of the Cat Survival Trust, a charity that rescues endangered big cats: 'You have a chap here who is genuine in what he is doing, he believes in what he is doing and does it very well. He will spend whatever is necessary to achieve what he wants to do. Unfortunately, you have a number of people in the domestic cat world who are jealous. I am sure a lot of the antagonism is jealousy and nothing but. He has been exceedingly successful with his breeding of Bengal cats and a lot of others have failed. There can be absolutely no dispute that he looks after his animals and is very careful with breeding.'

Call Catherine McElroy, Leicester hospital doctor: 'I think Esmond is one of the nicest people I have ever met and certainly one of the nicest cat breeders. Anyone who has got a kitten from him is of the same opinion. I think he has been put under an awful lot of pressure and unfair stress by other cat breeders who are obviously jealous of the quality of his kittens, which are the best in the country. He is being hounded.'

But by whom, I wondered? It was not hard to find witnesses for the prosecution, but few were willing to put their names to their accusations. A 'breeder in the East Midlands' described Gay as ignorant, arrogant, unintelligent, irresponsible, and motivated purely by money. 'I have never seen a breed that has attracted so many of the wrong sort of people,' she sniffed. 'I see standards in society dropping drastically, and that also applies to cat breeders.'

A 'breeder in London' was on the phone next. 'I'll tell you what Esmond's problem is,' he promised. 'He doesn't have a job. He sits on his arse all day phoning people. If he's not spoken to someone for an hour, he thinks they're talking about him and starts stirring things up. This is a hobby, but he's treating it as a status symbol. "I've sold a cat to Rolf Harris, and he's my friend." Big bloody deal.'

Not all of Gay's detractors hide behind anonymity. One of them

is Irene French, a Dorset sculptress and a dissatisfied customer of Gay's who claims a cat he sold her for £1,000 died after seven weeks ►



THE SUPPORTERS: GAY MAY BE TIRESOME AND ECCENTRIC, BUT HE'S A BRILLIANT BREEDER



With Mary and Jeffrey Archer



With Sarah Bignell and Esther Rantzen



Rolf Harris at Esmond Gay's home

► from the disease FIP (Feline Infectious Peritonitis). 'I find the man absolutely repulsive,' she told me. 'He's dangerous, a pathological liar. Unless you can prove what you say, he turns the tables on you and makes you look a fool, a liar or both. It's scary... I've got a bag here with five folders each measuring about four inches high of papers from or regarding Esmond. You're welcome to go through it.' Gay claims that he offered her immediate compensation for the dead kitten. She denies having been made any such offer, but 24 hours later she seemed unsure if she had spoken to me at all.

The next anti-Gay figure I contacted was Geoff Ward, a retired senior BT executive in Cambridge, a former chairman of the Bengal Cat Club of Great Britain and one of the last surviving members of the wartime Enigma code-breaking team. 'Esmond is obviously a psychiatric case,' he said, before whirling off into a tangled tale of fraternal friction in the Bengal world, of improper procedures, walk-outs, evidence, quorums, rival newsletters, packs of lies, troublemakers, fall-outs and intrigue.

What especially angered Mr Ward was a meeting of the Bengal Cat Club held in Welwyn Garden City last year. Gay, deciding that enough was enough, had called for an extraordinary general meeting, and had asked one of his customers, Lady Nourse, to chair it as she is the wife of a prominent judge. By all accounts the meeting, where Gay's Friendly Bengal Cat Club was born out of the ruins of the Bengal Cat Club of Great Britain, was an explosive one.

For a start, Lady Nourse arrived with her dog. Very bad form, evidently. 'We all considered her, for want of a better word, a "washerwoman",' recalls Mr Ward. The feeling was mutual. 'People were so angry at that meeting,' says Lady Nourse, 'yet as I kept reminding them, we were only here because of cats. It was a massive squabble. They seemed to be there for a power struggle rather than for the benefit of the wretched cats. I have to say, they were really nasty people, indescribably awful. They were exceedingly rude, not only to me, but

to Esmond and all the other people. Unpleasant, vicious, aggressive.'

Dianna Noble, a Bradford Bengal owner who was at this meeting, recalls: 'It was very, very ugly. They were shouting and carrying on at this wife of a High Court judge and wouldn't let her speak. I couldn't believe it. At the end of the day, the majority of us love cats. We want to talk about our cats, we want to swap stories and photographs. We want to be with cat people. I am not interested in who is the chairman of the club and who isn't. I couldn't give a bugger, as long as the situation is for the betterment of the cat world and the cat breed.'

After Gay formed his Friendly Cat Club, the rump of the remaining Bengal club held a meeting at Geoff Ward's home. 'Prior to this,' says Ward, 'I had a call in a disguised voice, the most abusive call I've ever had in my life. The voice said I would be killed by bully boys at the meeting. The threat was so serious that I reported it to the police. A second threat came just before the meeting saying I would be killed within a month. I know exactly who the calls came from, and I heard a voice I knew in the background saying, "Put the phone down," but I'm not prepared to say who.'

The time had come to visit one of Gay's most vociferous opponents, a breeder called Ann Heath. Mrs Heath, a committee member of the Bengal Cat Club of Great Britain, wrote me a pungent note a year ago saying that I didn't know the half about Esmond Gay. Sorry to be a bit late replying, I said, but could I come to see her? 'Is this one of those funny phone calls?' she asked. I told her that indeed it wasn't. She eventually agreed to see me, though she suspected then, and suspects now, that I am in fact a private investigator hired by Gay.

I was given the address of a semi-detached property on an estate in Biggleswade. There I was met by a man who would only identify himself as 'Tony'. He refused to say who he was, or what he did, only that he 'helped people' and 'investigated rip-offs like Esmond Gay'. Tony, who maintained a mysterious air throughout but did reveal he

was a local Conservative worthy, explained how he had (unsuccessfully) tried to warn the Archers about buying their cats from Gay. He said he bred long-haired cats, and had no time for Bengals, which he regarded as glorified tabbies, 'moggies for woolly old ladies' as he called them sotto voce, while Mrs Heath was making the tea.

Tony said Gay's cats were genetically faulty and sick. Several cats had died or become ill, he said, although he could only give me the name of one owner whose cat had died: the sculptress Irene French. Tony was not surprised that Gay had become a figure of resentment. 'You get it the same in the rabbit breeding fraternity, the budgerigar breeding fraternity, the kite-flying fraternity — jealousy. No matter what it is, it's the people who cause the trouble. I'm involved in golf clubs and you get the same there.'

People at the fateful Welwyn meeting recall a man answering Tony's description shouting out that Lady Nourse was 'an old hag with a dog'. He admits at least to having been there. Employing his political clout, he wrote a letter to the Lord Chancellor, Lord Mackay, asking him to give Lord Nourse a warning about Lady Nourse's Bengal cat activism. Tony confesses he has received no reply as yet.

Mrs Heath, a geriatric nurse, came in with the tea. She had made a study of Esmond Gay. She seemed to know a lot about him and about his psychiatric past. 'I make it my business to find things out,' she said. 'I've been doing it a long while with animal rights, so I know quite a lot of ways of getting information.' She had never been to Gay's house — 'not when he was in, anyway' — but disapproved of what she had heard of his breeding methods.

Mrs Heath was the first Bengal breeder in Britain, and had some press coverage at the time. Was her anger at Gay merely the

ozone whiff of stolen thunder? She resolutely denied this. 'I've had my day,' she said. 'I won't tell you who I've had in my house, for Burmese, not for Bengals, but it's royalty.' Was Mrs Heath actually a lover of Bengals? 'Not particularly, no. I prefer Burmese.'

By now I was pretty sure that in this mad spat over cats, Gay was more sinned against than sinning. Yet, not quite sure. The end of interviews, when the tape recorder is off, often gives rise to the most revealing comments. As I left Mrs Heath's house, she smiled and said almost conspiratorially: 'You don't want to worry about Esmond committing suicide. If he does, don't have a guilty conscience.'

Back in the previously quiet village of Piddington, Esmond Gay is a man under siege, from supporters and opponents, both real and (perhaps) imagined. The Bengal business is booming. Mohammed al Fayed has just ordered a couple. Arrangements are being made for the Sultan of Brunei to pick up his four kittens; the police say the whole of Esmond's close will have to be closed off for security if the Sultan comes himself. Discussions continue, as does the media circus. After a Daily Telegraph piece a fortnight ago, on Bengals being the latest fashionable pet, Gay's phone was once again rung off its brackets by radio and TV programmes.

The shotgun is safely back in its cabinet, but security cameras — 15 of them, put in at a cost of £15,000 — are now ranged around the Gay house, in the bushes, in the flowerbeds, in wait for a return of the mysterious 'dog poisoner'. Gay believes Sampson ate something that was destined for either his Asian leopard, or for the £12,500 ocotil he has just bought and is living in splendour in a specially built conservatory, complete with brass carriage lights.

The RSPCA says the case of the allegedly murdered dog, complete with the neighbour's video of the poor thing dying, and the whole affair's background of Machiavellian cat politics is one of the oddest they have investigated.

I think I can see their point. ■

