

To all our cats who gave and still give us their unquestioning affection.
And to Myrtle, Michael and Eric without whom there would have been no human or cat family to write about!

THE NAMING OF CATS

CHAPTER 1

Richard was our first cat. Like all our cats, his name was chosen only after giving it a lot of thought. We have never just *happened* on a cats name.

So, to understand how he became 'Richard', I will have to go back even before he came into our lives. By the way, when I say "we", I mean myself, Tony, and my wife, Myrtle. In both of our families we had always been used to having a cat around - it was a natural part of life. So of course, when we got married we automatically arranged to have a cat of our own, although I surprised Myrtle by getting our own little kitten before she had expected it.

I can't really remember the cat that my mother had (my father was away a lot, so didn't get consulted!) but I think it was the second since I was born and they were both called Dickie. Myrtle had actually been given a cat of her very own when she was about ten years old, and he was called Dinkie. We could have used a similar sounding name for our own kitten, but we liked the idea of at last having a cat with a real, human type name. I suppose we were influenced by "Dickie" and "Dinkie" so Richard was the natural follow up!

Back to the beginning again. When we got married, Myrtle was twenty and I was nineteen. We had first met about eighteen months earlier and had only missed seeing each other every day since then for one day over the Easter holidays while I was at Scout camp. Even then, Myrtle came out to Oxford by train so that we could have our own time together for the day. That was only a few weeks after we first met. By the next Easter, we were engaged and had our wedding that August.

It is very strange from today's perspective, to look back more than forty years and to remember that a week before the wedding I took just one day off work to arrange for somewhere to live. Then, all we had to do was to look in the local paper (you had to buy it then and it really had news in it) for flat adverts, pick a few to look at, and then choose one. I picked three that seemed promising and that were just a few streets away and chose the second one I looked at. The house had been converted to let off separate rooms on two floors with the owners still living on the ground floor and its number was 13. Coincidentally, Myrtle's parents house was also a number 13 and my parents house was twice thirteen - number 26, so it seemed a good omen. The same evening, we both had a look at the room and confirmed that we would take it. That, then, was the full extent of our flat hunting! Out came the wedding present list, and we added the few extra things that we knew the furnished room did not have, and I made my own secret list that contained just one item - a kitten.

It so happened that in the local grocers shop where my mother worked part time, the shop cat was in kitten and had given birth just a few days before. I chose the jet black one from the four that the mother cat proudly showed me and arranged to collect him as soon as he would be old enough to leave his mother, after our honeymoon. I managed to keep it a secret from Myrtle, but I think that I asked our new landlord before we moved in, at least I hope I did.

So now I had a new wife and we had a room of our own. Richard was by then only three or four weeks old, but the grocer didn't want the mother cat looking after her kittens for too long, so within only a couple of weeks after setting up our new home, we collected our first cat

Although he was so young, he turned out to be a very forward little kitten and was very easy to finish weaning. As our room was already furnished and decorated, we did not need to spend much time on it, so we could give Richard all our attention.

Together with Richard, Mr. Reader the grocer, also gave us a kitten sized cardboard box for his very own bed. We found a small piece of blanket and arranged torn up newspaper in a tin for a cat tray and at the end of our first evening all together, two happy people and a full kitten retired to our two separate beds.

That arrangement lasted about half an hour, just the time it took for Richard to get lonely, discover where we had got to and then work out how to climb up the bedclothes to us. We woke up, scolded him gently and settled him back in his own bed. Carefully arranged the bedding to be even more comfortable and cosy and we all went back to bed. Richard found his way back to us within a couple of minutes and that was the last time he ever used his 'own' bed. From then on, we all three always shared the same bed and if the night was cold enough, we were all under the blankets together!

That room of ours saw many happy hours with our very own kitten. I can recall many mental pictures. But of course, I must set the scene for you. Richard first. He was all over black -not one white hair anywhere, but he had one pure white whisker. We always told him that his blackness was the cause of some of his devilment and it got worse whenever the white whisker was shed and lasted until the next one started to show. To explain the first picture, I must describe the room. It is not very big, about fifteen feet square and on the first floor with one big sash window overlooking the front garden. This window is covered by old-fashioned net curtains as well as thick inner ones. A couch type double bed is in one corner next to the window and a large polished wood wardrobe in the corner on the other side of the window. Next to the wardrobe, in another corner, is the door to the room from the first floor landing. Between that door and the last corner of the room, is a sink, with a drainer and a double gas ring. The toilets and bathrooms in the house were communal and off the landings for all six rooms on the first and second floors. The furniture in our room was mainly a dining table with extending flaps, a couple of dining chairs and a couple of armchairs.

Richard had to spend his whole time in the room - after all, by the time that autumn had ended, he was still only three months old and with no direct access to any

garden, he had no chance to try it out. So all his family, his bed, his food, his toys were all in that one room. His only view of the outside world was from the wide window ledge and he spent a lot of time there, watching what, I now see with hindsight, must have been a giant mystery to that little kitten. We were both out at work all day, so after breakfast and his first doze of the day, we reckoned that he probably settled on to that ledge for the rest of the day. Certainly, we know he spent a lot of time there and made sure that he could see out, as every day when we came home, the net curtains would have been twisted round and round by him and pulled away to both sides of the window. He must have developed a good sense of timing, as every day when I arrived home, I would see him sitting watching. As I only worked three miles away I took about twenty minutes to cycle home, whereas Myrtle worked in the centre of London as a dress pattern designer and had to take the tube. It was as crowded then as it is now and so she always got back about three quarters of an hour later than me, so Richard and I had to get tea ready. Richard was an extremely smart kitten. He soon worked out that if he had to look after the room all day, then we had to feed him as soon as we arrived home as well as regularly thereafter. We also had to entertain him with all the games he invented. Obviously, he considered that we were just larger versions of cats and could therefore play with teeth and claws as well as he could. In consequence, our games were mostly played with me wearing my leather cycling gloves! He did not mean to be rough though, but merely made the best use of his natural equipment. He did however, get spitting mad if he thought that I was too rough with him, hence the gloves!

One favourite game was to chase a toy gyroscope that I would balance on a sloping string stretched from the wardrobe door handle so that it would run down just out of reach at the start of its journey. As he got bigger and jumped higher, so the string had to go higher!

Another game also involved the wardrobe. Over the previous year or so, we had got interested in photography, beyond just takings snaps and getting the results processed by the local shop. So we had bought a film developing kit and the inside of the wardrobe, with Myrtle holding the door firmly shut, was an ideal place to load the film into the tank. Richard, of course, thought that such games were invented just for him and endeavoured to get in with me.

With food, he naturally considered that anything to do with eating that went on in that room, also involved him. He soon developed a method of sitting on my lap at table in such a way that his back legs were on my lap and his front paws tidily resting on the table edge. In this way, without fuss, his mouth was nicely positioned to accept tit-bits from fork or fingers. As he was so sure of himself, he never felt it necessary to grab and, indeed, if he was offered two pieces at once, he always took the smallest, cat-sized piece!

When Spring came the following year, Richard was by then seven months old and we considered that he was old enough to be introduced to the great outside for real. We had, from time to time, taken him visiting when we went to see either of our parents who both lived within a mile of us, and he had got used to going out in his basket, so we looked forward to him being able to go into the garden with us. How

wrong we were! The first sight of the great outdoors and the touch of grass on his paws sent him straight for cover, which turned out to be vertically up my trousers and sweater to sit swearing on the top of my head. The second try got the same result but by the time we made a third attempt, he had spotted the house door and made a bee-line for that. He went so fast that he couldn't properly see where he was going, so hit his head on the bottom edge of the open door. That resulted in a cut on the top of his head that left a scar buried in the fur that he carried for the rest of his life.

We left our room for a ground floor flat later that second year and the only other time that Richard went outside that room before we moved, was during the Summer when basking on the window ledge, he stretched just that bit too much, and disappeared over the edge to land, unhurt, in a shrub directly below! We got to him before he had really worked out what had happened, so no harm was done.

When we did move, after about fifteen months in the room, Richard was a very handsome, neutered of course (at the PDSA), sleek black cat of the same age. After we had left, our landlord who up to then had quite admired Richard, discovered that Richard did not have quite the good litter tray behaviour that we thought he had. A patch of carpet under our bed was found to be rather soggy and his opinion of Richard and us took a nose-dive.

[Link to Chapter 2](#)

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