

CHAPTER 11

The Bedford van eventually worked very well with our old caravan and then with the brand new one. I had got it into quite good condition and even changed the drivers seat for a very comfortable Alfa Romeo bucket seat. Cutting out the rusty bits and replacing them with good steel and aluminium made it pass the MOT test with ease each year. We were so happy with the new caravanning part of our lives, cats included of course, that we extended it by joining the Caravan Club and going to rallies after we had bought the new caravan. On those rallies we came across, for the first time, Land Rovers being used as private cars and saw that they worked very well for caravanning. So, when the Bedford's gearbox started to wear out, we looked around to see if we could perhaps get a cheap Land Rover instead of spending that sort of money on extensive repairs to the Bedford. In the end, we found a family who needed another Bedford for spares to rebuild the one they already had, and a Land Rover repairer near Guildford who could supply us for a good price. We had rather a surprise when we went there as he seemed to have not so many to sell as we had thought. However, he showed us a chassis here, wheels there and an engine somewhere else and said that he could rebuild us one in about a week for £ 95 - the same price as was our motorcycle combination! We were happy with that and went to collect it about a week later. It was a 1955 short wheel base with a canvas hood and bench seats in the back for the boys. It was of course very strong and towed the caravan with ease. Rosemary, a friend at the TRC, sold special paint for colouring shoes, so we got a lot of small sample pots from her in a very tasteful shade of maroon and painted the hood with that. The bodywork was enamelled in the same colour and we made quite an impression at the next Caravan Club rally!

Of course Cleo and Koshka came with us and they started off with the boys in the back, but soon decided that that was not the way to see the country. After some loud complaints, we moved them around and they ended up where they wanted to be. Cleo got comfortable on Myrtle's lap (I was otherwise occupied!) and Koshka settled between us on the little jump seat. That was while we were moving! Every time we slowed or stopped for traffic or traffic lights, Cleo woke up and complained - she wanted to travel at 30 miles per hour minimum! Koshka would then sit up and look to see what she was on about! After that first journey, they settled into a steady routine that went something like this:

Preparation they were of course already dressed in their everyday collars and the most important medallions. (Cleo managed to make her collars last about three times as long as anyone elses.) After they had helped to get the caravan loaded and checked out, then it was time for their travelling harnesses. Many years ago we had discovered that it was possible to find, if you looked hard enough, properly designed cat harnesses. We also managed to find different sizes so Cleo could have the next size up from a kittens one and Koshka had the biggest size. Together with little leather leads, we could then constrain them if necessary while travelling. We also wanted them to be held, if the worst should happen, and we were involved in a road accident. Something that few people think about, is what might happen to a cat after a crash, as a cat would very likely run off and could even be run over if not held back by something as simple as a lead and harness.

Travelling Myrtle had to settle herself with Michaels old baby shawl on her lap so that Cleo could be comfortable. A small knitted blanket was Koshkas travelling comfort on the american-cloth jump seat. Neither, of course, could settle down until we were *properly* underway. As we had to go slowly down the drive and then turn into our road downhill, then turn and turn again almost immediately, the first couple of hundred yards had to be taken slowly. We were then, whichever way we went, having to go quite steeply uphill as there was no way out of our part of Finchley that did not involve going up. So it was not until nearly a quarter of a mile that we were going fast enough for Cleo to settle down, so her pretty little "miaow" was in use until she was satisfied with the speed of progress. Koshka, however, found an even better way of checking on progress - our first and second Land Rovers both had the original ventilation system which consists of a metal hinged flap that opens up and forward underneath the windscreen. Koshka discovered that his legs were long enough that he could stand on his seat and put his front paws on the shelf under the flap so his nose could poke out into the incoming air. In this attitude, at slow speeds, he could look out without any glass in the way and see, hear and smell exactly where and how we were going. The only snag was the wind - at about the time that Cleo was satisfied with the speed, Koshkas ears were flattened to his head and his eyes had to close against the wind. Thus anyone looking as we went by, were treated to the sight of the nose of a goofy seal point head poking out through the flap, eyes closed and ears flat! At that point, he settled all four paws back to the seat and announced himself satisfied. We could then close the flap to make ourselves more comfortable and proceed without any more fuss, except of course from little Speedy Gonzales, whenever the speed dropped too low for her.

Arrival at the caravan site was a little doubtful as neither of them knew exactly when we would arrive. So they had to get up and have a look around if we started to go slow for more than a few seconds. If it looked hopeful, then they would both come wide awake and look for someone to greet. (If it was the end of the journey home, then that was different. Somehow, at the same spot in the last but one road, they would know they were almost home and, to a cat, would stand up to look out of the windows and watch for home. We tried all we could think of to avoid a reaction of ours getting through to them, but no matter, they always knew when they were almost home.)

On the site as soon as we had stopped and lined up the caravan ready to uncouple and lower the legs, then they knew that they would be let out to have a look around at the new spot. The first thing we had to do was to get out their twenty foot long nylon cord leads and stake the ends by the caravan door. The other ends had a proper clip for the harness and they could then be allowed to walk around and check the lie of the ground and for any possible admirers. If there was a hedge near enough, then they would both settle down by it where they could look for possible wild life to inspect. In later years, we took other cats in our caravans, but no others took to the life so well as Cleo and Koshka.

Thus entered another fairly settled phase in all our lives. The winter that Koshka came to live, Michael was eleven years old and Susie was one year older. Nooky was just over four years old and her kittens, Chalky and Sara, just over three years as was

Sheba, our last remaining dog. The following spring marked Eric's ninth birthday. It was to be six years before our family changed again.

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