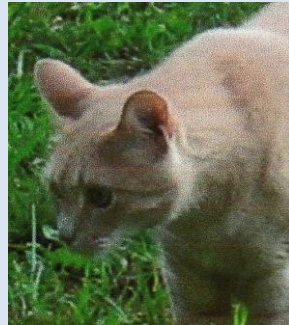


## I know where I'm going



Claude may seem an unusual name for a cat. When first adopted by the Lewis household he was called *Rustler*. That was on account of his being all creamy-white except for his brown front legs which the youngest member of the family thought looked like cowboy leggings. Later the same family member also noticed the scar down the left side of the cat's nose. *Look he said Rustler's been clawed.* So, with only a little change of spelling *Rustler* became *Claude*. The name suited his somewhat haughty nature.

Claude had a problem with names. Cats have difficulty with guttural sounds. The beagle next door would not disclose his pet name - perhaps it was somewhat effeminate and he felt embarrassed about it - and so Claude just called him *Bee*.

*You're putting on weight!* Claude observed from his wall-top perch. He had been lying there in the sun on a soft cushion of dried moss for some time this morning. He kept trying to catch *Bee*'s attention with wide sweeps of his creamy tail. *Bee* had certainly become heavier and slower lately. This morning he lay in the shade of a walnut tree, a seeming dream-contented grin across his face, purposely ignoring the tail on the wall.

*You don't get enough exercise,* Claude continued to taunt.

*That's not my fault. Two short walks a day and a quick run round the garden's no exercise for a beagle. We beagles are runners and chasers but I never get a chance.*

*I noticed you're a good chaser,* said Claude, *that day you got out and chased a car up the road. I don't know what you thought you were going to do with it when you caught it, but you did go fast. Your tail had a job keeping up with the rest of you!* *Bee* stood up, proud of the cat's praise, shook himself free of red sand dust, stretched and ran to the high gate just to prove he could still run.

He stayed, panting at the gate. There he could see Claude more clearly above him. *You been away?* he asked.

*Just a little travelling,* Claude responded. *I had a couple of days down at the beach and on the quay with some friends. The fishermen are good to us there. There's plenty of fish scraps. I took another day coming back over the fields. I love exploring mouse holes and rabbit tracks and climbing up to birds' nests. It's what we cats do. Most of us go travelling at least a couple of times a year. I wish I was free to travel,* Bee whined wistfully. *I'd love to see other places. But you wouldn't see them!* Claude interrupted, *You rush around so fast you never have time to see anything.*

Bee ignored his uninvited visitor's comment. *It's so boring here. We do the same walks every day, meet the same people same dogs, smell the same smells ...I could do with some travelling.*

*I've been to lots of places before I came here.* Claude was in boasting mode now. *I'd love to go on a really long journey. When I was down by the sea I thought I'd love to go to the other side of it ... I wonder what's there? Is there another side?* Bee had obviously never considered that. *But you hate water.*

*It won't be water on the other side will it!*

His disdainful tone was not lost on Bee who rapidly responded, *You have to go through water to get there. I've watched you when it's raining. You don't even like to get your feet wet on the lawn. I love getting wet and chasing through muddy, rain-soaked fields.*

*Huh! When? That must have been a long time ago!*

There was a pause in their conversation at that and Bee settled himself down in the shade again. Not for long though. The postman arrived - the signal for loud barking.

*Why do you have to bark so loud? The man could hear you a mile away!*

*It's only a friendly greeting,* argued Bee. *I always do my happy tail-wag at the same time.*

*I'm thinking,* Claude stood up on the wall top and yawned. *I'm going to travel again,* he said slowly. *I feel like going right now while the sun's shining. Why don't you come with me Bee? I'll show you the fish market and you could have a swim in the sea!* His fur rippled with horror at the thought of it.

*But I can't get out on my own. I have to be on a lead or I'll want to chase everything which moves, and then I'll get lost. Anyway, how do I get out? Do you think I'm going to jump the wall or climb this tree?*

*No.* said Claude. *It was a definite 'no'. Firstly, you won't be lost because you've got your address tied to your collar, and then if you come with me you*

*won't because we cats always know the way home. We don't even have to think about it. Then secondly. You may not have noticed that the postman was in such a hurry to get away from you he didn't latch the gate.*

So it was that early that sunny afternoon a somewhat overweight beagle and a creamy white cat with leather coloured forelegs were found together exploring the quay with little interest in boats or people and one of them chasing waves along the beach. Exciting food smells wafting from a bin outside the brightly painted quayside cafe reminded Bee that he was hungry. As his hunger increased so did his strength to push the bin over. He grabbed a partly eaten chicken leg.

Angry shouts prevented further consumption of mysterious delicacies. Bee fled to hide behind a stack of lobster baskets - with his chicken leg - while Claude disappeared along an alley by the shop, pursued by an arm-waving shop assistant. Unfortunately the alley was blocked by a fish delivery van with its doors wide open. There was no retreat and no other way forward but into the van - and into that heavenly fish aroma. The cafe assistant did not see where Claude had gone.

*Cats!* she exclaimed to the fish delivery man as he closed the doors of his van.

The journey was short but bumpy and noisy for a very frightened cat. As soon as the fish van stopped and its doors were opened Claude was out like a cork from a shaken pop bottle. He raced through avenues of market stalls, only pausing for breath when safely away from the van. The meat stall would normally have been alluring to him but just now fear and a fullness of fish dulled the inclination. The stall next door was more interesting. It was festooned with colourful ribbons, some with tinkling bells.

*Hello where have you come from?* A large lady sitting behind her stall scooped up Claude before he could resist. In her lap she stroked him gently. Claude could endure that just long enough to slow his heart rate. Distracted by the tinkling ribbons he reached out to them with both paws. The whole rack of them collapsed - and he was on the run again.

*Stop! Wait!* A familiar whining bark made Claude skid to a halt just in front of a small crowd of people. A breathless Bee caught up with him.

*Where did you come from?*

*From the quay, panted Bee. I followed the van. It was a great race! The van won but I kept up and after that I followed your fishy smell. You're quite strong you know!*

Claude was not impressed with such personal remarks but before he could think of a suitable retort the attention of them both was drawn to the crowd. An elderly woman was being helped into a wheelchair to be loaded into a waiting ambulance. Bee, ever curious, went forward to sniff things out and a policeman suddenly appeared.

*Whose dog is this? Get it out of the way.* The police officer put out his hand to grab Bee's collar. Bee discovered his speed again. Although Claude was not noticed, retreat for one meant escape for all. He raced forward in the only direction possible and undetected shot into the waiting ambulance. Cowering under a bed he heard the wheelchair being loaded, doors closing and then felt the rocking movement of the ambulance moving off.

At the hospital Claude waited till the ambulance crew wheeled the injured woman away then cautiously crept out again into the sunlight. The hospital was new territory. An intriguing place. Good smells drew Claude in the direction of the kitchens. He found himself in a paradise of miracles. A large square dish of food scraps lay outside a closed door. However the scraps posed a problem. Attached to them was a huge black cat who looked as though she had feasted on hospital scraps all her life. There was no friendly greeting. She looked round and with a single hiss and growl made it very clear that the dish was her property and there were no hospital rules about sharing. Claude backed away but returned ten minutes later to find the dining area unoccupied and the dish not quite empty.

The events of the day had been tiring. It would be good to find somewhere quiet for a nap. Claude knew nothing about hospitals but up one flight of stairs he found open doors leading to the entrance of the children's ward where on a table stood an enormous green-glassed fish tank. He was amazed. He had never seen fish swimming under water before. There was just enough space for him beside the tank. One leap had him positioned and curiosity did the rest. He pawed the glass. One fish pressed its nose against his paw. He found that by stretching his whole body he could reach the top of the tank and dabble a paw. The fish retreated. As did Claude when a tall woman dressed all in dark blue thrust open the door, paused to take in the scene, picked him up by the scruff of his neck, carried him downstairs, crossed the road and dropped him over the field hedge. Of course indignant Claude knew nothing of complaints about the way the health service treats its visitors. All he needed was a short sleep in the grass. But first he needed a lick-session, grooming himself tidy again. Then the sleep, but it was not long before he was wakened.

One short bark was followed by *Hello! I've been sniffing all over for you. What's a nose for if not for finding friends? I followed you. That van went very fast but I kept up. I'm sure I'm already a lot thinner. Are you all right? I quite like this travelling. I haven't run so fast for ages.*

Claude sighed. *I'm going to do some more leisurely travelling now. Aren't you coming home?*

No. *I've miles to go yet. On my own and in my own time.*

*I'll have to go back, said Bee. I know my way from here. My walks are often this way, but this time I can explore all the side turnings. I can chase anything that wants to run. I can sniff all the interesting smells without being dragged away. I'll see you at home. Don't get lost!*

*I told you, insisted Claude. Cats always know their way home. I can't get lost.*

Bee ran along the lane from the hospital. He stopped for a first sniffing and looked back. Claude did not turn. He was walking slowly towards the woods - travelling towards another dark, unknown adventure. He walked on, tail high, with confident assurance that wherever his travels took him he would always know his way home.

***That's not unlike the Christian who has a father  
with a house of many rooms.  
Christian knows the way home.***