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## Is That *a* Cat... in My Element?

I'M SURE MANY OF YOU have seen or maybe owned (or coveted) the best dog car in the world--a Honda Element. Why, oh why, don't they make them anymore? The back seats are easily removable, there is no carpet -- just waterproof flooring that can be washed out, and the step up is low to the ground for older dogs. It's essentially a big open box of love for your well-behaved dog family, and in my world, even a fiery red cat named Spencer, who thought he was a dog.

Delbert (the car) was the most loved vehicle in my life and my dog's lives. Delbert's open doors meant GO! Delbert was a space holder in time for my four (and ½) dogs --Louie, Madison, Cedar, Sage, and Spencer the half dog/half cat--and myself, the happy chauffeur of my favorite furry hearts. We made many memories together thanks to Delbert shuttling us back and forth dozens of times from the southern tip of the west coast of California to the northern tip of Washington State, approximately 1,300 miles one way. In Delbert's era, I owned a second home on an island in Washington that was our regular passage into sanity, rest, relaxation, fun, a beach to run on, whales to see while we walked on the beach below our bluff, which included all of us getting blessed by whale blows when they foraged close to our beach. It was a magical sprinkling of hello from the deep. We, my four dogs and Spencer, would all stand there in quiet awe as these uber-large gray whales and their babies would come to our little beach spot café for their favorite meal of ghost shrimp after their long passage north. We were all looking for the sustenance and the sanity only deep, quiet water can provide. Pure heaven for myself and the furry ones after a 22+hour drive.

Delbert had a 6" full foam padding in the happy dog area, with several cozy blankets, a small curl up bed for Spencer, although he refused to use

it since it was a "cat" bed and slightly embarrassing when you are pretending to be "one of the dogs," and room for travel supplies for our trips.

Our rest stops were always quietly hilarious and drew a lot of eyes our way. Madison was a tall 110-pound yellow lab, Cedar was a black lab mix at 80 pounds. Sage was a finer-boned lab mix that was 65 pounds. Louie was a 45-pound Puerto Rican street dog mutt/border collie, and Spencer was Spencer -- a cat. Five leashes, five animals. Me, I'm only 5'2" and 111 pounds, but I had dogs and a cat that were pros at leash manners and potty breaks -- even managing never to piddle on anyone else. This courtesy included Spencer, the very short guy who thought he was a dog. The magical word "wait," which everyone knew made it easy for me on the poo pickups, just in case you were wondering. It never took long for someone at the rest stop to give us a double take. We were hard to miss.

It also never took long to hear the inevitable question I've heard at least 100 times -- "Is that a cat?" Spencer was easy to leash train and was always in with the other four busy noses swinging about while chasing yummy rest stop pee-mail scents. I think Spencer liked the autonomy, and certainly, the celebrity status. He always was a bit of a ham. He pottied on command, was brave and polite on the leash, and definitely got the most attention.

We averaged 4-5 rest stops per one way trip, and I can't remember one where I wasn't asked that same question at least a few times -- "*Is that a cat?*" It reminded me of the comedian Jeff Foxworthy and his hilarious comedy clips "Here's Your Sign." I was living that clip!

We always ended up needing a wee nap on our travels, or at least I did. The dogs had naptime all figured out. Louie was sentry and would sit up

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## My Element

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in the front seat and watch over all of us without a blink, and once off his self-imposed duty he would crash into a deep sleep when we were rolling again. I climbed in the back and slept in the puppy and cat love pile. Cedar on my right, Madison on my left, and Sage and Spencer at my feet. Cozy! What an awesome way to travel.

My entourage and I braved whiteout snowstorms through the mountain passes (Honda Elements have great all-wheel drive. I only had to use chains twice.), torrential downpours, and slick black ice. There was also a lightning strike that hit right next to my driver's door on the final hour of the long drive—the last leg—while on the ferry at one o'clock in the morning. The lightning bolt struck the water and blew out all the electrical circuits in poor Delbert. We all had frizzled hair for a week or so, and my mechanic dubbed me "*she who got struck by lightning*," even though I technically did not.

Speaking of frizzled and frazzled: On one trip we had an oncoming pickup truck slamming into the center divider on a major freeway coming right at us about 70 mph and fortunately (for us) his back tire caught the concrete divider as he was airborne and stopped him from landing on us (phew!) he flipped over. As I was slamming on the brakes and dogs and cat were flying forward, his tire bounced over the divider and then over the hood of Delbert and into other lanes of traffic. I immediately called 911 and exited at the next off-ramp and pulled into a gas station, thoroughly checked all the animals and calmed us all down. Touching fur always calms me down. I gave a shaky statement to the police officer who told me he would hang out with me for a bit, which I thought was odd, but ok. Turns out that the gas station was going to have a drug bust in a half hour and he wanted to be sure I was safe before sending me off prior to the melee. Sheesh! It felt like I was in a bad movie!

When I got back on the on-ramp – a little shaky still – a calm came over me as approximately 2,000 migratory white American pelicans began landing in a large clearing right next to the highway. We pulled over with everyone else to see the majestic scene appearing out of the sky. From near disaster that shakes you to the bone to the healing magic of nature. What a beautiful distraction to settle and refocus all my bird loving dogs, cat, and especially me, the chauffeur.

I finally moved us all to Washington state, no more long trips up and down that crazy long coastline, no more comic tragedy replays, just whales, deep water, and a place that feels like home.

An ending note: Five years later Delbert was squashed by an irate person that had her gas pedal to the floor and backed straight out of a driveway while arguing with her boyfriend. The momentum threw Delbert up on the curb and ended his life as we knew it. I was not there for the gruesome scene but heard it was quite loud. By then Cedar, Spencer, Madison, and Sage had moved on over the rainbow bridge. Only Louie lasted for more life adventures with me and my new dog partners; he made it to 17 years old and still kept watch on me every night. ■

Elizabeth Anne Johnson has been working with the health and wellness of small, large, exotic animals, and wildlife for 35 years as a holistic animal healer, animal empath, veterinary technician, and wildlife biologist/rehabilitator. She is the author of *Know Your Dog's True Nature, Understanding Canine Personality through the Five Elements (Findhorn/Inner Traditions)*, vice-president of Global Wildlife Resources, and a TEDx Speaker. She lives on an island in Washington State and is the nightly howling partner of Wilbur and Pretzel.