

“MeOW”

by Troy Lynn Pritt

They had turned off the Interstate almost an hour ago. There was nothing to see but dark fields, the dark shapes of trees, and the somber purple darkness of an overcast sky. He was tired and his wife had already made her feelings known several times.

“Karl, find some town and let’s stop for the night. I need a good meal, a hot shower, and a clean bed in that order.”

Karl Ferrell was a traveling salesman. He knew how scarce any one of those three were. He was usually gone for a week at a time and Kate had often asked to accompany him. The more that he put off her requests, the more it seemed to her that these trips held some secret that she wasn’t meant to know. Now, for five days, in eleven towns, she sat in the car as he carried his overloaded case into the independent retail stores of his clients. In each store he had to wait patiently, while she waited impatiently, until the owner could give him time to pitch his wares, give him brochures and samples, and take his order.

For four nights, they had stayed in the kind of motels he could afford. They ate the greasy food that is standard fare for those who live on the road. She missed her daytime television shows. Until she went on this trip she thought that she liked country music. When it became her only diversion, she couldn’t stand it.

He saw a sign for a town, “Haggis”, with a sign pointing down a road to the left. As they came into town, they saw street lights, a few stores, a motel, and a grill with a bright neon sign “EAT”. They stopped at the grill and went inside. They were welcomed with the aroma of onions, potatoes, and meat cooking. They sat in a booth and a friendly, plump, middle-aged waitress brought two cups and a hot carafe of coffee.

Karl almost called her “Mom”. “Ma’am you sure do know what a weary traveler needs.”

Turning to Kate the waitress smiled, “I expect I know what your wife needs – someplace to freshen up and powder her nose. Go through those curtains, Honey, and you’ll see the door on your left.”

“Thank you. She probably thought that she was going to have to wait until we went to the motel.”

“Motel? You don’t want to take your wife to that motel. It is a roach infested dump. Go on down this street. Watch for Maple Avenue. Turn to the right and look for an ugly orange house. It is a Bed and Breakfast. Molly keeps it clean, and she serves a good breakfast, too.”

“Thank you.”

They enjoyed a supper of beef stew and dumplings, topped off with apple pie. Karl left a generous tip, for the good meal and for the information.

Matilda’s Bed and Breakfast was a large, clapboard, Victorian house that set a good way back from the street. They were met at the front door by Molly. The inside was old, but well kept and clean. Molly led them into a side room to sign the guest register. She told them that breakfast was at 8:30 AM. Then she led them upstairs and along a confusing labyrinth of hallways.

Their room was on the second floor, in the back of the house. The room was small. There was just enough space for the double bed, a dresser, a wardrobe, and two straight-back chairs. The bathroom was on the hallway. The toilet and a wash basin were in a tiny room on one side of the hallway, a bathtub with a jerry-rigged shower was in a small room on the other side of the hallway.

He wondered how they would ever find their way back to the stairway. As if reading his mind, Molly said, “There is a stairway just around the corner. It leads to the back porch.”

The back stairway was just around the corner of the hallway leading their small room. At the bottom of the stairs was a door leading to the back porch. Beside the stairway was a soda machine and an icemaker. To the left was a doorway into a narrow room with a television and a sofa. Another door in the television room opened into the room where breakfast was served.

Karl went to the back door and outside to begin carrying the suitcases. A little girl, who said her name was Jessica, was playing with a young cat on the back porch. The cat was black with dark brown streaks.

“See my cat. I named her ‘Smokey’.”

Coming back from the car with his first bunch of suitcases, Karl saw her mother in the hall. “That is a playful cat you folks have.”

“Oh, it isn’t our cat.. It might want to be our cat. It’s always trying to slip into the house.”

On his next trip from the car, the little girl was gone. The cat was meowing, curling itself between his legs. When he opened the door, it was going to try to get into the house. Opening the door was a job more suited to a contortionist: turn the doorknob to the left, turn the key in the lock to the right, prop the heavy, steel storm door open, shuffle the suitcases inside the house, and keep the cat outside the house.

Karl brought the second load of suitcases to their room. He was sweating, dizzy, and exhausted. He fell onto the bed, just to catch his breath. Instead, he fell asleep. When he awoke, Kate was already in bed, and sound asleep. He quietly let himself out of the room, and went to the car for the remaining items, including his shaving kit. The house was dark except for dim bulbs on the back porch and at the top of the stairs.

When he returned from the car, the cat again wrapped itself around his legs, trying to get into position to dart into the house when the door was opened. Karl shook it off his leg and sent it sliding across the length of the porch like a hockey puck on ice. This time he had some loose items in his arms. He struggled with the doorknob and lock, and propped the heavy storm door open as he shuffled the remaining suitcase inside. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the cat. He made it through the door and the storm door swung shut behind him.

“Yee-OW, yeeow, KHACK, hisss.”

The storm door had slammed onto the cat’s neck. Its paws were flailing uselessly, but noisily, on the metal door. Positioning his foot to keep the cat from running inside, Karl opened the door wide enough to reach the storm door latch. He cautiously shoved it open. The cat was gone! Closing the doors and starting to go upstairs, he heard a loud meowing in the television room.

“Oh, no, I’ve let the cat into the house.” Setting the suitcase and the loose articles down, he went into the television room. The television was on, but there was no picture. Its eerie moonlike glow was the only light in the room. He looked in the direction of the loud meowing sound. There on the carpet was the cat. The body and head were separated. The body was lying stretched out lazily on the rug. The head was sliding across the floor like a hockey puck on ice!

The head slid behind him, biting the back of his foot. He tried kicking backwards, but just as he did the head bit his other foot, nearly causing him to fall. The next time Karl kicked backwards, the cat sank its teeth into his foot and held on. He reached back to try to grab the head. Then the body sprang onto him, clawing his cheek, and raking its claws down his arm. He was blind with pain. The head again bit the back of his foot, the body wrapped itself between his legs, and he fell.

The head was sliding here and there like a pinball bouncing off the baffles, meowing and biting. The pain signals going off in Karl’s mind were like the flashing lights and ringing bells of a pinball machine. Meanwhile, the cat’s body was leaping about like a boxer, raking bare skin with its claws. With horror, he could feel the rough tongue of the cat licking his blood and purring.

He stumbled to his feet and found his way up the back stairs. The cat’s head was stopped by the first step and the body would not go on without it. Karl’s painful and bloody progress up the stairs was followed by mocking meows and hisses.

When he reached their room, he was in shock and couldn’t speak. Kate wrapped a blanket around him, cleaned his wounds with a wet washcloth, and took him down to the car. She found a hospital in a bigger town farther on down the road and took Karl into the emergency room. He still could not talk. His eyes were fixed in a dumb stare.

The doctor said to his wife, “It appears to me that he was attacked by a large rat. We have to assume the rat was rabid. Your husband will have to take a course of rabies shots.”

They returned to the bed and breakfast in the early morning hours. He looked fearfully for the cat but did not see it. Karl lay awake despite the shot they had given him. *“Where is the cat now? Even if the cat can’t come up the stairs, who knows what worse horrors are lurking in this house?”*

The next morning the Ferrells walked through the television room on their way to breakfast. He saw no evidence of blood on the carpet.

“Did you clean up the blood already?” Karl asked.

“I didn’t see any blood when I came through there. What happened to you? You have bandages all over you.”

Kate said, “We think that he was attacked by a large rat.”

Kate wanted to stay another day so that Karl could rest. He insisted that they leave as soon as possible. As they were moving the suitcases out to the car, they saw Jessica playing on the back porch with that same cat!

“See my cat? I named her Smokey.”