

"MeOW"

"Karl, for the last time: Find some town where we can stop for the night. I need a good meal, a shower and shampoo, and a clean, comfortable bed in that order!"

Karl Ferrell was a traveling salesman for a wholesale distributor of candy, tobacco products, and sundries. Other weeks, he would have driven straight through to home, arriving late on Friday night.

"Karen, I haven't seen a town since the last two times you made your needs known in that demanding and accusing tone. I tried to tell you how uncomfortable it would be for you. I'm used to the seedy motels, the greasy food, long hours in the car, the grind of going from one store to the next, one town to another. It's all part of being a traveling salesman. Mondays I start out, late Friday nights I come home. In between I go to a town, go into a store, show the manager the new products, give him a fistful of brochures, take his order, thank him, and go to the next stores and the

next towns. You kept asking to go along with me. I kept putting you off. Then you started accusing me of having girl friends along the way!"

Karl's "girl friends" were pinball machines. In the evenings when he could no longer visit his clients' stores, he played a pinball machine from after supper until bedtime. In every town the machine was different. In one town there was a machine whose steel balls sent race cars around a track on the bright colored lights of the upright panel, in another it was a beautiful girl who became more and more attractive, in another a plane dropped torpedoes on an elusive submarine. There were more than a score of vicarious adventures for him as he traveled from town to town.

Before this trip Karen never knew: how much she would miss her television programs, how quickly she could learn to detest country music (it was all she could find on the car radio), or that, at times, she could actually despise her husband of one year.

"There, Karl, there's a town!"

A sign said, "HAGGIS" and pointed down a county road to the left. Karl slowed down and turned. As they drove into town they saw street lights but no traffic or people on foot. There were a few stores, a gas station that was closed, a motel, and a diner with the neon invitation EAT.

Karl stopped at the diner and they went inside. They were greeted by competing odors of coffee, fried onions, the sharp sweetness of apples and cinnamon, and other cooked foods. They settled wearily into a booth. A friendly, plump, middle-age waitress wearing an apron and a warm smile came to them with two cups and a carafe of coffee.

"Ma'am (he almost called her Mom), you sure do know what a weary traveler needs!"

The waitress turned to Karen and said, "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 she was going to have to wait until we went to the motel to wash the last two hundred miles off her face."

"Motel did you say? You don't want to take your wife to that dingy, grimy, run-down place. Go on down this street and watch for Maple Avenue. Turn to the right and then look on the left for a big, orange, ugly house. There is a sign on the fence "Bed and Breakfast". Molly Hill, who owns and runs it, is a widow with two children. She keeps it clean and serves a good breakfast."

"Thank you."

They enjoyed a supper of beef stew and dumplings, and topped it off with apple pie. Karl left a generous tip for her friendly service and the information.

Molly's Bed and Breakfast was a large, clapboard, Victorian house that sat a good ways back from the street. They were met at the front door by Molly. The interior of the house was old. The furniture was worn and frayed but clean. Molly led them to a side room to

sign the guest register. "Breakfast is promptly at 8:30 AM. I have to take my daughter to school as soon as I serve you."

She led them upstairs and along a labyrinth of hallways to their room. It was a small bedroom on the rear of the house. There were a double bed, a straight-back chair, a narrow dresser, and hooks on the wall. The bathroom was in two very small rooms on either side of the hallway outside their door. A tub with a jerry-rigged shower barely fit in one room; a toilet and wash basin was in the other.

"You can use the rear entrance to bring in your bags." Karen collapsed on the bed and Karl followed Molly to the end of the short hallway. They turned right and another short hallway led to a staircase. At the bottom of the stairs was a door to the outside, and to the left an interior door.

"This door is to the television room. If you walk through the television room, there is a door to the breakfast room. I'll see you in the morning at 8:30."

Karl went outside onto the back porch. A little girl was playing with a young cat. The cat was black with brown streaks. "My name is Jessica. This is my cat. I named her Smokey."

On his first trip back from the car, Molly was on the back porch telling Jessica that it was time to come inside and get ready for bed. "That is a playful cat you folks have."

"It isn't our cat. It just wants to be our cat. It's always trying to slip into the house." She held the door for him as he struggled with the suitcases.

On his next trip from the car, the little girl was gone. The cat was mewling and curling itself between his legs. When he opened the door, it was going to try to slip into the house. Opening the door was a chore suited to a contortionist: turn the doorknob to the left, turn the deadbolt key to the right, prop the heavy, steel storm door open, shuffle the suitcases into the house, and keep the cat out.

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. Sleep caught him unaware. When he awoke, Karen was sound asleep in the bed. He quietly let himself out of the room and went to the automobile for a few remaining items including his shaving kit and medicine. The house was dark except for a dim light bulb at the top of the stairs and one on the back porch.

When he returned from the vehicle, Smokey again wrapped herself around his legs, trying to position herself to dart into the house while the door was open. Karl shook her off his leg and sent her shooting across the porch floor like a pinball being shot by the plunger.

This time he had loose items in his arms. He struggled with the doorknob and deadbolt, and propped the heavy storm door open as he slipped inside. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the cat. He hurried

through the door. The storm door swung shut behind him.

"Yee-OW, yeeow, KHACK, hiss."

The storm door had slammed onto the cat's neck! Its paws were flailing noisily, but uselessly, on the metal door. Positioning his foot to block the cat from running inside, Karl opened the door wide enough to reach the storm door latch. He shoved it open warily. The cat was gone! Closing the doors, he started up the stairs. From the television room he heard a loud mewling sound.

"Oh, no, I've let the cat into the house." Setting the bags on the step, he went into the television room. The television was on, but there was no picture. The eerie, moonlike glow was the only light in the room. He looked in the direction of the loud meows and hisses. There on the carpet was the cat - without its head! The body stretched lazily on the carpet. The head was rolling on the floor, bouncing off objects like a pinball bouncing off bumpers.

The head rolled behind him, biting the back of his foot. He tried kicking backwards, but just as he did, the head bit the other foot, nearly causing him to fall. The next time Karl kicked, the cat sank its teeth into his foot and held on. He reached back to try to grab the head. Then the body of the cat 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 rolling here and there like a pinball bouncing off baffles, mewling and biting. The pain signals going off inside Karl's head were like the flashing lights and ringing bells of a pinball machine. The cat's body was leaping about, raking bare skin with its claws. With horror, he could feel the cat's rough tongue licking his blood and he heard it purring.

He stumbled to his feet and found his way to the 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. Karen 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 larger town farther on down the highway they had been following before turning off to Haggis.

She led Karl into the emergency room. He still could not talk and his eyes were fixed in a glazed stare. The doctor said to Karen, "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 full course of rabies shots."

They returned to the bed and breakfast in the pre-dawn hours. Karl looked fearfully for the cat but didn't see it. He lay awake in bed despite a shot the nurse at the hospital had given him. *"Where is the cat now? Even if the cat can't come up the stairs, who knows what other horrors lurk in this house?"*

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

"Did you clean up the blood already?" he asked Molly.

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

Karen replied, "We think that he was attacked by a large rat."

Karen 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 their car, they saw Jessica playing on the back porch with that same cat!

"My name is Jessica. See my cat? I named her Smokey."