

THE CAT'S PAJAMAS



2003

IT IS NOT EVERY NIGHT driving along Millpass, California's Route 9, that one expects to spy a cat in the middle lane.

For that matter, it is not every evening that such a cat could be found on any untrafficked road, the cat being, more or less, an abandoned kitten.

Nevertheless, the small creature was there, busily cleaning itself, when two things happened:

A car traveling east at a rapid rate suddenly braked to a halt.

Simultaneously, a much more rapid convertible, traveling west, almost ruptured its tires to a dead standstill.

The doors of both cars banged wide in unison.

The small beast remained calm as high heels clattered one way and golfing brogans banged the other.

Almost colliding over the self-grooming creature, a handsome young man and a more than handsome young woman bent and reached.

Both hands touched the cat simultaneously.

It was a warm, round, velvet black ball with whiskers from which two great yellow eyes stared and a small pink tongue protruded.

The cat assumed a belated look of surprise as both travelers stared at the placement of their hands on its body.

"Oh no you don't!" cried the young woman.

"Oh no I don't *what?*" cried the young man.

"Let go of my cat!"

"Since when is it yours?"

"I got here first."

"It was a tie."

"Wasn't."

"Was."

He pulled at the back and she at the front and suddenly the cat *meowed*.

Both let go.

Instantly they re-seized the beautiful creature, this time the young woman grabbing the back and the young man the front.

They stared at each other for a long moment, trying to decide what to say.

"I love cats," she explained at last, not able to meet his gaze.

"So do I," he cried.

"Keep your voice down."

"Nobody can hear."

They looked both ways on the road. There was no traffic.

She blinked at the cat, as if trying to find some revelation.

"My cat died."

"So did mine," he countered.

This softened their hold on the beast.

"When?" she asked.

"Monday," he replied.

"Last Friday," she said.

They rearranged their hands on the small creature and did not so much hold as touch.

There was a moment of embarrassed silence.

"Well," he said at last.

"Yes, well," she said.

"Sorry," he said, lamely.

"The same," she said.

"What are we going to do? We can't stand here forever."

"Looks like," she said, "we're both needy."

For no reason at all he said, "I wrote an article for *Cat Fancy*."

She looked at him more intensely.

"I chaired a cat show in Kenosha," she offered.

They stood, agonizing on their new silence.

A car roared down the road past them. They jumped away

and when the car was gone saw that they both still held the wonderful creature, carrying it out of harm's way.

He stared off down the road. "There's a diner down there, I see its lights. Why don't we go have coffee and discuss the future?"

"There's no future without my cat," she said.

"Or mine, either. Come on. Follow me."

He removed the kitten from her hands.

She cried and reached out.

"It's okay," he said. "Follow me."

She backed off, got into her car, and followed him down the road.



THEY WALKED INTO THE EMPTY DINER, sat in a booth, and placed the kitten on the table between them.

The waitress glanced at them and the cat, walked off, and returned with a full saucer of cream, placing it on the table with a vast smile. They realized they were in the presence of another cat person.

The cat began to lap at the cream as the waitress brought coffee.

"Well, here we are," the young man said. "How long is this going to last? Are we going to talk all night?"

The waitress was still standing before them.

"I'm afraid it's closing time," she said.

On impulse, the young man said, "Look at us."

The waitress looked.

"If you were going to give this kitten to one of us," he said, "which one would it be?"

The waitress studied the young woman and the young man and said, "Thank God I'm not King Solomon." She wrote up the check and put it down. "There are people, you see, who still read the Bible."

"Is there another place we can go to talk?" said the young man.

The waitress nodded out the window. "There's a hotel down the road. They don't mind pets."

That caused both young people to half-jump from their seats.

Ten minutes later they walked into the hotel.

Glancing over, they saw that the bar was already dark.

"This is stupid," she said, "to let myself be brought here for the ownership of my cat."

"Not yours yet," he said.

"It won't be long," she said and glanced at the front desk.

"It's okay." He held the cat up. "This kitten will protect you. It will stand between you and me."

He carried the kitten to the front desk, where the man in charge took one look and placed a key on the signature book and handed them a pen.

Five minutes later they watched the kitten run happily into the suite's bathroom.

"Have you ever," he mused, "when you got on an elevator,

refused to discuss the weather, but told a story about your favorite cat? By the top floor, there's a wild mixture of sounds from your fellow travelers."

At which point the kitten ran back into the room.

The kitten jumped on the bed and settled itself in the middle of a pillow in the center of the bed. Seeing this, the young man commented, "Just what I was going to suggest. If we need to rest while we talk we just let the cat keep to the middle of the bed and we can lie, fully dressed, on each side to discuss our problem. Whichever of us the cat moves to first and chooses as future owner, that one gets the cat. Okay?"

"You've got some trick up your sleeve," she said.

"No," he said. "Whichever way the cat goes, that person becomes the owner."

The cat on its pillow was almost asleep.

The young man tried to think of something to say because the vast bed lay unoccupied, save by the slumbering beast. It suddenly popped into his head to speak across the bed to the young woman.

"What's your name?" he said.

"What?"

"Well," he said, "if we're going to argue till dawn about my cat—"

"Till dawn, nonsense! Midnight, maybe. *My* cat, you mean. Catherine."

"Beg pardon?"

"Silly, but my name's Catherine."

"Don't tell me your nickname." He almost laughed.

"I won't. Yours?"

"You won't believe it. Tom." He shook his head.

"I've known a dozen cats with that name."

"I don't live by it."

He tested the bed as if it were a warm bath, waiting.

"You can stand if you wish, but as for me—"

He arranged himself on the bed.

The kitten snoozed on.

With his eyes shut he said, "Well?"

She sat, and then lay on the far side, prepared to fall.

"That's more like it. Where were we?"

"Proving which of us deserves to go home with Electra."

"You've named the cat?"

"A noncommittal name, based on personality, not on sex."

"You didn't look then?"

"Nor shall I. Electra. Proceed."

"My plea for ownership? Well." He rummaged the space behind his eyelids.

He lay looking at the ceiling for a moment and then said, "You know, it's funny the way things work out with cats. When I was a kid my grandparents told me and my brothers to drown a litter of kittens. We kids went out and they did it, but I couldn't stand it and ran away."

There was a long silence.

She looked at the ceiling and said, "Thank God for that."

There was another silence and then he said, "An even more peculiar but better thing happened a few years ago. I went to a pet shop in Santa Monica, looking for a cat. They must've had twenty or thirty cats there, all kinds. I was looking around and the saleslady pointed to one cat and said, 'This one really needs help.'

"I looked at the cat, and it looked like it had been put in a washing machine and tumbled. I said, 'What happened?' She said, 'This cat belonged to someone who beat it, so it's scared of everyone.'

"I looked into the cat's eyes and then I said, 'This is the one I'll take home.'

"So I gathered the cat up and he was terrified and I took him home, put him down in the house, and he ran downstairs and wouldn't come out of the basement.

"It took me more than a month of going down to the basement and leaving food and cream until finally I lured him out, step by step. And then he became my pal.

"That's quite a difference in stories, isn't it?"

"Gosh," she said. "Yeah."

The room was dark now and very quiet. The little kitten lay on the pillow between them, and both looked over to see how the cat was doing.

It was sound asleep.

They lay, studying the ceiling.

"I've got something to tell you," she said after a while, "that I've put off saying, because it sounds like a special plea."

"Special plea?" he said.

"Well," she said, "at home, at this very moment, I have a piece of material I've cut and sewn into something for my little cat who died a week ago."

"What kind of material is that?" he said.

"Well," she said, "it's a pair of cat's pajamas."

"Oh my God!" He exhaled. "You've won. This small beast here is yours."

"Oh no!" she cried. "That's not fair."

"Anyone," he said, "who makes a pair of pajamas to fit a cat deserves to be the winner of the contest. This guy is yours."

"I can't do that," she said.

"It's my pleasure," he said.

They lay for a long while in silence. Finally she said, "You know, you're not half so bad."

"Half so bad as what?"

"As what I thought when I first met you."

"What's that sound?" he asked.

"I think I'm crying," she said.

"Let's sleep for a while," he said at last.

The moon went down the ceiling.



THE SUN ROSE.

He lay on his side of the bed, smiling.

She lay on her side of the bed, smiling.

The small kitten lay on the pillow between them.

At last, watching the sunlight in the window, she said, "Did the cat move either way during the night to indicate which of us it was going to belong to?"

"No," he said, smiling. "The cat didn't move. But *you* did."