

THE CAT OF THE HOUSE

Part II, "Jonathan"



*Karen & "Johnny"
at Van Nuys home 1965*

After settling in to our new home in Scottsdale, new reasons to have a cat in the house surfaced. Besides a balmy winter climate Phoenix had some other aspects that the chamber of commerce conveniently forgot to mention--Bugs! Snakes! The desert was pretty close to our back door and one of the nastiest local critters was a small, pale, almost translucent scorpion. Only about an inch and a half long, it packed what could be a lethal poison for a small child and leave an adult with nasty symptoms like paralysis, or loss of some sensory faculties--temporarily or permanently. The locals began to warn us "Always shake out your shoes before you put them on," "Never reach up to a shelf that you can't see," and other unsettling advice. The locals also said, "get a cat--they are immune to the scorpion's venom, and like to poke around in dark corners, closets, etc. where the nasty bug hangs out." Karen was now old enough to understand that a kitty could be played with, but not mauled, and so, we set out to get a cat that would have some new utilitarian purposes--not getting rid of mice, but scorpions.

Cats didn't seem to be appearing on our Scottsdale doorstep, so we headed for the Phoenix Humane Society. Since we were looking for a feline that would keep deadly bugs away, you would think we would have come home with maybe a lean, mean tiger-striped cat, or that most common of breeds, the "domestic shorthair." But, no! When we got to the pound and walked down those rows of cages, the kitty that caught our attention was a pug-nosed, fluffy gray Persian. Purebred, and with that pushed-up nose, he exuded snobbery. Ah, but he was so beautiful! Not a young kitten, but maybe a year old. Karen loved him, Barbara loved him....Glenn and Mark were neutral but willing to bring him home. He hardly looked the part of a venomous bug-killer though, and his name didn't help either--we were told that he was called "Jonathan" and we were to use that name, as he was used to it.

And so, Jonathan came home and was to share many adventures with us over the next twelve years. Being a purebred Persian, “Johnny” as he soon was called, was also high-strung and his tolerance of little Karen’s loving was limited. When he was sick and tired of being hugged and lugged around, he would give her a quick swipe with a paw--with claws extended. At this, Karen would drop the cat and start crying--loudly. Mom would come running to see what was going on, find Karen sniffing and the cat looking huffy. It really wasn’t fair, but I would give Johnny a swat and a very stern “BAD cat!” at which he would scurry off to the security to be found under a bed. Yes, I also reminded Karen that she mustn’t overdo the hugging and lugging, but I reasoned that the cat had to learn not to scratch her. Never underestimate the memory of a cat. Years later, long after Karen was beyond over-loving him, if she fell down and skinned her knee and started to cry, Johnny would dash for that safe haven under the bed--obviously, he had made the connection: “If Karen cries, I get swatted!”

Did Jonathan really keep our house safe from scorpions? Well, we never found him chewing on a dead one, but on the other hand, we never found one of the loathsome creatures in our house--and almost all of our neighbors did. One man found one clinging to a shirt--that he had just put on! Another woman pulled on the cord to open her drapes and was stung on the hand--then lost her sense of smell and hearing for a few days. Other neighbors found these little scorpions on their door jamb--but not us, so deservedly or not, the cat got credit for scaring away the bugs. And apparently he was willing to take on snakes too. Coming home one dark night from a movie, we found the cat staring fixedly at something on the ground in a flower bed. Coming up for a closer look, we found a small snake--probably a rattler. At that point, Johnny was quite willing to turn the job over to Glenn who dispatched the snake with a hoe.

Mostly though, Jonathan just added a touch of class to our home with his elegant good looks. When it was time to move back to Los Angeles, he almost didn’t make the trip. Moving day was memorable for so many reasons: it was early July, the hottest time of the year in Phoenix, a plague of grasshoppers had moved into town from the open desert, and we were in the middle of a record-breaking heat wave--115 degrees, day after day. Glenn had cleverly got himself assigned to computer classes in New York City, so I had the dubious pleasure of making all the moving arrangements, then driving Mark, Karen, and the cat to L.A. all by myself. I had purchased a nice wooden and wire mesh cat carrier for Jonathan and the idea was that after the movers left, we would drive in the relative coolness of the evening to Wickenburg--about two hours west. We’d stay at a motel until about 4 a.m., then try to dash across the almost-literally burning desert before the heat of the day was upon us.

My first mistake was to not lock the cat in his carrier very early in the morning of moving day. As soon as the movers arrived and the commotion began, Jonathan disappeared--upsetting things were going on, and he wanted no part of it. I was dimly aware that the cat was nowhere to be seen, but I had other more pressing distractions--such as when one of the movers came in to say, “Lady, your air conditioner just blew off a huge cloud of smoke out there!” Apparently 115 degrees was just too much for the cooling unit and yep, one of the copper tubes had given way, letting several pounds of very spendy Freon gas out into the dry desert air. There was a troubling little clause in the sales agreement for the house which said that “all mechanical appliances shall be in working condition.” Obviously, the air conditioner was no longer working! Neither were many other air conditioners in Phoenix on that hot July day, but with much pleading and wheedling I did get someone to come out and make the necessary and very expensive repairs. The last piece of furniture disappeared into the moving van and--we were ready to roll to Wickenburg and on to L.A.! Only one problem remained--where was the cat? We called, we shook his favorite box of dry Friskies, we enlisted the neighbor kids to help us look--all in

vain. It was almost dark by now, and I couldn't tarry any longer. Taking the cat carrier to a neighbor, I said, "Well, if he shows up, please ship him to this new address." Just as we climbed into the car, who should come strolling leisurely across the lawn, but a fluffy, aristocratic gray Persian, wondering what all the fuss was about? We pounced on him, and quickly locked him into his carrier. Later, we deduced that he had spent the day high up on the top of our neighbor's roof, inside their swamp cooler! The little stinker had been watching us all the time, no doubt amused by our frantic efforts to call him out of hiding.

Maybe Jonathan had a suspicion that traveling across the desert would not be a fun experience. Once my little family was complete and all tucked in our non-air conditioned Chevy, we made the first leg of our trip to Wickenburg with no problems. One image has stayed in my memory from that night drive through the desert. For miles, it seemed, the car's headlights would pick up big, ghostly white scorpions--all of whom seemed to be engaged in a game of "chicken" as they scurried across the highway, their evil-appearing, stinger-armed tails curved up and over their bodies.

I had our little band up and in the car just as dawn was breaking. Even with this early start, the desert was heating up fast under the morning sun, and by the time we reached Indio in the Coachella Valley the local radio station was giving the day's forecast: "Sunny, clear, and with a high of 120 degrees." It was only 10 a.m. so it must have been considerably under 120 degrees but it was hot enough that it felt like my foot, encased in leather sandals, was pressed against a hot stove, rather than the car's accelerator.

Karen was riding up front with me, while Mark and Jonathan shared the back seat with our big ice chest. A couple years of desert living had taught us one thing--never travel without water and an ice chest. We were all gulping down water, almost continuously. A glance in the rear view mirror told me that in his carrier, Jonathan was in trouble. Cats don't pant, as dogs do, but when stressed by thirst or heat, they bare their fangs. Poor Johnny's fangs were very bared as he tried to survive the extreme heat. I realized it would be at least two more hours before we would reach the Los Angeles basin and its cooler air. It didn't look like the cat could last that long. I told 6 year-old Mark that "Jonathan is going to die if we can't get him cooled down. You take off your shirt, dip it in the melted water in the ice chest, and lay it on top of the kitty's wire cage." Mark followed my instructions to the letter, and kept re-wetting his shirt and draping it over the cat carrier for many miles. His efforts and the principle of evaporative cooling worked! Somewhere between Beaumont and Riverside we drove out of that desert oven and felt cool marine air, flowing inland. What a blessed feeling that moist air was! And, Jonathan was still alive and no longer had bared fangs. While this trek didn't quite equal those made by pioneers in Conestoga wagons, it *did* become a "saga" in the Halliday chronicles. And the cat? Well, he still had his nine lives, made good use of them and was our companion through yet *another* move.

With his smugly upturned nose, luxurious, silky gray hair and refined appearance, Jonathan came off as, well, let's be honest: a "lacey pants" cat. When elegantly positioned by our fireplace hearth, he definitely added some class to our home but a fierce predator? Hardly! Still, as a succession of mockingbirds discovered, under that well-bred exterior lurked the heart of a jungle cat. Maybe not a jaguar, but when it suited him, "Johnny" could be as predatory as any ocelot prowling the Brazilian jungle.

When Glenn was transferred back to Los Angeles from Phoenix, we soon purchased our second home in the San Fernando Valley. Jonathan adapted nicely to the Southern California life and enjoyed a little

afternoon nap under the palm tree in our back yard. Too often, though, his naps were interrupted by the pesky mockingbirds who must have seen through Johnny's disguise and recognized a serious threat when they saw one. They chose bombardment as the best way to chase him from the yard and would make steep dive-bombing runs at him. Hearing all the raucous bird noises I would go out to see what was going on, and there would be the poor cat, walking slowly across the lawn, while the mockingbirds made their bombing runs at him, often pecking him and leaving little tufts of gray hair sprouting up along the cat's back. I would shoo the birds away and imagined that poor, "lacey-pants" Jonathan must be grateful for my aid.

But then, while doing a little garden weeding, I would discover a dead, chewed-upon mockingbird. A few days later---the corpse of another crashed dive-bomber. Gradually, I figured out what was going on. Far from being the victim, the cat was enticing those birds to be brazen in their attacks, coming closer and closer to him until wham! soft gray paws suddenly unsheathed talons and sharp incisor teeth appeared in that smug little face. I gained a lot of respect for our cat and the skills that instinct had given him.

I learned just how much Jonathan meant to Karen in October, 1962 when we had to face the threat of a Russian nuclear missile attack from Cuba. The entire nation went on high alert and like so many other families, we had serious discussions about what we would do if an evacuation was ordered. We agreed that if the sirens sounded while Glenn was at work 40 miles away, in downtown Los Angeles, the kids and I would throw our emergency food supply and camping gear in my car and head north for the mountains. Glenn would try to join us there. So far, so good. Then, Karen said, "What about Johnny?" I explained that if we had to evacuate, we would only be able to take ourselves. Jonathan would, uh, have to look out for himself back at our house. Well! Karen was having none of that. She announced, very firmly, "If Johnny has to stay, I'm staying with him!" She was very serious about this, and I'm grateful that President Kennedy and Mr. Khrushchev were able to resolve this crisis before I had to deal with heart-wrenching decisions concerning our cat.

Other than the Cuban Missile Crisis, life was good in Southern California for all of us, but life means change. After 8 years in La La Land, Glenn was invited to join the home office of UNIVAC, on the other side of the continent in Philadelphia. No hot ride through the burning desert heat for us this time. Instead, our cars made the trip in the moving van, while our family, including Jonathan, were whisked across the country by air. I don't know if the cat's memory was long enough to remember how he almost died of heat prostration when we moved from Phoenix to Los Angeles. But I suspect his version of the airplane ride to Philadelphia would have been worse. Days before we left L.A., I bought a little cat harness and leash, figuring that we might need a secure way to hang onto a nervous cat. With some struggle, I got the right paws into the right parts of the harness and let Johnny get used to his new accessory. To the cat, this was something to get out of, not get used to. He spent about three days just backing up throughout the house! Worse insults were ahead of him. When we dropped him off at the airport baggage counter, in his carrier, we saw that he would be sharing the cargo hold with one other passenger-- a yapping black puppy, who apparently was prepared to bark and yelp at Johnny, nonstop all the way to Philadelphia. To a cat who was used to a dog-less environment and who ran and hid at all loud noises, it must have been pure torture to be cooped up in a cage next to such a noisy creature.

When we disembarked at the Philadelphia airport, we hurried over to the baggage counter where pets were placed for pick up. As I walked toward the cat, I could see him staring out of his carrier. But, as

soon as he saw me, he wheeled about in his cage and refused to look at me. True, Jonathan couldn't talk, but his actions let me know he was really, really pissed.

Eventually, the cat came around, and we became friends again. No longer young, he still enjoyed the thrill of the hunt now and then. Our home in Doylestown had a woodland adjoining it, and instead of mockingbirds to lure in for the kill, Johnny had to deal with the clever eastern squirrels, and colorful birds like the red Cardinals. He loved to spend his days in our yard and the fringe of the woods, but was happy to come when called for dinner in the evening. Then, one cold autumn night in 1968, Johnny didn't come to our call. We grew anxious and searched and called for him until it was too dark to find our way through the woods. But at earliest daylight the next morning, Karen resumed the search and made the sad discovery of a little gray body in the underbrush. We surmised that a pack of dogs that frequented the woods had chased the cat until his aged heart gave out.

We laid Jonathan to rest under those tall woodland trees and Glenn comforted Karen with the words, "Now, Johnny can chase all the birds he wants, forever."