

THE CAT OF THE HOUSE

Part III, "Imp"



Not many weeks after "Jonathan," our elegant and aged Persian cat, succumbed we found ourselves walking through the animal cages of the Doylestown Humane Society. There was something missing in our family life, without the family cat, and we all agreed we needed a replacement for "Johnny."

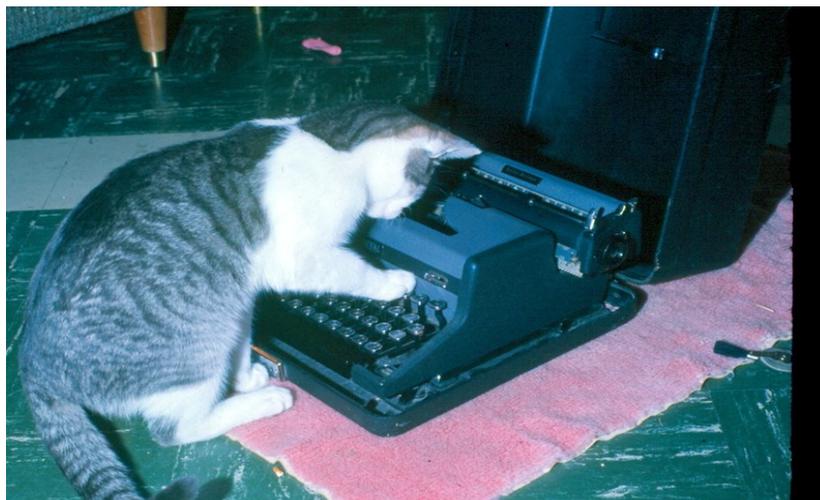
While we all enjoyed the company of a kitty, Karen had a special bond with our pets, she mourned Johnny the most, and she was the one leading us along the narrow aisles at the Humane Society, in that late November, 1966. The stoniest heart surely must melt when faced with the upturned, seeking faces of the many dogs and puppies confined to their metal cages. There is an awesome sense of the life or death power you hold for those poor creatures. The cats didn't come out to beseech us, instead, most retreated to the depths of their cages, too trapped by their innate feline dignity to stoop to begging for a home. But we knew they shared the same fate as the canines.

Playing God is heavy work, and we were all finding it hard to say that yes! we would rescue that little black kitten, while perhaps dooming his neighbor to a short life. Then, suddenly, the decision was made for us. A gray paw extended from a cage and tugged at Karen's coat--an old pea coat from Glenn's Navy years. Attached to that paw was a slim little adolescent cat, probably best described as an

American Shorthair Tabby, or.....just plain Cat. He had the gray and black tiger stripes of a tabby cat, with green eyes that appeared to have dark mascara outlining them. He wasn't the cutest kitty in the place but he had an impish quality that soon inspired his name when he came home with us: "Imp" was the new Cat of the House.

We knew Imp must have had the typical alley cat genealogy, but could there have been some dog ancestors mixed in there? He had some traits that didn't seem typical of his species. If we went for a walk along the little road that circled through deep woods behind our house, Imp tagged right along, just as a puppy would have done. However, about halfway around the circle he pooped out, sat down in the road and refused to budge until some human picked him up for an easy trip back to the house. He had another canine trait: a keen sense of boundaries and what he was supposed to guard. The spacious lawns in our development had no fences to divide the properties. When the lady next door would stroll over to our yard, followed by her non-miniature poodle, Imp would have none of this interloper. The lady? O.K. But her dog? No way! Imp would run straight at the poodle, who immediately took shelter behind his mistress, whining pitifully about this attack cat!

Playing tag with Karen was high on Imp's list of ways to amuse himself. Karen thought this would be a one-way game, with her doing the chasing and the cat hiding. She was as surprised as that poodle, when Imp would suddenly spring forth from his hiding place and charge straight for her. The cat was very gentle when he tagged Karen during their game, but when it came to the squirrels, rabbits, mice and birds that inhabited our woods, his exceptional skills as a predator shone. Almost daily, he would come marching proudly up to the house, with some poor little critter in his jaws. At first, he would drop them at Karen's feet, expecting her to be impressed with his prowess. To the cat's dismay, Karen would snatch the little limp body of bunny, mouse, bird or squirrel and toss it into a nearby garbage can. She even added insult to injury by scolding Imp, saying "Bad! Bad! You'll get tapeworm!" The poor cat would give out a few protesting meows and slink away, hurt and confused by this reception of his gift. Karen thought she had finally convinced the cat to give up his hunting, but Imp was not to be denied his predator instincts. We kept a small travel trailer by the house, and it was seldom moved. The next time we rolled it out of its parking place, we knew Imp was not a repentant sinner; just a clever cat who hauled his prey to the exact center point under the trailer, too far for human arms to reach. He had created an impressive bone pile under there--all without our suspecting a thing.



Imp at the typewriter, Doylestown, 1967

Indoors, Imp played the expected role of house cat, not hunter. And he certainly exhibited the curiosity always associated with felines. I had a small portable typewriter, and the cat loved to sit next to me as I tapped away at the keys. Later, I would notice that his paws were all covered with typewriter ink, and I soon discovered that after I left the typewriter, the cat stayed on--pulling up on the inky metal keys, then letting them fall back. Apparently the typewriter was a great source of amusement, but in all honesty, Imp never wrote anything of literary value.

After three years as our "cat of the house" Imp found out, as Jonathan had before him, that the Hallidays were a mobile family. Glenn accepted a transfer from UNIVAC's home office in Pennsylvania to their Salt Lake City operation. By early June, 1970, Imp was going about his usual routine, in blissful ignorance of what was about to transpire, while the rest of us dealt with packing boxes, divesting items we couldn't see moving across the continent, and making trip plans for our journey west. This time, we planned to drive to Salt Lake City, viewing this move as an opportunity to see what the United States looked like on the ground, not from a jet plane's window at 30,000 feet

There was no question but what Imp would make the journey with us--hey, he was family! But, driving 2,152 miles with a cat sounded like too *much* togetherness in our smallish sedan. So, I made arrangements to have Imp transported by air from Philadelphia to a cat kennel in Salt Lake City. I even stapled the kennel's name and address to his carrier. The day before we were to set off on our transcontinental trek, I took the cat, in his carrier, to the Doylestown office of Air Express. The agent took one look at the cat carrier, and said, "Oh no! That carrier is *way* too small for the cat. You'll have to get the airline's regulation-size one." O.K. Did they have them? Nope. And where might we procure one? Perhaps at the airport, some 35 miles away. There must have been some other insurmountable problems in getting Imp into a bigger carrier and on an airplane, but I can't recall them.

The upshot was that when our green sedan pulled out of the driveway on a late-June day, riding in the center of the backseat, flanked by two scrunched-up teenagers, was Imp in his non-regulation carrier. The cat would probably have yowled all the way to Salt Lake City on an airplane too, but *we* wouldn't have heard it. Instead, we were treated to an almost non-stop concert of cat meowing and yowling, into western Pennsylvania, through Ohio and the noisy thunderstorms that seemed to follow us, through Indiana ("Look Imp! There's Notre Dame University!"), along our detour around Chicago, through the Corn Belt, and on toward Rapid City, South Dakota and the Black Hills. He did develop a touch of laryngitis somewhere near Sioux City, Iowa for which we were all grateful.

The itinerary we had planned (before we knew Imp would be in the party) was a couple overnight stops along our route, and two nights in Rapid City, so we could take in the Badlands and the Mt. Rushmore National Monument. With our little guest in the car, we could only give the Badlands a very short visit. Summer had come to South Dakota and even with the windows rolled down, the car soon become a mini-oven. In the Holiday Inn in Rapid City, we gave the cat a little room to stretch out in--the motel bathroom. The following morning, we left for Mt. Rushmore, leaving the bathroom door tightly shut, and a big warning sign on it for the maid: "Cat in here! Don't Open!" We might not get fresh towels, but we hoped Imp wouldn't be able to make a break for freedom either.

We ran the gauntlet of cheesy tourist traps enroute to Mt. Rushmore; found that the sculptures seemed smallish--those granite heads had seemed huge when Cary Grant was being chased up and over them in the movie "North by Northwest." Taking advantage of our cat-less day, we drove on to the mining town of Lead and toured the big Homestake gold mine.

Our security measures worked; the cat was still in the bathroom when we returned. The westward trek continued the next day and we soon arrived in the Great Salt Lake Valley--all five of us.

Our new home was on one of the "benches" above the valley, with pretty little Scrub Oak trees in the yard--perfect perches for a cat. All of the homes in our neighborhood shared one architectural feature--they had flat roofs. After the moving van left, we relaxed and decided we could let Imp out to explore his new digs.

Under usual circumstances, it might have been a few days before we met our next-door neighbors, but Imp speeded up the introductions. After a cautious turn around the yard, he quickly figured out how to climb up on our roof and with an athletic jump, he landed on our neighbor's roof. So far, so good. However, Imp was no better at coming down from roofs than he had been at coming down trees back in Doylestown. He could go up a tree almost as fast as the squirrel he was chasing, but backing down the tree trunk was a slow process for him. Since there weren't even any handy tree trunks to come down from the neighbors' roof, the cat soon decided he was stuck and called for help in his feline way--yowling as loud as possible, while pacing back and forth, across the roof.

It didn't take too long to realize it was *our* cat making all that racket, and we spotted him looking forlornly over the lip of the roof. We went next door, knocked, and when neighbor Larry answered, we said, "Hello! We're the Hallidays, and we just moved in. Our cat is on your roof." Larry replied "Yes, we know that. From our side of the ceiling it sounds like a mountain lion stomping around up there." But, Larry was indeed the good neighbor, got out his ladder, and managed to grab Imp and return him to *terra firma*. Apparently this episode made a great impression on the cat....as far as we knew, he never again went in for roof exploration.

The summer of 1970 started a transition for our family. In August, Mark left for his first year of college, at Willamette University, in Salem, Oregon. Two years later, Karen graduated from Skyline High School, and enrolled at the University of Utah. While the university was right in Salt Lake City, we insisted that she live in the dorms, figuring that was a big part of college life.

So, suddenly, Glenn and I were "empty nesters." Well, almost. We still had Imp! And, we now had a new relationship with the cat. Without Karen, we were Imp's sole source of food, entertainment and sleeping arrangements. He quickly shifted his allegiance from Karen's empty bed to ours. We knew we had *really* come a long way in our attitude toward pets when we would wake up, to find ourselves clinging to the opposite edges of our bed, while this little furry creature somehow managed to stretch out in all directions, taking over the entire center of the mattress!

Imp seemed quite content in his home on the side of the Wasatch Mountains and if there were few squirrels to chase, there were still plenty of birds. Salt Lake City's long and snowy winters made Imp quite content to stay inside, and with Glenn's help, he developed a great interest in bird-watching. We had bird feeders about the yard, but Glenn would also scatter bird seed onto our patio steps. Imp could sit behind our loose-woven drapes, with a close-up view of the steps and all the little birdies, chirping and hungrily scarfing up seed. But, the chirping birdies could not see Imp. In reality, Imp couldn't get through the double-paned glass door and grab a bird, but somehow, he never grasped this fact. He had a series of instinctive motions he would go through at the patio window. First, he would take up his post there; next he would spot the movement of the birds and go into a crouching position; third, as the birds hopped closer and closer to him, his jaws would tremble and his teeth made an audible chatter.

By this point, Imp was in attack mode and that thick glass pane didn't matter. He would suddenly gather himself together and make a big leap--straight into that window, which would respond with a gong-like tone. Ouch! That must've hurt! Or, so we thought. The cat would back away from the window, shaking his head, maybe take a break for a little bite to eat, but sooner or later, there he would be again--staring at the hopping birdies, going into attack mode and then BAM! we would hear the window resonate.

You can either conclude that Imp was not the brightest bulb in the chandelier, or be more generous, as we were. Instinct just took over for him and if that window hadn't been there, one less bird might have been enjoying Glenn's seed.

At Willamette University, Mark worked in the school's photo lab and got interested in photography. One Christmas, he surprised us with a framed portrait of Imp, shot through the leaves of those Scrub Oak trees where the cat was perched. We have lots of pictures and slides of our family, but right now, the only family member whose portrait hangs on the wall is Imp!

The summer of 1974 was the toughest we had ever experienced. In June, Glenn was diagnosed with throat cancer and had to have his vocal chords removed. While we were still getting our bearings after this traumatic experience, one morning Imp suddenly left his usual position in the center of our bed, leaped to the floor with a loud "Meow" and collapsed. We soon realized the cat was in serious trouble; his eyes were literally rolling and he could not move. At the vet's we got the bad news: Imp had lymphoma which had hit his brain; nothing could be done for our little buddy and he was put to sleep. As the two of us ate breakfast later, salty tears were mingling with our cornflakes. Yes, he was just a cat, but for us, he was special.

When Imp reached out from his cage and caught Karen's sleeve at the Doylestown Humane Society, he caught our hearts as well.



*Imp, in oak trees,
at Salt Lake City home*