

Free Cats

by C. KEVIN SMITH

The road is only one more unnecessary detour in a long day spent avoiding the Interstate. On your old auto club map it appears as the thinnest, palest line among the map's many vivid colors, as if it might not even be a road, perhaps a boundary marker. You're in a flat dusty agricultural area somewhere east of Fresno, seriously off track given your itinerary from San Francisco to Los Angeles; you abandoned I-5 earlier this morning after being passed by countless revved-up, impatient engines, whiny horns, contemptuous stares.

The narrow road is just as it appears on the map, completely straight, though what shows on the map as surrounding empty space proves to be densely planted rows of large trees. Just as you are wondering what kind of trees they are you pass a small wooden sign advertising *PEACHES ½ MI*, and then it's obvious, the slender orange leaves, drooping but still aglow with the light of the November afternoon, the same color as the summer's long-vanished fruit.

Something moving just ahead breaks into your thoughts, a fluttering, nervous blur of shadow and white on the right side of the road. As you get closer you see that it's a child waving some kind of sign. You feel a little rush of energy as your foot tries and fails to maintain the same pressure on the gas pedal. You want not to stop, not to know what this person wants; you are eager to keep moving, if not to arrive. You've had your fill of requests and demands, claims and desires, all the vocabulary of divorce and its suffocating complexity.

As you draw near the sign, which you can't read, you see that the waving arms belong to a young girl. Immediately you wonder how close in age she is to your daughter, and then it's unavoidable, you have no choice but to slow down to get a better look. You bring the car to a crawl as though to stare at an accident, feeling that sudden mood of both shame and fascination one is glad to brush off when the accident is passed. But now instead of continuing on you let the car come to a stop. You and the girl eyeball each other through the bug-streaked windshield, your tired skin suddenly flushed from the intensity of her gaze, as though the markings of failure might be your most prominent feature. You've been out of work a little over a year—it's not just you, all of Silicon Valley is littered with empty buildings and wrecked families—but to the news in September that you had at last found a job in Los Angeles, a good one, your wife declared that she and the children would not move to L.A. with you, that she had been contemplating divorce. That she had had enough of the uncertainty.

The girl walks around to your side of the car and holds up the sign, obscuring her face. It's no wonder you couldn't read it before, the words are written in hasty ballpoint, red ink: *FREE CATS*.

You turn off the ignition. Then you unbuckle your seatbelt.

"Hi there," you say as you get out. You stand behind the car door which hangs open between you and the girl. The air is warm. Your car emits a long series of low, airy clicks, car farts, your oldest son calls them. You see that the girl is a couple years older than your daughter, perhaps eight or nine. She says nothing, only turns and walks around the front of the car to a cardboard box you now notice on the side of the road. You close the car door and follow her slowly. The muscles in your back are jammed painfully into a solid lump that pulses just above your belt. It's the full day of driving that is to blame, also the spongy couch in the living room, where you've been sleeping lately.

You're in front of a large, open area apart from the trees. A two-story house built decades earlier in a vaguely Victorian style is set back several hundred feet from where you stand. Its windows are all shuttered, save one on the ground floor next to the entrance. Across the surface of the house, peeling white paint reveals thick irregular patches of dark gray wood. Everything is still. A small red pickup is

parked to one side, facing away from the road. In the air you smell the fruity sweetness of dust and dead leaves warmed by the sun. A breeze just barely rubs your cheeks, and as if to follow its path you turn your head to gaze into the trees. You've never lost the fascination you first felt as a boy before the dizzying spread of patterns in orchards or fields, numberless combinations of lines criss-crossing to eternity. Now you think how pleasant it would be to walk among the falling yellow leaves. How one might turn and turn and turn again, walking forever, without ever exhausting the possibilities of paths.

"I need to find a good home for my cat's babies."

The high voice startles you; she's noticed your inattention and is looking up at you, her expression pleading yet suspicious. You concentrate on the girl for the first time. She has short, dark hair, indifferently cut. Her mouth, pinched into a tiny knot of trapped emotion, stands out against the flat whiteness of her face.

"How many are there?"

She holds up three fingers.

"Why can't you keep them?"

She shakes her head. The answer is obviously too painful to say. You see how weary she looks. Has she been there all day? Was yours the first car to drive by? When did she last eat? No one else has been on the road since you turned onto it, which presently feels like ages ago. Even the house itself, which you now squint at, appears empty. You feel light-headed and bend forward, pressing your hands heavily into the small ledge of bone just above your knees.

All year long, your youngest son has been yearning for a puppy. Your eyes are closed but what you see are dancing shapes of pale pink and shadowy dark, the barely illuminated underside of the world unfolding on the screen of your eyelids. You wonder if it is possible for a man to see the beating of his own heart.

You stand up too quickly, dizzy, your back bursting with streaks of pain, but there is nothing to hold onto. To your son, your wife said repeatedly, "We will consider a puppy after your Daddy gets a job. Not before."

"May I see them?" you say to the girl without looking at her, peering instead over her head at the box, which is covered with a pale-blue bath towel.

She kneels down, whispering words you can't hear, slowly removes the towel, then inches away to let you see inside. A little mound of fur in several shades of gray, black and white occupies one corner of the box, the bodies pressed together so tightly it's impossible to distinguish one kitten from another. The girl cranes her head back above the box, sharing the space above it with you. Still she murmurs, a papery whistling sound like that made by dried leaves or insect wings. Eventually, one tiny, blinking kitten face emerges from the mass of fur. It yawns dramatically, then closes its eyes.

"I'll take them," you say, shocked at your words. Yet once spoken you know you cannot take them back. This you have learned. And what will you do with three baby cats in your new apartment in Studio City? You're going to be working all day in Glendale; you haven't even seen the place yet. Your sister found it for you and said it was "Basically fine, for now." You haven't read with much care the lease you signed and faxed, but assume pets are not allowed.

"You will? All of them?" Her eyes widen, but then just as quickly grow small. "Do you have a good home?"

"A wonderful home," you say.

"Do you have a yard?" she asks. "Cats like to go outside, but you have to call them in at night." She is staring into the orchard as she says this, her face fixed with the kind of worry you suspect she will not outgrow.

You say you have a very nice yard, with a good, strong fence. You and the girl are both standing now. There is a small flower and vegetable garden, you say. You're the last house of a cul-de-sac, you say, so it's very safe and peaceful. There are three children, one for each cat, you say. She looks back and forth between the cats and your face as you speak.

You turn your head to the road, thinking you've heard something, a distant car perhaps, but nothing has changed, no one has come. After a moment, the girl, walking slowly, goes to the house to collect some things that she wants you to take with you. Just after she leaves, you consider following her, having a conversation with her mother, who you imagine to be watching from behind a window dark with dust. But you are unable to move: all you can do is wait. You gaze again into the trees, and wonder what it would be like to grow up in such a place, surrounded by so many miles of silence. Your father did, as did his father before him. You grew up in the city, taking for granted its crowds and its self-important activities. It was there you met your wife.

The girl returns from the house, and you both examine what she has brought, two plastic bowls for food and water, as well as a small, dingy blanket, pale yellow, frayed and covered in cat hair. It belonged to the cats' mother, she explains when she returns. You nod and together you put the box and supplies in the front seat of your car. You watch her stare at the back seat, where all available space is taken by large boxes and plastic grocery bags full of clothes. She turns to look at you curiously, and then you know, know with certainty, that she has already passed the age when children understand that adults can't always be trusted. That they don't always speak the truth, even when they mean to. You wonder if from now on you will forever be standing before someone who looks at you and judges, knowing things about yourself even you do not know. You want to explain the presence of the bags and boxes, tell her not to worry, her cats will be fine, but she has already moved away from the car, her white face ghostly in the deepening shadows. Again you think you hear something unusual and you stare at length at the rows of trees, the road, the space around the silent house. But there is only the wind, now growing cool, moving slowly across the soil.

It's nearing dusk when you emerge at an intersection that marks the end of the orchard. A quick study of your map shows that you are still just east of Fresno. How is this possible? You feel as though you've been driving through the forest of peach trees for hours.

You turn west. Near the city you stop at a phone booth in the parking lot of a gas station and look in the Yellow Pages for the address of a local animal shelter. The heavy, awkward book keeps falling out of your hands, as if impatient to slough off the attached plastic binder and its theft-proof metal cord. You freeze up with frustration, it's all too much, and you consider going back to your car for your cellphone, which you turned off that morning. No: the cellphone will remain off, you will remain at the booth. You grasp the book, find the address and phone number, insert the coins, dial for directions. When you let go of the phone book the entire booth rattles, quivering metal and glass. Your mind produces the image of a ship putting down anchor, but by the time you've returned to the car, your thoughts have moved on.

When you drop off the cats at the shelter—you say that you found the box in a nearby parking lot—a young, cheerful woman gives you a piece of paper to fill out.

"So we can contact you when they're placed," she says, smiling. She adds that you shouldn't worry, kittens are easier to find homes for than adult cats. You begin writing down your address, then realize it's the old one. But you don't know your new address; you'll have to go to the car to get it. Just then the phone rings. While the woman is talking and looking at something on her desk, her head bent, you walk out.

It's not long before you've made your way to I-5, where you join the stream of automobiles rushing south at 80 miles per hour. Your mind is mostly blank; occasionally there flickers an imagined pic-

ture of the empty apartment in Studio City. As you near the Grapevine's summit a sharp cry rises above the thick drone of traffic, and your eyes fly to the seat next to you. It's the cats—for a moment you forgot about the shelter and you thought they were still in your car. But in fact they were oddly silent the entire time they were with you. Had they been afraid, or merely asleep? From the girl's cardboard box they would have been transferred to a metal cage in a back room, and from there to an uncertain future. Your heart lurches and you wonder if you did the right thing and then the cry comes again, still fresh in your memory from earlier that morning *why why* your children's voices you will always hear and will never hear. You force yourself to focus on the road *why* now descending into the city, on the streaks of white and red lights from the thousands of vehicles, the enormous trucks creeping down the mountain, hugging the edge of the highway, some of them so clearly burdened with hidden freight you can only wonder what prevents them from falling over.