Kinky Friedman
When the Cat’s Away

'Genuinely funny fiction is rare, but genuinely funny crime fiction is rarer still. All the more reason, therefore, to celebrate Kinky Friedman.'
Sunday Times
“When the Cat’s Away gleams with wit and insight and that hard-eyed look at a perturbing world that is Kinky Friedman’s trademark.” —ROBERT B. PARKER

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KINKY FRIEDMAN

“The Damon Runyon of the ’80s” (New York Woman) is back with the third in a series of mystery novels renowned as much for their wisecracking, cigar-smoking, cat-loving reluctant hero-detective as for their pungent New York-based stories.

And he’s at his funniest and sharpest in When the Cat’s Away, which begins with the search for a cat that has mysteriously disappeared from the cat show at Madison Square Garden, a tranquil lovefest populated by cuddly kittens and their adoring but eccentric owners. But when it’s disrupted by the kidnapping of Kinky’s friend’s cat, he promises to help find her.

While searching for this white-pawed wonder with the aid of his modern-day Watson, Ratso, Kinky stumbles into a gang war between Colombian cocaine cartels, a smoldering love affair with a pretty Palestinian, and several rather ghastly murders.

The race to find this friendly kitten’s link to violent murder is vintage Kinky.
When the Cat's Away
By Kinky Friedman

When the Cat’s Away
A Case of Lone Star
Greenwich Killing Time
The word “book” is said to derive from *boka*, or beech. The beech tree has been the patron tree of writers since ancient times and represents the flowering of literature and knowledge.
One magic midnight show
She taught you how it feels
Once, oh so long ago
When rock ’n’ roll was real

For Kacey Cohen,
The angel on my shoulder
Winnie Katz’s lesbian dance class was like God. Mankind never saw it, but you always knew it was there.

Of course, Moses had seen God. In the form of a burning bush, interestingly enough. Then he took two tablets and went to bed.

There are people who have seen God since, but we have a place for them. It is called Bellevue and the area around it, for a twenty-block radius, is regarded as having one of the highest violent-crime rates in the city. That’s because it’s impossible to tell who’s insane in New York.

Every seven minutes they let a perfectly normal-looking guy out of Bellevue. He walks a block or two, buys a pretzel on the street, asks somebody what time it is, then has a flashback to the Peloponnesian War. He takes out a Swiss Army knife and cuts some Korean woman’s head off. Uses the wrong blade. The one you’re supposed to cut nose hairs with. Of course, it isn’t his fault.

Not everybody’s had the opportunity to be in the Swiss Army.

I listened to the rhythmic thuddings in the loft above me. I wondered what the hell was really going on up there. If somebody’s wayward daughter from Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, was being broken down like a double-barreled shotgun, it’d be a hell of a lot of early ballroom lessons gone to waste. On the other hand, what did I know about modern dance?

It was a chilly evening in late January and I was sitting at my desk just sort of waiting for something besides my New Year’s resolutions to kick in. If you’re patient and you wait long enough something will usually happen and it’ll usually be something you don’t like. I poured a generous slug of Jameson Irish whiskey into the old bull’s horn that I sometimes used as a shotglass. I killed the shot.

Like my pal McGovern always says: gets rid of the toothpaste taste.

I was dreaming the unisexual dreams of the everyday houseperson, when the phones rang. There are two red telephones in my loft, both connected to the same line, at stage left and stage right of my desk. When you’re sitting at the desk they ring simultaneously on either side of what you’re pleased to call your brain. While this may upgrade the significance of any incoming wounded you’re likely to receive, it can also make you want to jump into your boots and slide down the pole.

I woke with a start, which was a good thing. Daydreaming while smoking cigars can be a fire hazard. It can be as dangerous as drugs and booze unless you know what you’re doing. If you know what you’re doing, it can be as safe as walking down the street. Long as you’re not daydreaming within a twenty-block radius of Bellevue.
I watched the phones ring for a while. I’d been dreaming about a girl in a peach-colored dress. Another couple of rings wasn’t going to hurt anybody. I took a leisurely puff on the cigar and picked up the blower on the left.

“Spit it,” I said.

A woman was sobbing on the other end of the line. I tried to identify her by her sob but I couldn’t. Maybe it was a wrong number.

Finally, the voice collected itself somewhat and said, “Kinky. Kinky. This … this is Jane Meara. Jane Meara was a friend of mine, a pretty, perky, intelligent girl and one of the authors of the book Growing Up Catholic. At the moment it didn’t sound like she’d grown up at all.

Grieving women are not my long suit. I have found, however, that a direct, almost gruff demeanor is usually quite effective. Anyway, it was all I had in stock.

“Jane,” I said, “pull yourself together. What the hell’s the matter? Your guppies die?”

This, apparently, broke the dam. A heartfelt wail was now coming down the line. I put the blower down on the desk. I puffed several times rapidly on my cigar. When I picked up again it was just the right time to hear Jane saying, “I wish, I wish my guppies had died.”

“C’mon, Jane,” I said, “what is it? You’re cuttin’ into my cocktail hour.”

I could hear her shoulders stiffen. She snuffled a few more times. Then she said, “My cat disappeared.”

“Relax, Jane,” I said. “We’ll get it back. What’s the cat’s name?”

“Rocky.”

“What’s he look like?”

“It’s a she.”

“Fine.”

I got the pertinent details from Jane. Rocky was yellow and white with four white paws. According to Jane she “looked like she was wearing sweat socks.” Rocky’d disappeared—vanished into thin air—right in the middle of a cat show at Madison Square Garden. Jane had stepped away for just a moment, and when she’d returned the cage was empty and the cat was gone.

I pressed Jane for a little more information, made some reassuring noises, and gave her my word I’d hop right on it.

I hung up, walked over to the kitchen window, and watched the gloom settle over the city. Monday night and it looked like it.

The cat show, according to Jane, would be purring along all week and would be closing each night at nine. It was now nudging seven o’clock. I’d have to work fairly fast.

If the cat was still in the Garden, there was always a chance. She might wind up on the wrong end of a hockey stick, but there was a chance.

If Rocky’d gotten out of the Garden and into the street, getting her back would be tough. Almost as tough as getting back a girl in a peach-colored dress.
Finding lost cats is not the most romantic, macho experience a country-singer-turned-amateur detective might get into. But there was something rather poignant about the hopelessness of Jane Meara’s situation that I couldn’t bend my conscience quite enough to ignore.

I puffed on my cigar and reflected that I’d never much liked cats myself. Until one winter night about eight years ago in an alley in Chinatown when I’d met the first pussy that ever swept me off my feet.

Now I have a cat. Well, that’s not quite accurate. A cat and I have each other. We inhabit a large, drafty loft on the fourth floor of a converted warehouse at 199B Vandam, New York City.

In the summer the loft is hotter than Equatorial West Topsyland. In the winter it’s so cold you have to jump-start your electric toothbrush. The landlord has promised to do something about it. The cat and I live in hope.

Cats, country music, and cigars have become the three spiritual linchpins of my life. Actually, I have a few other spiritual linchpins and they also begin with a c, but we won’t go into that now.

If I was going to find Jane’s cat, I’d better get cracking.

I called Ratso, a friend of mine who, over the past few years, had accompanied me in solving several rather ugly murder cases in the Village. Ratso was loud, garish, and fiscally tight as a tick, but he was also warm, loyal, and blessed with an ingenious spirit. He was as worthy a modern-day Dr. Watson as I was ever likely to find. Good help is hard to get these days.

Ratso was not home so I tried him at the office. He was the editor of the National Lampoon. Maybe he was working late, I thought. He answered the phone himself.

“Leprosarium for Unwed Mothers,” he said.

“Ratso,” I said, “it’s Kinky. I need your help. I’m looking for a lost cat. It got away at the cat show down at the Garden.”

My words were greeted by laughter and hoots of derision. It became quickly apparent to me that Ratso had put me on the speaker phone. I could hear Mike Simmons, the other editor of the magazine, shout, “If you find that pussy, give me a call.” There was more laughter. I was beginning to run out of charm.

“Ratso,” I said, “either you’re coming or you’re not.” Simmons shouted again, “That’s what she told him last night.” That one seemed to crack up the whole office.

“Listen, Kinkster,” said Ratso, “you and I’ve got better things to do than run around New York looking for a lost fucking cat. You’re a hero, Kinkster.” I winced slightly and took a puff on the cigar.

Ratso continued, “You solved the Worthington case. You got McGovern off the hook. Remember?”

“’Fraid so,” I said.

“You saved the girl at the bank from the mugger.”

“Anybody could’ve.”

“But anybody didn’t—you did. That’s why you’re somebody. You’re hot. You’re happening! You can pick and choose, baby.”

“Look,” I said, “it’s just something I’ve gotten myself into. I’ll go down there alone.”
There was a moment of silence on the line. Then Ratso said, “All right, I’ll meet you at the Garden. Window eleven. Fifteen minutes.”

“Make it ten,” I said. “We take any longer, this cat’s gonna be out at LaGuardia asking for an aisle seat in the nonsmoking section.”

As I hung up I heard Ratso mutter something to himself. It sounded very much like “Fucking cat.”

I put on my hat and my old hunting vest and took three cigars for the road. I put them in the little stitched pockets of the vest where some Americans keep their shotgun shells.

“You see,” I said to my own cat as I left for the Garden, “he’s not such a terrible Watson after all.”
Ratso was waiting for me at window 11. He looked like an amiable pimp. He wore a coonskin cap—minus the tail, fuchsia slacks, and red flea-market shoes that, as I often pointed out to him, had once belonged to a dead man. To round it off, he wore a blue sweatshirt that said NATIONAL LAMPOON COHABITATION TEAM.

“Nice outfit,” I said. “You look like the Don Juan of all ticket scalpers.”

“Thanks,” he said. “Wardrobe by Hadassah Thrift Shop.”

We walked down the corridor toward the Felt Forum, with most of the people going in the opposite direction. They looked like harmless, happy cat fanciers. A few of them carried cats in cages, but under close scrutiny none of the cats were wearing little sweat socks.

Jane Meara was standing by the entrance to the exhibition hall. She looked like a biker gang had just raped her Cabbage Patch doll.

I introduced Jane to Ratso and the three of us made our way into the hall. The whole place had the air of a carnival that couldn’t make up its mind whether or not it was leaving town. All around us people were either packing up their cages or preparing their cats for last-minute judging. Every few moments someone would race by with a cat on his upturned palm like an Italian waiter with a rush order pizza.

Rocky’s empty cage had food, water, a litter box, a bed, and lace curtains. If the rents kept going up, I might check in there myself.

Rocky seemed very gone indeed.

A woman came up beside us wringing her hands. “This is terrible,” she said. “I’m Marilyn Park, the producer of the show. This is the first time anything like this has happened at one of our shows. I know how you must feel, Jane, dear.”

Jane nodded and let go with a little sob.

“Look, Miss Park—” I said.

“Mrs. Park,” said Mrs. Park. “My husband and I produce the shows together and I told Stanley security here at the Garden should’ve been tighter.”

“Mrs. Park—” I said.

“Call me Marilyn,” she said. “And we will find the cat. We have people checking right now into all the places a lost little pussycat could go.”

“Marilyn,” I said, “do you think the cat is loose in the Garden or do you think someone could’ve taken Rocky?”

“All the cats,” she said, “have identification numbers. They’re checked coming in and leaving the exhibition hall.”

“Well,” I said, “do you think …”

I stopped.

Something was winking at me from beneath the lace curtains in the corner of the cage. It was too short to be a Times Square hooker. It was too small even to be a cat. I reached into the cage, put my hand under the curtains, and withdrew a metal object.
It was the key to room 407 of the Roosevelt Hotel.
I turned the key over in my hand. I put my arm around Jane Meara.
“I don’t think Rocky’s in the Garden,” I said.

* * *

The cab ride over to the Roosevelt was a bit strained. Jane appeared to be fighting off a mounting hysteria. Ratso was behaving like a self-appointed member of a lost-cat support group.

“We’ll find him, Jane,” he said. “We’ll find him.”

“He’s a her,” wailed Jane.

“Don’t worry,” said Ratso. “There ain’t a cat alive that the Kinkster can’t find …”

“That’s what I’m worried about!” sobbed Jane. “Whether she’s alive!”

“… blindfolded,” continued Ratso, in a stubborn, almost toneless voice.

I was trying not to listen to them. I was trying to think. Why would someone want to steal Jane Meara’s cat? I couldn’t make head or tail of it.

Marilyn Park had told us that the Roosevelt Hotel was where all the out-of-town cats were staying for the cat show. Almost a thousand of them. One of the few hotels in the city that allowed cats.

As we got out of the cab in front of the Roosevelt, I looked up at the hotel. It looked like a giant gray ship in a children’s book, and I imagined hundreds of little cat faces staring down at us from the portholes. I wondered what was waiting for us in room 407.

We crossed the hotel lobby and took the elevator to the fourth floor. Room 407 was down the hall to the left. The hallway was gray, dusty, and smelled like buildings used to smell when you were a child.

I knocked sharply on 407.

Nothing. Not even a meow.

I inserted the key into the lock and opened the door. I hit the lights and we took a look around. The room was not quite empty.

On the bed was a note scrawled on Roosevelt Hotel stationery.

It read: “What’s the matter—cat got your tongue?”
We put Jane Meara into a cab. Exposure to a distraught woman was not healthy for Kinky. And my increasing surliness wasn’t likely to calm Jane’s heart. Somewhere there was a guy who could comfort her. A guy who could take her in his arms and tell her, “Don’t worry, honey, everything’s going to be all right.” Unfortunately, the guy probably sang in the Gay Men’s Chorus.

Ratso and I crossed Forty-fifth at Madison, took a left, and walked halfway up the block to J.R. Tobacco, home of the Jamaican “A” cigar. The Jamaican “A” has been aged for one full year. The cigar has more breeding than some people I know.

“Scratch one tabby,” said Ratso moments later as the two of us were walking down Fifth Avenue smoking our Jamaican “A’s.”

“Eighty-six one mange-ridden mouser.”

“Not particularly spoken like a cat fancier,” I said.

“I hate the precious, preening, putrid little bastards.”

I took a puff on the cigar as we walked along the avenue in the cold. “They speak very highly of you,” I said.

“I mean it,” said Ratso, poking the air vehemently with his cigar. “I hate the little bastards.”

“You’re not alone,” I said. “Brahms used to shoot them from his window with a bow and arrow. Napoleon hated cats as well.”

“The French hate everyone.”

“Except Jerry Lewis. Hitler hated cats, too.”

“He wasn’t real partial to Jews, either,” said Ratso.

“No,” I said.

We walked along in silence at a fairly brisk pace until we got to Thirty-fifth Street. I pointed to the right in the general vicinity of some old brownstones. “That’s where Nero Wolfe lives,” I said.

Before Ratso could say anything, a dark blur shot through the street directly across our path. A black cat.

Ratso made a hard right up my leg and tried to nest in my vest pocket. I didn’t think he was a Nero Wolfe devotee, so I had to assume that he was avoiding the path of the black cat. Couldn’t blame him.

We were only a few blocks from the Garden and I felt I would be remiss in my responsibilities as friend and country-singer-turned-amateur-detective if I didn’t go back and look for Rocky one more time. Not that I figured we’d find anything.

I bribed Ratso to come along with me to the Garden. I offered him three cigars and promised I'd buy lunch next time at Big Wong, our favorite Chinese restaurant. It was almost shameful to have attempted an adult in this way, but as Ratso pointed out, he hardly knew Jane Meara, and his dislike of cats was long-standing and rather intense. It would’ve been useless to try to reason with him.

In fact, the whole little affair didn’t seem to be making a hell of a lot of sense. Somebody, it would appear, was playing a pretty mean prank on Jane Meara. And Jane Meara was the kind of person who didn’t have an enemy in the world. Never much liked that kind of person myself. Still, I couldn’t imagine hating her. Evidently, someone could and did.
Or maybe it was Rocky they were after. But Rocky, from what I understood, was more of a house pet than a grand champion. Outside of her four little sweat socks, there wasn’t much about her that would whip your average cat fancier into a sexual frenzy. Of course, cat fanciers had been known to have rather strange appetites. Stranger even than the menu at Big Wong.

We got to Eighth Avenue and entered through the side doors of the Felt Forum. It was nudging nine o’clock and there was a steady stream of cage-carrying cat fanciers and assorted spectators leaving the Garden area. We had almost gotten to the entrance of the exhibition hall when I noticed a worrisome knot of people gathered in a corner off to the left-hand side of the lobby. At the center of the small crowd stood a big, burly man with a little notebook.

He looked unpleasantly familiar.

A large woman carrying a large cat in a large cage blocked my field of vision for a moment. When she stepped out of the way, I caught a brief but sufficient glimpse of the malevolent mug of Detective Sergeant Mort Cooperman from the Sixth Precinct. Sufficient to remind me that Cooperman and I were not exactly chummy. And sufficient to tell me that something was terribly wrong at the cat show.

If they’d found Rocky, somehow I didn’t think it was going to be pretty. I was glad Jane Meara wasn’t around. “Ratso,” I said, “I think we’re too late.”

“Too late? What do you mean?”

“I mean I think we’ve got a dead cat on the line.”
When you look for something in life, sometimes you find it. Then you find it wasn’t what you were looking for. Then you wonder why the hell you went looking for it in the first place. Just curiosity, you figure. You rack your brains trying to remember what curiosity did to the cat. Did it make him healthy, wealthy, and wise? Did it help him get the worm? Oh, Christ! It killed him!

But by now it’s too late. You catch your reflection in a stolen hubcap—you’re a cat. The specter of curiosity, which looks like a large, seductive Venetian blind, stalks you across miles and miles of bathroom tiles … across the cold and creaky warehouse floor of your life … across a candlelit table in a restaurant that closed twelve years ago. Shut down by the city for being too quaint.

I killed what was left of the Jamaican “A” and Ratso and I walked across the foyer to where the people were standing. We were just in time to hear Marilyn Park say to Sergeant Cooperman, “Nothing like this has ever happened at one of our shows.”

Ratso nodded solemnly and winked at me. I watched the man standing next to Marilyn Park, a shadowy fellow whom I took to be her husband, Stanley Park. The one who thought the security at the show was adequate. He was introducing a third man to Cooperman.

“Sergeant,” said Stanley Park, “this gentleman is Hilton Head. He’s in charge of all our public relations. The spokesperson for the whole show.”

Head was a nervous, rather effeminate man who ran a limp hand through limp hair and kept repeating the phrase “… such a pussycat … such a pussycat …”

Cooperman glovered at the young man and scribbled a thing or two in his little notebook. You can always tell a cop with a notebook from an angry young novelist with a notebook. Both of them are angry, but the novelist opens his notebook from the side while the cop flips the pages over the top.

Cooperman flipped a page over the top and looked up from his notebook. He was not pleased to see me standing there in the small crowd of cat fanciers.

He tried to pick me up by the scruff of the neck with his left eye.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, “talk about a bad penny.”

“Did you find the cat?” I asked.

“Did we find the cat?” said Cooperman with a smile. “Yeah, we found the cat.”

“Where’s the cat now?” I asked.

“Where’s the cat now? The cat’s right back here in this office.” He jerked his thumb toward what looked like a small cloakroom.

Cooperman had a fairly sick smile on his face that I couldn’t quite cipher. I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

“Wanna take a look?” he asked.

I shrugged and motioned to Ratso and the two of us followed his trucklike body into the small room adjoining the foyer. At first I didn’t see anything because a camera flash went off practically right in my eyes. When I could see, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. The room was a beehive of activity. Cops and technicians all over the place. Rocky was nowhere in sight. But something else was.

On the floor in the center of the room was the body of a man. His chest was so red it looked like E.T.’s little heart-light.
There was a blood-encrusted, gaping hole where you kind of expected a mouth to be.

“How do you like that?” said Sergeant Cooperman cheerfully. “Looks like the cat’s lost his tongue.”
If life is but a dream, death is but a nightmare. That information notwithstanding, I was pleased to find, when I woke up Tuesday morning, that my cat was still in the loft and my tongue was still in my head. All things considered, not a bad way to start the day.

I fed the cat, put the espresso machine into high gear, and lit my first cigar of the morning. I looked out the window at the sun-dappled, grimy warehouses across the street. The billboards were glistening with dew. The rust was shining on all the fire escapes. It was a beautiful morning.

I sat down at the kitchen table for a quiet cup of espresso. If you ignored the constant rumbling of the garbage trucks, everything was fairly peaceful. One of the appealing things about this case, I reflected, was that a dead man with his tongue cut out couldn’t give you any lip.

I sipped the espresso from my Imus in the Morning coffee cup. I puffed the cigar and watched the blue wreath drift upward toward the lesbian dance class. Pretty quiet up there just now. Maybe they were getting into their little lesbian leotards. Or out of them. The whole world loves a lesbian, I thought, and nobody knows dick about her. Of course, when you’ve got ’em thudding on your ceiling all day long, even lesbians can lose a little magic.

If lesbians were a mystery, so was the dead man at the Garden. But I knew a little more about him. Just a little more. His name was Rick “Slick” Goldberg. He had a cat entered in the cat show. When he hadn’t been busy entering cats in cat shows, he’d been a literary agent.

I had not gotten this information from Sergeant Cooperman. When I’d asked him who the dead man was, he’d asked me if I was next of kin. I’d told him I didn’t know because I didn’t know who the dead man was. He’d told me to wait till tomorrow and ask a newsboy. That was that.

But if you hang around a few crime scenes you usually learn a thing or two, besides not to hang around crime scenes. Once you get behind the police lines into the crime scene search area, it is assumed that you belong there. Like being backstage at a rock concert—once you’re actually there nobody questions your presence. So I’d gotten the information from a uniform who was standing there listening to his hair grow.

I poured myself another cup of espresso and thought it over. Rick “Slick” Goldberg. Cat fancier. Literary agent. Current occupation: worm bait. Nothing too slick about worm bait—we’re all worm bait waiting to happen. It’s what you do while you wait that matters.

Unless you wanted to count my laundry, there were only two things that I needed to do at this moment: find out all I could about the tongueless stiff at the Garden, and find out who’d occupied room 407 at the Roosevelt Hotel yesterday. I decided to call the Roosevelt Hotel.

Rick “Slick” Goldberg would keep.
“Good morning,” said the blower on the left, “Roosevelt Hotel.”

“Can I speak to the cashier, please?” I said.

“One moment, sir.”

“Fine.”

I waited. I puffed patiently on my cigar as I sat at the desk. I was going to get only one take on this and I knew it’d better be a wrap. I didn’t think the “cat got your tongue” note and the stiff sans tongue at the Garden were just one of death’s little coincidences. It was past time to turn the note over to Cooperman, but I wanted to take one little shot at the situation first. Maybe I’d hit the side of the barn.

“Cashier,” said an irritated, almost petulant voice. It was the voice of a woman you wouldn’t care to meet.

“Mornin’, ma’am,” I said in a bright voice. “This is the FTD florist in Fort Worth. Chuck speakin’.

Try to disarm her with a little southern charm. I thought briefly of how John Kennedy had once described Washington, D.C.: “Northern charm and southern efficiency.”

“Yes?” she said impatiently.

“We’re havin’ a little booger of a problem down here, ma’am. I thought like maybe you could help us with it.”

“Yes?” Sounded like she was warming up to me. “Seems we sent our Silver Anniversary Cup Bouquet—it’s been a real popular item for us—we’ve got a lot of retired folks down here …”

“Sir …”

“… sent it out yesterday mornin’ to a Mrs. Rose Bush from here in Texas—I think they said she was related to the Vice President—second cousin or somethin’ like that…. “

“Sir! What exactly do you want?”

“Well, now, we sent it to Mrs. Bush—to her room there at the Roosevelt Hotel—and somebody signed for it and took it and now I hear from the boss that Mrs. Bush never did get it. Boss’s madder than an Indian who’s trying to take a peepee and can’t find a teepee.”

There was a silence on the line. Finally, the cashier asked in a rather curt voice, “What room was the—uh—Bush party in, sir?”

“Well now, let’s see … The Silver Anniversary Cup Bouquet was sent to—hold the weddin’, I’ll find it—here it is—room 407.”

“Just a moment, sir.” There was a pause while the cashier checked her ledger. “There must be a mistake, sir. There’s no Bush party registered.”

“Well, I’ll be hog-tied and branded.”

“Will that be all, sir?”

“Well, now, you see, if I could get the name of the party that was registered in that room—just for our records, you see—I’d be off the hook. As the catfish said to Little Black Sambo.”

There was a deep and somewhat disgusted sigh on the other end of the line. Then a silence. Then an abrupt decision was apparently made. “The party registered in room 407 was not from Texas,” said the cashier in an almost haughty voice. “The party was from Connecticut. The party’s name was Fred
Katz.”

I took a thoughtful puff on my cigar. “Care to spell that?” I asked.
They say that death is just nature’s way of telling you to slow down a little bit. Whether or not that is true, it can certainly add a slightly bitter taste to your espresso.

I listened to the lesbian dance class starting up over my head and I listened to some of the darker thoughts dancing around inside my head. Somehow I did not think that Fred Katz was related to Winnie Katz. In fact, I doubted that he was related to anyone. I doubted that he existed.

The name was obviously a rather humorous alias. Or at least it might’ve been if Rocky hadn’t been missing. And if they hadn’t found a stiff in the Garden with his clapper torn out. Little things like that can kill a laugh pretty quickly.

I thought over the whole situation. Somebody’s cat was missing and somebody’s literary agent had gone to Jesus. Which was more important depended on how you looked at the world. In the case hand, however, the cat and the agent were closely interrelated. Whoever’d heisted the cat had written the note, and whoever’d written the note had iced the agent. He’d probably done a few other things too. Could’ve picked up sticks. Buckled his shoe. Well, whatever he’d done and whoever he was, he had to be declawed and neutered fairly rapidly or things could get ugly.

The first step, I decided, was to drop by the Sixth Precinct and lay the “cat got your tongue” note on Sergeant Cooperman. It promised to be an extremely tedious little visit, but if I didn’t go soon, I might be obstructing a lot more than my own slim likelihood of having a nice day.

I had not forgotten about Marilyn Park, Stanley Park, Hilton Head, and the hundreds of other cat fanciers down at the Garden. They’d be there all week. I hadn’t forgotten that an agent like Rick “Slick” Goldberg had probably made a lot of enemies over the years. If he was like most agents I knew, half his clients would’ve liked to have croaked him.

I remembered a little story my pal John Mankiewicz had told me about a writer in L.A. who came home to find his house burned to the ground. A neighbor came over and said, “Your agent came by. He raped your wife and daughter, killed your dog, and torched the whole house.” The writer was stunned. He stumbled through the ashes of his home and all he could say was “My agent came by?”

I’d put on my hat, coat, and hunting vest, stuffed the note in the vest pocket, left the cat in charge and was almost out the door when the phones rang. This was good for two reasons: one, I’d forgotten my cigars; and two, it was one of those calls that can change your life. I went back to the desk, picked up a few cigars, and collared the blower on the left.

“Start talkin’,” I said.

“Kinky!”

“Yeah.”

This is Eugene at Jane Meara’s office. I’m her assistant.” Jane, I knew, was an editor now for a large publishing house.

“Yeah?”

“Jane would like you to come over here right away if you can.”

The cat had jumped up on the desk, and as I stroked her, a little shiver went jogging down my spine.

“What seems to be the problem, Eugene?”

“Well, this may sound crazy—like something out of Agatha Christie—but Jane just got back from
“Get to the meat of it,” I said irritably.

“There’s a butcher knife on her desk. It’s covered with blood.”

I stroked the cat one more time and tried to collect my thoughts. I fitted the last cigar into the little stitched pocket of the hunting vest.

“Sharp move,” I said.
I took the Otis box to the seventeenth floor of Jane’s building, bootlegging a lit cigar the whole way. Things didn’t get ugly till fourteen, when a woman with a hypersensitive beezer got on and sniffed me out. Nothing lasts forever.

I escaped into a small lobby and practically ran into the back of a tall, snakelike figure who’d been doing a fair impersonation of a man studying gourmet cookbooks in a glass showcase. The figure uncoiled and sprang toward me just as the elevator doors closed.

“What took you so long, Tex?” it hissed. It was Detective Sergeant Buddy Fox, Sixth Precinct. “Waitin’ for my nails to dry,” I said. Fox was probably my second favorite American. My first was everybody else.

“I understand,” said Fox, “you been squirrelin’ some evidence in a homicide. Maybe you ought to fork over this purloined letter we been hearin’ so much about. Or would you like to hang on to it till Valentine’s Day?” There was a smile on Fox’s face but it seemed to lack a certain warmth.

I reached into my vest pocket and handed him the note that Ratso, Jane, and I had found in room 407 of the Roosevelt Hotel.

Dear Jane, I thought. Dear, sweet, innocent, little cat-loving Jane. Right then I could’ve killed Jane Meara with a pair of numb-nuts, or whatever they’re called. Any exotic North Korean martial-art device would probably do. She’d gotten me into this mess by appealing to a sense of compassion I didn’t even know I had. Now, albeit unwittingly, she’d thrown me to the dogs, pigs, jackals, lions, wolves—whatever animal you’d choose if you could be any animal you wanted to be. As for myself, I felt like a swallow that had gone down the wrong way and stopped at a service station for directions to Capistrano. I needed either a road map or a Heimlich maneuver and I wasn’t sure which.

Fox escorted me down a maze of hallways to a small office. He motioned for me to go in, stuck his head in the doorway after me, winked, and said, “Wait here, Tex.”

I looked around the room. There was a sofa and a cluttered desk. On the wall were various book jackets. There was a little bulletin board with pictures of Jane Meara at a baseball game and several shots of a cat. I noticed rather grimly that the cat was wearing four little sweat socks. Rocky. I took down one of the snapshots of Rocky and slipped it into my pocket.

I didn’t need Frank and Joe Hardy to tell me I was in Jane Meara’s office. I looked carefully at the desk. I did not see a bloody butcher knife. Of course, it’s a little hard to see one if it’s sticking in your back.

Actually, I thought, it was nobody’s fault. Self-pity could be an important trait in a country singer, but in a detective, it was about as attractive as a busted valise. Maybe the whole, rather tedious situation was just one of the little tricks God plays on us from time to time. Like being born with freckles or coming back from Vietnam on a skateboard.

I was pondering this when a large, vaguely evil form darkened the doorway behind me. Without acknowledging my presence, Cooperman walked around the desk and sat in the chair. Fox slithered across the threshold and motioned me seductively toward the sofa. I walked over and sat down. Still not looking at me, Cooperman took a pack of Gauloises from his pocket, shook one out, and lit it with his Zippo lighter. I took out a cigar and lit it with a Bic. Nobody said anything. If silence was golden,
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The cat is mighty dignified until the dog comes by. It is easy to be brave from a safe distance. Opportunity makes a thief. Under its entry for phrases relating to absence, New American Roget's College Thesaurus in Dictionary Form groups Out of/Outta sight, out of/outta mind with When the cat's away, the mice will play. Proverb: out of sight, out of mind. When something [the cat?] is not nearby, it is forgotten about. (from Wiktionary).