

The adventures of Clarence and his friends (they're cats).

Disco Food Court

by Jim Kreuch

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A Novel by

Jim Kreuch

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3) The Shopping Mall

The next day being Saturday, all of the Bennetts except for Ben were at home. From my perch on the back of the living room sofa, I could see that Mary Ann was gently swaying back and forth on the porch swing, reading a magazine. A perfect opportunity. Standing by the front door, I let out a stream of really annoying meows until Joey came over and let me out. I was just about to run over to fetch Princess when my sister emerged from the row of bushes that stood in front of the porch. She had ditched her collar and was doing her best to look sad and lonely. Sure enough, before two minutes had passed Princess was purring away on Mary Ann's lap. From the look on the girl's face I could tell that it was working like a charm.

"Is that Mrs. Elliot's cat, dear? Mrs. Elliot from down the street?" Betty Bennett was standing just inside the screen door. "Where's its collar?"

"I don't know, it must have come off. I heard she's going to have to give up her cat when she moves. Can we keep it?"

"Are you sure you want to take on another pet? You'll have to feed it and clean the litter box."

"No sweat. We already have Clarence, and feeding one more won't be any more trouble at all. I'll take care of the cats, I promise."

"Well okay. As long as it's okay with your father it's okay with me."

I knew from previous observation of many such instances that the approval of the nominal head of the

family was a mere formality. A *slam dunk* if you will. I have no idea where that phrase comes from, but the humans sure are fond of repeating it.

A middle-aged woman wearing a cotton dress with a flower print pattern and a broad-brimmed hat walked up the sidewalk and approached the house.

"Hi Aunt Martha. Taking your walk?"

"Yes, these days are so pleasant I just had to get out and enjoy the weather. Is your mother home?"

"She is. I'll get her." With that Mary Ann gently placed Princess on the porch swing and went inside. Martha sat down and proceeded to stroke Princess' head and back. Momentarily Betty appeared through the screen door with her daughter at her heels. The latter did an abrupt about face with the first ring of a telephone and had answered it before the second ring had expired.

"Hey sis. I was just leaving for the shopping mall. I wouldn't mind some company."

"I'd be delighted. Let's go."

As soon as it was mentioned that the two-door car would be taken, Princess and I had the same idea, that is, we would tag along. Let me explain. The *tag-along* is a daring maneuver that cats use to hitch a ride, feasible only when one or two humans are going somewhere in a two-door car. The cats hide underneath the vehicle until one or both of the doors open, then quickly jump in. There's just enough room to squeeze in behind the front seats and hide on the floor. And it's got to be quick if you value your tail!

We scampered over to the driveway and hid underneath the car. I took the driver's side, Princess the passenger side. We waited patiently, ready to spring into action. The trick is to avoid the temptation to go when you hear the door open, you see, you have to wait until the human steps into the car so as to remain unobserved. Then you have to jump in quickly and reel in your tail, before they close the door. And believe me, some of these humans slam that door rather quickly. This particular time was a challenge. The two sisters approached the car and one of them, I don't know which, opened the driver's side door. Then they stood there arguing over who would drive.

"Really, I don't mind, dear," said Martha, the older of the two by several years. "You must get so tired of always running around town. Why don't you relax and let me drive? I hardly ever get to drive." I got the feeling that Betty surrendered the car keys reluctantly due to a lack of confidence in her older sister's driving skills. So Aunt Martha opened the driver's side door and started to get in, but I had to wait until Betty turned to walk around to the other side before I could make my move. It was close, but I made it without being seen and, more importantly, with my tail intact. Princess made me proud by timing her move to perfection. We were two happy little stowaways. The car made a sudden lurch and then came to a stop just as suddenly, causing Princess and I to hunker down on the floor mats and hang on.

"Oooh, this car goes faster than mine," came a voice from the driver's side of the car.

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive?"

“No, no, I'm okay. Now where's forward on this thing?”

Once Martha had found *DRIVE* she became overly cautious as if to make reparations for the violence of the exit from the driveway. I managed a peek at the speedometer which was holding steady at twenty miles per hour. Her sister was fidgeting nervously in the passenger seat. My friend and I spent the duration of the crosstown drive eavesdropping, the necessity of keeping still and quiet depriving us of any other form of amusement. We learned that we were on our way to Pinewood Mall, the older of the two climate-controlled shopping centers in town. It had been hemorrhaging tenants ever since the bigger, more upscale Apple Creek Mall opened on the outskirts of town. Ben had heard that it was likely he could obtain a very reasonable rate on some space there for use as his mayoral campaign headquarters. Betty was to meet with the mall manager to pick out an appropriate store front. Martha, no doubt, would seek out a bargain or two while in the neighborhood.

I felt the car come to a halt. My companion and I exchanged glances, then turned around to face our respective car doors. This time the two women disembarked simultaneously, oblivious to the fact that an unseen hitchhiker was jumping out of each door. Princess and I made our rendezvous under the car.

“Why do they call this place Pinewood?” asked Princess. “There's not a tree in sight.”

"If you think that's bad, remind me to tell you about a country called Greenland some time."

"Hey, I smell fish!" said Princess.

"Fish and chips. Yummy!" Sure enough, it was the unmistakable aroma of deep-fried cod and potatoes. We had planned to follow the Bennett women into the main entrance of the mall, but changed our minds the instant we smelled fish. A *no-brainer*, as the humans would say. We ran as fast as our paws would carry us across the warm pavement, which wasn't far. Martha had parked the car close to the building, the parking lot containing only a handful of cars.

Just as we were trying to figure out how to get inside the fish and chips shop, the door flew open. Princess and I hid behind a dumpster where we could see a man step outside and lean against the wall. He was dressed in a white shirt and breeches partially covered by a bright red apron. He casually lit up a cigarette, staring into the distance at nothing in particular.

"Look," I said, "he's left the door propped open."

We wasted no time, slipping inside quicker than you can say *pass the tartar sauce*. The tiny kitchen was unoccupied except for one teenage girl, dressed identically to the man outside. She was sitting on an overturned five-gallon plastic drum, engaged in what was undoubtedly a personal call on the telephone and paid us no mind. The lunch rush was obviously over, or more likely it had never really begun. Princess and I feasted on fries and scraps of fish we found on the floor. You wouldn't believe how much perfectly good food gets

dropped on the floor in fast food joints. I eyed a mouse crouching in a dark corner behind the steam table, but the fish was so good that I couldn't be bothered. Some other time, varmint.

Having gotten this far without detection by anybody with two legs, I invited my furry companion to go exploring by boldly leaping onto the counter of the fish and chips shop and into the seating area of the food court. The fish and chips shop was just one of several fast food establishments lined up one after the other forming three sides of a sizable rectangular room. The fourth wall was non-existent, the food court opening up to the main concourse of the shopping mall. Half of the little restaurants were closed down, though, the number of potential diners having of course dropped off along with the business of the other stores. Only four of the tables in the seating area were occupied. A threesome of mechanics from the tire store across the parking lot hunched over burgers and fries while a pair of clerks from the last surviving dress store sipped coffee. At the third table sat a middle-aged man in a dark blue business suit perusing a newspaper while skillfully shoveling the contents of a plastic bowl into his mouth with a pair of chopsticks.

Princess and I crept over and made ourselves comfortable underneath the fourth table where there sat another middle-aged man, this one in a light blue business suit. The fish and chips man who had been smoking outside came in and sat down. "What's the word?" he said, stirring some coffee in a disposable cup.

"Hanging in there," was the reply. The businessman was slowly shaking his head. "We're still trying to come up with a way to get some of these empty stores rented. When shoppers have to walk past too many of them they get real uncomfortable and quit coming back. The stores that are still open are having all kinds of sales, but it doesn't seem to be doing any good. The good news is that nobody has given me notice to terminate their lease today. The bad news is, the day's not over with yet. I'm telling you, if we don't get some more traffic in this place I'm afraid it's going to be lights out."

"Where's your partner?"

"She's meeting with Betty Bennett about renting some space for her husband's campaign headquarters."

"Campaign?"

"Yeah, Ben's running for mayor. Hadn't you heard?"

"News to me."

"Anyway, don't spread this around, but we're going to let them have it real cheap. I don't want everybody asking for a break, you included."

After a long pause, the fish and chips man looked around and said, "Have you thought of maybe sprucing up the food court a little? Maybe people would come here on purpose for lunch if we made it real nice. And I dunno, perhaps they would do some shopping on the way back to the car. Just a thought."

"Yeah, maybe."

From here the conversation turned to the weather and other boring topics, so Princess and I slipped out and made our way through the mall. We darted from one hiding place to another, a planter here, a trash can there,

so as not to be seen. This was easily done as precious few humans were in the place. A sign in the window of a pet store caught our attention. It said:

Pet Door: lets your dog or cat come and go as they please. No more getting up to let them in and out!

We looked at each other and without a word knew that we were thinking the same thing. After we had thoroughly explored the mall it dawned on me that the Bennett gals would be leaving soon.

"Come on," I said, "we don't want to miss our ride home. It's a long walk back." We retraced our steps through the food court and the fish and chips shop back to the parking lot, taking care to stay out of the sight of the humans. "Oh no! They're gone."

"Not to worry," said Princess with a smug look on her face. "I've been studying my lady's bus schedules when she isn't looking. We can hitch a ride easily enough."

"A tag-along on the bus? That's insane!" Of course I readily agreed to it. What can I say? Cats are crazy. Princess led the way across the parking lot to the bus stop.

"The first thing you need to know is that there's two routes that serve this bus stop. We want route ten. Don't get on the number twenty-two or we'll really have a long walk back. Got it?"

"Got it." We hid behind the trash can next to the bench at the bus stop and waited. After a little while a bus arrived. I was ready to pounce until I saw a pair of deuces, big as life on the display above the windshield of

the bus. We waited until a bus displaying the number ten arrived. The thing didn't stop, but just kept right on going anyway.

"Why didn't it stop?" I asked. "How are we supposed to get on if the stupid thing doesn't even slow down?"

"Hmmm... I guess they don't have any reason to stop if they don't see anybody at the bus stop. Maybe we should sit up on the bench so the next driver sees us."

"Don't be ridiculous. They're not going to stop for a couple of cats. We're just going to have to wait until a human or two show up. You've never actually done this before, have you?"

"Well.... no." We sat there feeling a bit silly for some time. Just when I was about to suggest we start walking, another bus number ten approached and this time it wheezed to a stop. "Of course!" exclaimed Princess. "It's got to stop to let people off, too."

"Why didn't I think of that?" I mumbled half aloud. As the bus came to a halt with a wheeze and a clunk, Princess started towards the door. "Psst! There's another door in the back. They'll see us if we go in the front."

"It's no good. The lady is getting off through the front door. The back one isn't opening." Princess made a mad dash for the door, which was now starting to close. I followed as fast as I could and barely made it. I fully expected to be picked up and unceremoniously tossed back onto the sidewalk, not imagining that we could possibly reach a hiding place without being seen. To my surprise we made it to a safe haven under a seat without any human batting an eyelash. Apparently the driver was too preoccupied with his driving to notice a couple of pint

sized stowaways right under his nose. And the passengers, well, remarkably none of them paid us any mind at all. Each and every one of them had their eyeballs glued to a tiny screen on one kind of hand-held electronic device or another, little things stuck in their ears with the wires hanging down. They were so engrossed in texting, surfing, playing, shopping, calculating and talking that they were completely oblivious to their surroundings.

At the next stop two humans boarded the bus, followed closely by a cat. This cat just stepped right onto the bus and strutted down the aisle making no attempt whatsoever to keep out of sight. I was impressed. I recognized him as a cat I had lately seen around the neighborhood.

"Hey Princess. What are you doing here?"

"Soldier! I thought it was you. We pulled a tag-along to the old shopping mall but missed our ride home. Have you met my brother Clarence?"

"I've seen you around," he said to me. "You're the Bennett's cat aren't you?"

"The one and only," I said, quickly adding, "so far, at least."

"My humans moved in down at the other end of the block from you a couple of weeks ago."

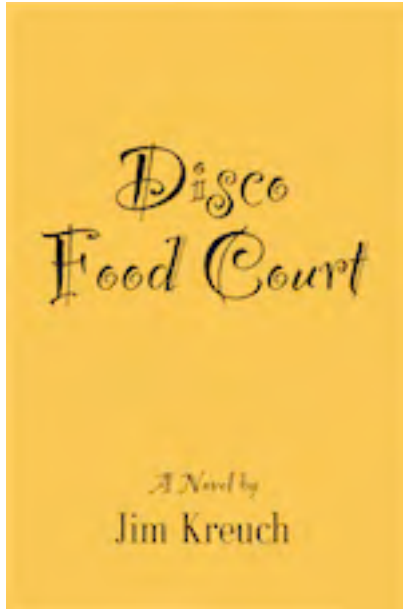
"So how did you get a name like *Soldier*?"

"Quite by accident I'm afraid. My human found me at the scene of a dog fight where a poor mutt who had just gotten clobbered was limping away and whining like a little puppy. The big hound that had administered the beating had left the scene, so the human assumed that I was the one who had whipped the mutt. Humans do that

a lot, jumping to conclusions. Anyway, he figured I was a real tough guy so they named me Soldier. I think he adopted me with the intention of gaining protection from burglars. Imagine that, a watch cat.”

As we rode we told each other stories, somewhat embellished of course, of our experiences and adventures. Like most cats I'm not terribly sociable, but I could tell that Soldier was a good guy and well worth adding to my small circle of companions.

“Our stop is coming up,” he said suddenly. Then he hopped up onto one of the seats, sitting right next to a human. Seeing the astonished expressions on our faces, he said, “don't worry, they wouldn't notice if I jumped up and down while playing a banjo.” Soldier then proceeded to get up on his hind legs with his paws on the back of the seat in front of him. He gazed out the window until apparently spotting a landmark that told him it was time to pull the cord. He reached over the human in order to ring the bell. Need I say that the human remained oblivious, her eyes fixed on the little screen, thumbs tapping madly at the little keyboard?



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