

NIKKI GETS LOST

Once upon a time, there was a boy named TJ. He lived in a big house with his mother and father, his sister Stacie, his cat Nikki, and twelve other cats. Nikki usually had lots of fun playing in the house or the yard, but one day she became bored with always seeing the same old things, always smelling the same old smells. It was obvious that TJ and his family were getting ready to go somewhere. Their mother had called all the kids in from playing, faces were being scrubbed, clothes were being changed, and their father had just put a package in the trunk of the car. "Why should they get to have all the fun?" thought Nikki. One of the car windows was rolled down just far enough for a kitty to squeeze in, and that's exactly what Nikki did. She slipped under the back seat and curled up in a little pocket behind the seat. Soon the rest of the family got in, the car started moving, and Nikki took a nap.

SLAM! Nikki woke up when she heard the car door being closed. She waited a moment to make certain everyone was gone, and then crawled out from under the seat. They were parked in the middle of the city, with the biggest buildings she had ever seen towering over her. Everywhere she looked there were tall buildings, traffic, and crowds of people walking on the sidewalks. One of the kids had left a back window down, so Nikki crawled out and began to explore her new world.

The streets were filled strange new sights, new noises, and new smells. Nikki had to keep close to the buildings to avoid being stepped on, as people were hurrying to and fro without ever looking down at their feet. One store was flooding the sidewalk with the delicious smells of fresh baked goods, like when TJ's mother baked bread only a hundred times stronger. Another store was filled with antiques. Right in the middle of the front window was an old wind-up

phonograph, just like the ones TJ's father had throughout the house. There were lots of stores that sold clothes, but these didn't interest Nikki much. Nikki had never been able to figure out why people wore clothes instead of growing fur. Suddenly, Nikki came to a store with the most wonderful smells she had ever encountered. It was a fish market! She rubbed against the corner to claim this store for her own and began meowing at the door. No one paid any attention to her, but when a customer left the store she slipped in through the open door.

The inside of the fish market was fantastic! Long rows of glass cases held more kinds of fish than Nikki had ever seen in her life. There were giant silver fish lying on a bed of ice, small pieces of fish wrapped in plastic, and piles of crabs, clams, and oysters flooding the store with their delicious aroma. At one end of the store was a large glass tank filled with live lobsters. Nikki put her front paws on the glass and begged for a free sample. Sometimes when she meowed like this at home, TJ's mother would set a plate of food on the floor and call "Kitty Treats!" so all the cats would come running. To Nikki's surprise, however, the store owner did not set down a plate of food. Instead, he came running after her with a broom. "Get outta my store!" he shouted. "I don't want you drooling on the glass!" He threw open the door and, with one well-aimed sweep of his broom, sent Nikki tumbling out into the sidewalk.

"Sheesh! What a grouch!" thought Nikki as she picked herself up. She decided maybe the city wasn't as interesting as she thought and headed back toward the car.

As Nikki walked along, she grew more and more uneasy. She was certain this was where she had left the car, but it was nowhere to be found. She began running, and ran up and down every side street she could find, but there was no sign of the car. It was gone! That meant that

TJ, Stacie, their mother and their father were gone, and Nikki was all alone. Since nobody knew she had sneaked into the car, nobody would come looking for her. Poor Nikki walked slowly along the street, looking down at the sidewalk. She wasn't paying attention to where she was going, because it didn't matter. She had no place to go, no place to live. The sun was getting low, and the shopkeepers were closing up their shops. The shadows were getting long, and Nikki wandered through the shadows.

When she turned into an alley, she perked up a little. There was something to eat nearby, something delightfully old and smelly. Nikki sniffed at the air and tried to locate the source of this aroma. She had been so sad she hadn't noticed how hungry she was, but now she was famished. There! The smell was coming from those garbage cans. With a purr of delight she jumped the trash can. These cans were in back of the fish market, and they were filled with fish scraps!

"Mrowrr!!" Something slapped Nikki on the side of the head and knocked her off the trash can. There was a large, brown and black alley cat standing on top of the trash can. One ear was torn and his fur was all in tangles, but he was at least half-again as big as Nikki. "Stay outta my trash!" he hissed.

"But there's more than enough for two cats," Nikki pleaded. "I'm lost, and I haven't eaten all day."

"Find your own trash can." the alley cat growled. "This is mine! Go away! Leave me alone." The alley cat turned away from Nikki and climbed back into the can.

Sadly, Nikki turned and walked away. She was too sad and hungry to fight. Eventually, she found a small patch of grass to eat. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. She ate the grass in silence, then curled up on an old scrap of carpet she found near an abandoned building. She wished she were back home. She wondered what TJ and his family were doing. They were probably finished with dinner by now. Maybe they were dancing to old records. Sometimes after dinner their father would play old records on the wind-up phonograph with the big horn. He would dance with their mother, and the kids would hop up and down to the music. When the kids were little, their dad would pick them up and whirl around the room with them, laughing all the time.

THAT WAS IT! Nikki had a plan to get back home. She curled up contentedly and purred herself to sleep.

The next morning Nikki was up bright and early, sitting outside the antique store. She waited patiently until the store opened, and then slipped in the door with the first customer. She immediately hopped up next to the phonograph in the front window. She put one paw on the crank and tried to wind it up, but she couldn't move it. Maybe it was already wound. She batted the on/off switch with her paw until she turned it on. She stared at the turntable spinning round, but there was no record on it. She looked at the store owner and meowed loudly.

The store owner and the customer were staring at Nikki in disbelief. "I believe she wants you to play a record, Zeke." said the customer. The store owner grabbed a record off a dusty pile and put it on the phonograph. Nikki winced for a moment when the music started. It was a Jack Smith vocal. She hated Jack Smith records, and to make matters worse the needle was badly

worn. Nevertheless, she scampered to the front of the phonograph and sat down, her head cocked to one side, as she listened to the music. She was trying to look just like Nipper, the dog in the Victor trademark.

"Would you look at that!" the customer exclaimed. "She looks just like that dog in the RCA ad." The store owner was looking. So were a lot of other people. A small crowd gathered outside the store to look in the window, and several people came inside. Nikki listened to records all morning, and the store did a brisk business. So many people tried to buy Nikki that the store owner put "not for sale" signs in front of Nikki and the phonograph.

"I know how to make things even better" the owner said when the crowd had thinned for a moment. He picked up the phone and called the local newspaper. Before long, there was a photographer in the store to take a picture of the famous "Phono Cat."

"Watch this" said the store owner, as he placed another record on the turntable. Nikki pawed at the crank until the owner wound it up. Then she batted the switch to turn it on. The room was filled with the sounds of an organ.

"Skating music!" thought Nikki. "Don't they have any jazz? Maybe a little ragtime?" Nevertheless, she cocked her head to one side and listened attentively to the music while the photographer snapped pictures.

"It's Nikki!!" TJ shouted the next morning when he saw the newspaper. "How in the world did she ever get there!" He excitedly showed the picture to his mom and dad, and soon the

whole family piled into the car and headed for the antique store. Nikki jumped into TJ's arms and started rubbing her cheeks against his chin the moment he walked into the store. It didn't take long to convince the store owner that Nikki was their cat, and soon they were driving back to their house.

"It sure was lucky Nikki got her picture in the paper" TJ's dad said as they drove down the highway.

"Luck had nothing to do with it!" thought Nikki. She curled up contentedly in TJ's lap and swore she'd never leave home again.