

NIKKI'S GIANT SNEEZE

Once upon a time there was a cat named Nikki who lived with a boy named TJ, a girl named Stacie, a baby named Alyssa, their mother and father, and twelve other cats. These cats had lots of fun playing together. Sometimes they'd chase a white Tinkertoy piece down the hallway, batting it with their paws until it flew down the stairs. Then they'd thunder down the stairs after it. The first one to reach it would snatch it up in his mouth and tear back up the stairs, with the others chasing after him. Then he'd drop the Tinkertoy in the hallway, and the game would start all over again. Sometimes they played Kitty Tag, racing through the house in a great, free-for-all chase game. Sometimes they'd go exploring outside, chasing birds and butterflies across the soft, green grass.

One day, when the cats had been playing tag outdoors for the longest time, Nikki grew tired and came inside. She trotted up the stairs to the bedrooms, hopped up on TJ's bed, and was soon fast asleep. She was sleeping in her best kitty behavior pose, with her front paws tucked neatly under her chest and her chin barely touching the bedspread.

After Nikki fell asleep, Mugsy began to feel tired so he too came in for a nap. He snuggled up next to Nikki and was soon fast asleep. A little while later, Bugsy got tired so he came in for a nap. He snuggled up to Nikki's other side, and the three cats lay side by side on the bed. When Coaches came in for a nap, he climbed on top of the three cats and lay crosswise across their backs. Soon he began to snore.

And so it went with all the other cats. Muffin, Nipper, Amber, Jaguar, Dummer, Patches, Roly, and "NJ" (Nikki Junior) all piled on top of the sleeping cats. Finally, Zip came in for a nap. Zip was the biggest, strongest cat of them all. He slowly climbed to the very top of the pile

of cats, stretched his legs and his back, and then settled down to sleep.

Meanwhile, Nikki was having a terrible nightmare. She dreamed she was being chased by a bear. Just when he was about to grab her, he tripped and fell right on top of her, smashing her into the ground. He must have knocked himself out because he didn't move after that. He just lay on top of her, crushing her with his hot, furry body. Suddenly she woke up, and found she couldn't move! The weight of all those cats was pressing her against the mattress so hard that she couldn't pull her legs out from under her. To make matters worse, Mugsy's whiskers were tickling her nose! Every time he breathed, his whiskers twitched and it tickled her a little more. She felt a sneeze building up inside of her, but with all those cats on top of her she couldn't draw a deep enough breath to sneeze. All she could do was draw short little gasps of breath.

Ahh...Ahh-ha...Ahhh-ha...Ahhh-ha-ha...Ahhhhh-ha-ha-ha...

Each breath grew a little larger than the last, as the pile of cats jiggled up and down with her breathing.

Ahhh-ha-ha...Ahhhh-ha-ha-ha...Ahh-Ahh-haaa...Ahhhh-ha-ha...Ahhhh...AHHHH...

AHHHHH-CHOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!

Cats flew everywhere! Patches bounced off the wall and landed on the dresser, with one paw stuck in a model car. She leaped off the dresser and ran down the hall, the toy car clattering

against the wooden floor with every step. Muffin flew across the room and landed on the toy stove, her head stuck in a wicker basket. Coaches landed on the phonograph and lay there in a daze, spinning round and round with the record. And Zip! Poor old Zip flew all the way up to the ceiling and was hanging from the light fixture, his front claws barely clinging to the edge of the globe.

"What's going on here?" TJ's mother stepped into the room and stared at the jumble of cats. In a flash they jumped to the floor and raced out the door. All except poor Zip. He was still clinging to the light fixture. Suddenly he lost his grip. With a loud "Meow!" he fell -- right onto TJ's mother's head!

TJ's mother screamed and Zip leaped off her head. He landed on TJ's desk, his right rear paw stuck in a bottle of ink. He shook the bottle off his paw (which made a terrible mess!) and ran from the room. He zoomed into TJ's parents' room, ran under the bed, and climbed up into the springs through a small tear in the fabric. This was his special hiding place. No one had *ever* found him in there! To his great surprise, TJ's mother walked straight into the bedroom, reached into the springs, and pulled him out! Then he saw why. Trailing across the floor, under the bed, and up into the springs was a string of black, inky pawprints.

The other cats slowly came out of hiding and crept to the top of the stairs. They stared down into the living room, trying to see where TJ's mother had taken Zip. Suddenly, they heard the sound the cats hated most. It was the sound of water filling the kitchen sink. There was a short, desperate "meow!" and a splash as Zip got dunked into the bath. The water splashed for a long time, and then they heard the second most dreaded sound that ever filled a kitty's ears...

Whirrrrrrrr..... It was the sound of an electric hairdryer! It lasted for a long, long time, and then everything was quiet. Everything, that is, except the "clump, clump, clump" as Zip stomped up the stairs. You've probably never hear a kitty stomp. Normally they glide softly

from room to room, or they charge about with thundering paws, but when they're *really* mad they stomp. When Zip reached the top of the stairs they saw why. Around his neck, the ultimate insult to a big strong cat like Zip, was a giant pink bow! His fur was puffed up like cotton candy, and pink ribbon fairly glowed against his white fur. The other cats backed up against the walls, and Zip strode between the two rows of cowering cats.

Zip walked straight up to Nikki. Nikki was scared, but she didn't show it. She stared right back at Zip, and their noses touched. Neither blinked for a moment, and then Zip said one word:

"Ghesundteit!"

Then Zip marched into the bedroom, hopped up on TJ's bed, and lay down to sleep. The other cats slowly crept back into the bedroom and lay back down to finish their naps, but they all lay side by side. No one wanted to sleep on top of another cat!