

The Cat at Light's End



Charlie Dickinson

**The Cat at Light's End
and other stories**

CHARLIE DICKINSON

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This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination, or, if real, used fictitiously.

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~ CD

For Nancia

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THE CAT AT LIGHT'S END

Jayne knew exactly how she, Russ, their daughter Alyssa, and a cat ended up living out of a beater Econoline van, now parked at a Fred Meyer's One-Stop Shopping Center in Portland, Oregon. It was as obvious, as unavoidable, once things were in motion, as a good car wreck. Some six months ago, things got tough when Nehalem Lumber laid off Russ and all the other mill workers.

Nothing Russ or anybody did. The word was simply "No more logs to cut."

Jayne saw Russ and his buddies try as they may to keep each other up with jokes about tree huggers and owls. He put a bumper sticker on the Econoline: ARE YOU AN ENVIRONMENTALIST OR DO YOU WORK FOR A LIVING? Russ's buddies got a kick out of that one.

But Jayne realized the growing truth of a mill that would never reopen was bearing down. They scraped by with money from unemployment. Russ even admitted that because he was out of work, he should take off the bumper sticker. Then he got madder about bureaucrats stealing their way of life and decided the bumper sticker would stay.

Weeks rolled by. The owl jokes got scarcer and what Jayne heard out of Russ was talk about buddies moving on. Some set off for Seattle to drive trucks at good pay, bach-ing it until their families could come up for more permanent arrangements.

Things, though, would not turn for Russ. And when they wanted to have a garage sale and raise money, they discovered Vernonia had too many garage sales and too many people holding cash tight. One thing led to another. They gave away most of their junk, kept a few good things with Russ's brother, and then, a few weeks back, with the rent due, took up life in the van.

Jayne lit one of her cigarettes, the Virginia Slims she called Ginny Skinnies. She did not mind the waiting. Who knows? Russ could get on at Fred Meyer's.

Back of the front seat in the Econoline, Alyssa screamed Toby scratched her, but Jayne knew a scrawny kitten was not up to scratching anybody. "Alyssa," she said in a voice wise to kid tricks. Toby had escaped into the plaid flannel liner of one of the two green sleeping bags.

Jayne let it be and looked over the sorry, plain apartments just outside the parking lot. Did people living there have any idea how quick their personal situation might just sour and leave them out on the street? She took a long drag, then lowered her eyes and blew a smoke ring with her lips *O*d-out like a hungry fish.

Alyssa giggled, then tried to stop, without much success. She was being bad. Jayne raised her cigarette, gave her four-year-old the eye.

Alyssa had Toby up on his hind legs. The light-colored fur on his chest and belly showed more than the darker tabby stripes. Poor Toby looked like some Muppet she wanted to make dance.

Jayne stubbed the cigarette in the ashtray.

"Alyssa, put him down, right this second. Now!" What was it with kids that made them enjoy torturing animals?

"Mommy, I'm not hurting him," Alyssa said softly like she might get spanked. "Toby wants to play." She started to smooth the fur on his back, but he crawled away for the other side of the van.

"Give him here," Jayne said. "He probably wants to go and your teasing don't help things one bit." Jayne winced at the idea of cat pee on sleeping bags. Would that smell ever hang around for a while.

Alyssa flopped over, grabbing the cat by the tail like she was in a game of tackle football.

"Alyssa, watch yourself--he's going to take a leak!"

Jayne took Toby in hand, pushed open the door, got out, and plunked him down on the blacktop. His spindly legs made him look unsteady. He sniffed the pavement. Jayne got a handful of cat litter and tossed it well under the van. She didn't need Russ yapping about stepping in a cat's little puddle.

"Whatcha doin'? Whatcha doin'?"

"This primes the pump," Jayne said, then she picked up Toby and slid his spindly legs smack in the middle of the cat litter. He stood still, then scratched with a forepaw. Alyssa hung out the door, head upside down to see everything.

"Alyssa, get back in the car." Toby was pawing to cover up a patch of damp cat litter.

Before Toby could walk anywhere, Jayne grabbed and tossed him on the sleeping bags. Alyssa took him in her arms.

"I love you, kitty. Don't ever leave me like Figaro. Poor Figaro."

They found old Figaro lying on the back steps, flies all over his head. Jayne told Alyssa he had gone to heaven where every cat is happy. Didn't matter. Alyssa cried she would never have another cat so special.

That is, until Toby a month ago. Toby was free and came with markings just like Figaro.

"Uh, oh," Jayne said, "doesn't look like Daddy's got good news."

Head down, Russ walked back to the van with a bunch of papers.

"How'd it go?" Jayne asked.

Russ pulled himself up to a full six-foot-two and shook the papers like he just might throw them away. "Oh, nice guy and all, wants me to fill these out even though he doesn't have any current openings and nothing coming up." He gazed skyward.

Jayne got another cigarette going. "Oh, sure," she said, her words mixed with smoke, "like on the off-chance he's got some dork in mind he's set to fire any day." Jayne kept an eye on Alyssa.

"Right. Sounds like a line he's paid to tell anyone comes in for employment." His words trailed off.

"Daddy's getting a *jo-ob*," Alyssa said to Toby all singsongy. She had him dancing on his hind legs again.

"Did you tell him you wanted to work produce?" Jayne asked.

"You bet. First thing I said. But he said most likely any opening's gonna be bottle returns."

"Bottle returns!"

"That's what I thought. Then I asked him what the pay was, how many hours, I couldn't believe it."

"That job's for a kid living at home."

"Yeah. I came right out and said no way could I feed a wife and kid and live any place half decent here in Portland."

"And little Toby!" Alyssa cried out.

"I don't know," Russ said. "That little kitty might have to go out for his own dinner this situation don't pick up."

"Mommy, you said we'd keep Toby." Alyssa looked at Toby's golden eyes. "You said he was for me. You did."

"Alyssa," Jayne said, "that's not what Daddy meant. He just meant we might have to find someone to take Toby in if we can't feed him."

That's all."

Alyssa's face twisted with pain as if she knew Russ was really thinking about dumping her cat at the pound.

"No, no, Toby's mine. I'll always take care of him." She was crying.

"A cat? That's the least of our worries," Russ said to Jayne.

Alyssa sobbed tears that got her face good and red. She gasped for breath and blurted out, "Toby's mine. We'll run away. We'll live in the forest." Jayne reached one hand back as if to comfort her, then glanced sideways at Russ.

He had out the electric blue nylon wallet and tore back the Velcro flap stained with grease. "Look, this is it, not even one hundred fifty." Russ thumbed the twenties, the fives, the ones. He slapped the wallet shut. Alyssa got quiet. "This is it. Spend it on food and gas and there's nothing more. So if that cat's gotta go, it's because he's taking chances like all of us."

He grabbed the bag with Toby's food and asked how many cat food cans were left. He ignored Alyssa hugging Toby. Russ counted cans. "Five more days, Toby, you're on your own."

Jayne turned away from Russ. Stared again at the apartments. Why did he single out Toby? And five days? A hundred fifty's not gonna let the rest of them eat much longer. A month, if that. Russ was not in a good mood. She would keep her thoughts private.

They stopped at a pay phone by a gas station. Russ had focus. He copied out addresses for another Fred Meyer, some Safeways, and an Albertson's, all on the Eastside. Jayne did not see what it was with grocery stores. He could cast in different waters. But Russ knew what he wanted: "Produce, not bottle returns." He said it was a matter of saying the same line over and over. Somewhere, some grocery store had to buy the pitch and take him on.

Jayne wanted to tell Russ to apply some place that advertised openings, but then buried in the van was a family heirloom. A pickled thumb from one of Russ's uncles. He axed it off on a dare. Russ could have inherited a genetics problem about not letting go of a challenge. Anyway, Jayne understood, had no advice, especially with how Russ felt about Toby.

So in a parking lot, out a parking lot, the Econoline went and they hit a total of five stores for the afternoon. While they waited at each stop, Alyssa went back to teasing Toby. The shrieks and questions were such that Jayne promised her she could suggest one thing for dinner. At Albertson's, Russ returned to say, "There's only so much rejection a guy can take."

"You made it through your list of stores," Jayne said.

"And I'm beat as a broken drum."

Jayne glanced at store shoppers coming out the automatic doors, pushing loaded carts. "Hate to mention it," Jayne said, "but this place as good as any to get some things for dinner."

Russ folded his arms on the steering wheel and rested his head.

"I wouldn't make you do that. I'll go in," Jayne said.

Alyssa jumped, holding on the seatback. "Potato chips, mommy, potato chips."

They headed over to Forest Park where tall fir trees kept things well in the shade except where sunlight sparkled off a playground slide, a pair of swings, and a merry-go-round, which had a real circle of a rut from kids running next to it.

Alyssa wanted someone to push her on a swing. Jayne sighed. Who could blame the kid cooped up in the van all day? But Russ said first came dinner. Jayne made tuna-and-mustard sandwiches and they broke open the bag of chips and with Pepsi from a 32-ounce plastic bottle, they washed it all down.

After the food was gone, Russ asked Alyssa if she was ready for the swings.

"What's for dessert," she said, then giggled.

"Young lady," Russ said, as if holding back a spanking, "you better be thankful, you got to eat."

"She is, Russ. You saw she ate most of the potato chips." Jayne tied off in its plastic bag what was left of the bread, wondering how to use it for breakfast tomorrow.

Alyssa giggled.

Russ kneeled and brushed his daughter's bangs away from her forehead. "You think she enjoys being a pest?" he said to Jayne.

"No, I'm not," Alyssa said. She put hands on hips, elbows out.

"Then let's see you over on the swings."

Before long, Russ was pushing Alyssa in the swing so far off the ground, she laughed nonstop. She shrieked. Jayne remembered Alyssa could be fun when she was good.

Jayne tossed the trash. What could tomorrow bring? It had been one discouraging day for Russ.

After Alyssa tired of the swing, the merry-go-round, and the slide, they sat around the table and fed Toby dinner and told stories about when things were easier back in Vernonia. The cat licked his fur, cleaning himself. The sky went dark like the shadows around them. With the four of them at the picnic table, Jayne felt for a moment oddly happy, remembering they were a family, forgetting they were living out of a van.

The park was empty and Alyssa was half-asleep against Jayne. Russ yawned.

Jayne carried Alyssa over to the Econoline and Russ followed with Toby. After some tired words, they were ready for the sack.

In the morning, Jayne woke to the sight of Toby curled up on the dashboard. His fur seemed almost on fire in morning light. Jayne studied the glow about Toby. She had slept really well. She was so rested that she did not feel like having a smoke or feel like she needed coffee just yet.

Toby's tail twitched like he was in a dream. How could he know he had five days of food left?

Jayne could see that Toby acted as if things would turn out okay. He had no sense of how tomorrow things could get bad. The sun was there keeping him warm. What else did he need to know?

Jayne knew things would be okay for them too. Toby would keep them going.

Russ zipped himself out of the sleeping bag. His tousled hair needed combing, his stubbly whiskers, shaving. She could kid him about applying for a job looking like that, but she wouldn't. On the front seat, Alyssa slept on, one side of her face reddened with crease lines from the upholstery where she'd turned over. Jayne wanted to untangle the small blanket about her feet, but it was no use waking her.

"Look at that. Asleep," Jayne whispered to Russ when he straightened up for a look, mostly out of habit, at his daughter. "She was so upset yesterday. Hard to believe it's the same girl."

"Upset about what?" Russ locked eyes with Jayne like he was trying to figure how much argument was on tap. "You startin' in on the cat again."

"Russ, I'm sorry. But I've decided we're gonna keep Toby. Come hell, come high water. We're gonna keep him. I'm sorry."

"Sorry, she says. Sorry is another mouth to feed." Russ whipped closed the top flap of the sleeping bag, his face settled down to a good crabbed look. Jayne eyed Toby. His fur had stopped glowing from the

sun. She needed to calm down; she wanted a cigarette. "What do we have?" Russ said. "Six dollars less than I counted out yesterday."

"Wait a minute," she said. "That cat never ate through fifty cents worth of food any day of his life. So what's the six dollars? Besides, that's not the problem. Problem's Alyssa thinks you're gonna take Toby to the pound so they'll put him to sleep." She took a slow, deep breath. Russ could get her mad, she'd let him.

"She didn't get that idea from me. Personally, I don't believe in pounds. Set him free on some back road, he'll survive in the wild--"

"Survive in the wild--you think we can?"

"What do you mean by that?" Russ seemed as confused as some parachutist in a tree.

"Toby no more gonna survive in the wild than we can. You know that, Russ. If he's done for, we're done for. Admit it."

"That the way you want to see it, okay. The money runs out, we're all done for. So?"

"I was just thinking we're all in this together." The sleeping form on the front seat started to stir. "We can't stop feeding Toby anymore we can stop feeding Alyssa or any of us." Jayne thought it was cute how Alyssa would keep her eyes shut, the rest of her moving, when she awoke. "And you gotta hang on to hope that things will turn." She pinched the toes of one foot, suddenly remembering past times she'd enjoy putting coral polish on her toenails. Not any more.

"You gonna give that cat a tin cup?"

"Okay, you keep it up, Mr. Smarty Pants Sad Sack. Let Alyssa and I be positive. We know there's a job here in Portland. Russ is written on it in neon letters--" Jayne smiled at Russ like they could have been the oldest of friends.

"Stop it, you're wishful thinking on me. That job sure ain't got no

Fred Meyer neon letters."

Her face sweaty and flush, Alyssa pulled herself up on the front seat. Her eyes were opened wide like she was lost in the forest, running from that fairy-tale gingerbread house. "Mommy, they were after me. I couldn't run. My legs wouldn't move. I was so scared, Mommy."

Russ's eyes cut to his daughter with a peevish gaze. "That's all those potato chips," Jayne said softly. "You ate too many potato chips last night, Alyssa. Your blood gets agitated, then you get nightmares." Even Jayne could believe that, or maybe it was that she felt hungry for some good food and a smoke afterward. "Say, I have an idea. Let's eat breakfast at a real restaurant."

"What and starve a day sooner?"

"No, over at Newberry's. I saw the sign we drove by yesterday. Breakfast, dollar forty-nine. Two eggs, bacon, toast, coffee. What do you say? It's their come-on special for us folks that are economical."

Russ dropped back his head and gave the torn headliner in the van a quizzical look before he said anything. "I have a choice?"

Jayne figured a man's stomach knows when to stop arguing. "And we could get Alyssa a glass of milk and give her some of our toast."

"We keep him," Russ said, flagging an index finger at Toby, "he better not bring me bad luck, all I have to say."

At Newberry's, the three sat in a row at an old-style counter, its shiny aluminum edging hugging the Formica top. The waiter, an older fellow with a gray crewcut, wore a black-and-white checked shirt under a white kitchen apron. After toweling off the counter, he hesitated about where the towel went, then he gave them breakfast menus with enough awkwardness that Jayne guessed he was covering for someone who was late for work.

Russ went ahead, ordered. Two of the dollar forty-nine specials and a glass of milk, which the stand-in waiter got down on an order pad.

"Will that be all?" he asked, eyeing Alyssa, who was busy unpacking and sorting every jam packet from a counter bowl. Jayne thought better of telling him that Alyssa would share their toast.

Right when the waiter was about to clip the order on the carousel for the cook, Russ stopped scratching his chin and called out, "One other thing, I almost forgot, we'd like a side order of crispy fried spotted owl wings to go."

"Maybe we should put that on the menu," the waiter said. Russ's eyes twinkled like he'd found a timber buddy.

"Russ," Jayne said, "this is not Vernonia."

He palmed Alyssa's shoulder. "I can't say threatening things about her four-legged friend, I gotta unleash a crack or two about Mr. Who-who." Alyssa said the orange marmalades were first and slowly pushed the other jam packets aside. The waiter returned with two coffees and then fetched a glass of milk and a straw.

And minutes later, he brought two plates with the breakfasts and offered to get ketchup or Tabasco. "No," Jayne said, "but can I trouble you for an extra plate. My daughter, she sometimes gets messy." Alyssa wiggled away Jayne's knife.

The waiter studied Alyssa, the four orange marmalade packets she'd piled up on the counter. "Sure thing," the waiter said. "How about an order of toast on that plate?"

"No, she's got enough with milk."

"Today's manager special. Extra toast on a double breakfast order." He clasped his two hands together like he would be ready with the toast in a jiff.

"No charge?" Jayne had to be sure.

"No charge. What do you want, Miss: white or wheat?"

"White toast," Alyssa said and he went to get the toast and Jayne

took a sip of her coffee, blonde with real half-and-half. Why was her squirmy daughter so behaved in public? Maybe thanks to this man who knew a small kid wants her own toast, even when the parents have to watch their money, even when the picky eater is likely to eat no more than half a slice of bread.

With a few people here, there like the waiter, Jayne saw the city could, like Vernonia, be home. Once they stopped living in the van. The van where they still had to feed Toby what little food he really needed. Worse came to worse, she could pick up pop cans and beer bottles for that money. Russ was mopping his egg with toast. She knew he'd come around and not be so choosy about what job he wanted--then he'd get a bounce his way. Jayne knew that as live truth. And, hot damn, the owl jokes were back.

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