

Sealed with a Lick

by Lori De Milto

Of all of Key West's many attractions—natural, historic, edible, cultural, and nocturnal—it is something that few visitors ever see that lures me to the island: the cats. They roam the streets of this semi tropical playground, stretch languidly in windowsills, and perch upon roofs gazing scornfully down at passerby. You don't see them on Duval Street or near most of the popular tourist haunts. But spend some time in Key West's Old Town, where my husband Joe and I rented a vacation cottage, and they'll find you. Like Gray found us.

If you're of a literary mind, you might attribute the profusion of cats to Ernest Hemingway, who kept a yard full of the critters during the 12 years he lived on the island. Today, dozens of cats, many identifiable as descendants of Hemingway's cats by the extra toe on one paw, live contentedly on the grounds of his house. Visitors who aren't careful may step on a tail when walking through the lush, jungle-like garden that surrounds the house. And sitting in one of the wrought iron chairs that adorn the grounds without looking first can be perilous.

On the other hand, the unusually large cat population could simply be the result of the island's semi-tropical foliage: ideal hiding place and hunting ground. Or it could be due to the tolerance of the two-legged natives for all creatures—great and small. Or the leisurely pace of island life that matches the feline temperament. Whatever the reason for their presence, the cats of Key West are certainly an added, albeit little known, attraction.

They even come calling. That's how we met the

cat that we later came to call Gray, over morning coffee our first day on the island. She was gracefully descending the spiral staircase that led from the second floor porch to the small semi-tropical garden where we sat under a palm tree. Stopping on the stair that put her pale green eyes level with ours, she coolly surveyed us. Amused, Joe and I watched her back, wondering where she had come from, and to whom she belonged. Maybe, we speculated, she came with our Old Town cottage; we'd have to take a closer look at the rental agreement. While we were so musing, the cat turned to a more interesting pursuit—leaping gleefully toward a tiny lizard.

Coffee finished, we set off to reacquaint ourselves with our favorite island. We explored the Key West City Cemetery. We wiggled our toes in the warm sand, and swam in the cool ocean. We forgot all about the cat. But when we returned to our cottage, there she was, stretched out languidly on the picnic table. Our picnic table. Which made it particularly galling when she appraised us with disdain.

Having lived with unsociable neighbors before, we simply decided to go about our business. Joe went into our cottage to open a bottle of wine while I settled into a lounge chair with *The Sot Weed Factor*. I was wondering how Ebenezer Cooke and his sometimes faithful servant Bertrand would be rescued from the pirates that were about to make them walk the plank when I felt something moist on my toes. The cat was licking my feet. I must have tasted alright, because she then climbed onto my chest, pushed aside my book, and looked me straight in the eye.

And that, in cat terms, was the adoption ceremony. Signed and sealed with a delicate lick of my right

cheek. We were hers for the remainder of our time on the island. Joe came out to find the cat perched on my chest and I gave him the good news. All that was lacking was a name. The proud papa and I consulted, and we decided to call her Gray, after the color of her fur. Not very imaginative, but then, she hadn't given us much time to think about it. Anyway, Gray must have been happy with the name, because she began answering to it immediately.

Having adopted us, Gray now began following us into the cottage. She moved so fast that we couldn't have kept her out if we had wanted to. When her saucer-like eyes peered up at us from the foot of the refrigerator, which we hadn't gone near, we succumbed, sharing our fat-free milk, our cold cuts, and even our barbecued dolphin (the fish, not the mammal).

Fortunately, Joe was there to guide me in the care of our new family member, since I had grown up in an otherwise wonderful home but one where "pet" was a dirty word. He, on the other hand, had spent his early years with a bulldog living in his kitchen and assorted neighborhood cats under his arm.

We never knew what Gray did or where she went during the day, but each evening when we returned to the cottage, there she was, stretched out on the doormat in front of the cottage. And each morning we woke to find her curled serenely at the foot of our bed.

By the end of our vacation, we had become quite attached to our feline friend. We considered making the adoption permanent, and wondered if Gray had a real home. She had no collar, but then, few of the cats of Key West did. And she looked too sleek and well fed to be a stray. On the other hand, it was us she came to

at night. We thought about the nearly eternal sunshine and the semi-tropical foliage that we would be leaving and the raw cold winter to which we would be returning up north. And we made the decision that was the best for Gray, to leave her in her natural habitat.

On our next trip to Key West, we will rent the same cottage, and sip our morning coffee under the palm tree in the garden. We will watch the spiral staircase, and, with any luck, Gray will come leaping down to greet us once again.