

# Ignatz

By Ron Goulart

GLENN WHEELAN stepped back out of the way as the water came hissing up across the quiet night beach. He rolled his pants cuffs a turn higher and looked back at Karen Wylie. "And the whole thing is worse. Teachers, you know, look forward to vacations as much as kids. More. But I was almost afraid to come back here."

Karen's cigarette glowed red in the darkness. "But San Miguel is much brighter and cleaner. They even have a theater that shows nothing but foreign movies. And three laundromats. Now the place is building up, Glenn."

"Because of a bunch of nitwits who're tired of all the lunatic outfits in Los Angeles." Wheelan moved to the girl's side. "Why, even in Pasadena people talk about San Miguel."

Karen caught his hand and led him up to the beach away from the water, "Well, every town is noted for something. Like one's the lettuce capital and another's the wine center. It certainly doesn't hurt San Miguel to be known."

Wheelan turned from the glare that the city's lights made against the faintly overcast sky. "Ever since I was a kid I've hated cats. They make me feel crawly all over. Like persimmons do."

"Persimmons don't do any such thing," Karen said, tossing her cigarette at the foam below.

"So I come back to my old hometown. Unpack my bags and walk into my aunt's homey kitchen, and she springs it on me."

"What?"

"She's one of them now, too. It's not bad enough a bunch of retired dentists from Omaha go along with Balderstone. My aunt now! I'll have a hell of a time forcing down second helpings. I get this crawly feeling."

"You're as touchy as Pavlov's dog. Everything makes you crawly."

"Well, look, Karen. You've been up at Cal most of the year. Doesn't the place seem odder to you?" Wheelan stepped next to a driftwood log. "Doesn't it bother you?"

Karen sat down on the log and put her elbows on her knees. "I told you, Glenn. San Miguel looks newer

and cleaner. Why, even the slums look better. I think they've painted them."

"The only time we ever had a cat, when I was eleven, it made me sneeze. My aunt made me give it away. I wanted to drown it in a gunny sack but she talked me out of it."

"Oh, you couldn't have. You're too tender and kindly." She held her hand out and motioned him down beside her.

Wheelan sat, feeling the sand seep in over the sides of his loafers. "Maybe I'll talk to Neff. There should be a law against this kind of thing."

"Chief Neff? I doubt if he'll do anything."

"Why?"

"Because he's so active on our Civil Public Relations Committee. And he owns a couple of motels."

Wheelan absently put his hand on Karen's shoulder. "Now, somebody must be against this. Maybe Dr. Watchers. He was even against free paper towels in the public Johns."

"He passed away," Karen said, moving Wheelan's arm around her with her shoulders.

"I could write to the governor," Wheelan said, noticing Karen's soft dark hair fluttering faintly over the tip of his nose. "There must be a law against lycanthropy."

Karen shook her head. "No. They checked on it. There is in one of the New England states. The dunking stool is the penalty, I think."

"Why?" he said in a loud voice.

"Why dunking?"

"No," Wheelan said, blowing her hair out of his face. "Why do people want to turn into cats anyway? My God, it must feel crawly."

"Well, you know what Mr. Balderstone says."

"He's a quack."

"Perhaps. But nevertheless he perfected a method for turning people into cats and back. And that's more than a lot of people have done. He can't be all quack." Karen relaxed and snuggled back against Wheelan.

"Who the hell else would want to discover something like that? You might just as well invent an economical method of canning persimmons." Wheelan shuddered. "Cats."

Karen closed her eyes. "Anyway, he says it's a great tension-reliever. People get out of themselves. Forget their troubles. Aggressions. That's very important in times like these when everyone is worrying about blowing up unexpectedly."

Wheelan tightened his arm around her. "Damn. When I think of all those people going out to the old fairgrounds and turning into cats and yowling around it . . ."

"Makes you crawly?"

Wheelan turned her head up and kissed her.

Karen's tongue shot under his and back and she pulled away. "You take everything too seriously. Mr. Balderstone has a way of helping people relax. So what? What's that Latin thing about disputandum and all?"

"Yeah, but a whole town. My town and yours! And it's given over to turning people into cats."

"My town and yours! You sound like Chief Neff." She kissed him on the cheek. "Hey. Last summer we didn't spend all this time debating."

Wheelan smiled quickly. "I'm maturing. Once you pass twenty-six you get wisdom. You'll see."

"I say if they want to be cats let them. It's very good therapy. And Lord knows we need it."

"It's not right."

Karen sighed. "What was that comic strip when we were kids, about the cat and the mouse? Cicero's Cat?"

"Krazy Kat?"

She nodded. "You're like that mouse. Always have to go around throwing bricks at the cats. And it always got him in trouble. Ignatz. That was his name, Ignatz Mouse. That's who you are."

"Very profound insight." Wheelan ran his hand down her back, touching each of the white buttons on her sweater. "I'm still going to do something about it."

Though she was fading away Wheelan could feel her smile. "Glenri?" she said.

He undid the first small button. "Yeah?"

"I went out there last week. And it is quite relaxing. I've felt much happier this week."

Wheelan got to the second button before he realized what she had said. "Karen, you're kidding!"

"No. So you see, it's nothing so terrible."

Wheelan stood up. "Damn it. Damn it!"

Karen rose, reaching behind her to rebutton her sweater. "You're being pretty intolerant."

"Damn it, the whole town!" He backed away, his feet sinking deep in the cold sand.

Karen shrugged. "Don't take it so big." She looked up at him hopefully. "Well, you'll at least drive me home?"

Belatedly, Wheelan said, "Sure. Come on." Near his car he said quietly, "Now I'm really going to get them."

It wasn't until the next Wednesday that Wheelan had his leaflets ready to hand out. The local printers had, one way and another, refused the Job. He'd had to have them done in Santa Monica.

The two cub scouts he'd hired to help him had both come down with something late Tuesday. Wheelan stationed himself on Chambers Drive near the two largest tourist motels early on the clear June morning.

He had handed out five of his anti-lycanthropy leaflets when Chief Harold Neff drove up on his official motorcycle. Wheelan spotted him a block away by his gold-painted crash helmet. It was the only one on the force.

"Hi, there, Glenn," said Neff, after he'd/parked the cycle in a red zone. "What are you up to?"

Wheelan frowned at the chief's broad, tanned face. "I'm agitating, Hal."

Neff rubbed his jaw. "Without a permit, though?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

The chief nodded. "You'll have to stop. You can't hand out those things without a permit."

Wheelan tucked his box of leaflets up under his arm. "Who do I see about a permit?"

"Me, Glenn." Chief Neff flipped off his helmet and stroked his crewcut, looking down the street. "Let's go down to the Blue Oasis and have a beer and talk."

"Can you drink while on duty?"

"Beer." He took Wheelan's arm.

"What about your motorcycle?"

"Won't come to any harm."

In one of the Blue Oasis's dark leather booths Neff said, "Don't you like the way the old town's blossoming, Glenn?"

"Cats make me feel crawly," Wheelan said, pushing his schooner back and forth in front of him.

"Why, even the slums are a sight to see. And San Miguel's getting to be a well-liked spot. Like Capistrano and Disneyland. Being well-liked is good for a town's civic pride." The chief grinned at Wheelan.

"I think there's something basically wrong with people turning into cats." Wheelan made up his mind not to drink the beer.

"There might be something wrong in it if people did it out of spite or for mischief, Glenn. But I think most competent authorities will agree that Mr. Balderstone's method has a real, honest-to-gosh therapeutic value." He looked straight at Wheelan. "There's a lot of nervous tension these days, Glenn. Even teaching in Pasadena you must have seen that."

"Well, Hal, I'll admit that. I just don't think Balder-stone's approach is any solution."

Neff laughed. "There's not really much solution to anything." He leaned back into the shadows in the booth corner. "You're as interested in our town as anybody, aren't you, Glenn? Growing up here, playing in the Little League, attending Grover Cleveland High."

"Sure. That's why I hate to see it taken over by some crackpot cult."

"You're entitled to your opinions. Just don't hand them out in the form of leaflets."

"About that permit?"

"Well, Glenn, you know how tangled in red tape any government gets. It'll take time. Even with me putting the spurs to everybody. Uh, you're leaving the first part of September?"

"Yeah, when school opens." Wheelan pushed his glass away and slid out of the booth. "It'll take until early September to get the permit, huh?"

"No. With me seeing to it you should have it by the end of August." He stood and shook hands. Something about shaking hands with Chief Neff unsettled Wheelan. Trying not to show it, he walked with Neff out into the light.

Wheelan was squatting, studying the bottom shelves of his aunt's refrigerator. He looked into an opened tin of smoked oysters, then decided against making a sandwich. He opened a can of beer and sat down at the white-topped table. This was the night his aunt went out to Balderstone's. Wheelan shivered. They even had special buses running out there.

The doorbell rang, or rather chimed a tune that had been a favorite of his aunt's during prohibition. Karen Wylie was standing on the front porch in a big tan coat. "Hi," she said. "Busy?"

"Pretty much."

She glanced at his hand. "Can I have a beer?"

Wheelan moved back so she could enter.

After he'd taken her coat and brought her a beer Karen said, "What are you up to now?"

"Well, I sent letters to both our local papers, but they haven't been printed. I suppose you know about my trying to hand out leaflets last week. Then I tried to rent a soundtruck, but Neff says I need a permit for that, too." He sat down on his aunt's chintz-covered sofa. "Now I'm doing a mail campaign."

"Why don't you give up?" Karen watched him with an anxious expression. "What good are you doing?"

"I think that every citizen has a right to act as he chooses. I mean, when an evil exists it's the individual's right to try to combat it."

"With leaflets?"

"In any way he can," Wheelan said.

She smiled. "You Just look silly. And you'll annoy people. Really, Glenn, what's wrong with all this? You're just judging others by your own standards. All this talk about good and evil."

"I don't think people should turn into cats. If they have to, I don't think our town should encourage them." He clenched his fists. "Why, they've got signs on the road now, telling how far it is to Balderstone's temple, or whatever he calls it."

"There's certainly nothing unethical in advertising, Glenn. You're not that narrow-minded."

Wheelan finished his beer and bent the can in half. He was angry enough to do it with one hand. "Let's forget it. How've you been?"

"Wonderful." She touched one hand to her temple. "Very relaxed."

"Which is your night in the temple?"

Karen frowned. "Oh, I've only dropped out a couple of times."

Rubbing his hands slowly together, Wheelan said, "I'm trying to start an anti-cat league, Karen. Would you join?"

Karen laughed and stood up. "How many members have you got?"

"I just started mailing yesterday."

"But so far?"

"None." He picked Karen's coat off the chair he draped it on. "Thanks for dropping in."

Getting into her coat Karen said, "Take it easy, Glenn, will you?"

"I have to do what I think is right."

Karen was smiling as he held the door open for her.

It was a foggy night, two nights after Wheelan had picketed the fairgrounds and been run off by Chief Neff. Wheelan had decided to walk down toward the beach after dinner. His aunt wasn't speaking to him.

Nor was she cooking for him. He got a hamburger at a drive-in across the road from the long, narrow San Miguel beach; then wandered through the fog toward the last sidewalk before the sand.

He heard a car slow behind him, then saw the nose of a Ford convertible slide out of the thickening mist. Eventually he saw Karen, her dark hair in a thin scarf, smiling at him from behind the wheel. "You mad?" she called.

Wheelan finished the hamburger and wiped his hands on his pocket handkerchief. "More or less."

"Want to come along for a drive?"

He came up to the passenger side of the front seat. "Why don't you put the top up?"

"I like the way the fog feels. Come on." She stretched across the front seat and opened the door.

"Someplace in particular?" He caught the door as it swung out.

"Well, yes. Somebody wants to see you."

"Oh?" He got in. "You playing messenger now?"

"Don't be nasty. This is for your own good, or I wouldn't be doing it."

"Okay. I take your word for it." Wheelan stretched his legs out as far as they would go and folded his arms.

Karen made a U-turn on the smooth street and drove carefully back through the town.

Near the fairgrounds Wheelan asked, "You taking me to the meeting with you?"

Karen shook her head, turning the car sharply up a steep, tree-lined street. They stopped in front of a ranch-style bungalow. "Here we are," she said, getting out of the car.

Wheelan followed her up a brick path, his hands in his pockets. The fog was tightening in around them.

A short man with a high, lined forehead and cropped gray hair opened the door of the bungalow. "Evening, Karen," he said, smiling.

"Mr. Balderstone, Mr. Wheelan," Karen said.

Wheelan nodded and came into the house after her.



Balderstone stopped in front of a deep fireplace. "Thought we ought to have a chat."

"I hear you mentioned me in your service the night I picketed your place," Wheelan said.

"Explained to newcomers that you were the town eccentric." Balderstone's heavy gray eyebrows slanted toward each other. "People come to my lectures—don't call them services—to unbend. To relax. Don't like to have somebody shouting at them through a megaphone and waving signs, Wheelan." He crossed the room. "Drink?"

Wheelan shook his head, glancing at Karen.

She had sat in a straight-back chair and folded her hands. "Scotch and soda," she said to Balderstone.

After he made the drinks Balderstone said, "Some consider me a benefactor, Wheelan. I have invented a somewhat unique thing. Applied lycanthropy—though most people think of that as involving only wolves." He gestured, and ice rattled in his glass. "Cats have a much higher therapeutic value. It's essential, Wheelan, for people to get out of themselves now and then. To find relief from tension so that their lives may be more rewarding and satisfying." He moved closer to Wheelan, who was still standing near the door. "These are troubled times, Wheelan."

"I've told him that myself," Karen said, trying her Scotch.

"The results of applied lycanthropy have been most positive. Not only have people been helped, but San Miguel has been helped. Don't think other cities wouldn't Jump at the chance to have me locate there." He cleared his throat. "As a matter of fact, we're considering opening branches. It's my intention to help the entire world."

"And it's my intention to run you out of town," Wheelan said.

Balderstone laughed and shook his head. "Miss Wylie tells me you're a decent fellow, basically, as are so many before the pressures of everyday life remold them. At any rate, I simply want to point out that many of us are annoyed by you. I don't think you want that."

"Yes, I do. I'm out to get you."

"You're getting on my nerves." Balderstone scratched his nose. "Leaflets, pamphlets, letters. Demonstrations. And now I get word that you've been going around to pet shops and florists trying to buy large quantities of catnip."

"Nobody has any."

"Of course not. And I also find that yesterday you visited the humane society in Santa Monica and tried to buy several big dogs. The trouble with you, Wheelan, you've got no civic pride."

Wheelan smiled. "I'm as proud of San Miguel as anybody."

"And further, Wheelan, you can't stand to see people have a good time. And even worse, you're against scientific progress. I'm sure that had you lived in Austria at the end of the last century you would have sent Sig-mund Freud crank letters,"

"He wasn't a quack."

"You annoy me more up close than at a distance."

Karen jumped up. "Mr. Balderstone, perhaps if Glenn attended one of your lectures he wouldn't be so prejudiced."

"I don't want him sulking around my talks."

"But it might convince him."

Balderstone squinted one eye. "Hmm. Perhaps."

Wheelan shook his head. "I wouldn't go near one."

"Oh, that's right, Mr. Balderstone. Cats make him feel crawly."

Balderstone stroked his chin. "You're in need of help yourself, Wheelan."

"Couldn't he stand backstage?" Karen came and took Wheelan's arm. "I'll stay with you, Glenn."

"He'd heckle," said Balderstone, checking his watch. "But if you're willing to vouch for him . . ."

"I'm not going near that place," Wheelan said, "unless it's to bum it down."

Balderstone tightened his tie and studied Wheelan's face. "Destroy city property? Fine citizen you are."

Karen tightened her grip on Wheelan's arm. "Come, Glenn. I know you'll think differently when you see the fine work Mr. Balderstone is doing."

Balderstone was half in a closet, selecting an expensive-looking coat.

Wheelan said quietly to Karen, "You're not going to ...?"

"Change? Not tonight. Please come. I want you to be convinced."

Wheelan was aware that wouldn't happen, but he was curious. "All right."

Everyone was smiling when they started for the fairgrounds.

Balderstone's platform was set up at the edge of the field where tents were once pitched. Just to the left of the platform was the old merry-go-round that had become city property after the last carnival had gone broke. Balderstone's narrow stage was backed by canvas flats, and Wheelan and Karen stood behind one of these on some machinery crates, watching the audience through a peephole in the canvas.

"This isn't my idea of backstage," Wheelan said, taking his eye from the hole so Karen could peek.

"All of Mr. Balderstone's money goes into improving his process. And things like that."

The night was getting colder and high mist hung over the fairgrounds. Only half of the bench seats were filled, meaning probably about three hundred in attendance.

When Wheelan looked out again the lights around the field had dimmed and the two young men with blond, curly hair and double-breasted suits had stopped taking donations at the entrance arch. Balderstone left the folding chair he'd been sitting in and walked slowly across the stage planks to the mike.

"Nothing like a touch of cold to keep people home at nights," he said, acknowledging with a grin the laughter that followed. He smoothed the front of his coat and took a small blue leaflet out of his pocket. "Think you'll find copies of this tacked to your seats. If you're a regular you know the system. If not, best leaf through it."

About a third of the heads ducked to look for the leaflet. Balderstone pinched his nose and briefly glanced at the peephole.

Karen slipped a leaflet into Wheelan's hand. He tossed it aside. "You want to look again?"

"No, I know the procedure. You keep watching. You're the one we want to convince."

She squeezed his arm gently.

"Lots of worry these days," Balderstone said. "People don't know where their next worry's coming from."

Most of the heads, except the ones that were still bent over the leaflet, nodded in agreement.

"Lots of problems people just can't solve. But they still want to give it a try." Balderstone's voice grew louder. "One more chance at bat. That's not the way. Worrying about problems causes fretting. Fretting produces tension. Tense people aren't happy people." Balderstone's hands came up in front of his chest, gradually clenching. "If you can't change the world, I'm informing you, you can change yourself. At least for awhile. That's important. That's what is called escape. It's good for you. Applied lycanthropy."

The lights had been dimming all through his last sentences. A few yards from the merry-go-round the blond young men had a bonfire going.

"We're going to lose all those worries. We're not going to fret. Not now, not for awhile." Balderstone's voice seemed to have taken on some of the crackle of the fire. "Everyone of you should have a capsule. Now, who doesn't?"

A dozen hands went up and one of the young men ran through the crowd, giving out capsules from an orange cardboard box.

Balderstone had stepped out of Wheelan's range, but he reappeared wheeling something that looked like a giant lamp. It was half again as tall as he was.

"He's got enough quack equipment," Wheelan said.

"Be still," Karen said, her hold tight now on his arm.

"We're going to change," shouted Balderstone, not using the microphone. "When I say 'swallow' I want you all to swallow those capsules. Then you better get out of your clothes quick! Because when I turn on my applied lycanthropy beam things are going to start happening." He had reached the platform edge and was crouched there, teetering. "Now! One, two, three. Swallow!"

Balderstone dived for the beam and clicked it on. Ties and hats shot up into the air. Coat sleeves flapped, became entangled with print dresses and lace slips.

"Looks like Annapolis on graduation day," Wheelan said softly, starting to feel uneasy.

The beam was played over the audience, slowly from left to right. All the lights were out and there was only the dim orange flicker of the bonfire. "Relax, relax," Balderstone shouted. "Change!" He dropped and sat on the stage edge.

There was a sputtering howl near the entrance and a large black cat leaped up, clawing at the air, twisting and falling back.

Wheelan couldn't breathe, couldn't tell Karen to stop her fingernails from digging into his skin.

Great yowling cats were popping up across the field, faster and faster. Wheelan noticed his dentist still hadn't gotten his striped shorts off. Then he jerked back against Karen and they both tumbled off the crates. "Run," he said.

Karen twisted up and caught him. "No, Glenn. Wait. Till they change back. You'll see how happy and calm they all are. You'll be convinced."

"Cats," he said, pulling away. "Run!"

He ran; jumped the fence beyond the rodeo area and stumbled away into the brush. He got home in under an hour. It was mostly downhill.

Two nights later Wheelan set fire to Balderstone's bungalow while he was away at the lecture. The fire department put out the fire before more than half of the house was gone.

Early on the following morning he rented an airplane and had his remaining leaflets dropped over San Miguel.

Wheelan had decided that if he couldn't do anything positive he was still going to annoy Balderstone and anybody else who was on his side.

No one mentioned his harassing actions to him, not even Chief Neff. Wheelan's aunt did indicate that she would never cook another meal or wash another pajama top for him. He moved to a run-down motel near the ocean.

He had been there nearly three days when, just after sundown, someone knocked on his door. It was Karen, wearing a light cotton dress, her hair pulled back. "Are you comfortable, Glenn?"

He smiled. "Yeah. I like this business now. I've been thinking up new activities."

Karen frowned around the room. "Like to come out for a walk?"

"Where?"

"Oh, along the beach. You can't spend all your life in a damp motel-room."

"It's not damp. That's the fresh sea air you feel." He picked a windbreaker off the bed and nodded at the door. "So, let's walk." The night was warm, but heavy with fog. "Sorry I left you up there the other night, Karen. But you know . . ."

"Yes. I know. Cats make you crawly." She took his hand when they reached the sidewalk and pulled him after her in the direction of the beach. "Have you really been doing all those annoying things, Glenn?"

"Who else? You think I've gotten any recruits?" The street was quiet. They left the last sidewalk and walked down through scrubby brush to the beach. The water looked blurred as it touched the misty shore. "Just me."

Karen shivered and stepped away from Wheelan. "You've just made an awful nuisance of yourself, Glenn. I've always been very fond of you, as I'm sure you know. But—I'm very sorry."

She darted in suddenly and pushed hard.

The surprise and the clump of brush behind him sent Wheelan over into the sand. When he got to his knees and looked around he caught a brief flicker of Karen's skirt in the fog. Then she was lost. He stood. He tried to brush himself off, but his hands had started to shake. And he was beginning to feel odd in the stomach.

Wind came in then across the water and scattered some of the mist. He saw the cats.

Dozens of them, crouched twenty yards away. Their tails were switching and Wheelan became aware of a puzzling, whirring sound.

Purring.

In another gust more mist scattered, and Wheelan realized that he was cut off from the town by a half circle of hundreds of cats. And they were contentedly edging down across the sand toward him.

Hundreds of damned cats! They made Wheelan feel so crawly he couldn't move. But if he didn't move soon the first of the cats would touch him. That thought made him jump back. The cats moved up.

The sand was sucking at his shoes; he could feel the chill of the ocean on the back of his neck. Maybe if he ran straight at them they'd scatter. But he couldn't do that. They knew that, too. The cats eased a little nearer.

Wheelan bent and grabbed off his shoes, then his socks. He backed into the cold, wet sand near the water. He got out of his clothes—all except his shorts;

he'd have to come ashore someplace. The cats were close now. For a moment Wheelan thought he wouldn't be able to move, but finally he was able to grin and thumb his nose.

Then he ran quickly out into the water.

It was dark and cold, but he was a fair swimmer. He could make it down the coast a quarter mile or so. Far enough. As he swam, Wheelan made up his mind he'd never come back to his hometown again.

Not even for Christmas.