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Chad and Chester, Chester and Chad

by Ron Singer

Chad Green, the cad, found himself getting more and more annoyed at Chester, the cat. Sometimes, when his wife was not around, he would even subject the big gray-and-white eunuch to verbal abuse. (It was she who had named Chester, "Chester.")

"Tell me, *Chet*," Chad would sneer, "why are you still alive?" Chester, who was only six, did seem to have lost a large part of his *raison d'être*, at least in Chad's eyes, during the previous winter when, for some mysterious *raison* and for the first time in living memory, there were no more mice in the house.

"Maybe, you caught them all, Catso," Chad commented. "Single-pawedly wiped out the entire rodent population of our little habitat." Like many spayed males, Chester was saggy, but not particularly fat. Chad had hefted the heavy, muscular feline once or twice in the past, but the insulting sobriquet ignored the cat's actual body type. Had Chad been aware that "cazzo" is an obscene Italian expletive, meaning "penis," his enjoyment of the insult would undoubtedly have been enhanced.

Of course, if Chester had possessed the capacity, and been so inclined, he might have asked Chad the same question. Chad spent his days in "Mission Central," the dim, climate-controlled, sound-proofed study of his sprawling, heavily mortgaged, one-story, pink stucco, stand-alone cookie-cutter condo in Hollywood (FL). There, over multiple cups of decaf coffee and tea, and little cookies and other snacks, he stared, hour after hour, at a bank of computer monitors. When one of the monitors would tell him to move a client's money to a new financial instrument, with a few rapid key strokes, Chad would move it. A waggish friend of theirs (Ellen's, really) once characterized Chad's Floridian quotidian as "Bobby Fisher Meets Marcel Proust."

He had adhered to this regimen for almost seven (fat) years, ever since he had decided that donning suit and tie and squeezing into the cattle car to and from Wall-Street five days a week was "a mug's game." Nor was the transplant unaware that he had lucked out (barely) of Nine-Eleven.

Sometimes, Chad's cat abuse veered toward the physical. When Chester would high-step out onto the Astroturf of the screened porch, Chad would look up from putting practice and swipe in the cat's direction with the club, causing him to turn tail and trot back into the bowels of the house. The cat's flight would, in turn, cause Chad a pop of pleasure tinged with a sub-atomic particle of guilt.

Chad really did like golf. He had a respectable handicap, eighteen, and, when the wind was right, he could drive the little white gutta-percha sphere almost 230 yards off the tee. A favorite fantasy of his involved Chester, or part of him. It was right up there with the legendary foursome of which he imagined himself a member --Tiger, Arnie, the Golden Bear, and, yes, "Chad Always-on-the Green" (a sort of Native-American moniker). The other fantasy involved Chester's big head spinning cartoon-like down the middle of the fairway, with tiny Chad in the follow-through position way back at the tee.

Chad's wife, Ellen, knew perfectly well that Old Grouchy did not exactly share her love for the cuddly, inoffensive animal. The couple, empty nesters, had cohabited with "Chet," as she, too, called him, since early kittenhood, when she had picked him out of a lineup at the shelter.

"He's more like a dog," she would say in the early days, hoping this might make headway against the felinophobia of her Other. It was true. Chet came when you —she—called him. He sat on your —her—lap, and he even tried to buddy up to Chad once in a while, but only when Ellen was present, which showed that the cat was endowed with a measure of horse sense.

Chad's hostility to Chester was probably innate. Certainly, there had been a palpable coolness, at least, from the get-go. But the defining incident, the one that brought the male human's enmity to critical mass, had occurred in *Anno* 3 A.C. (After Chester —his birth, that is). A dinner guest had inadvertently closed the bathroom door on his way out, denying the well-trained, fastidious animal access to his designated dumping station. Presumably not wanting to empty his bladder onto the Astroturf, a rug, or even the tiled kitchen floor, Chester had discretely entered Chad's closet and filled one of his slippers --not a favorite or anything, but still... .

The upshot, after Chad had slipped a toe into the slipper, which looked like a gravy boat, was a chase around the house with a black umbrella (not golf). Luckily, Ellen was home, so Chet got off with a single glancing, if nasty, blow to the ribs, which he licked furiously for perhaps thirty seconds. The attack produced a passing pang of guilt in Old Stone Face; what it produced in his spouse can easily be imagined. Nor would it have taken a detective, let alone a rocket scientist, to notice that, henceforth, Chester invariably shied from umbrellas, both furled and un-. Oddly, however, the cat appeared to bear no grudge, still sidling up to Chad now and then (in Ellen's presence), in the forlorn hope of a more gentle stroke than the one with the umbrella. Occasionally, too, the optimistic and opportunistic animal would still roll over in Chad's path, displaying his ample snowbank in hopes of a rub of the toe from one of his master's two big shoes. As if!

In *Anno* 6, Chad underwent a small, fleeting sea change (although their home was about ten miles from the actual "sea," the Atlantic.) The cause of the change was... whatever: a mid-life crisis; accumulated guilt; or maybe it was his fear that Ellen was finally becoming alienated from him over the nagging cat issue (although she never did nag him about the cat; she was not the nagging type).

The sea change began with a tsunami of a perception. It was a hot summer night, and he and Ellen were relaxing on the porch, he, reading the newspaper, and she, a novel. Chester was somewhere out of sight, presumably lying on one of his preferred cool surfaces, his body precisely oriented to catch the intermittent breeze.

Suddenly, out of the blue (although it was pitch black outside), Chad looked up and announced, "You know what? I think the reason I'm so mean to the cat is because we're basically alike."

After she had thought, "Kool Aid," then un-swallowed her teeth, Ellen replied, with a little cat grin of her own, "You've finally realized that, dear?"

"Give me one unobvious example," he said, "just to prove you thought of the idea before I mentioned it. You know, not stuff like we're both independent, or aggressive, or that we both eat food --something more specific."

Ignoring the childishness of the challenge, she did not miss a beat. "Well, dear, you both always wait until you get home to do your business." Obviously, she had thought of this before.

“Huh! That’s a good example.”

It was a good example. If they went out for a meal in the evening, Chad would never use the rest room, either at the restaurant or, if they stopped for gas, at the station. But, when they got home, as soon as he had turned off the ignition, he would dart up the sensor-triggered, spotlighted driveway and zoom through the side door of the house. By the time Ellen walked in, he would have disappeared into the bathroom, from which would issue the sound of a mighty torrent, or, if no torrent, she would infer that he was ensconced *au pot*. The whole sequence, car to toilet, would happen faster than you could say “Jack Robinson” (or whatever you say).

Chet? Same thing. Every day, he would spend several (presumably) delightful hours stalking and creeping around in the shrubbery, decimating the small mammal population (which was apparently unaffected by the end of the mouse era, within). Then, all of a sudden, the Big Fellow would be meowing at the back door and, when it was opened (by either human –*this*, Chad would do for him), he would make a feline beeline for the box, where he would produce a large, solid deposit.

Number One? Well, the slipper incident made it clear that Chet did at least part of that business in-house. Chad had assumed he must also mark territory outside, until Ellen disabused him: spayed cats do not mark territory. Perhaps, this was a second similarity, for neither was Chad a pee-in-the-woods kind of guy. To be fair, though, and technically speaking, his reason might have been that the only “woods” in the immediate vicinity were diaphanous curtains of Cryptomeria and Crape Myrtle to either side, and to the rear, of the Greens’ 40’ x 100’ plot.

But Chad’s sea change proved subject to a predictable shift in his emotional tides, or, if metaphors can tack, the pro-Chester moment passed like a summer breeze. In the event, about a month after his epi-phony, Chad made what must be called a critical error, or, both literally and metaphorically, a death mistake: he willed Chester’s death.

That week, Ellen was in Honolulu at a conference of the American Psychoanalytic Philately Society. (“No blow-job jokes!” Chad had been sternly admonished.) To digress, she was a niche practitioner within the field of Forensic Psychiatry, called in by the State from time to time on a *per horem* basis for expert opinion or testimony in those extremely rare cases that turned upon a suspect’s taste in stamps. If someone accused of, say, a violent crime or threat, could be shown to have persistently favored stamps with images of predatory birds or animals, the accusation might be marginally supported.

One such case involved a popular Everglades issue with an especially sanguinary-looking alligator. The alleged threatener of a Miami restaurateur in the grip of the local Shylocks turned out to own a hundred of these stamps, two big sheets of them, which were found, via search warrant, tucked beneath a pornographic magazine in the night table drawer of his squalid lair. Allegation supported, case (he copped a plea) closed. Such was Ellen’s (a)vocation.

At any rate, Chad willed Chester’s death. Early Tuesday morning the week of the conference, when the markets were just throwing cold water on their faces and stretching their buff torsos, Chad watched as the big animal tucked into the costly organic cat food he (Chad) had begrudgingly slapped into his (Chester’s) bowl.

Then, he (Chad) thought to himself, “And may you choke on it!” Chester did. With a gurgle and a snort, hopping around the kitchen as if he had a flea up his ass, he shuddered and plopped in a heap onto the tiles. In Chad’s defense, he had taken no overt action to cause the cat’s demise.

When the Animal Rescue Team, which he called immediately, rapidly responded, opening

Chester's trachea they declared asphyxiation to have been the likely cause of death. They also noted that a nearly full bowl of fresh water sat on the floor right next to the half-eaten bowl of food. There had been no neglect. As to malice aforethought ...

"Even healthy cats choke, sometimes," the thoughtful attendant informed Chad, who wore a very guilty face, because his nasty wish had come true. Whether or not the wish really figured in the cat's sudden demise, however, I leave to folklorists, or whoever else studies the dynamics of voodoo, juju, and other forms of "black magic," toward which we in the modern world exercise a healthy, if ethnocentric, skepticism.

Of course, Chad immediately called Ellen, who, because of the time difference, had been asleep. Her response to the news was sorrow, but not anger. If she suspected him of having harbored lethal thoughts toward their –her—pet, she kept her counsel. After all, as any shrinkologist knows, most living humans harbor lethal thoughts. Had she not herself harbored them from time to time toward her fairly significant Other (exploding golf balls ... computer death rays ...)?

"Would you see to the, er, arrangements, please, dear? I'm not giving my paper till Friday, and since the State wouldn't even pay for *one* trip...."

Chad, whose heightened motivation to please his *cara sposa* just then may easily be imagined, went for the big, empty gesture. "Come on, El, you know we can afford another plane ticket. Follow your heart, Hon."

"My heart doesn't need an extra round of jet lag, thanks. Besides, it's fun here."

"I bet. Well, enjoy," he said, and they hung up.

As they were speaking, Chad had imagined himself in the beach scene in "From Here to Eternity" (although not with Ellen, alas, the cur!) He had also wondered if she resented the fact that her paper, which he presumed would make a point tiny enough to fit onto one of those stamps she studied, was scheduled for the last afternoon of the conference. By then, most of the conferees would presumably be deep into the local R & R, before returning to whatever daily grinds they ... ground. But Chad had wisely kept his pie hole shut about Ellen's demeaning slot.

After a few more phone calls, he took ex-Chester, wrapped in a double Hefty, and, he presumed, spiritually prepared for his journey to the figurative West(chester), to the usual vet. This was a genial woman, each of whose two children, Chad calculated, he and Ellen had already bankrolled to the tune of about a semester of (private) college.

"Just keep him on ice for now," he instructed the motherly vet, whom he fancifully thought of as tabby-faced. "I'll get back to you in a day or two." Chad knew the meter would be running, but a.he hoped Ellen might appreciate his largesse, if she happened to notice from the bill that he had not hustled Chet into oblivion, just to save a few shekels; b.the markets were particularly volatile today; and c.if at all possible, he wanted to hit the links in time to squeeze in a quick nine before dark.

In the event, he was on the first green by just after five –perfect. But, at that juncture, the human (and cat) element(s) intruded. Casting his gaze down the familiar vista, before he had taken a single practice swing or even adjusted his gloves, Chad was stunned to see you-know-who, you bet, Chet, pop right into the bucolic scene –into Chad's visual cortex, that is. It was the cat-head golf ball, but in reverse, flying toward him like a whiskered meteorite. Swiping at the specter with his driver, Chad flinched, which flipped him into some kind of symbiotic reverse fugue state, where he and Chester were twitching in synch, beside the sink on the

kitchen floor.

Fate was fate. He packed his gear, hastened back to the clubhouse, pled illness (“must have been the shrimp”), and paid the forfeit fee. Then, still wearing his togs, the plaid pants and purple knit shirt with the tasteful alligator, he made a beeline back into town, straight to the vet’s, where he set the exorcism in motion. This, he did by ordering the top-of-the-line Deluxe Terminal Package (The Full Morty, The Full Leaveland).

“First thing tomorrow, please. It won’t matter if there’s an extra charge.” Would there be? Is the bear Catholic? Does the Pope shit in the woods? And did Chester ... enough. They went over the details, and Chad left a (plastic) deposit.

The early morning ceremony was lovely. From the thirty-some musical options, Chad had selected the *Godfather* theme. The Package also included a *gilt* urn for Chet’s ashes, a gilt frame for his head shot, and even a wreath (plastic pine and red wooden berries) to frame the frame.

During the phone call later that evening (afternoon, in Honolulu), when he mentioned the music, Ellen immediately realized that Chad’s choice had been a tendentious one. It wouldn’t have taken a shrink with three degrees to smell *that* coffee.

When she stepped from the cab early Sunday morning, as soon as he had rolled her bags through the front door and given her a big hug, Chad pulled Ellen into the den, where the framed, wreathed photo of Old Chubs stared down at her from the mantel. Ellen was amused, possibly even touched. Yet ...

“That’s very cute, dear. Are you sure you didn’t slip Chester a mickey, after all? Just kidding!”

“Fore!” (days later: July 10, 2008)

One-eighty, down the center of the fairway, flies Mr. Chad Green’s tee shot, rolling, rolling, rolling, right over the lip of the cup, and smack-dab into the stick at the front of the green of the par three seventh hole, dogleg (lifted) right, big sand trap wrapped around the back of the green like a pitted brake drum.

Holding the same classic follow-through pose featured in his old cat-ball fantasy, this time Chad hears a disembodied little cat voice: “Way to go, Chadster! Your first H.I.O, I believe?” (Hole-in-One.) Not only. On this day, Mr. Chad Green winds up shooting an epoch-making 91. Life is good.

But not purrr-fect. As he walks on air back from the 18th hole toward the clubhouse, he once again hears the cat voice, which, this time, may even be characterized as a still, small one: “Now, if you’ll just keep on being nice to me -to my memory- Chad. Very, very nice...”

Was that a cloud no bigger than a man’s golf ball? Whatever.

But, the very next day, Fanny and Freddy both double-bogied.

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Ron Singer's prose fiction has appeared in publications including *The Avatar Review*, *big bridge*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Defenestration*, *diagram*, *Drunken Boat*, *elimae*, *Ellipses*, *ghoti*, *Oregon Literary Review*, *Paper Street*, *Willow Review*, and *Word Riot*. To date, Singer has also published two books: a chapbook, *A Voice for My Grandmother* (Ten Penny Players/bardpress); and an e-book of three long stories, *The Second Kingdom* (Cantarabooks). Currently, he is in southern Africa working on a book of interviews with pro-democracy activists (Africa World Press/Red Sea Press). He has been invited to participate in the March 12 commemoration of the life and work of poet/activist Dennis Brutus, in Durban, South Africa.