

Tithonus Redux

by Richard Tornello

I'm sitting outside at a family owned coffee shop in El Cajon. The current time is 8:15 AM and the weather is wonderful. I love San Diego and I love having two morning coffee breaks.

One of the regulars, Chip, shows up without his familiar entourage. He usually arrives with his two boys in tow. Chip comes here for coffee, conversation and breakfast/dessert for the boys. He hates to cook. His wife leaves early for her job. His idea of breakfast consists of some type of cake or pastry and milk.

"It's got grain, fruit, and with milk, what can be bad? Besides, the wife is not here and I'm in charge," is his standard reply to anyone questioning his nutritional knowledge -- not that I ever would, considering my own breakfast preferences.

I wave to him and he strolls over.

"Chip, let me buy you a cup today. You're unencumbered for a change."

"Sure Artie," he says "Thanks. What, did you mug some body?"

"Very funny," I shoot back. We talk for a bit. Then I ask him in all seriousness, "Do you have a few minutes to listen to a story? I have one you won't believe. It's true, and it's out of this world."

"Sure why not. But I have to leave for work in a half hour. How long is *this* one going to take?"

"It's not too long, believe me. And it's as true as me sitting here with you" I pause for effect. "And what do you mean, '*this* one'?"

Chip nods, smiles and says to me, "Artie, I'll believe anything you say. You're paying for the drink. See, I believe you already."

"Sarcasm will get you no more free coffee." I state, with false umbrage. "Chip, you really have to hear this."

He takes a sip of his coffee, gestures for me to continue, and I begin:

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Late one moonless night, I was driving home from another one of those "necessary meetings". I was tired and alone. My wife was out of town. This section of the street, north of my home, was unlit. The trees with their branches spreading across created a natural tunnel effect making the road even darker, like my mood.

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Chip interjects, "Trees like that? Here in San Diego?"

I ignore him and continue:

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My thoughts were wandering between the recent waste of time and a shower and bed. The headlights of my car pushed the darkness away and were soon reflected back by two little shiny orbs directly in my path. I flicked my high beams hoping to get the animal to move, with no effect. I figured it was a raccoon -- those suckers seem to think they can stare down anything.

I slowed down to a crawl, then to a stop, close enough to see that the eyes belonged to a very large cat. It was sitting in the middle of the road, not moving, just staring straight back at me. I had expected it to run away in one of two directions, my right or left. No, it sat there, not moving not blinking, simply staring. I flicked my high beams once again, and as before, nothing. I turned the ignition off, but left my running lights and four ways on for safety, both mine and the cat's.

It sat there. In all my 56 years of having cats, I had never run into anything like this. What healthy cat sits in the middle of the road and does not move for a vehicle, no less an unknown human being?

Getting out of the car, I approached this very large cat. It still did not move but was very much alive. Slowly, one finger pointing, crouching and making the usual cat type noises, puss, puss, puss, etc., etc., etc. I came up to the cat.

It made no sound, no meow, no warning hiss -- nothing.

It just sat there. I circled it a couple of times. I did not touch it, thinking it might be rabid -- a rabid animal is a species of one, unpredictable. Finally facing the cat, squatting on my haunches I looked straight into its eyes.

Even though they reflected the headlight beams like little green mirrors, up close I could see that the eyes of the cat were cloudy. It was blind!

Who abandons a blind cat in the middle of anywhere? I wondered, pissed off at the thought. But then I thought, maybe it escaped from a house by accident. Even a blind cat could be pretty slippery.

A quick look showed no collar. I couldn't call Animal Control -- they would probably just kill it, a feral -- no collar, remember? -- possibly rabid, apparently blind animal. For its own good, of course. No, that idea was out. And it was way too late to ring random door bells, unless I wanted to get shot or arrested for disturbing the peace.

This was a true dilemma, probably a matter of life and death for the cat. But I still couldn't bring myself to risk grabbing it and taking it home. There was the possibility of rabies, and the certainty that Ms Stella, the chief and only feline of my house would attack the newcomer and maybe me, too.

I nudged the cat over to the side of the road and rushed home. There I 'borrowed' some food from Ms Stella. I drove back with the food for this blind cat. What a sucker I was.

When I returned, the cat had parked itself next to a bush. When I called, it wouldn't move. It wouldn't come forward. (Of course, they say that it doesn't matter what you call a cat, it won't come when called.) So I got closer. I left the food and returned home hoping that it was really a local cat that got out of that house, and would find its way back when someone calls its name.

I woke up early the next morning, got into my car and drove up the street to check. I saw no cat, but the food container was empty. I hoped for the best -- at least there was no bloody bundle of gray fur by the curb.

I did occasionally see a large gray cat in the wooded area behind the one house where I left the food. I used to slow down during the daylight hours hoping to possibly spy the cat safe in the house sunning itself in a bay window. I never got that wish.

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Chip looks at me in a strange manner. He asks again, "Woods? Where are there woods or a forest except in the zoo and up north?"

"I'll tell you later. Will you let me tell the story? IT's true I told you. Just sit and listen."

I continued:

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Incidents like this happen and you usually never think about them again. But in my case, I couldn't stop thinking about it! The memory seemed to haunt me. OK, this was a strange occurrence. Yes it was the oddest I ever had with a cat, but so what? I have had cats as friends, pets and the occasional temporary uninvited cat guest. For a cat to sit there and not move, run, meow cry, purr growl, just blindly stare was very uncatlike. I had to force myself to say so what. It's gone and I have Ms Stella to deal with.

Later -- maybe days, weeks, I'm not sure -- I began to have a recurring dream about Pumpkin, my recently departed cat. He and Ms Stella had been housemates for a few months before -- never mind. That's a story for another time.

This dream was odd to say the least. In the dream Pumpkin morphed into the Blind Gray Cat, quite a change, from burnt orange to silver, let me tell you. And the cat was talking to me.

The cat said, "Artie, sit down, because you're not going to believe what you're about to hear." Even in my dream I knew this was "off the wall", but I did as I was told.

I looked into this big gray cat's eyes -- and when I say 'big', I mean like thirty or forty pounds big, which is huge for a cat. It was still blind.

The cat continued, "My name is unimportant. What is important is that you alone of all the people on that road stopped. You have no idea how many times I was ignored, or dodged, or even run over. But you stopped, got out to investigate and ushered me of to the side of the road for my protection. You even came back with some food.

The cat exclaimed, "I never even expected that! And I have been around some!"

I began to have serious doubts about that leftover guacamole I had eaten before bedtime...

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Chip murmurs, "Alice anyone?"

"Exactly!" I exclaim. "I figured the White Rabbit was just around the corner! But what came next was weirder than Lewis Carroll."

Chip raises an eyebrow and waves for me to continue with the story.

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The cat continued, "You saved me and fed me. You even came back to check up. I saw you drive and walk by looking at the house where you put the food. Yes, that was me in the woods."

I remember thinking Great! I have earned the gratitude of a blind, feral cat! Except the cat seemed to know what I was thinking, because it cleared its throat -- which sounded like coughing up a hairball, but more sarcastic.

"Artie. Artie! Pay attention, please. We have a special gift for you. Three wishes. That's special, because We usually only give one".

"We?" I squeaked.

No answer.

Oh yeah, *I thought*. Poof and there it is. Right! Oh please... This dream is great, but way out there.

Mr. Cat explained, "You can have anything you want within the limits of physics discovered and yet undiscovered in 'your realm'."

Well, *I thought*, that makes all the difference! I have to work within the realm of physics and scientific reality known -- and still unknown. Which could mean anything at all, if you include all that weird quantum crap. *I wondered if this cat knew that fellow Schrodinger.*

But it was a dream, right? So I figured I might as well go along with the game. I asked Mr. Cat, "Is there a time limit on when I can make my requests?"

He said, "There's no official rule, but usually We expect requests to be made within a week of the offer. Mind you, most people don't take that long to think about it. They just say the first things that pop into their ape brains, and..." He did not elaborate. "In your case, call whenever you want. I'll be there." And he was gone.

When I woke up, I looked around. I noticed no changes, no gray cat fur on the rug, no hair balls, no cat puke, nothing, not even one of Ms Stella's little reminders of her Mighty Hunter ancestry. All I had were fading recollections of the strangest dream I'd ever had.

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Chip is rolling his eyes but still listening. He grins and starts to speak, but I cut him off.

"No, the cat did not disappear gradually, with his grin going last. Now listen up -- this is where it gets *really* interesting:"

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For the hell of it and to play this out, I forced myself to concentrate on this out-of-this-world opportunity. I asked myself seriously, what do I really want: money, long life, cars, houses, ... But pretty soon I concluded that material things -- or even money that you end up using to buy material things -- cause more trouble than they're worth. Look at all the problems many the lottery winners appear to have. So I didn't wish for the usual crap, gold and jewels and palaces, the stuff that would pop into ape brains, as Mr. Cat put it. I decided to put a lot more thought into it.

Besides, I remembered that the cat had said, "Call whenever you want." And yes, I also remembered thinking that I must be losing my mind to be thinking about it as if it could

be real. I wondered if I was overdosing on caffeine, the way my mind kept spinning through the possibilities.

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Chip looks into his coffee cup. "You know, they say the decaf is a lot better than it used to be--"

"Focus, Chip," I tell him. "It wasn't caffeine."

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One morning, after conducting my regular morning ablutions, I went downstairs to feed Ms Stella. Later, just as I was about to start work, I remembered the dream, the big gray cat, and last but definitely not least, the three wishes. What a whopper that was, I thought. Although I remember one even weirder than that, back when I was living in Maryland...

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Chip mumbles something about Maryland, weird, and not fitting together. "When'd you have it, when you were two years old? I thought you'd lived here all your life."

I ignore him and continue:

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In the Maryland dream, I killed someone for no reason. When I woke up, I actually sat on the side of the bed waiting for the police to come get me. I wondered why I did anything like that. That was, until I fully woke up. I had still been in the alpha state between waking and sleeping. I guessed that was similar to the sleepwalking my daughter does. We have had full conversations until she says something totally off the wall that lets me know that she is somewhere else in her dreams. I also consider the experience a weird, parallel universe, Everett based activity.

Aside from weirdness level, the murder dream and the cat dram have one thing in common: I couldn't let go of them. The dream and the cat kept coming back. It haunted me. Finally, a day came when I was working at home. I let my mind drift. I again began to think, ponder, to daydream. Just what would I want if I had three wishes granted me?

I knew it was silly. But with the dream dominating my thoughts anyway, I figured I might as well try to settle the question. Maybe then I could get back to reality.

After much thought, eliminating the easy and shallow, I arrived at the following:

First, I would like to have the ability to understand, speak, read and write in any language, current or 'dead'. I could go anywhere, not that I'm a big traveler. I could pick up on any conversation from the supermarket to the language of extraterrestrials. Aside from being cool, it would be a big advantage in business or even ordering in a restaurant.

Of course, if you could understand the language no matter where you went, then it made sense to be able to go anywhere. So for my second wish, I would want the ability to travel safely and instantaneously with friends and family to any place I wanted to go. No lines at the airport, no idiot security rules, no carbon footprint guilt, no jet lag. Not too bad, I thought.

I decided to hold my third wish in reserve, in case I needed to tweak some aspect of the first two. The sudden linguistic skills alone might draw suspicion in the post 9-11 world, and I didn't want to be a fugitive (even if you can teleport, it's no fun to have no place to call home).

In the back of my mind, I wondered if I could ask that the skills granted by the first two wishes be passed on to my offspring for a negotiated number of generations. Hey, if you don't ask, the answer is no.

The phone was not ringing. I had no immediate work that had to be completed. So I said out loud, "Okay, Mr. Cat, I have my wishes figured out. Some of them, anyway. Where are you?" I felt like a complete ass, of course, calling a "magic" cat from a dream. I called out again, this time in sort of a whisper, "Cat, puss, puss, puss, oh caa-aat." It had occurred to me that my wife would think that I was crazy for calling a cat -- any cat -- and especially a wish-granting cat. Of course, she already thought I was crazy...

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Chip is nodding in agreement. "Wise woman," he says.

"You're lucky I didn't ask for the power to kill with my mind," I mutter, then continue the story as Chip pretends to hide behind his coffee cup.

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I wasn't really expecting anything to happen. Then poof, Mr. Cat appeared!

"Hello Artie," he said.

"Oh SHIT! " I replied cleverly. On the desk, straddling the computer keyboard, was one very large, gray, cloudy-eyed cat. Any doubts as to its reality were dispelled by the rows of nonsense characters filling the computer screen as the cat shifted its weight on the keys.

"You were expecting?" Mr Cat. asked.

"You talk!" I sputter.

"But of course," he answered in an affected French accent -- Pepe LePew by way of Bronson Pinchot as Serge.

I'm usually not one to be at a loss for words, but it took a bit to gather my wits. Finally, I managed to state my first two wishes with the add-on about inheritability. Was I rude, I wonder?

The cat said the first two could be granted immediately. "I'll have to consult my colleagues about allowing the abilities to be passed on to your descendants," he added. "Most people only focus on their own desires, so it isn't something We have considered before. Now, your third wish?"

"I'm going to hold on that one, Tithonus and all that," I stated, and explained the other reasons.

He nodded, or at least I thought he nodded. With cats, it's hard to tell.

Late that night, he returned in a dream. If I remember the conversation, it went something like this:

"I pondered the question of extended benefits. I discussed it with the others"

"Others," I interrupted, "In this dream world? What others?"

On that subject, Mr. Cat remained silent.

He continued as though I never asked a thing. "Though your request is unique, it's granted. It is granted as an experiment to go out ten generations only." He added, "Ten human generations is nothing to us. We understand that it can be eternities to humans."

I stifled the urge to ask if it was because "We" had nine lives, but again, he seemed to know what I was thinking. He mentioned (as if in passing) that he had appeared in different forms and manifestations throughout human history, depending upon the person and the time.

I exclaimed, "So the stories about Aladdin, The Fisherman, and Tithonus, to name a few, are real events and not myths!"

A cat smile appears on his face. "Artie, what do YOU think?"

I thought, Great, the cat's a shrink too.

Chip looks at me like a shrink might just be what the doctor ordered.

But I can't blame him for figuring I'm nuts, or telling a really elaborate shaggy cat story, so I continue:

The next day, reality set in. I began to wonder and question the wisdom of the add-on. Can you imagine what it might be like if my kids asked for something before I brief them? I thought. Suppose they wish for something like travel while they are in line at the store, or on the Metro. And all of a sudden, there they are, and they understand every word they hear or see? Unless I tell them... jeeze, suppose my daughter says, as she has done more often than I care to count, "I wish I were in France." And there she would be. I really need to do something, soon.

But first, let's see if this works: I want to go to that small friendly family coffee shop in El Cajon near my brother's place. It's lunch time here but in California...

And I was here. I don't know if the teleportation thing comes with some kind of stealth function, or people are just too busy to notice when someone appears out of thin air, but I was able to order my espresso and a couple biscotti and nobody so much as blinked.

Then I looked up, and you were walking through the door...

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"THE END," I say to Chip.

"Well Chip, what do you think?"

He gives me a very strange look and says, "Nice story Artie. The boys would love it."

"If I told you I was from another planet you wouldn't believe that either."

He laughs, shaking his head as he leaves for work. I have to do the same. I have to get shaved and suited up for a 1:30 meeting in Bethesda, MD. I have the time.

THE END

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*Bio: Richard Tornello is a business owner/consultant/technical recruiter with 28+ years experience, married and kept by one very neurotic cat Stella. He has a degree from Rutgers University in Asian Studies. Richard's poetry and fiction has appeared a number of times in *Aphelion* (with one or more poems almost every month!); his most recent short story was [Experiment 1919](#), September 2009.*

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