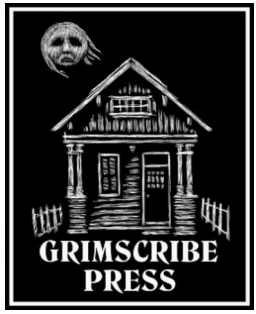


Nine Kinds of Cat

by Brendon Rose

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New Orleans, Louisiana

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Cover art by Brendon and Spencer

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ISBN 979-8-2341-6680-7

Published by

Grimscribe Press
New Orleans, LA
USA

grimscribepress.com

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For Mom, Dad, Mandy, Matthew, and Matt. Thank you.

Chapter One
Tree is for Birds

CHESTER THE CAT quickly understood his harness meant Outside. His person hung it by the door, near their jacket, and it seemed to work the same. They put it on to go out and took it off once they came in.

It wasn't long before he came prutting and twining around their ankles when it seemed like time to go. When dressed, he sat pretty for his treat with his tail curled around his paws, and his person told all their friends what a smart little man he was. He was their first cat, so everything about him was delightful. They were his first person, and big, and warm.

Chester was a tawny tabby, with stripes on his legs and sides, and spots all over. Dark on his back and light on his tummy, which was lined in vest buttons. He had black paw pads and a little russet nose. His eyes were golden green and, at seven months, too big for his face, but the right size for his ears. His person called him their little tiger, on account of his pattern, and how he liked to pounce and stalk, and how easily he could hide in plain sight.

He noticed his person didn't need their jacket every time they went out, like he needed his harness. That was probably because they were so big.

He used to be able to sit in their hand when he first came, but he was getting big too. Since his arrival at four months, he had nearly doubled in size. It was possible that could keep happening until he was big enough to hold his leash himself.

For the first few weeks of his new tenancy, Chester explored the yard on a leash and his person followed him like a hitched wagon. He was good at Outside, in his own estimation. He was immediately better than his person, who didn't chase or hunt at all. They barely even played. He did his best to show them what he had learned from his mother and brothers and attacked their shoes and shins with brio. But they would just smile and make happy sounds and then keep looking at their hand.

There was a big maple in the middle of the yard. They let him clamber up it, because cats and trees were like cookies and milk. He didn't go very high at first, but each time he tried he got a little further, and a little braver.

One fatefully educational day, he finally made it up to the first big branch that reached out over the yard. He pulled himself onto it and ventured out a little way, and then lay across it, and felt quite content that he had climbed higher than he had ever been, and that his person, for all their bigness, could not.

He did not linger in his satisfaction. Movement caught his eye through the layers of branches above him. Little black shadows hopped between them. They were chirping at each other. He had heard them from the ground but thought it was a sound leaves made. He found himself chirping back under his breath. Eke eke eke.

His leash hung down, still attached to his person. They didn't seem to mind until they got bored with their phone and noticed their little tiger had successfully tigered up the tree. After some tugging and pleading, they let go

and ran inside the house. Chester felt the slack and stood up on the branch. The treetop tittered with secrets he needed to know.

With the tension on the leash gone, he climbed up quick. Over and through and around, he gained several Chesters of height before his person came out of the house rattling the crispies bag. They watched in horror as the end of the leash disappeared up the tree like a slurped noodle. They shook the bag like they were mad at it.

As his person fussed, his whiskers pricked. They told him the hopping shadows were close enough to catch, if he were quiet, and careful, and quick. The shaking of the bag called to something inside him that was almost as compelling as his need to learn. But he already knew about crispies. He did not yet know about birds.

Before he could investigate further, there was a hollow metal crash from below. His person had dropped the ladder they were handling. Suddenly the flock took flight as if they had been sneezed from the tree. Their exit shook the branches around him.

Chester held on tight and all the fur on his body puffed out. He let out a hiss that surprised him. The ground was much further away than it should be. His leash meandered through the tangle of branches he used to climb up here but didn't show him a way back down.

Chester learned regret.

It was about to get worse. Unbeknownst to Chester, his person, and the departing flock of birds, there was another resident of the canopy.

It was hidden as a shadow against the trunk, not three lengths of Chester above him. It had opened its eyes at the ladder drop and narrowed them at the birds fleeing. It heard Chester hiss, and it turned its moon face

upside down to glare at him with the contempt of a being that had never met a thing it didn't hate.

Chester clung to the branch and watched the shadow spread its wings wide above him. They blocked out the light, though Chester didn't need it to see its round flashing eyes and sharp hooked beak and huge talons, talons that suddenly let go of the branch beneath them and rushed at him. He was paralyzed. There was no precedent. He had never been prey.

The owl grabbed him and squished him against the branch. It was heavy, and he couldn't breathe. It pumped its wings and the leaves around them whispered and hissed. It pecked at him, knocking him hard on the head and nipping his left ear. The pain was sudden and intense, and Chester screamed a scream he didn't know he could. His person cried out below.

With a mighty beating of its wings, the owl grabbed Chester by the harness and took flight. Chester's claws left scars in the bark as he was pulled free.

His lead snagged on a branch and yanked him out of the owl's grip as it flew away. Talons grazed his sides as they let go. The owl didn't even look behind it. It flapped heavily and soared off over the cedars surrounding the yard, where the startled flock had alighted. They scattered before it, screeching and cheeping.

So. The big one was collecting the little ones. It was a notion that would stick with him. Birds, big and small, were all in cahoots. They were numerous, free roaming, made from trees, and bad news.

The lesson hit home as Chester swung like a tetherball and crashed against the tree. It knocked the wind out of him in a merp, and his harness strained against his throat. He hung for a moment, limp and dazed.

His person jumped off the ladder they had barely begun to climb and scooped him up in their arms and squeezed him tighter than he liked. He swiped and hissed, and they said, "I'm so sorry, sweetie, I'm so, so sorry." They wet his head with their soft kisses and tears and left the leash dangling in the tree.

Chapter Two
Inside Out

IN HIS SECOND year, his person, and every person, became very sick.

Chester tended them as best he could. He stayed by their side. When they lay in bed he cuddled them and purred. When they could still sit up he crawled into their lap, and kneaded, and purred. At night he slept at their feet and kept watch for spooks. In the morning, he tapped their nose and breathed purry breaths into their ear. When they still had the strength, they ran their fingers through his tawny tabby fur and whispered, "My little tiger." When their strength waned, they rested their hand on him, and he purred under it, and into it, as best he could.

His person had other persons visit them, the ones they called Elgin and Percy. Elgin had a warm lap and gentle hands and was good at finding itches. Percy had thin grabby hands, and Chester was good at avoiding Percy. They each came to visit his person several times, and soon the trio all started to sniffle together.

Then Percy didn't come, and Elgin didn't come. His person moved from their bed only to fill his bowls and get themselves water and use the toi let. Rudely, they shut the door on him, which seemed highly inappropriate

given the circumstances. If there ever was a time for a bathroom buddy, it was now. They coughed and wheezed incessantly.

When his litter box became too full, Chester shit in the corner behind it, where kicked litter had gathered, and peed in the corner opposite, where Elgin had spread out a pile of newspapers. Elgin had also left a window open, the one over the kitchen sink that looked out on the backyard. They had said to him, "Just in case, little buddy. Hope not, but just in case."

Then they coughed violently and threw up in the sink. Chester bonked his head against their shins. They ran the water, and Chester jumped up. They turned off the tap and Chester touched their hand. He murrued, and touched the tap, and then their hand again.

Elgin, sweating and teary-eyed, spat out a laugh, and turned the tap on to a dribble. "Good thinking," they said. They scratched Chester's head and left. He never saw them again.

Chester returned to the bedroom and his person, who was sleeping and breathing hard. He could hear the air whistling in and rattling out of their lungs, and their heart beat funny. He sat on their chest and purred. It was all he could do.

***

A few days later, Chester knocked his harness down from its spot by the door. He dragged it to the bedroom. His person had not moved from the bed since Elgin left, and now barely moved at all. They opened their eyes, though, and spoke in a whisper that sounded like a rock tumbler. "Little tiger. Want to go? Go bye-bye?" They weakly patted the bed beside them.

Chester dropped the harness and jumped up with a little mew, the kind of mew he gave when he was being a Sweet Baby.

His person smiled weakly and confirmed, "My sweet baby," and Chester rubbed his face against their hand. They hardly pushed back at all. He looked to his person, and then the harness on the floor, and mewed. His person choked, and Chester jumped down. They struggled for breath. He jumped up, and jumped down, and murred a question. His person coughed and coughed, and gasped and shook.

As they sputtered, Chester saw gossamer ribbons of light rise out of their mouth and nose, their eyes and ears, their belly button, their groin; rise like smoke in a sunbeam, and braid together, and coil like silk. With each convulsion more ribbon spooled out, until one last, long sigh set them free. There, above his person, they resolved into a long bright string.

String was one of Chester's favorite-favorite games. Despite himself, he jumped up and grabbed at it but his claws had nothing to catch. It hung for a moment, then disappeared into the ceiling.

He looked at the harness, and at his person, who was very still now, very still. Their insides ticked down like an unwound watch. He licked salt and sour off their cheek. Their eyes were open, as was their mouth, but Chester understood this was no longer their eyes or their mouth, because they were gone. Gone with the string. He knew this as all cats know death. He looked to the corners of the room. He sniffed and whisked the air. They were gone.

Still, he thought it best to be sure, so he climbed onto the chest of his person's former body and kneaded and walked in a circle and curled in a bun, and purred. He purred hard, to be a beacon for them to return to, should they return. He wasn't sure. All the other ribbonstrings like this he

had ever seen were just passing through, floating aimlessly like discarded plastic bags, or following some oblivious human like a string on an invisible balloon. Ribbons didn't necessarily just go away. They could linger. Maybe they could come back.

A foulness had begun. It hovered like a fog around the body's middle, and grew fouler by the second. But Chester would stay, just for a bit, just in case. He purred for his person, and also himself, for now there was no one to pet him, and he wished they had, one last time. He wished they had put his harness on, because he wasn't allowed Outside without it. He wanted to go bye-bye very much.

His person had been his person his whole life. He had gone from his birthing bed to their arms. It seemed unfair for them to leave him behind. Maybe they didn't. Maybe they had just forgotten. His person was sometimes gone for ages without him, which seemed unlikely to be on purpose, given how they loved him, and he loved them. They belonged to each other. His person always came back.

Ribboning seemed distracting. Chester knew distraction well, like how a ball could suddenly become invisible when a scrap of crumpled paper missed the garbage. He would remember the ball eventually, when the paper had played out. Maybe after doing the string things, they would remember they forgot him, and come back.

***

Over the next few days, Chester remained in the house. He ate all the kibble in his bowl, then from the bag he spilled, and then all the stray kibbles that had scattered every which way. He liked that game. His person used to take

handfuls of kibble and toss them one at a time, and he would stalk and pounce, and his person said, "My little tiger."

Then the kibbles were all gone, and he began to feel hungry.

The sink dripped, and he drank the drips until the taps ran dry. The drips lasted longer than the kibbles, but not by much. It took less time between the end of drips and the beginning of thirst, and soon he was very thirsty.

Inside the house, the air gathered stink like storm clouds. It first filled the bedroom, around the body, and Chester finally knew that, wherever his person's ribbon had gone, it would not return here. The smell was certainty. This body was over.

Chester dragged his harness to the kitchen, and with some effort brought it up on the counter, and laid it down, and peeked out the window.

Outside, the sky was clear, and the sun was warm. Chester had never been further than the yard, but the yard had evolved to have a lot of Outside in it. There were patches of wildflowers and long grass, with paths mowed between them, and around the maple. The term his person used was meadowscaped, but locally it was also known as neglected.

Bees and bugs popped and sizzled over the wild growth. His golden green eyes widened, and his tail twitched. No one had thrown a ball for him in ages. He had a lot of built-up chase and pounce on top of his thirst and hunger. He couldn't stay Inside, but he knew he needed his harness to go Out.

So he took the harness in his mouth and jumped up to the windowsill. He dropped it, then bat-bat-batted it over the side, where it landed with a clink on the patio, and he landed silently beside it.

***

He went to the back door and the plantless pot beside the step. Water from his dish tasted like tap, with a tinge of dirt. A bit flat and ordinary. He preferred rainwater when he could get it. It tasted like sky. Here it was cool and fresh from a short rain in the night. Chester tapped the surface of the water with his paw and lapped at the ripples he made. First he lapped greedily, then slow and steady, and for a time he ceased to be anything but a slaking thirst. Without water nothing mattered.

With it, he felt his hunger again. His belly was an empty bowl that only he could fill. Fortunately, the world was a buffet, and he had two whole years to learn how to hunt it. Without his leash he could also catch it.

The afternoon of his relocation from Inside to Out, Chester caught two mice and ate them tip to tail, bones and all. His hunger made him sharper and made the mice taste better. Kibble was crisp and meatsy, while the mice were wet and squealing and incredulous. He enjoyed that, unlike his kibble, the mice kept going when they got tossed around. For a time.

In the yard there was also the occasional shrew or vole tunneling around in the patches of long grass. He made sport of the grasshoppers, catching them in his jaws midair as they leapt hither and thither. These he liked to munch, like celery. Bees he knew better than to bother. He wasn't fussed for eating beetles, or butterflies, but he did, and he found his taste for them grew the further he was from his last kibble. He loved stalking them. Sometimes he would chew them like gum.

Ever since the incident, he was wary of trees and birds. But he couldn't help his fascination. He only ever hunted birds with his eyes, and his heart,

and chittered back at them as they circled in the air far above the reach of his tether and courage.

His person had noticed his fear and was grateful. In an effort to both let him explore and continue to look intently at their hand for as long as possible, his person stuck an anchor in the ground at the end of the stone patio, and got him a leash with enough leeway to reach the tree but not climb far up it. He had been content to rake his claws across its roots, and hoped the birds could see how sharp they were.

He was untethered now, and unharnessed, though he kept returning to it throughout the day. He dragged it to the back door, near his water, and then later to the foot of the tree. There the harness stayed.

He gamboled and hunted and napped until all the day sounds became night sounds, and the night smells rose like a mist.

At a certain level of darkness, he jumped up to the window, and waited for his person to open it, and unhook his leash, and pull him inside. Except the window was already open, and it was dark inside, and that dark boiled with a darker smell.

He dropped back down and licked his paw. His tail twitched irritably. It wasn't that he had forgotten. It just hadn't occurred to him to remember. Now that the day was done, he felt drawn back to his loops again.

He wanted his kibble, and to tuck in his person, and then to hunt centipedes by stovelight, and by nightlight bat the bellball around. He wanted to search the rooms for the things that sometimes haunted houses and no one but cats and babies saw. If there were any, he would chase them out. He had been here for nearly two years, though, so local spooks knew to avoid his house, and travelers had stopped visiting. At the end of his patrol, he wanted to sleep by his person until it was time to get up and begin again.

He wanted, and went without, and each day without led to less want. His first day Outside was still several days since he was dislodged from his routine. Outside was a place he knew and liked, and it hadn't changed at all. One might even say it improved. He knew how to be out here, who he was. So he curled up on the old wicker patio chair like he always had, only now it was night and that was neat. The chair smelled like his person had been away from it for longer than they ever had before.

He laid his head on his paws and looked up. Far away and far above, ribbons of light floated across the sky in a great migration. They were too far away to see if any of them were his person, but that must be where they went. They were shed of their final harness, not a jacket or a shoe but a body, and it wasn't the yard they went to, but Beyond. Chester didn't know Beyond except that it was on the other side of the trees, past the chain-link fence he could never reach on the end of his tether. All he knew of Beyond was that it was out there, and now his person was, too.

Under ribbons of light that streamed across the sky, Chester slept and dreamt of string.

***

Over the next few weeks, Chester explored Beyond.

Unbeknownst to him, he lived on a quiet street in the suburbs, and while his yard was patchy and wild, every other yard on the street had been manicured and tucked in tight. He liked these, because they gave him room to run. There were so many surfaces to climb and smells to follow. Each yard felt like it was a little world, and Chester found no end of distractions to keep his interest.

He also found that, the longer he was Outside, the more yards in the Beyond began to look like his own. With no one to mow them they started to shag, and by the time growing had slowed for the season they were all on their way to neglectscaped. It made sense to Chester. He had escaped the confines of the yard he came from. Stood to reason that the yard might want to escape too.

Next door became a favorite place to hang out: specifically the plastic playhouse that sat at the back of the yard, closed but for two little windows, each divided into four glassless squares that were perfectly Chester-sized. There was also a crumpled blanket that smelled like the giggles he had heard coming from behind the cedars, and it was soft like his old mother blanket. His purrs reverberated off the plastic walls and made the little house hum. In their echo he felt small again, and safe.

For a time, it became a second home to him, but still he returned to his own yard and slept in his wicker chair, and stalked the tall vegetation for small prey, and consulted his harness. It had not moved from where he dropped it by the tree. It still felt important in a way, but as the days went on and he struck out further, it seemed less and less necessary. Maybe he didn't need to wear it. Having it Outside was enough.

He kept to the backyards. The neighborhood was designed in a grid, with yards butting up against each other divided by shrubs and assorted fences, and the alleys between houses were only big enough to drag a mower through and put an AC unit in. From there he had observed the street, but it had been a while since he had heard anything of note coming from that direction, and the stretch of backyards ran long, and was full of food, water, and play. It was also safer. The yards were open, but not so open as he

couldn't see several exits and safe spots to duck into should need be. On the street there were too many places for other things to hide.

The house was no longer his. His person's smell Inside was supplanted by a black stink. It felt like the house was full of all the spooks he had once chased away, now made brave in numbers, and empowered by death. Feeding off it, drawn to it. He understood that Inside was now theirs. Perhaps it always had been.

The smell on the chair became his smell, and his alone. His person wasn't coming back. They left him behind, and he felt a hurt in his heart. They must be so scared. It was up to him to find them.

That was alright. He loved chasing strings.

Here ends the preview of

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