

11-15-1992

## ***"Naughty or Nice"***

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### **Recommended Citation**

Shafer, E. D. (1992) "*Naughty or Nice*", *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 1992 : Iss. 14 , Article 13.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol1992/iss14/13>

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



### Abstract

"Charles Michael Dare put the cat down, and I mean do it now!" Pesker-cat watched the kitty-litter gray carpet rush toward his face. Chuckie Dare shrugged his shoulders. "Gee, Mom, I thought cats were always suppose to land on their feet."

### Additional Keywords

Fiction; Naughty or Nice; E. D. Shafer

of his brow and his voice wavered. "That winter evening on Coates Street when she—" He stared blankly ahead, his eyelids hanging half over his eyes. "She was playing the harp and singing, then suddenly— she reached for her throat and coughed. Blood was running down her gown. I carried her upstairs. Then in a state of near-madness I ran out in search of Dr. Mitchel—" He stopped abruptly and clutched his heart. His face was white and he broke out in a sweat.

The room was silent. That painful incident was well known to us all and we genuinely sympathized. At the same time we were confronted with a mind hopelessly behind the times; we were weary of Poe; the miracle of his presence among us now seemed a banal occurrence.

We didn't want him at our dinner— this seemed understood. Yet we were uneasy about crudely ditching him— pretending that we would be dispersing after class. I daresay we all felt a little guilty.

It was time to go. Professor Dixon glanced at his watch and closed the notebook before him.

"I'd like to make a suggestion," Leon Jarvis said suddenly, "This is Mr. Poe's birthday, I propose we take up a collection. We all know he is poor—"

We applauded our clever classmate, now for the second time, and we reached for our wallets. I am sure I was not the only one thinking of those pathetic requests for loans, advances, money in whatever form, that Poe made of his friends, employers, and, sadly, even of his enemies, throughout his career.

I saw some five, ten, even twenty-dollar bills as Jarvis counted the money. We were all absorbed in our generous donations— until a gasp from one of us made everyone look at Poe. He had begun to fade. The contours of his face were blurring, the expression around his eyes and mouth was uncertain. It was as if a fog had

descended between us, or cataract had formed over our eyes. Only his voice came distinctly still, in a mellifluous almost chanting drawl.

"Lie— truth— they all become one in the dream. You do not understand the dream. You do not understand that you too are dreamed up. I took laudanum yet I never took laudanum. Oh but you will never understand. You think you can analyze the love I bore my Virginia but you can only make paltry calculations. Those who read my works will know what I mean. You are not imaginative, you are not poets. You are dreamed up but you do not dream. You cling to your foolish consistency. You grovel in the dust, you blaspheme in the dust."

He was no longer in the room. I was thinking desperately of what Professor Dixon once said: "Perhaps we scholars lack the poet's divine fire, but ours is the equally grave, if humbler and less rewarded, responsibility to know, to judge, to exile, or preserve." That speech now sounded shabby and pathetic in my mind.

Jarvis spread out the bills on the table and we took back our contributions. It was as if Poe were returning our money, in spite of his dire poverty, to shame us. There seemed to be a single feeling reigning in the room: our consciousness of our intellectual pomposity and our presumption. We had nothing to celebrate. Finally Jarvis offered to call the Hotel Taylor and cancel our reservation.

Poe's appearance had a blasting effect on our further efforts to study him. Soon after, Professor Dixon died; Stephanie Green got married and left academia; Jarvis went into banking. Those of us who clung to scholarship fled into other areas of specialization.

## "Naughty or Nice"

by E.D. Schafer

"Charles Michael Dare put the cat down, and I mean do it now!" Pesker-cat watched the kitty-litter gray carpet rush toward his face. Chuckie Dare shrugged his shoulders. "Gee, Mom, I thought cats were always suppose to land on their feet."

"Charles, can't you just be good for a little while? I know you're bored during your Christmas vacation, but Mommy has got a lot of work to do."

Chuckie smirked and ran his index finger through the gingerbread cookie dough his mother had just mixed. "Nope." Pesker, recovering from his fall, groomed himself while he watched Chuckie's mother

shape gingerbread animals, stars and Santas.

Chuckie sucked the dough off his finger. "That's a stupid cat you and Dad brought home. I don't know why you ever picked him up."

"It was sleeting that night, Charles, we've already told you. Pesker would have frozen if we had left him on that highway."

"Stupid cat." Charles picked up the hose attachment by the sink, pointing it at Pesker.

"Charles, I'm warning you," Margaret Dare said as sternly as she felt was possible.

"You couldn't stop me if you tried," Chuckie boasted, drenching Pesker with the jet spray. The raven black tom fled.

Margaret pounded her fist into the dough. "Go to your room right now, Charles Michael. I mean it."

"Yeah, yeah. Wimpy old fleabag. Should have left him to die and be road kill," Chuckie muttered as he stomped into his room and slammed the door. Pesker, realizing he had picked the wrong sanctuary, sank his claws into his perch, terrified.

"Get off my desk, cat. I've got serious work to do." Chuckie grabbed Pesker by his tail, slinging him toward the floor. "Serves you right anyway. You're just a dumb ol' cat." Chuckie picked up his notebook and began to write with his stubby pencil:

*December 18  
743 Hamilton St.*

*Dear Santa,*

*I have been a very, very, very good little boy this year!!! I have been nice to my Mommy and Daddy and my teachers. I want lots of gifts for Christmas. I want a Nintendo, a radio controlled tank and airplane, a CD player and lots of CD's, a TV, a VCR, a...*

The doorbell chimed. Chuckie heard his Mom open the door and yell, "Chuckie, come down here. Sam's here to see you." He lobbed his pencil at the poster of Batman on the wall. Pesker cowered in the shadows, waiting until Chuckie left the room; he unsheathed his claws and began to work.

\* \* \*

At 4:23 on Christmas morning, Chuckie raced down the stairs toward the tree. Piles of presents surrounded the fir. Chuckie fell to his knees and embraced the packages. "Mine, mine, mine!" he shouted with glee. Pesker paced beside the boxes. Chuckie threw a box at him. "Oh, get away from here you stupid cat."

Chuckie's parents stumbled into the room intoxicated by drowsiness and the Parker's eggnog from the night before. "Go ahead, Chuckster," Mr. Dare yawned, "rip your presents open." The Dares were used to this routine: Chuck grabbing package after package, shredding wrapping paper and brandishing new toys. But this year was different.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Chuckie angrily screamed. "None of these boxes have my name on them!" Chuckie's parental units leaned toward the boxes, inspecting the tags.

"Of course there are presents for you Chuckie. We... I mean I'm sure there were some there when we came in last night."

"Oh dear," Chuckie's mother whispered. "I think Charles is right." She divided the boxes into two piles: those with tags that said Frank and those for Margaret.

"The tags are wrong. That's it! Open them, now!"

Chuckie screeched hysterically. Frank and Margaret Dare unfolded paper and opened boxes, moving much too slowly in their son's opinion. The boxes bore silks, and furs, and power tools, and liqueurs: none of it was for Charles Michael Dare.

Dejectedly he slumped against the fireplace. Pesker sat at his feet, digesting a fur ball. "Dumb cat."

"Be nice to the cat, dear; it isn't his fault."

Chuckie kicked Pesker hard, flinging him into the Christmas tree. Pesker sat up, his head entwined with tinsel.

"Charles, I'm warning you," Margaret Dare admonished. She kneeled over Pesker and comforted him. "I'll go get you some kitty tuna, Pesker-kittiums." Pesker winked his amber eye and purred. Margaret smiled. "What a precious Pesker-cat. Come on Frank, help me figure out how to use that new can opener."

"I hate them," Chuckie muttered under his breath as soon as they left for the kitchen.

"I don't know why. They are very good people."

"Huh?"

"I said that they are very good people. You are lucky to have such nice parents. A lot of kids are really unfortunate..."

"Now just wait a second, stupid cat. You can talk?"

"All cats can talk if they want to."

"Well why haven't you ever said anything to me before?"

"My mother taught me that if you couldn't say anything nice, you shouldn't say anything at all." Pesker wrapped his tail around his body and yawned smugly. "Most people don't like to listen to advice or suggestions anyway..."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Chuckie interrupted. He leaned against the wall and pondered his discovery. "O.K. If you can talk, then tell me what happened to all my gifts."

Pesker smiled. "Santa decided to leave you the best gift of all in your stocking." Before Pesker closed his mouth, Chuckie had reached his hand deep into the three-foot long stocking.

"Gross," he yelled, quickly withdrawing from the sock. His hand was covered with damp granules of gritty kitty litter. "What's the meaning of this, cat?"

Pesker stretched his hind leg, cleaning between his toes. "The note will explain."

Charles grabbed the envelope. Inside was his letter to Santa. Beneath his scribblings, a strange handwriting appeared.

*Santa,*

*Charles Michael Dare of 743 Hamilton Street has continued to exhibit unsavory behavior in this his tenth year of life. I recommend his expulsion from your route this year and suggest his inclusion on Bastet's itinerary. Would it be*

*possible for me to apply for reassignment? Perhaps a girl would suffice my needs most. I regret having to delete young Charles from your annual celebration but feel this dismissal will be in the best interest of all parties concerned.*

Sincerely,

"Pesker" Miminata

Santa Surveillance Unit #1077-90876

Chuckie tossed the note in the fireplace. "I hate you."

"Now, now, dear Charles. All is not lost. Look in your stocking again. I gave you a present."

Charles' face brightened. Greedily he reached into the litter-stuffed stocking and searched until he found an oblong package about the size of a red pepper. When he wrapped his hand around it, it squished between his fingers.

"I see you've found it. It's all so sad," Pesker slyly grinned and wiped his paw across his brow.

Twinkling a rainbow host of lights, the Christmas tree's star danced to life, gliding around the furry branches. Pesker could feel its warm glow of happiness and hope brush against his fur. He leaned toward the heat. The star circled and circled, touching each branch, until it reached the shag carpet. It zoomed between Pesker's paws, sweeping him off his feet and out the window. Chuckie's jaw dropped in amazement.

Frank and Margaret Dare stumbled into the room. "What was that noise, Chuckie?" They looked at the starless tree.

"Charles, what happened to the tree?" Margaret nervously scanned the room. It felt empty and lifeless. She hesitated, rubbing her chin with her hand, but she knew that she had to ask the question. "Where is Pesker?"

Chuckie pointed to the open window. Margaret rushed toward it, searching the snow for paw prints, but she found none.

"Honest, Mom, he went out the window." Chuckie lowered his head and sniffled. "I think he's gone for good."

Frank and Margaret held each other, remembering the Christmas Eve when Chuckie was three that they had found Pesker by the highway when they returned from the Sanderson's Christmas party.

"If it's O.K. with you Mom, I think I'll go wash my hands." Chuckie trudged toward the bathroom.

\* \* \*

Five miles away Pesker sat, somewhat humiliated, with a red satin ribbon around his neck. A Christmas tree, with a star identical to the Dare's, shimmered soft light across pastel pictures of balloons and baby animals painted on the walls.

"Do you think Amanda will like him?" Barbara McAnnally whispered to her husband.

"Of course. He's a very handsome cat. He has a glossy coat for a stray cat. We were very lucky Mrs. Pratt found him for us." He smiled at Pesker, who returned a dignified nod. Ronald hugged his wife, rubbing his unshaved face against her cheek. "I'm glad we decided to put the tree in Amanda's nursery. This is really a family Christmas."

They leaned over the crib and stroked the sleeping child's golden hair across her forehead. Her name was Amanda Jane McAnnally, and she loved cats.

## LETTERS of COMMENT

Dear Editors

Thanks for the latest *Mythic Circle*. I particularly enjoyed the imagery in Mary Choo's poetry this time out.

I have to comment on your reply to my letter printed in the same issue. While Hood's celebration of Columbus irritated me, I don't believe I said, or even implied, that it shouldn't have been published. It woke a strong response in me and that's what good work should do, so that even while I disagreed with the content of the poem, her verse was still successful.

There's nothing more repugnant to me than material being screened for its political correctness and I have to admit that the idea of being considered a part of the camp that espouses such a blinkered vision of art disturbs me greatly. Do keep in mind that disagreement with another's views does not equal a cry for censorship.

Until again, cheers,

Charles de Lint

Ottawa, Canada

*Thanks for the clarification. There have been times when we have published poems or stories about whose themes or content we felt ambivalent, but whose skill or imagery prompted us to put them before the readership. By all means, debate and discussion are welcome!--CISL. // This does not imply, however, that we have reservations about the content of Ms. Hood's work, which shows both technical skill and thematic integrity--TC.*

Dear Editors

I liked "The Frog Prince" despite its predictability. (Sad princess plus happy frog-- what else could happen and still have a happy ending?) The story was told simply and directly, which suited its fairy-tale theme.

John Grey's poetry was, as usual, quite simply good. Although I usually do not like free verse, Grey does it