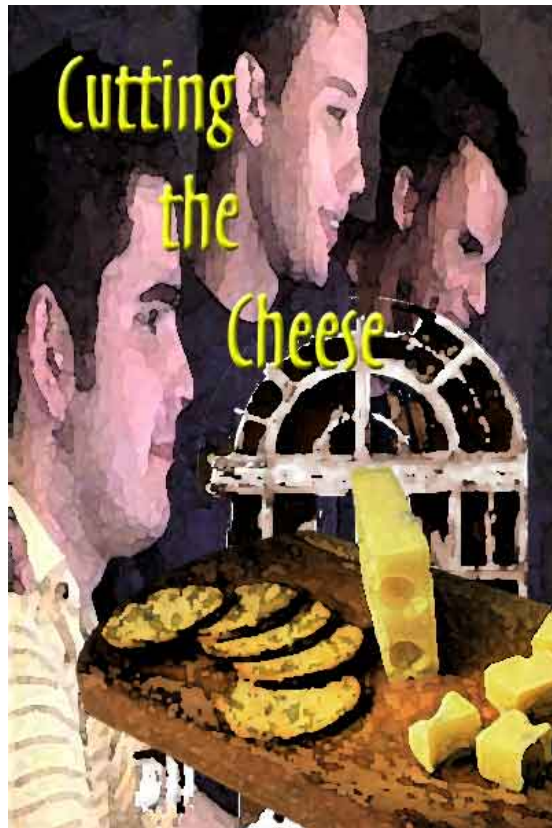


Cutting the Cheese



By Edward C. Patterson

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Cheddar-Sharp

Kelly Rodriguez struggled with the plastic grocery bags while trying to shut the back door.

“Kelly? Is that you?” Mortimer shouted from the recesses of the living room.

Kelly swept into the kitchen balancing the bags. “No, it’s Tom Cruise,” he said. He flung the bags on the butcher block, waving his hands about his nose. “I was in the neighborhood, found these fucking bags of cheese and thought they needed a home.”

No response.

Kelly rolled his eyes and, placing his hands on his hips, did his best impression of a salad cruet. “Would you help me? This is your shit anyway!” He slammed his palm on the counter, and then muttered: “I’m not having the gay scary fairies of New Birch meeting.”

Kelly caught his reflection in the polished flour canister. *Scary fairy, my ass*, he thought. *Lovely creature*. “But I’m not some fucking slave, Mortimer! Do you hear me?”

Kelly continued to preen before the canister until Mortimer bounced into the kitchen his hands over his ears as if to block an air raid siren. “I heard you,” he said, “and they’re not the *scary fairies*.”

Sharp ears, Kelly thought giving Mortimer attitude.

Mortimer approached the hallowed butcher block and its cargo of cheese. “The Gay Activists of New Birch are the hope for our future. And who are *you* to call anyone scary?” Mortimer stepped back and waved his hand down Kelly’s skinny butt and tight Nelly shorts.

Kelly answered with a finger snap, and then blew a hiss between pursed lips. “And who are you? Vanna White?”

Mortimer shrugged. He had reached the butcher block. “I’m just glad you finally got back. I thought you’d gone to the moon.”

“Where else can you get this much cheese?” Kelly snickered. He grabbed a dishcloth and began washing the counters, occasionally smiling at his own image in the flour tin.

“They’ll be here any minute.”

“I’ll be out of your way,” Kelly said. “Roy gave me a chore list.” He twirled around, his back to the counter. “And I’m not hanging around here to be enlisted in the Cheddar brigade. It’s bad enough I’ve dish pan hands.”

Mortimer looked into the bags, his face gnarling like a sourdough pretzel. “Shit! This is cheddar-sharp.”

Kelly threw the dishcloth into the sink. “Not all of it.” Mortimer scowled placing his hand mid-hip. Kelly shot him a glance that would kill. *Who the fuck does he think he is? I’m the houseboy and it’s not his house. Wait ‘til Roy gets home*. “Sorry I didn’t beat the cream on the rock so disa here cheese, she’d be purfuct for y’all.” He bowed, the dishcloth now retrieved like a fop’s hanky. “If you don’t like what I got, you should have gotten off your princess ass and went yourself. Cheddar-Sharp! Not all of it.” He grabbed Roy’s chore list from the counter.

“I asked you not to get Cheddar-Sharp. Can’t you follow a simple set of instructions?” Mortimer looked at the cheese as it dumped across the block. He clicked his tongue as if the world turned on dairy purchases. “I wanted it to be perfect. Cheddar-Sharp is harder to cut. It crumbles and they don’t eat it.”

Kelly clanked the silverware into the dishwasher. “Roy asked me to help you. I’m not under any obligation for this meeting.” He dipped his back against the sink like some precious coquette

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at Twelve Oaks. “I’m not even a fucking activist you know.” He grinned as if the angel’s had tickled him.

“Well you should get some community spirit and a social conscience,” Mort said. “You should join up.”

Kelly’s grin faded. He charged toward the bags of cheese, his slinking gait beckoning for the runaway. “Do you want this in the refrigerator? Or what?” he snapped.

Mortimer blocked him. “No, leave it be. I said they’d be here any minute. You don’t hear a word I say.”

I wish, Kelly thought. His eyes said as much.

Mortimer stacked the cheese blocks into a pyramid. “We’ll start cubing when they come.”

Kelly rolled his eyes, and then adjusted his crotch in an *eat me* gesture. “What’s this meeting about anyway?” he asked, retreating to the silverware.

“I thought you didn’t care.”

“I didn’t say *I didn’t care*. I said *I wouldn’t join*.” Kelly twirled over to the counter, leaning back again — the perfect Liza Minelli. “Just think of it as an inquiring mind that needs to know.”

It was Mortimer’s turn to roll eyes and snap fingers. “Important stuff.”

Kelly chuckled. He had been to the Gay Activist of New Birch meetings — at least twice, and he had seen these committee groups and sub-groups meet in various homes in the area. Not once did he ever consider the content to be weighty enough to label it *Important stuff*.

“Be a shit then,” Mortimer snapped. He continued the cheese set-ups. “I don’t think you take anything seriously.” He glanced back at Kelly. “Well, maybe your waistline, or by some stretch, your hair.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?” He glanced into the flour canister again.

No one ever took the houseboy seriously, especially Kelly Rodriguez. Sure he was a looker — had those thin, wiry hips, good for bed bearing and clock cleaning, but the boy had attitude — too much for a serious community member, like good old Mortimer. Kelly had moves, true. He danced naked in D.C. — on the bar top, down passed his BVDs. That’s where Roy Otterson first saw him, somewhere between the five dollar squeeze and the one hundred dollar nibble at the club *La Cage*, where the D.C. cops turn their heads the other way as they did with all the O Street *doings*. Kelly knew a *Sugar Daddy* at five hundred yards. Roy Otterson never had a quiet bankroll. Roy knew its power — power to draw young Kelly into the Otterson coterie of fops and tag-alongs — a hummingbird knowing the nectar in one sniff. For this, Kelly now cleaned the toilets and mopped up party spills in service to the generous and powerful lord of the manor, but — *seriously* — no one took Kelly Rodriguez seriously — especially Mortimer Levine.

Kelly combed his fingers through his hair. “Of course I take it seriously,” he said. “I think very highly of the committee’s decision on the bunting color at the Gay Pride Parade. Heavy, man. Real heavy.” He gave Mortimer an Italian glance — an over the shoulder, Gloria Swanson glare.

“You wouldn’t understand these things.”

“Like I don’t vote!” Kelly skipped over to Mortimer, and then perched his chin on his nemesis’ shoulder, winking with butterfly lashes. “You know Mortimer, just because you’re Roy’s *Project of the Month*, doesn’t give you free reign to get snotty with me.” He straightened (as a figure of speech). “I’ve seen that basement apartment rented to the best . . . and the worst, not saying where you lie in the course of things . . . dear. You know, they come and go and come and come and come . . . but in the end — they go.” He flicked his hands in an inevitable *whoosh*.

“Look who’s talking — the *twink du jour*.”

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“At least I know it.” Kelly was nobody’s fool and anybody’s purchase. He would be the first to admit it — in fact, proclaim it: “Houseboys are in it for the *mullah* and the perks and Roy’s riches flow freely to those of us who open our hearts and do a little light cleaning.”

“You mean spread your legs and do a lot of apple polishing.” Mortimer continued to spread the cheese out on the block.

Kelly clunked his elbows on the block and supported his pretty little head in those caressing palms like a candy heart perched in a show window. “What’s your point, Sir Mortimer?” No response. “I’ll tell you the point. I get the master bedroom, while you get the basement apartment — the damp, cold basement apartment with the water bugs and no windows.”

Mortimer clicked his teeth. He had taken a steady stream of Kelly’s tongue-lashing since he had arrived as Roy’s star tenant. But after all, Kelly was the *hired-help*. One should never stoop to quibble with the *hired-help*. Instead, one rises to the occasion and underscores the reality of existence — values and impact.

“Roy has confidence in my work,” Mort snarled, and then smiled. “He’s backing a winner.” Roy Otterson constantly sponsored emerging artists — writers, musicians and sometimes a dancer or three — it was his hobby; that, and the constant expansion of *the house*, this ghost of Tara future that all gay men in New Birch aspired to occupy, if only for the price of a committee meeting and a lump of Cheddar-Sharp cheese.

Kelly thought of Roy’s winners in terms of horse racing with so many contenders on the track. “Roy has confidence in *my* work,” he said. “And I go to the bank the winner.” He preened over his reflection again. “No illusions here.” He stood at attention, took a stiff breath and marched to the butcher block. His hand slammed down on a pale block of cheese. “Look here — mild cheddar.” He poked at another. “Most of this is mild, mild, mild.” Suddenly, the doorbell rang — or should we say *clanged*, a rich string of chimes and chords playing Bach’s *O Jesu, heart of man’s desiring*, a most unfitting tune for the Otterson estate. “Oh, there’s the doorbell. Shall I get it, your lordship.” Kelly cocked his head. “Surely you don’t want me to greet your company, or are you just going to lie there in state surrounded by rank cheese?” A few things surrounded in *rank cheese* crossed Kelly’s mind. He snickered.

“Fuck you.” Mortimer threw the cheese aside and headed through the kitchen door.

Kelly chuckled. They all think they’re hot shit because they think they have talent, he thought. Roy’s been through writers, musicians, singers, philosophers and even a dress designer. Flashes in the pan. He returned to his reflection and grinned, his teeth blossoming like a pretty jackass wreathed for some bacchanal. Talent is playing buckaroo bonsai in bed — and I’ve a doctorate in that. “And when my charms fade,” he muttered, “or if the MasterCard’s declined, then — and only then I’ll consider my next career move.” His nose twitched. “Oh, that cheese stinks already.”

Roquefort

The Otterson home, less home than hobby, was set partially up a hidden drive, which cut away and sank into a ravine beside the river — a perfect hiding spot from the tourist riff-raff of New Birch. A cross between Tara and the Pink Flamingo, the mansion was always under construction adding *this* wing or *that* barn, giving it a museum-look — the curator always at work. Entering the Otterson Homestead was an experience not soon forgotten. The portico led into a marble-floored lobby — a *palazzo gran* in the old Venetian style, flanked by a spiral staircase in the old plantation style and graced by a grand piano (of course) and not an ordinary grand piano. No. This one had never been played by its owner, like all great showpieces — meant to fetch attention to the potential rather than the Bauhaus meanness of the instrument. After all, there was a gold handled can-opener in Roy Otterson's cabinet that would never see the edge of a Star-Kist can. The lobby gave way to a verandah that overlooked a woodland pool and an Italianate patio.

This Homestead (dare we call it that) lavished guests with a huge main room, a sunken living space decked with Florentine couches and Limoges chairs over an ever changing doily of oriental carpeting. Air freshener was never needed here, because the florist delivered barrels of cut flowers daily — roses and peonies and the Calla lilies (*when they were in bloom again*). Sometimes Kelly Rodriguez bunched these into arrangements, but Roy paid a professional to twist Sunflowers and Spider Mums into contorted and artful displays for his precocious eye and his exclusive nose.

Everything was *just-so* and undercut by walls of original art. Roy's close friend was a procurer of art, fine originals, and as dear to his heart as those other procurers. Overhanging the living room, like a flower box, were balconies that skirted the periphery, making the room look medieval; sort of the great outdoors — indoors. Another grand staircase cascaded into the living room like a bridal veil. As it opened into the heart of the house, this staircase was well trod and when parties exploded, as they often had, became the main perch for guests that lined in steps like manikins on a wedding cake.

From the living room one needed a map to navigate the nook and cranny of rooms. They held meditative charm like some Cathedral chinked to receive a votive candle and small change. Although many a Mary graced these alcoves, there were few virgins. An award winning dining room, with a long, mahogany table, always set for banqueting, thrust into a wing that overlooked the pool and patio. The walls half-timbered Tudor — the windows *Louis Quatorze*. At the table's center stood a carousel horse, the genuine article rummaged from some trolley park in the mid-west that had met with hard times and a bulldozer. The great wooded *equus* cast its shadow on a table set for work — the chaparral for the monthly meeting for the Gay & Lesbian Activist Association of New Birch and Sipsboro (GLAABS). There was a banner draped across the wall to announce this fact, a spurious addition as if anyone who wandered in from the pool or the driveway would not know they were attending a meeting of the lavender brigade, although the word *Activist* would make one think that they were in a cell making bombs and *coup* maps instead of arranging the fate of the Gay Pride bunting, while eating stinky cheese.

Into these hallowed halls came the ring chimes of Bach announcing the arrival of the first members of the GLAABS. They rang twice and waited, as anything beyond that would be rude (at least according to *Miss Chatty's Book of Queenly Etiquette*). Three bodies stood outside before the door listening to the muted sounds of *O Jesu, heart of man's desiring*. *One body was*

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lank, one *portly* (although he'd be the first to deny it), and one *just right* in all proportions. The *lank* one swayed over both feet appearing either impatient to gain entry or in need of a urinal. The *portly* one rolled his eyes, probably wondering if he had arrived too early. He scanned the portico's trim as if comparing it with other trim in his acquaintance. The *just right* one twisted before the door as if he hoped it would never open and thereby affect his escape. Finally it *did* open.

Mortimer lifted his arms in welcome as if he was a prize show host and he the prize. "Todd, Padgett, Luke. Come right on in." Luke, the *just right* one, thought to turn around and leave now. He was the new kid on the block and relied on Padgett (the *lank* one) and Todd (the *portly* one) to steer him through these gay (and in this case, ostentatious) waters.

Entering Castle Otterson was a ritual Luke had not learned yet, but he soon had a pattern to follow. Even these three early arrivals (in truth the cheddar-brigade) had to do this predestined *schtick*. Padgett threw his hands in the air like Carol Channing and spun about ogling the walls, the paintings, the stairs, the piano and the lemon pledged shining marble. "Wow," he sang his tall frame spread to its full height like a crane about to whoop — only he was whooping already. "What a place." This was coached so much like Betty Davis' *What a dump*, Luke laughed, for which he received an arched eye and an Italian glance. Padgett grabbed Mortimer's hand and whirled him around. "How did you manage this, Mortimer?"

Todd (the *portly* one-although he'd never admit it) gave the place a *once over* glance, a scan that any disapproving mother would know. It was another take on *ye old entry ritual*. "It's quite nice here," he said touching the banister and checking for dust. As he looked about — looking for the fault, no doubt, he reached for Luke's shoulder. "You know *my* home was photographed by *Better Homes and Gardens*." This was not a lie, but it was also old news — over the hill and far away news, but still it was meant to maintain shelf-life until Todd decided it should be discarded, which meant — *never*. "*Better Homes and Gardens*, I said."

"Really," Padgett remarked rolling his eyes. "We didn't hear about that — today!"

Todd Moorehouse's mitts brushed the piano keys admiring his somewhat ambiguous visage in the highly polished black hood. Padgett watched him, and then shook his head. The look bespoke a clear message to Luke. It said *see the embittered, jealous queen*. "Always comparison shopping," he said. "He's never quite at home unless the home is his."

Luke laughed — but not really. The place was grand and he thought to make some compliment to his host, but he realized that Mortimer was not *the host*. Roy was the host and only Roy should get the compliment and it had to be a careful, terse remark so it didn't seem to pander, or at least that's what Padgett had told him. *Luke, dear, you always say the wrong things to Roy. You should rehearse a few brief comments and deliver them in your sweet, but masculine manner. Roy likes that, and what Roy likes, Roy takes.*

The grand entry hall intimidated Luke. He couldn't imagine anyone living in such a magnificent space. Luke lived in a two-room apartment and liked his little shoebox. He had no aspirations to grandeur and often wondered why he was even traveling in the company of the Padgett Andersons and the Todd Moorehouses of this world. Still, if you come out, you need to know the territory and if the territory came with posh entry rituals into the halls of the rich *Pappatozzi*, so be it. He sucked it in and shook his head in wonder, quietly watching Padgett and Todd paw the furniture. He had learned one basic truth. When in the company of Queens, sometimes silence is the most laudable of qualities.

"Come in," Mortimer said to Luke pulling him through the lobby. "The place won't bite you." Luke shrugged as if he had been bitten already. "I know it's a bit big, but it'll shrink once

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you know your way around. Isn't it nice that Roy's letting us have our meeting here?" Luke *did* think it was nice, even accommodating considering that Roy never meddled with GLAABS, and as far as he knew, never set foot across the threshold of their regular meeting hall — the New Birch Unitarian Church of the Holy Family.

Todd began his crouching investigations now. "I *do so* love the carpet," he said bending and plushing. "Is that recessed mahogany?"

"You know it is, Toddy," Padgett said. Padgett had *eye rolling* down to a science. In fact, he had at least six distinct classifiable eye rolls, each with its own subtext and glossary. "I know you Todd Moorehouse. You're just trying to set us up for the story about how you had the same work done in your little bungalow."

Todd sprang to his feet. "Bungalow? *Pardonez-moi?*" Insulted or not, the springboard was there. "Oh, you're such a kidder. Perhaps, I should call you Margo from now on."

Mortimer continued to pull Luke through the living room like a man arriving at the penitentiary and being guided to his cell. *You'll love the accommodations — running water, a toilet and a room mate, oo la la!* Luke looked back toward his mother hens, a look that said: *save me*. Todd grabbed Luke's other hand and tugged him center room.

"What's your hurry Mortimer?"

"Yes, Mort, we'd like to take in the sights."

"When Roy returns he'll give you a tour."

Padgett gave the classic *dreamy eye roll*. "I bet he will."

Mortimer snorted, and then waved them toward the kitchen, but since they weren't budging, he leaned on the stairway railing and enjoyed Luke's *just right* torso. Suddenly, he shook his head like a cook who forgot that the *roux* was on the stove. "Luke, didn't Roy ask you to bring someone with you — to the after-meeting get-together?"

Luke had met Roy twice before, both times at social events at the local Gay Bar — *Leathers and Feathers*. These were private affairs, to which Luke went stag. Roy was perturbed by this and demanded that the next time he invited Luke anywhere (Luke was invited as part of the network of ripple invitations that always followed in the wake of Roy's commands), Luke *must* bring a *date*. You didn't thwart Sir Otterson and expect another invitation. Most of the company regarded upon *that* command to Luke as a reprieve, the lucky bastard.

"Yes," Luke said. "I have invited someone."

Mortimer looked behind Luke. "Where is he?"

"Or she," Padgett interjected. "I sometimes wonder whether our little newbie here is really gay or is just doing a research paper."

Luke took a step back nearly falling into the gapping hole of the living room. "Don't worry," he said, "he'll be here later."

Mortimer did the salad cruet stance. "Well, who is he? Is he at least a GLAABS member?"

"He is," Luke said. That of course would make all the difference — instant acceptance into the club. Little did Luke know. "His name's Chaz."

The hands went to the chins as the mother hens pondered the GLAABS roster for a *Chaz*. There were plenty of *Mikes* and far too many *Scotts*, but a *Chaz?*

"I don't think I know him," Mortimer said with a tone that reeked of doubt as if Luke was making the whole thing up and the mythical *Chaz* would never materialize. *Three strikes and you're out at Roy's ballgame.*

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Luke tried to muster an image of *Chaz*. “He’s pretty quiet at the meetings,” Luke said. That didn’t describe many of the pansies that pranced in the halls Unitarian, but it narrowed it down a bit.

“Like you, eh?” Padgett remarked. “Don’t tell me you have a gay brother.”

Luke grimaced. Why he put up with these geese, who could tell, but they had hovered over his coming out with enough panache to assure some modicum of security. “Chaz sat next to me at the last rap session.” He saw the thin, duck-snouted Chaz, not a great looker, but fetching enough in his three-piece suit and his unfastened tie. Chaz had cocked his head and was listening to the rap group leader. The subject was *coming out to parents and siblings*, a ritual Luke had performed just recently and not to the best effect. Chaz seemed far away and lost in the leader’s words, which to Luke’s mind meant he was somewhere else. When the meeting concluded, Luke introduced himself and then: “Since Roy insisted I bring someone tonight, I got up the nerve to ask him.”

“Just what we need,” Padgett said, “another wallflower to sit in the corner with you, dear Luke — someone to help you count the ceiling tiles.”

Luke began to flip Padgett the finger, but stopped mid-flip. Padgett was okay, very funny at times and as sharp as the cheese they were about to cut, but sometimes the attitude was too *soufflé* for Luke.

As his middle finger unfurled, and then stopped, Todd intervened. “No dear,” he said. “You must follow through when it comes to Padgett. Like this.” Todd zapped his finger out with great *élan*, bowling his arm upward. “See . . . one clean steady, underhanded sweep. Middle finger extended to the full. And there. A worthy *fuck you* for dear, and I’ll say it, *old*, Padgett.”

Padgett’s head bounced as if it were on springs. He pursed his lips. Luke knew that there would be a small war of digits accompanied by a concerto of rhyming vulgarities. He had seen it before. It wasn’t pretty.

Mortimer intervened. “Let’s get started before the Lesbos come,” he said, heading off this charming spear throwing contest.

Todd preened toward the windows. He changed the subject: “I like this window treatment,” he crowed. “It’s almost like mine, but not quite.”

Padgett blew a loud raspberry.

“So, Luke,” Mortimer said trying to keep the momentum toward the kitchen and away from fairy ring-toss. “What does this Chaz do?”

Luke stared at him. “I don’t know. I just met him.”

“You didn’t talk a little with him, dear,” Todd remarked. “He might be a doctor, like me.”

“Doctor, my ass,” Padgett said.

“Well, a child psychologist *is* a doctor, you know. And if you need a doctor for your ass, dear, try a proctologist.”

Luke smiled at this. He had only one brief conversation with Chaz as they had sat at the rap, watching the guest speaker demonstrate: *the correct application of monocydil before slipping on a condom*. Even though the demonstrator used an acrylic penis, the hall was filled with catcalls from the men. Admonishments from the womyn, not that they would ever see one of *them thar things* beyond the acrylic. “Chaz isn’t a doctor,” Luke said. “He works for Grebe.”

“Grebe? How quaint,” Padgett said, “an insurance faggot.”

“Maybe an insurance adjuster,” Mort said. “I could use an adjustment.”

“I once dated an Insurance adjuster,” Todd said.

“Oh shut up,” Padgett snapped.

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“Or was it a rate adjuster?” Todd took Luke aside grasping his wrist like Auntie Mame. “In any event, Luke, you must remember the newbie rule. You can’t have a husband before *I* get one. Newbies must wait their turn in the halls of love until their long hopeful sisters get settled.”

Luke looked to Mortimer for help now. He had heard enough bullshit to last the evening. He also knew that the evening had just begun — the piles were just beginning to unload into neat pink clumps on the carpeting.

“Don’t listen to him Luke,” Mort said. He grasped Luke’s other wrist and wrestled him away from Dr. Moorehouse, child psychologist. “Into the kitchen folks. Let’s cut the cheese.”

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