

The Saga

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is that our dreams and desires are often impossible to realize. We live on a placid island of reality, always building our boats, always longing for the greener pastures of the islands we imagine existing beyond the horizon, knowing that we are not meant to voyage to far. Fables tell us that to reach the islands of our dreams will only lead to sorrow, as Midas with his touch of gold, or Jephtah and his daughter. But a far more frightful position, as I discovered, is to be marooned on the island of another's desires.

...

"How is your job?"

I have two options. I can tell my mother the truth, or I can lie. The adolescent version of me badly wants to tell her how boring my job is, and that I don't know what I'm doing with my life. The adolescent version wants reassurance, to be told again that I am a smart young lady, that I have made the right life choices and that this is merely a spot of bad luck. But adolescence ended two years ago, and I am a college graduate who is financially and emotionally independent, and who realizes that there is nothing productive will result from the truth except to worry her mother.

"It's great. It's great to have job flexes my math skills."

Lie number one. Figuring out the amount of postage to charge for a given package and destination and estimating delivery times requires at most high school math, not someone with a physics degree, and my tasks are scheduled to be replaced by a computer a few months from now.

"and I've made a lot of new friends."

Lie number two. The retail front end of the post office is staffed by primarily by women. Despite being one, I have no idea to befriend women. I regard this as a major failing, second to my current career path. In university, everyone was a fan of StarCraft or Battlestar Galactica. You knew exactly what to talk about. You were insta-friends. In my current job, I had made one friend, and as usual, he was a dude. Corey was gay, or at least so I assumed. My assumption was due to the way he walked and because I think I saw him making out with another

guy late at night in the gazebo of the main street park of this conservative little town. Corey and I were friends (and that term is used very loosely) because we were both pretty much ignored by our co-workers. They were friendly to him at first, but he was a huge nerd. Contrary to what they'd seen on t.v., not all effeminate guys were fashion or celebrity gossip gurus.

"and how is Robert? Does he like his job?"

"oh, he loves it. He says his projects are really interesting. His boss loves him. He's made himself invaluable to the company. They're going to be expanding soon, and he's going to be promoted to project manager with a team of people to order around. It also comes with a significant pay increase."

"That's impressive."

I can feel the jealousy rising in me. My mother is supposed to be reserve her pride for me, her actual child, not her daughter's boyfriend. I let my adolescent self loose.

"I have a really hard time not feeling envious ..."

"Well, if you didn't want to feel jealous, you could have dated a loser."

"Speak of the devil"

Behind me, Rob entered the apartment we shared.

"I'll talk to you later. Love you, say hi to Robert for me."

"Bye mom, love you too."

Rob keeps the door open as he takes off his jacket. "Hello sweatpea, have a good chat with momulous? Will they share their cloaking technology with you?"

That pun was stretching. "Yes, she says hi. Can you close the door? You let a moth in."

Rob closes the door and grabs his shoe. "I have you now Mon Mothma! I killed your Bothan spies, now I kill you!" He hits the moth with his freshly removed shoe, leaving a muddy footprint on the wall.

I erupt in laughter. "I don't get it, why do you laugh at that but not my momulous joke? I thought you liked Star Trek more than Star Wars?"

I shrug. He hugs me, and it finally feels like I'm home, like I'm safe and nothing will ever change.

"How was your work?" he asks.

"Good, boring as usual. My coworkers keep talking about this book series. I figured I should read it too, but the reviews say it's the dog's breakfast."

"So don't read it. Don't waste money on books you know are going to be bad, it just encourages more bad books to be published."

"Yes, but you don't understand. I have nothing in common with my co-workers. This is a relatively painless way to fit in. Don't worry, I found the book at Sally-Ann, so my money will be going to feed the homeless and not the publishers."

"Okay. Personally I think life is too short to spend on bad books."

"Says the person in this room with a life."

"I'm sorry. Can I tell you again how happy I am that you moved here with me? How is the job search going?"

"Shitty. There's nothing in this town unless you want to work at Tim Horton's or a call centre."

"That's too bad. You know, I learned today that my company is hiring user experience evaluators. You should apply."

"Really? But I'm probably not qualified." My physics degree qualified me to integrate complex equations and find the equations of motion from hamiltonians and lagrangians, but unfortunately no one was hiring for that skill set.

"You're too hard on yourself. Anyone who is analytically-minded and has good communication skills is qualified for the job. You should apply."

"Sure"

...

I wake up before Rob, as usual, a small annoyance. I crack open the book and started reading. In the front cover, where people usually put the stickers that say "from the library of..." there are a bunch of little chicken scratches in purple gel-pen that look like runic markings. This doesn't surprise me. I've seen worse in used books, at least this book isn't annotated to the same extent as some used copies of the Lord of the Rings or Atlas Shrugged are. I guess that it's a record of the number of times the book has been read.

About an hour in, I scoff loudly enough to wake up Rob.

"What goes on?" he asks, in his slumber-garbled English.

"Nothing. I'm just annoyed at this book. Go back to sleep."

"What did book do to sweetpea?"

"The book is young adult fiction, strike that, bottom of the barrel young adult fiction. The heroine is 17, but the people at work who are fans of this book are in their mid-twenties to late thirties. It's like they enjoy being infantilized."

Rob grabs the book and puts it between his legs. "No more book" he says. "Sleep time now." He puts his arm around me and kisses my hip. His face feels like a warm pillow.

"Wish I could, but I need to get up and go to work."

...

Corey came to visit me at the parcels desk during my shift.

"Lots of customers today, eh?" He says sarcastically.

"Yep. Sure are." I look out into the store. A tall blonde-haired muscular guy, stares at the bulk options for express envelopes.

"Hey, I know that guy." I point at Blondie Terminator.

"Really? He's a regular. Chantal's had a crush on him for months."

"He was my TA for electrical engineering. He wasn't particularly helpful, he spent most of the lab periods reading the message forums for his World of Warcraft guild."

"Oh really? Let's go say hi."

I walk up to my former TA and introduce him to Corey. I can see Chantal fussing with her hair and adjusting her uniform to make her boobs look bigger in the corner of my eye.

Corey says: "A little bird tells me you play wow."

"Yep. It owns over half of my life right now. I have four level 85 characters and one that I recently got up to 90. And you?"

"I used to be really in to it, but I haven't really been on since pre-Cataclysm. Now that mists is out I may consider re-subscribing. So tell me, do you enjoy being a panda?"

I excuse myself and walk over to Chantal, who looks deflated. "Why can't men be like the ones in books?"

By books, I know she means the craptacular series I'd read this morning. Her passive-aggressive comment hinted that she had fallen out of infatuation over his gaming.

"Meh, I think it's good to have hobbies. It gets boring fast if you're spending every single waking moment with them."

As soon as the words leave my mouth I want to take them back. That comment is not helping me build bridges.

"Speak for yourself, if it's true love you'll never be bored of each other."

I leave her at the counter without saying goodbye. I'm pissed at what I interpret as an insinuation that Rob and I aren't really in love, but I probably deserved it given that I had insulted her interpretation of love.

....

I read Chantal's favourite book until Rob gets home. It's horrible, but it's written in a simple level that is easy to follow given how stressed out I've been. Since coming to this town I've been constantly anxious. I have a general sense of unease about my career and the path my life is taking. I don't want to be one of those women who gets a university degree and then doesn't do anything with it. I chose Rob over my career, and although I love him, I can't help the regret.

Rob comes home with flowers: a large bouquet of yellow carnations. I think I mentioned over three years ago that yellow flowers remind me of my grandmother's house. Rob never buys me flowers, but I guess tonight is an exception.

On a typical weeknight Rob and I would talk for ten minutes, then go to separate rooms in our apartment, where I would play some mindless jrpg and he would read stuff on the internet until we got tired and went to bed. It was a sort of unspoken agreement, not that we don't enjoy each other's company, it's just that we both need our ways of unwinding. But tonight Rob sits next to me on the couch and watches me play the game. It was a nice change. Perhaps Chantal is right about love.

....

A new movie in the adaptation of the book series was about to come out, and my co-workers were unsurprisingly excited about it. Plans were being made to attend the premiere as a group. I didn't share their excitement, but I am willing to sacrifice my sense of taste to fit in. Luckily, I wouldn't be the only one.

Corey decided that I was now his best work friend. Chantal had been teasing Corey for months about playing wow, and exposing the object of her affections as a gamer had been a sweet revenge. He also did not get why our co-workers were so invested in the books, but like me, he wanted to be part of the group.

To fit in, we would have to attend the premiere in matching t-shirts. The central plot of the book series, if it can be called that, involved a love triangle between the heroine and the two other main characters. Our co-workers were going to go to the premiere in shirts that said "team" and the name of one of the male corners in the love triangle. Their "team" was based on which they were the most attracted to, not who they thought would make the better boyfriend for the heroine. Given both characters were supposed to be teenagers, and that at least one of the actors was 16, I find this behaviour kind of creepy.

Chantal put an order sheet for the t-shirts in the breakroom. I put myself down as "team moustache", because the heroine's father had awesome facial hair. Due to the unfortunate fact that one of the heartthrobs really shouldn't take his shirt off, Corey put himself down as "team nipple hair".

I'm going to miss Corey. I interviewed for the userx job, and it went really well. The guy who interviewed me, who was also Rob's boss- it was a start-up and the company was small- asked me if I was willing to travel for the job. I said yes, and told him about a recent camping and cycling trip I'd taken around Newfoundland. Turns out the boss is from Cornerbrook. I spent the last ten minutes of the interview showing him photos of the trip on my smartphone. That, combined with the nepotism of dating their star employee, and that my physics degree made me more qualified than anyone else they would be able to find in this small town, made me a shoe-in.

...

Rob wanted to go for a walk when I got home. I was tired, but he insisted. His palms were sweaty. We walked through the park on main street and to a little bench near the stream under a willow tree, which I had mentioned a few months before was one of the few things I liked about this town.

He pulled out a ruby and diamond ring, just like I'd always dreamed of, and asked me to marry him. I said yes. Now I only need the affirmative response from Rob's company, and my life will be perfect.

...

My mother was not surprised when I told her the news. While some mothers cry when their daughters get engaged, mine nonchalantly congratulated me and said I'd made a good choice. My mom was pragmatic about love and was a good judge of character. When I'd talked about previous boyfriends in that irrational period when they seemed perfect, she was already predicting that they'd cheat a few months down the line. And she didn't hold back on expressing her predictions. It used to drive me crazy, but I've come to trust her wisdom and experience. I'm glad she approves of Rob.

...

The women at work were ecstatic over my rock. Finally, something to talk about with them, although I saw my wedding planning as more of a chore than a pleasure. The newest movie is one that features the marriage of the

heroine to one of corners of the triangle. Corey started putting a little distance between us. I figured it was just because by getting married I was acting like a breeder. once Corey realized that I had no intention of starting to pop out babies once I got married, we'd be back to making fun of Chantal and generally goofing off at work.

Rob is always at my side during the wedding planning. He's started waking up with me, which makes me very happy. I haven't heard back from Rob's company yet regarding my interview, which is starting to worry me, but I'm sure I'll hear back soon.

...

I sit down next to Corey in the break room in an attempt to spark a conversation. He gets up and moves to another table. I feel so hurt that I want to cry. Instead, I pick up an old issue of US weekly and prop it up around my tupperware container, so that if I break down, my cry face is masked by the images of celebrity's bikini-bodied cellulite.

Later, Corey comes up and leans against my corner, arms folded. "I can't believe you're marrying him."

"Why's that?"

"You could do so much better. Rob is a slob."

"What?"

"You told me yourself that he killed a moth with a muddy shoe, left mud on the wall, and didn't clean it up. You bugged him about it several times and then ended up cleaning it up on your own."

"Yeah, but that's just me venting. When you get into a long term relationship, there's always a few things that start to annoy you about the other person. I may complain about Rob, but that doesn't mean I don't love him."

Corey sulks.

"I don't understand why you're so upset about it. We'll still hang out when I'm Mrs. Rob. I'm not going to quit my job to take care of him." Except that I was planning to quit my job.

...

The book doesn't like to be closed. It flops open where-ever I drop it. It's gibbous pages have acquired a spring constant that pushes off any object placed on top, even ceramic mugs. It doesn't like to play nice on bookshelves, but I'm not worried. I'm going to trash it as soon as I'm done.

...

Corey starts talking to me again. I think our short conversation is cathartic.

...

"Ugh, this book."

"What's wrong with it?" The side-effect of Rob spending more time around me is that I have become more aware of how much I talk to myself.

"Oh, I've just read a part of the book that the girls of work think is so great and romantic, where one of the love interests professes his undying love for the heroine, and how he is going off to a fight where he is going to die. The heroine then spends an entire chapter fretting over him and feeling guilty, but I can't feel any sympathy because she is the entire cause of the fight in the first place, and she can stop it. It all started when..."

"Oh, please stop" Rob interjects. "I thought I cared about this when I asked the question, but I really don't."

"Okay. Sorry for offending your ears." I go back to reading with a scowl that I usually intend to mean *I'm mad*

at you but that Rob never picks up on.

This time, the Rob does pick up on it. "I'm sorry, that was condescending. You explain to me how the heroine started the fight if you want."

I sigh. "Nah, it's too silly. I don't know why I'm so wrapped up in this stupid book."

...

Next day I have a slow mid-day shift, and since I'm almost done the book, I pull it out and read it at the counter. Being able to be paid to read is a perk of this job, but I can't make a career out of being paid to read.

"Where are you?" Chantal asks, seeing me reading.

"Oh, I'm at the part where he bribes his gang to look after her while he goes off to the fight."

"Oh I love that part, it's so cute! When she paints the nails of her bodyguards."

"Really? I just find it really creepy. She clearly expresses that she doesn't want to be there, that she wants to see the fight. She's being kept against her will."

"He's just doing that to protect her."

"I don't know, it seems really possessive. He seems like a real creep. I mean, a couple of chapters previously, she wanted to go hang out with his competition, and he prevented her from seeing him by taking her car apart."

"Well, boys will be boys."

“I don't know, one of the reasons I love Rob is that he does not get jealous. The guy I dated before him would get mad at me if I so much as sat next to another man in lecture.”

“Yeah, but he never tells her he's upset about her visiting the other guy.”

“No, he just passive-aggressively disassembles her car.”

Chantal shrugs and goes off to deal with a customer. I go back to reading. Corey approaches me next.

“There's something I need to tell you.”

“Okay. Go ahead.”

“I don't want you to marry Rob because I'm in love with you.”

I laugh so much I'm cackling. This must be a joke, there is no way this un-confirmed gay man, who has never expressed any interest in me and talks to me for maybe 20-30 minutes per shift at our boring minimum-wage job is in love with me.

“Why are you laughing? Are you trying to hurt me? I'm serious!”

I look at him. I have nothing to say. I am shocked and dumbfounded. He presses his mouth against mine and forces his tongue in. I push him back, hard, slamming him into the wall and exclaim: “What the fuck? This isn't funny.”

He hides from my view behind a display of decorative packing options for the remainder of the shift. I really need to get out of this job.

...

"Did you hear back about my interview? I haven't heard anything back and I'm thinking about contacting them."

"Oh, I told them you weren't interested."

"But I am interested. You need to tell them that I am."

"It's too late, they've already filled the position."

I stomp my feet down, as if I'm a toddler about to throw a tantrum. I walk to the kitchen, to make dinner, trying anything to ignore the tempest of rage inside. I fill a pot with water and set it on the stove to boil. The tasks I need to do are too banal to keep my mind off my frustrations. I walk back to the living room, where Rob is lounging on the sofa, watching some documentary about truckers in the arctic.

"Why did you tell them I wasn't interested?"

"Well, I didn't realize the job involved a lot of travel."

"But I love to travel."

"But I wouldn't like it if you were gone a lot, and you would miss me too."

"It's still my decision to make."

"We're going to get married. That means we were a team now. We make decisions on the basis of what's best for the team."

"But I need something more in my life than working at the post office!"

"If you don't like your job, please quit it. I make enough money to support us, and a baby, if that's what you'd like."

"You want me to stay home and clean and cook for you?"

"We can hire a maid."

"Ugh! You're not getting it. I swear all the men in my life are going crazy. First Corey, now you!"

"What did Corey do?"

"Oh, he told me he loved me and then rape-kissed me in front of everyone in the store."

"He raped you?"

"No, he didn't rape me, he just kissed me against my will. It was gross. He's obviously gone crazy, because he was gay before. Well, I never confirmed that he was gay. But he was awfully fishy."

"I'm going to talk to Corey. This behaviour is unacceptable."

"I agree, but don't. This is my life. Don't go around telling people I am or am not interested in job offers, and don't go telling off my friends."

"You consider this man your friend? I would stay away from him."

"I'm sure it's just a moment of weakness."

I pulled up my computer and sent Corey a message. I know that it is socially frowned upon to not say these things face to face, but I want my angst to go away.

"Corey," I write, "I value our friendship, but I am not romantically interested in you, and I suspect you aren't really, so please stop coming on to me."

I get an e-mail back almost instantaneously.

"You are wrong. I am in love with you, and I am going to continue trying to make you see that. I can't help the way I feel. My love for you burns like a flame."

I laugh, because I've never heard anyone talk like that outside of a Celine Dion song. I laugh because they're crazy and I feel more anxious.

Rob stands over my shoulder and asks me what I find funny. "Nothing." I say, as I slap my notebook shut, but I can tell by the disgust on his face that he's seen the e-mail. He thinks I'm laughing because I'm falling for Corey's flowery language.

"Rob, it's not what you think."

"I don't want to hear it." He says, and stalks off.

I should not have tried to hide the e-mail from Rob. I should have shown it to him, and shown the ridiculousness of the response. That's what a well-adjusted adult couple would do. Rob would normally have laughed it off with me. But Rob is not functioning within normal parameters at the moment.

My anxiety at this point has reached a fevered peak. Normally I would talk out my feelings with Rob, but since

he's an unreliable source of sanity at the moment, I call my mom.

I explain the situation, the job opportunity that Rob ruined for me, and Corey's sudden team-switching. And her advice is:

"Your problem is that you're turning men into women. You see, men are simple creatures. Rob needs to feel like he's protecting you in order to affirm his masculinity. You should let him do it, it's good to have someone protecting you now that you live far away from your father and me. As to this Corey, men don't head over heels in love like that without a lot of obvious hinting. You must have done something to lead him on. If I were you, I'd do what Rob suggests and stay..."

I don't let her finish. For the first time in my life, I hang up on my mom. I had enough of her leave-it-to-beaver sitcom-mom lecture. Everyone around me is going absolutely insane and I feel defeated. I go up to my bed, curl up in the foetal position, and cry myself to sleep.

...

I wake up on Rob's back. He's picked me out of bed and is carrying me over to a dining room chair that has found its way into our bedroom. Before I can wake myself up enough to react, he's put me down in a chair. He's trying to tie my legs and arms to the chair with my scarves and leggings. I kick and bite but he is much stronger than me, and has a determination to see me stuck in this chair. Eventually he wins.

"Why are you doing this, Rob?"

"I have to deal with Corey. He crossed a line."

"No!"

"You were always so gentle-hearted. That's why I knew you had to be restrained. Otherwise you might try to stop this and what you might see would be traumatic."

"Fuck you! Let me go."

"My darling, I do this to protect you. I love you eternally."

I scream at him until my voice is raw. There is genuine pain in his eyes, but he leaves anyway, picking up a crowbar on the way out. I cry in the chair, alone. After several minutes I calm down. Looking around the room, I have an epiphany.

Rob hasn't tied the knots tightly enough to hurt me, leaving my feet just enough room to crab-walk the chair over to the dresser. He also didn't bother to take my sewing scissors off the dresser, allowing me to knock them into my hands, and cut the leggings tying my hands together. I stand up and look out the window. In the back yard, I can see Rob confronting Corey. Corey has a steel baseball bat in his hand.

I grab the book off the nightstand and a box of matches from the kitchen. I run out to the driveway, set the book on fire, and drop it on the pavement. Rob and Corey are coming to blows now with the crowbar and baseball bat. I dial 911 on my cell phone and answer the operator's questions as I watch flames consume the book. The black photographed cover curled up and fell off. The first page was next. As the chicken scratches burned up they produced a noxious purple fume and sizzled. The book dissolved into a foetid black ichor. As the last of the yellow wrinkled pages melted, Rob and Corey fainted, mid blows. The ambulance arrived and took them to the hospital. I waited in the hospital lobby as their gashes were stitched and they were checked for trauma. Both Rob and Corey suffered minor concussions.

I waited until his wounds had healed, but I couldn't stay with Rob. He had no memory of the past two weeks, but I did. Even though I suspected his behaviour to be due to the cursed book, my impression of him had been irrevocably changed, and in my mind he was no longer the person I was in love with. I feel even more guilt and shame to what the book did to Corey – changing his sexuality. Seeing him back to making out with guys in the gazebo is a small consolation.

I moved back to the city and got a job working for a technology start-up. My job is fulfilling and my co-workers obsess over Diablo 3 and the next Iron Man movie.

I am happy now, but I am ashamed, after all that has transpired, to miss being in love.