

Magical Girls



I used to believe I was a fairy when I was a young girl. I would stand in the sandy playground of my preschool, catching water from the sprinkler in my pudgy little fists, then make the water ‘disappear,’ showing off my magic to my friends. The teacher said she could see droplets running down my arm, that I wasn’t making the water disappear (which was kind of a dick move, now that I think back on it), but I didn’t believe her. Why would I? She was just upset she didn’t have magic like I did.

I was just like Silvermist, a water fairy from Tinkerbell. I loved Silvermist, a calm fairy who befriended goldfish and carried dewdrops to flowers so they could bloom in the spring. I thought she was so pretty, so wonderful, I had to be like her. Plus, who wouldn’t want to be a fairy?

I had dreams of flying on wings of my own, but instead of fairy wings, they were feathered, barn owl wings, a sign of my incredible talent with flight. I loved my wings in those dreams, how utterly unique they were, how above all else they were *mine*. In my dreams, I flew with Silvermist and the rest of her fairy friends, Rani and Fawn and Vidia and Tinkerbell, and the skies were at my fingertips, the wind a friend that circled my wings and kept me afloat. I was beautiful. I was magical.

As a third grader heading to fourth in the midst of a hot summer, when we went to the pool for my summer camp, I would sink to the bottom and cross my legs. I would try to hold my breath for as long as I could, to sit calmly like I saw Percy Jackson do in the movie theater a few days beforehand. The idea of Greek gods and all their monsters being real was an appealing idea, but I had already been in love with the water before I ever saw a son of Poseidon.

One of my favorite childhood movies was Barbie Mermaidia, the sequel to Fairytoria, where the main character, Elina, becomes a mermaid to help save the world. She abandoned her fairy wings, ate a magical fruit or something like that, and grew an exquisitely pink tail.

I liked her mermaid friend's blue tail more than Elina's, but I couldn't help but be dazzled by this underwater kingdom of shining scales and fins that drifted like ball gowns. There were so many pretty girls, every mermaid divine and kind, with the magic of the sea resting in their voices. A siren's song of safety and seafoam opposed to destructive riptides.

I sat at the bottom of the concrete pool with my eyes wide open, stinging slightly in the chlorine, and tried to swim while forcing my legs together. As if I had a tail. As if I was the mermaid I wished to be. I did that everytime my summer camp went to the pool.

Every time I was disappointed when I left the water, tailless. Ordinary.

By the time I was thirteen, despite my instinct to cling to magic and fairies and mermaids, despite my hope that I could receive a Hogwarts acceptance letter two years late, I didn't see the magic in the world. I couldn't.

I had just started watching an anime called Madoka Magica, a sad story that I, at the time, couldn't understand was about hope. The main characters died off, giving up on life or getting killed for daring to be happy. One of them spent an eternity trying to save the love of her life,

only for her love to become God and erase her mortal existence from the universe to save everyone else. Watching it felt like discovering painful, raging grief for my younger self. The death of my childhood, to put it as dramatically as my younger self would have. An incredibly surprising end result considering the bright and cute title card the show had on Netflix.

Madoka Magica is a magical girl anime, a subgenre of sorts that is about depicting that femininity isn't a weakness, that love and feelings and beauty have power. Think something along the lines of a Japanese Powerpuff Girls, or Totally Spies. If those are unknown, maybe Sailor Moon rings a bell, as it essentially launched the genre alongside shows like Cardcaptor Sakura and Tokyo Mew Mew. Shows about girl power. From my description of it though, one wouldn't really think Madoka Magica fit, right?

At the time, to me, it didn't. It was dark and gritty and sad. Even though I hated one of the characters, the show was incredibly impactful to me. Enough that I haven't forgotten about the twelve-episode show nine years after I first watched it.

What really drew me into the show though were these Witches, eldritch-esque beings of dark magic and grief that embody all the desires a Magical Girl had that went unfulfilled. They grew from the souls of magical girls who had given up hope, destroying the girl in the process. Three-dimensional monsters in a two-dimensional world, to call them reality-breaking wouldn't begin to cover it.

One Witch that stuck with me throughout the years was Oktavia von Seckendorff. She was born from the character that I mentioned hating earlier, Sayaka Miki. A girl can only become 'magical' within the show by forming a contract with a cute little rat bastard named 'Kyubey,' which, in exchange for granting any one wish the girl has, the girl will then be forced to fight Witches to protect the general populace. Supposedly. Sayaka made a wish to heal her

crush's hand so that he could play music again, and was minorly heartbroken when he went on to date one of her best friends. What really broke her, however, was finding out that her soul had been, literally, separated from her body, taking the form of a gem shaped like an egg. In her eyes, she wasn't a person anymore. She was something monstrous.

When she fell into despair, her soul gem shattered like stained glass. The world warped, a whirlpool of all her anguish taking the form of a mermaid whose upper body was a suit of armor. Her love wasn't returned, and despite her best attempts at nobility, being kind without expecting anything back, all she received was hurt. She conducts a private orchestra with her sword as a baton, and launches wheels of fate at anyone who would dare interrupt. Oktavia von Seckendorff was inevitable, from the moment Sayaka Miki made her wish.

When I watched the show the first time, I should have been delighted that the character that annoyed me so greatly was finally suffering the consequences of her actions. Instead, as her soul collapsed into itself, I felt horror. I felt pity. I felt- empty.

I had to take a break in watching the show after I saw the birth of the Mermaid Witch.

My dad told me he was coming back from Montana when I was thirteen, after having left me and my sister for somewhere around two years, with only the occasional phone call for contact. I had a feeling he was only coming back because his girlfriend up there finally got tired of his shit and kicked him out.

It was late fall I believe, and I was probably wearing a pink Abercrombie & Fitch jacket that has been sitting in my closet for about eight years now. My legs and feet have always had bad circulation, so I could get away with wearing shorts in the frosty temperatures, but in that moment, I wouldn't have noticed the cold regardless. The cement curb I sat on dug into my

thighs, ripe with bee stingers and shredded glass that would leave red marks. I sat with my head cradled in my hands, back arched like something was trying to tear its way out, break skin and bone so that this pulsing tempest could escape.

How could I have understood, really, all of thirteen years old, that I felt guilty for hating a parent? That I hated my dad, and I hated myself for hating him, hated the world for letting me become like this. Bitter. Sad. Ugly. How could I have known that anger would be so exhausting that I simply refused to feel anything, would refuse to feel most things for years to come?

I wonder if that's what Sayaka felt like when she collapsed in a train station, all rocky shores and raging whirlpools. Alone despite the people around her, because how could they really fix this? Fix her? Could they rewrite the universe so her soul would return to her body again? Could they hear the voice crooning tunes of sweet oblivion in her head, the siren's call to drown in this feeling of false empowerment? Did they understand that as the sea she would be unstoppable, untameable, unbreakable?

(Unstable?)

Vermillion wings ripped themselves from the flesh of my back, an intangible sharpness pounding in sync with the dry sobs evaporating the air before my cracked, red lips. I let them surround me, searing away asphalt and brick and glass and metal, melting the world to my twisted sanctuary. My skin became weathered concrete, salted earth breaking my joints with every moment. Molten debris became sparking gold mirrors, an ocean isolating me, the only thing on the horizon past burning forests my monstrous reflection. Trapped in a labyrinth, I was shattered. The Gargoyle Witch towered over my broken body.

When I actually realised I was depressed, I locked myself in my room, put a note on my door telling my mom not to disturb me while I figured stuff out, and tried to hide from the world. I didn't want to make her have to worry about me, I wasn't worth the effort. Why would she want to care for someone so wrapped up in their own mind? Someone so selfish?

Everything was miserable, and I ran in two default states- tired or apathetic. Something was preying on me. I'd like to think it's something noble and savage. Maybe a huntsman had come to claim my power for himself. Hungry and angry and taut as a live wire, he wanders through my sunset-fire mangrove, hunting for the Gargoyle Witch who stands guard over a magical girl's corpse. He lies to my pious salamanders with their little pope hats. He dances in the shadows, hair burning bright, misleading my sentinels with illusions. He looks, and looks, and looks, but my labyrinth is too great, no matter how loud and large I am. He can't find me, and he can't find a way out, and no one will find him. My heart was so miserable that a spitfire drowned, abandoned, and wandered off into the fog despondent. He turns away, and never meets the monster that haunts the Gargoyle Witch's woods.

This monster loves the witch, like a child loves a doll. Possessive. He doesn't understand the glass-bubbling, petrified lightning feeling that comes from being loved by a monster.

Owl sentinels with hollow eyes are on the lookout for if it approaches the heart of the Labyrinth. When it gets too close, they ask *who* with deep pitch and pulse, their demands shaking the sharp, shattered sky. They rattle the witch until she shrieks, split lips bleeding salt water, and her wings tear into earth, rupturing bedrock, digging deep, deep, deep until the cage they keep her safe in cannot be moved. See, she isn't a coward, look at how she stands her ground before the disgusting beast. See how she's immobile while the monster prowls closer,

how she doesn't move, how she can't move even though she's about to drown in her fear. See how it tastes like Bud Light and tears.

The monster comes closer still, touches the blistering bars of her cage, his skin is seared off and it smells like Marlboros, while the owls' drumbeat continues to pound into the Witch's spine, crawling out of her mouth, the sharpest tongue imaginable. The vertebrae are gilded with tarnished lead, and she uses them to beat the monster's knuckles bloody, to flay them to muscle and bone because *how dare he think he could do this to her, how dare he love her, how dare he think she's her father's daughter-*

My mom ignored my note, opened my door, and forced me to go downstairs with her to the doctor. She was going to get me help, no matter how much I wanted to die as a rabbit.

I didn't understand why she didn't trust me on my own.

My high school was having its annual Thanksgiving parade, mostly kids walking a few blocks with different clubs and sports being shown off. It was my first year of high school, so I was kind of excited to see it, watch it with my friends. I had been feeling ignored- when we ate lunch in the library together, nobody heard me when I spoke. I didn't think I was particularly quiet. I guess I just wasn't really interesting.

(Maybe I really was dead, the ghost of that girl who layed in a pool of scalding water cascading from the Gargoyle Witch's body. Paralyzed by her mane of angel trumpet flowers.)

One time, when we were hanging out at a coffee shop, I thought it would be funny to see how many ridiculous things I could get away with saying without anyone noticing. I said I was a war criminal, that my dad was the Grinch, that I ate my teeth for breakfast. No one even looked at me. But that was fine, I was being stupid anyways.

The morning of the parade, we met up in the library and said we'd decide where to meet up to watch it later. It was going to be fun and silly, plus we would get free candy. Nothing could go wrong.

(I tried to ignore the gravelly platitudes of the creature who called herself Seine de Lionne would cradle me with. I had friends and they cared about me, I didn't need to be okay on my own. I didn't need to not need them.)

Just after the lunch bell rang, I walked outside with my phone in hand, the old rubber phonecase of a cat biting the powerbutton soft in my sweaty hands. I was proud that even after dropping my iPhone 5S in a bucket of water, it still worked mostly fine. It was cold and I was alone in the crowd of high school students, texting my best friends to see where we were meeting, because I hadn't gotten a message yet. No one replied to me, and Seine's warbles were getting louder, but it was fine. There was still ten minutes or so before the parade started anyways. Plenty of time to meet up and get a response.

With five minutes left and no response, I sent another text, because maybe they didn't get my first one. I ignored how the Gargoyle Witch whimpered and whined, pacing the best one could when their lower body is ballgown-shaped waterfalls. I wouldn't be alone. I had friends. They cared about me. I wouldn't be lonely.

I still hadn't gotten a text or call back by the time the parade began, so I stayed where I was and watched it roll past me. One float that stuck with me was the football team's, they had a large stuffed lion on a "spit" above a fake fire, and the members were holding up signs that said 'Beat Borah!' Their mascot was a lion, and they were our high school's rival football team, even though Boise High's football team had consistently been one of the worst in its area, with Borah

being on the higher end. Needless to say, we did not ‘Beat Borah!’ that year. We did not ‘Beat Borah!’ the whole time I went to high school. It was still a funny float though.

It was one of the last floats in the parade, and soon after it passed, I looked back at my phone to see if I had gotten any response over the course of the last twenty minutes, and I hadn’t. Since school was out early for the parade, I wandered into downtown Boise to try and find my friends, because even if they didn’t talk to me, I still wanted to talk to them. My steps could have broken the sidewalk and my face felt red. I became frantic as I followed the parade route, trying to find them, occasionally shooting a text, before eventually giving up with teary eyes. If nothing else, my best friend should respond to a call. That should let her know I was serious, right?

I sniffled, the cold making it harder to breathe while the phone rang and rang and rang in my hand. She didn’t answer the first time. So I called her again. This time, she picked up, and had the audacity to sound completely unaffected.

“You guys didn’t tell me where we were meeting to watch the parade,” I said. It should have been a question, but Seine coated my tone flat with moss-spotted stone.

“We sent it to the group text,” she said, “didn’t you get it?”

“I’m not in the group chat.”

(I wasn’t even aware there *was* a group chat.)

“Oh, sorry, guess we forgot to add you.”

“M’kay.”

We sat in dead air for a moment, the sky grey and the pavement grey and the cars grey and everything so absolutely monotone I would have done anything to see a splash of color.

(How could they *forget* me?)

“Why didn’t you respond to my texts?” I asked.

“I was taking pictures of the parade and my phone was on silent, sorry.”

(I guess I was easy to ignore.)

I hung up, and didn't speak to my 'best friends' for the rest of the year. They never tried to apologize.

(I can't help but remember that Sayaka's last words, before she died was an apology to her best friend, Madoka- saying that she was sorry for giving up hope.)

I was in my first year of college when I lost my second best friend. This time, it was my fault. I was trying to help, but my helping just made everything worse.

They were my everything, not in a romantic sense, but I just felt like we would be genuine friends forever. I went to a college I didn't really want to be at to be with them. I lived in the dorms because they said they were going to live there also, only to live in a different building than the one we decided to live in together. I wasn't really making any friends there- I tried with my roommates, but they were all straight girls from middle-of-nowhere Idaho, and despite being nice enough, they couldn't really understand the perspective of the depressed queer kid, and I felt that even if I tried harder, we wouldn't have been long term friends. We were circumstantial. My best friend on the other hand- let's call them 'Forrest'- lucked out with roommates, getting a chill music major and an uptight theater kid, but at least the theater kid was gay too. Birds of a feather and all that. They were fast friends, went on late night trips to Albertsons and the like. I went too, alongside the theater kid's friend who lived in the building I did.

We had fun, and for a while it was great, even if they were more Forrest's friends than mine. Then they invited a girl who lived a few rooms over from them, who was a friend of theater kid, and she seemed nice, cool. I wanted to be friends with her, but didn't really know

how to go about it, so I just sat there awkwardly while she talked to Forrest. And then, after going a good few months without having heard Seine trying to sing me to sleep, the monster from her woods gone, she soared over the treeline with molten red wings and screeched a tempest.

“Look!” she screamed. “Look, I was right, see how they takes longer to respond to you! See how they hear you speak less and less! See how they don’t think to invite you! Look at them! Look at this girl who thinks she’s so pretty and nice, who Forrest is ignoring you to talk to! Forrest is leaving us! Forrest is leaving us! FIX IT!”

Suffice to say, in the midst of panic and jealousy, I did *not* fix it. I, in fact, broke everything.

(There is something to be said about how you can’t help someone else until you help yourself. Seine and I both needed to learn that.)

We may or may not have had certain liquid contraband, and Forrest and this girl were in her room, howling and barking out of the building at around midnight. Forrest’s musical roommate and I were worried they were going to get in trouble for a) noise disturbance, b) being intoxicated, and c) having guests in the building/dorms when they weren’t supposed to. So it was with mostly good intentions (and a little bit of jealousy) that I sent them something along the lines of this:

You two need to stop howling, ur gonna get in trouble

They said something like ‘it’s not us’ and ‘calm down,’ which I am calling bullshit on, because Forrest has a habit of barking and howling at people, and up until those two left, the only noise in the night was us dicking around.

Look, I’m sorry for being rude, I just don’t want u guys to get in trouble, okay

A pretty reasonable message in my opinion. But then they responded with more messages saying that it wasn't them, and I kind of lost it at that point. I was tired, I had way too many late assignments, I was paranoid my best friend, who was a known liar, was trying to ditch me, and I was only trying to help them, so when the girl sent a message in the group chat, telling me to lay off, I did something a girl should never do to a girl she just met.

Bitch, was I talking to you

Never call a feminine stranger a bitch unless you are looking to start a fight. And at that point, I honestly kind of was. I yelled at both of them in the group chat, I tore them apart and was as mean as I could be. I told the recently dumped girl maybe her boyfriend left her because she was so whiny and pathetic, that maybe if they were both so stupid they deserved each other. I left the building to go back to my dorm because I wasn't dealing with the two of them being idiots for the whole night.

The next morning, I would feel bad and apologize because I was way out of line, then find out the girl blocked me. Fair enough, she didn't have a reason not to block me. She wouldn't see the apology I sent her, but I'd live. Forrest, however... when I tried to apologize, it wasn't enough. I tried to show them how I was feeling through writing and some metaphor about a caged bird with clipped wings, and that I was sorry for trapping them. For being so reliant on them. They told me that they wanted a week to think, so I gave it to them. Radio silence, exactly like they asked for. I was nervous, but things would probably work out. It's not like I placed the continuation of the universe on their shoulders. I just asked for a chance at forgiveness.

When I texted them after the week was over, saying I was sorry and asking if we could meet up, they told me they had Covid and were quarantining for two weeks, and that maybe we could meet up afterwards. I said sure, and that I was sorry, again, because I couldn't get across

just how much I knew how badly I fucked up and was trying to make amends. They never replied to that message. My best friend managed to erase their existence from my universe. Seine whimpered pathetically, a sound like water cutting steel, and I hid my tears in her falls, waiting to drown.

My second year of college, I left BSU and headed for CWI- a two year degree seemed much more manageable to my fragile mental state than a four year one, and I would do well somewhere with a more personal touch. I needed a less stressful environment, and I was doing good. I failed exactly zero classes within my first semester at CWI, so already better than BSU, which I started out with failing three classes in my first semester there. I was studying computer science (bleh) so that I could hopefully make a video game one day. When registering for my second semester, I was told that I was short three credits of being a full-time student, and didn't really have any other classes in my major that I could pursue, and was asked if there were any electives I wanted to take. I threw out that I enjoyed creative writing, and before I knew it, I was double-majoring and signed up for a poetry class in the spring. For the first time in years, I was actually excited to go to school.

That first day I was a jittering beehive, all frantic energy and excitement and nerves. Seine trembled like an earthquake. What if I wasn't good? What if I ruined everything, again? I thought I was good at writing in high school, but what if everyone who told me so was just full of shit? What if my new classmates didn't like me? What if we spent more time reading than writing? What if all my metaphors were cliché garbage, and I had no sense of rhythm? What if, what if, what if-

But everything was okay. I sat next to this girl who had a tattoo of a lizard on her arm and the same humor I do. She told me about her wife, and her niece, and I was so happy for her. I hope I have a wife someday. Most of my other classmates were chill, the teacher even better. In a cramped little room that was long like a pool table, we ricocheted ideas and poets off of each other into our own poems. For the first time, possibly ever, I didn't procrastinate on homework because I wanted my poems to be good, to have consistency and form and atmosphere. I wanted to build worlds so enrapturing that even whispers of wanting to leave ceased to exist.

I wrote about a priestess whose gods were the deep sea vents that created life. I wrote about a firefly clan that followed the guidance of the swamp lights in the midst of a faction war. I wrote about how boring Las Vegas is from a child's perspective, how everything smells like nicotine smoke and every carpet pathway looks the exact same. I wrote about how whenever I had sexualized or objectified, starting from when I was nine, I wished I had contracted with the devil to become a witch, to have the power to curse anyone who looked at me like that without my permission, to send them to the deepest pits of hell and shake them like a bag of marbles. I wrote what I knew and what I didn't know I learned. I stole my style from Li-Young Lee, Galway Kinnell, Langston Hughes, Muriel Rukeyser, Denise Levertov, Audre Lord, and every other poet we read in that class, even if that theft was solely the idea of 'Oddly formatted poetry subtracts from the quality of the words chosen' or 'T. S. Eliot was way too long-winded.'

I was happy. I don't think either Seine or I knew what to do with our newfound calm. She was waiting for the other shoe to drop, and I couldn't blame her, but things were tentatively going our way. We even found a way to channel her fear- our fears in a healthy way. She seemed to settle- less of a monstrous lion-bird-woman, and more like a housecat-sized dragon with a mossy mane and earth-red scales beglittered in micah. She wouldn't have seemed out of place

crawling out of the snake river. We began to work together, instead of her dominating our choices or me doing the same.

Seine liked the poems where we were angry, the ones where we're powerful for once, her tone something ancient and offended. She helped with lines like "By nature or by nurture, I am bred to become a diabolist," and "In fact, I am the god of the pavement, the eternal tormenter of beaten brick roads, I'll stomp dirt highways all the way to hell and scowl at the dust it stains me with."

I'm more of a fan of the ones where we make something from nothing, like our swamp kingdom, Bluewill, that's at war with itself, the fireflies governed by the Lady of the Wisps, who sends them messages through bursts of swamplight. I haven't truly liked anything in a long while.

Seine curls around my neck like she's a ferret instead of an eldritch abomination, and I wonder if in death, Sayaka Miki was able to make peace with Oktavia von Seckendorff. I hope she has. I hope that they can be hopeful together. Magical girl and witch, together.

I couldn't imagine a future for myself when I was thirteen. I couldn't imagine my future when I was eighteen, and having to pick out colleges with no clue what I wanted from life. I couldn't see my future when I was nineteen and friendless, jobless, disappointing my mom because I couldn't stop lying to her. I can see a future now though.

I want to live in the Irish countryside, and have a house that isn't too large, but can fit me and my junk and my pets, maybe even a best friend or a lover. I want land, land that's ripe with berry bushes I've planted and a plum tree, and a chicken coop with fat, happy hens who let me pet them and enjoy running around their yard. I want a big dog who can run where he wants to,

and maybe a goat. I want to bring my cat with me, and have a bed big enough to fit me and my cat and my massive, fluffy dog. I want kpop music to echo across my wood floors, hardly visible under all of the neat rugs I've found. I want to have a study, and a couch, and nice pots, I want a million throw blankets and I want to make a nest on the floor of my living room. I want to have a wall in my study dedicated to just my books. I want my closet to be colorful and diverse, I want long skirts and short dresses, I want to wrestle with my dog and dress like a little kid. I don't want to have to drive, I want to be within walking or biking distance to town. I want to go to pubs and laugh with strangers while watching whatever sport is playing on the TV. I want to be a writer, and sit at my kotatsu that I bought with my money from my job as a writer. I want Seine to be content with our life. I want to be able to imagine our future. I want to show Sayaka Miki that there are things worth living for. That I've found them.

I know Sayaka is just a character, lights and lines that form a moving image, but I wish I could talk to her. I want to tell her "I'm sorry that when I first met you, when I was thirteen, I didn't like you. I'm sorry I hated you for being stupid, for being like me, because I hated myself then."

Because in her I see myself; I see a sad, tired, lonely teenager who feels the weight of the world on her shoulders but won't accept help because she doesn't want anyone to go out of their way for her, she isn't worth their worry. She's a monster. I want to tell her "People will always love you, whether you want them to or not, and killing yourself won't make the world better. Mutilating your soul to pacify others won't fix things. I'm so, so sorry you feel that you're alone, that you don't feel like you deserve help. I'm sorry you won't let yourself cry, that you force yourself to do something you hate because it's the 'right thing.' Maybe you are a monster, but maybe that means you're human too because it's human to be selfish, it's human to want and to

need and to love, having desires doesn't make you monstrous. I'm sorry that when you try to see the future, nothing comes to mind but shadows and static. I'm sorry I didn't help you. I'm sorry I didn't love you."

I know the ocean you're drowning in, Sayaka, but I promise you, those fish that swarm your body will push you to the surface, that the manta rays will guide you to shore, that seals will teach you to laugh and seagulls will teach you to fly.

I promise, whenever you're ready, I will be waiting with Seine on my shoulders, and we will help you. Because you are worth the effort. Because you can be magical again. So don't give up.

We can be magical together.