

On Matters of Love and Nuclear Fusion

Their first encounter was as much of a surprise as the storm which served as its catalyst. The Shopkeeper had risen early, dressed and set the kettle to boil on the gas hob in his makeshift kitchenette. He selected a delicate lavender teacup from the cupboard, measured out his tea, and poured the steaming water. He watched as the pearls unfurled slowly, the water taking on a shifting green hue. Through the window, ominous black clouds were rapidly coalescing across the bruise-purple expanse, the promise of a storm on the horizon. A shiver of anticipation ran down his spine and he pulled the worn wool cardigan closer around himself. Summer was drawing to a close, and the inexorable turn of the earth brought with it both a crispness in the air and the strange electricity of impending change.

Thunderstorms had always given the Shopkeeper a secret thrill, fear tempered by the knowledge that his little thatch-roofed shop would keep him safe and cozy during the raging of the elements. It was the kind of day that assured no decent person would be out on the streets, giving him a perfectly reasonable excuse not to open for the day.

The Shopkeeper loved his little store. He loved the odd items people brought in to trade—silverware sets short a knife or spoon, well-used books marked with cryptic notes at the margins, ornately molded brass mirrors gone over green with patina. It was a place where items had a chance to find new purpose in the safe respite of sturdy curio cabinets and lovingly hung shelves.

Though he found a deep satisfaction in his work, he was a man well into his middle years, and the idea of enjoying his tea downstairs in the shop, nestled in throws knitted by caring hands, called sweetly to him, and he surrendered to the temptation with little consternation.

Curled up on an overstuffed loveseat and bathed in the warm glow of a crackling hearth, he had begun drifting in and out of consciousness when a powerful bang shuddered through the

shop. Startled upright, the Shopkeeper rubbed his eyes and watched through the window expectantly.

There was no answering shock of lightning across the grey skies. The pounding came again, and he realized that it was only someone at the door, someone frantically trying to get his attention. He ran a quick hand over his greying curls, attempting to feel his way to a respectable state. The curls frizzed in all directions, fueled by humidity and, he sometimes felt, a personal vendetta.

Cautiously, the Shopkeeper opened the door a few inches and peered outside. He was met with the sight of an unfamiliar man, slightly taller than himself and a great deal slimmer, with a narrow face obscured by dark hair slicked flat by the downpour.

“Oh! Thank goodness,” the man said in a rush. “I am so sorry to intrude, but I was quite surprised by the storm and I’m looking for somewhere to shelter until it passes. I saw that your barn looks empty.” Behind him, the Shopkeeper saw a small pony harnessed to a wooden cart waiting patiently and pathetically in the cobblestone street. A dark leather jacket covering its flank carried away the worst of the rain. He looked back at the man, noting the quiver of his thin shoulders under a threadbare linen shirt.

“Of course, of course! Please do make use of it. There hasn’t been any livestock on the property in years, but the roof is watertight,” the Shopkeeper offered. The weather at this time of year was often unpredictable and the storm this morning had been particularly sudden. There wasn’t any harm in letting the poor beast and its rider wait it out in the barn.

The man looked so grateful for the permission that the Shopkeeper felt oddly guilty. “I believe your cart will fit as well,” he continued, helpfully.

“Much appreciated,” said the man. The low rumble of his voice echoed the sounds of the storm. “We’ll be no trouble, promise. Soon as the storm lets up I’ll find an inn in town. I’m a florist, you see, and I was intending to introduce myself to the local merchants.” He smiled sheepishly. “I didn’t plan for the storm.”

The closest inn was miles away yet. Though the shop was considered to be a part of the village, the residents had built the town as a loose, sprawling thing, the roads laid out at an angle from the town center like petals on a daisy.

He thought longingly of the cooling cup of tea, the pile of soft throws, the book on the side table. The man continued to drip onto the old, woven welcome mat. The Shopkeeper made a decision.

“Nonsense,” he said, and waved a hand dismissively. “You must be miserable. Let me fetch you a blanket for your horse but please come inside when the poor dear is situated. Your clothes are soaked clear through and I have already built a wonderfully warm fire.”

The Florist looked hesitant to accept the offer. He brushed wet hair from his face and bounced from one foot to the other. He chewed his bottom lip, a hint of sharp canines and crooked, white teeth.

“I must insist,” continued the Shopkeeper. “If you catch your death out there I will never forgive myself.” The Florist looked quite frail and helpless, and the Shopkeeper felt an instinctive tug to caretake. The Florist’s teeth had begun to chatter behind the blue-tinged slant of his mouth and finally he nodded. “Yes, I— thank you.”

They hurried through introductions, and the Shopkeeper fetched an old woolen blanket for the horse. He watched the man pat the animal comfortingly as he led it to the barn.

Then he busied himself in the kitchenette, setting more water to boil and fetching a rarely-used teapot from a high shelf. A brown package in the pantry yielded a small variety of pastries, which he arranged carefully on a serving tray. He laid everything out on the little tea table in the seating area by the hearth. The array of dishes were of varied prints and patterns, delicate florals and bold stripes; a complete tea service cobbled together with mismatched pieces that he had found particularly appealing and held back for his personal use. Each item had been lovingly chosen and cared for. But for the first time, he saw the service from an outside perspective, and felt a twinge of shame, ephemeral and stifling as smoke, coil around his insides.

A knock at the door shook him from his thoughts and he opened it to the sound and fury of the elements, the heavy rain blown nearly horizontal with the strength of it.

“It’s me again,” said the Florist. The Shopkeeper invited him inside and offered a box of clothing he had collected over the years. The pieces were outdated, he knew, but clean and dry.

The Shopkeeper returned to the hearth and added a few additional logs. When the Florist emerged his hair was still rain-black but his cheeks were pink and healthy.

“I don’t know why you didn’t want this for yourself,” he said, and gestured to the sweater he was now wearing. It was expertly knitted, and of good quality wool. A dozen pastel cats paraded across the chest, their little paws operating various musical instruments. They wore brimmed caps, each adorned by a tiny yellow feather.

The Shopkeeper blushed. “I’m afraid it shrunk a bit in the wash,” he said.

Now that he was dry and warm, the Florist seemed much more ebullient, his hair drying in friendly chestnut waves. He was new to the area, he explained, after inheriting a cottage nearby. It had been time for him to think about settling down and the cottage had afforded him

not only a swath of workable land, but a sizable greenhouse formerly used for sensitive food crops, and now, to overwinter dozens of flowering plants.

As they drank their tea, the Shopkeeper was delighted to learn of their shared interests. The Florist, though lacking in formal education, was possessed of knowledge in a vast array of subjects gained through his extensive travels. They shared a fondness for oddities, as well as a similar dry sense of humor.

After the pastries were consumed and the teapot emptied, the Shopkeeper brought out a handprinted wooden board that the baker's girl had offered him in exchange for a state-of-the-art bicycle with a straw basket hung from the handlebars. She had ridden away, nearly falling over in her excitement, and he set the game atop the bookshelves, never bothering to look closely at it. Clearing a space on the tea table, he lifted the lid from the box.

On the board, a sinuous serpent coiled around and through random numbers. The instructions on the back were vague and confusing, and the Florist repeatedly attempted to talk his way around them, laughing delightedly when the Shopkeeper finally caught on and managed to outwit him with a clever use of sleight-of-hand.

By the time the rainfall had faded into a delicate mist, the sun hung low in the sky. The Florist thanked the Shopkeeper for his hospitality, and promised to return the clothes on his next trip in. The Shopkeeper knew that the clothing was essentially worthless; he didn't need the items returned. But he said nothing, only followed the man out to the old shed to fetch the wool blanket.

"Well," he began, feeling awkward and exposed at the door of the barn. "It was lovely to meet you. I'll be sure to patronize your cart when you come through next." He watched the Florist hitch the small horse to the cart and fiddled with his wristwatch. The adjustment knob

was worn smooth and couldn't be moved without a pair of jeweler's pliers. The Florist didn't respond; he had pulled back the canvas cover on the wagon and seemed to be digging through something.

"Aha!" He exclaimed. His face cracked into a wide smile. In his hand he held a full bouquet of flowers, their long stems tied neatly with a bit of twine. "As a thank you."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly accept—" But the Florist shook his head. "It's a sample bouquet," he explained. "You can put it in your shop and when people ask about it, let them know when I will be in town."

This seemed reasonable to the Shopkeeper, and he accepted the bouquet. He lifted it to his nose and sniffed lightly, then blushed when he met the Florist's eyes. The Florist just grinned and held out his hand again, in which he held a single flower. Its petals were so vividly pink as to slip into impertinence, if not for the temperance of their delicately frilled edges.

"And this," he said, as the Shopkeeper took the small bloom. "Is for you. Sweet William. It means gallantry, if one speaks the language of the flowers." The Shopkeeper felt his face warm in a flush but the Florist just winked and turned back to his horse. And then he was gone, and the Shopkeeper went back inside.

The whole experience had left him feeling out of sorts, slightly adrift. His routine had so rarely been interrupted since he opened his shop on the outskirts of town. The days passed and carried him along unhurriedly, like a pebble being pushed along a river bottom, worn smooth and toothless in the pulse of water. He was unmoored.

He gathered a few sheets of blank parchment from the roll-top desk where he kept his account ledgers and rifled through the collection of hardback books in the back of the shop. Opening a book of botanical illustrations, he laid the flower carefully in between two pages,

lined with parchment, and closed the book with a sigh. The cover of the book was faded past legibility but he could make out single letters here and there. He traced a finger over a capital L, followed the trailing calligraphy through its ornate loops and curls. The Shopkeeper carried the book back to the desk. He opened a drawer and set the book inside. He closed the drawer.

The Florist did return, as promised, before the bouquet had fully wilted.

The Shopkeeper hadn't thought he was lonely; certainly, he spoke with many customers throughout the week and his shop remained lively. It was particularly popular during autumn, as people of the village sought hobbies and books to carry them through the winter. But the Florist's visits brought a different sort of excitement with them, a taste of ozone that seemed to cling to his hair, a hint of electricity in his resonant tenor.

It was love, romantic love, he supposed, though it felt nothing like he had been led to believe. His bookshelves bowed under the weight of cheap novels betrayed of their contents by portraits of desperation, of two halves making a whole, divine alchemy where selves become catalyzed by joining at hands and mouths and hearts. But there was no pining through cold, dark nights, no gazing endlessly out the large bay windows for the sight of dark hair, a gently lined face, no listening intently for wood wheels turning roughly over uneven cobbles taking over the Shopkeeper's life. The contrast unsettled him.

He still felt like himself. In fact, he felt more like himself than ever before, as though a door had been unlocked and from within, more *him* had come flowing out to fill any empty spaces. Something bright, and shimmering, manifesting from deep within radiated out to light everything he saw, touched, everyone he spoke to. The feeling remained in the long periods of solitude when the road glazed over in treacherous ice and rendered visits unwise.

When the world turned again and brought about a quiet thaw and lush meadows and a forget-me-not sky, the Florist's visits became a regular pleasure. He brought bespoke bouquets for the table where they shared stories and drink, along with other small gifts and trinkets he came across. The idea of the man thinking about him on his travels caused a thrill of delight flickering up his spine, and the souvenirs quickly found a home amongst the other treasures of the shop, each sat behind a neatly handwritten sign— *Not For Sale*.

On the day of the spring equinox, the Florist brought with him a wax record wrapped in brown florist's paper and the Shopkeeper carefully extricated an old gramophone player from a dark corner of the shop. A previous owner had artfully modified the horn into a very convincing simulacrum of a lily, graceful petals molded into bewitching curls. The Shopkeeper set the record to the turntable and wound the crank. The sound of a cello flowed through the center of the lily, a soft, bittersweet melody which left him aching.

The Florist had goaded him into dancing that night. "I know you can't be as bad at dancing as you are at Draughts," he had teased. The Shopkeeper had laughed, accepted his hand, and proved him wrong. Bemoaning crushed toes, the Florist had pulled him close. The thrum of his pulse against the Shopkeeper's cheek felt like another kind of music.

The weather continued to warm, and on a particularly balmy evening the Shopkeeper presented a rudimentary reflector telescope he had procured by trading a number of cut-glass candy dishes— which glowed an ethereal green when the sun hit just right— and a shadeless brass lamp. The Florist's face lit up immediately, his brown eyes shining like burnt honey candy.

They set up the device behind the shop, in the starlit clearing between the road and the sudden density of forest just beyond the old shed. The Florist's face was shadowed as he positioned the long scope, all the while his voice a lull of esoteric knowledge on mirrors and

parallax and deep-space nebulae. The moon reflected in his eyes and the Shopkeeper felt a tightness behind his ribs.

Finally he motioned the Shopkeeper over. “Take a look,” he said softly. And he did, closing one eye to peer through the eyepiece. He was startled by brightness of the cold glow, night-blown pupils constricting in rapid adjustment. He blinked, waiting for his eyes to adapt, and saw for the first time the unexpected detail of the moon’s surface. He saw its pitted edges and strange fractured lines, the stark, sterile brightness of it.

“*Oh,*” he breathed. The Shopkeeper felt very small, and slightly detached from his body, a visceral sense of something just out of place, out of reach, out of focus. It was a feeling like if he were to walk into his shop one day to find the walls a slightly different shade of ochre or learned he had been pronouncing a word incorrectly all his life. He stepped back, disoriented.

The Florist studied him with a furrowed brow, then asked, “Are you alright?”

“I didn’t know there was more to it, I suppose. The moonlight obscures all the textures, makes it seem smooth and flat.” The Florist fiddled with a knob on the machine. The night was warm and he had rolled back his sleeves. Even in the low light of the waning moon the Shopkeeper could see the fine bones of his wrists, could see the slivers of dark soil under his short nails.

“It’s not the light of the moon, actually,” he replied. He was focused on the telescope, making fine adjustments. The Shopkeeper watched him, waited quietly for him to continue. “The moon doesn’t make its own light, just reflects photons from the sun.”

“Really?”

“Mm. The moon is, at its essence, just a big rock, like the earth. Neither can create light. Moonlight doesn’t really exist,” the Florist said, his voice low and hypnotic in the still night.

“Ah.”

“You sound disappointed. It’s still quite beautiful, don’t you think?” He sat down on the throw they had laid out on the grass and leaned back on his hands. His head tilted back and he gazed at the Shopkeeper under indulgent, half-hooded lids.

“I’m sorry, of course it is very beautiful. Quite a clever thing, to steal light from the sun like that.”

The Florist laughed, which pleased the Shopkeeper. “Not quite. The sun doesn’t really run out of sunshine, it loses nothing by shining on the moon. And in turn, the moon shines down on us.”

“I suppose that is, in itself, quite lovely.” A button was coming loose on his knitted cardigan and he tugged a few threads loose.

“Gets better, actually.” The Florist looked at him. His head was tilted to the side, a small crooked grin on his face.

“Oh?”

“Can’t see it tonight, moon’s too full. I’ll have to come back during the crescent. But sometimes, if you catch the moon at just the right time, you can see both the full moon and the crescent. Some people call it an ashen moon. Sunlight and earthshine meeting to create something different, something new.” He settled fully onto his back and folded his arms behind his head.

“I see,” the Shopkeeper said, looking up at the vast starfield. He felt lighter, though he hadn’t known he had been carrying a weight.

The Florist had warned him it would be several weeks before he returned. The Shopkeeper had taken an interest in astronomy after their last encounter, and watched as the

moon grew full, almost preternaturally large at perigee. He sketched its likeness in a leather bound journal, tracked its progress as it fell to shadow.

On the day he had predicted the narrowest sickle of a crescent moon, he opened the windows in the shop, pounded the dust from the velvet loveseat in the corner, laid two different teacups on two different saucers. He placed the dried Sweet William bloom in his favorite glass bud vase, the branches of a hairline crack down the side familiar and soothing. As he set the kettle to boil he heard the sound of wheels against cobblestone and a rough tenor crooning an old folk song.

The Shopkeeper took a deep breath and opened the front door, watched as the Florist squinted against the brightness of the dawn, watched his face break into a smile, glowing like a moonrise. Watched as the Florist threw one skinny arm over his head in an exaggerated wave.

The sun was warm on his face.