

Measures

Let me tell you a story about when the Syndicate came to the free world of Camilia.

I met the woman of my dreams in the strangest of places; a gay bar. Strange, I say, because we were both straight. It was the only bar in town that stayed open though the early hours of the morning. And that was something I had a lot of use of, after dropping out of uni. Of course, I did not know quite how important she would become to me at that point.

What I knew, bluntly, was that Avellana was beautiful, striking; bright auburn hair coiled to her thighs as thick and arresting as medusa's snakes. She had tattoos of cavorting antelopes running up her arms and a smile that flashed at every dirty joke. It said *'I'm here for all the joy I can get.'* A little conversation told me we were both jobless, without responsibilities, lacking all but the meagrest of funds, and we were both enjoying every moment of it.

It was her who made the first move, a taboo for a female on Camilia. But then she was quite drunk (a not infrequent occurrence as it turned out) and had none of normal self-consciousness young women normally do. After some heavy fumbling in a dark corner we decided to go back to my place.

And by the morning, that was that, as far as she was concerned.

Not for me. She sounded surprised when a few days later I called and said I wanted to meet again: She was no stranger to the disposable one-nighter and assumed all partners discarded her in the same casual manner. I think it piqued her sense of novelty to see the same guy twice.

That night we were again deep in an alcoholic haze. She said, "I'm not looking for a boyfriend at the moment, I don't want a relationship."

"Neither am I," I replied.

Thus, the ground rules were set. At this point our relationship was not just about the sex, it was never *just* about the sex, but it was prime in our minds that night and for several nights to come.

With no jobs, it was easy for us to spend whole days in each other's arms, never leaving the covers of the bed. We would tickle, tease and taunt each other until we collapsed into giggles and kisses. Between the sex we got to talking properly and it was fast revealed to me that despite her having the exterior of a drunkard, she was remarkably intelligent; perhaps, and I don't say it lightly, the most intelligent person I had ever met. Like me, she was a university dropout. Her tattoos were copies of a near forgotten artist that came with the first founding a thousand years ago. Her philosophy was of class war and self-sufficiency; she hated the Syndicate and she hated the way it was dragging us into conflict with the scythrial. She tried to explain it to me more than once.

"Our ancestors came to Camilia to escape the Syndicate. That's why they took a world in the demilitarised zone near the scythrial. It was the only way they could be sure the Syndicate wouldn't come after them. And now the Belt Treaty is breaking down they are making their move on us. The political class of this world

is too damn worried about their own jobs to make a stand. It's simpler to let them take control bit by bit. That's what this 'metrication' ceremony is all about. They say they are *gifting* us an official set of Syndicate weights and measures so we can carry out trade with them, but its more insidious. They are making our economy ready for full integration."

"I agree the Syndicate wants us, but is that such a bad thing? We do need their protection."

"That's Shit! Protection! At the moment we don't matter to anyone. As soon as we start supplying the Syndicate with arms and resources, we become a great big target for the scythrial. Don't you think it's time us plebs stormed the parliament and started shooting the people selling this planet out."

I could not answer that. Sometimes she would frighten me with her talk of armed uprising and we would debate things for hours. I would rarely win; I can count the times I did on one hand.

Once, after one of our arguments, she pushed a small red book into my hands: *On the Merits of Independence* by Papa Lindel.

"Why are you always trying to convert me?" I asked.

"Call it horizontal recruitment," she said. And she pushed me flat onto the bed.

It was as early as our second date that she first said she loved me, although she swiftly added 'as a friend, I mean.' She did not need to; I knew what she meant. She said that many times: 'I love you...as a friend.'

The more we saw of each other, the more our sessions became a tender and intimate mix of lovemaking and conversation; maybe stopping mid-penetration to discuss our fondness of nature; maybe trying to distract a line of argument with carnal favours.

Once she read her favourite poem to me - The Rapparee Man – a bitter epic about outlaws and lost love. She was so moved as she read that at the end she collapsed into my arms and cried until we were both asleep. This I did not mind; I was glad she felt so comfortable with me.

I never could understand how this woman could be such a genius and such a drunken lout, and so sentimental and so malice-fuelled all in one body. I was always in awe at the new facets she would show me, like a slowly turning ruby, never quite getting to see all its sides.

When she finally woke up, I told her,

"That was beautiful."

"You're beautiful," she replied.

Naturally, I thought the same about her. Perhaps I did not tell her enough. No...if that was a mistake I made, then it was the least of them.

I remember a few days later, we got back from the gay bar just as dawn was breaking and I'd had too much to perform. I started kissing her and caressing her anyway. She seemed angry.

"I don't know what you want me to do!" she cried.

"I don't want you to do anything." I said.

"Then why are you kissing me!?"

“Because even though we can’t have sex, I still like you!”

She went quiet.

“Oh...” she said, “No one has ever said that to me before.”

For a second I did not believe her. Then I realised it was true, and it was one of the saddest things I ever heard. After that she would sometimes come round my house when we could not have sex, when it was her time of the month, just so that we could sleep in the same bed. And that made me just as happy: Without knowing it, somewhere she had slipped from being my friend to my best friend.

I wonder why the feeling of pulling someone you care about tight against your body produces such a feeling of exhilaration?

“I think this bit is as important as the sex” said Avellana.

“I think it is more important” I said.

“...I was going to say that, but I thought it might go beyond the bounds of the friendship.”

To my mind, we had done that long ago.

It had been six months since we started seeing each other, and there had been no others, despite both having ample opportunity. At some point the equivocation stopped; when she said, ‘I love you,’ it stayed, ‘I love you.’ Sometimes she would pause afterwards and I got the impression she was waiting for me to say something back.

I guess this was about the time I realised I *was* in love with her. There was no ex, no celebrity, no dream-born fantasy I would rather have. How utterly unshocking that it should come not from screaming orgasm, but tender kiss? How mind-numbingly obvious that it should be born not from lust, but from conversation?

Then I went and did something stupid: I got a job. They syndicate was coming, and with it, new trade opportunities. There was to be a grand ‘metrication ceremony.’ It was the biggest public event in more than a decade and there was work for anyone who wanted it, though it meant I would have to move to a different city for a month. I resolved to tell her how I felt before I left. One morning, as I cradled her in my arms,

“I love you,” I said for the first time.

“No you don’t,” she dismissed. Then, “You best not do!”

Denial...Anger. I smiled and squeezed her and buried my face in her skin, where I was content. Some minutes later,

“I love you,” she conceded.

Acceptance. I said to myself, as I had more than once, ‘It doesn’t get any better than this.’

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And so to the job. Boring drudge work. The entire time I was away I spent thinking of her. Every time I was sad I pictured her smiling, every time I was lonely I imagined her arms around me. We had gone beyond the bounds of our intended

relationship, that much was clear, but I did not know how far I could push it. I decided to ask her to move together; not necessarily into the same house (though that would be ideal), but in the long term, if we had to go to another city to work, then perhaps to go to the same city and get homes close to each other? I thought that was the minimum I could ask for and stay sane.

When I got back four weeks later, the very first thing I did was go and seek Avellana. She immediately launched herself at me and hugged more tightly than she ever had before. I can not say how happy that made me. But I could not 'pop the question' right then; she had things to do and all she could manage was a quick 'Hello.' She told me to meet her at the bar later, when she was done.

She didn't tell me a time so I left it until after the other bars had shut. Otherwise, I'd have risked sitting by myself for hours and looking like the worst closet case in town. She was perched in her usual seat, several drained glasses in front of her. She noticed me and acknowledged my presence.

Then the barman came over and they kissed.

All the colour must have drained from my face, I'm sure. In that one single action she had undone all of my plans. I did not feel any anger towards her, or him, she was just acting within the rules of what we had agreed. What I felt was a profound sense of loss: Everything I thought I had, I did not.

I went and sat next to her, with the barman on the other side. She gripped my hand under the table and rubbed it, the way a reassuring lover might. It gave me some comfort, but at various stages in the night I noticed her other hand slip under the table and do the same for him. So the three of us sat, and drank, and tried to force conversation.

When the barman got up to relieve himself I turned to her and said,

"I missed you so much."

"I missed you too."

"I love you."

"And I love you."

She kissed me. But it still needed to be asked,

"What do you mean when you say you love me?" I questioned.

"I mean I really, really, really, really like you," she said.

"...Then we don't mean the same thing."

"What do *you* mean?" she asked.

But the barman was coming back and I did not want to have such an intimate discussion in front of him.

"We can talk about this later," I said.

She shot a look across to the returning barman, then dismissed his presence.

"You tell me now!"

"...When I say I love you, I actually mean *I love you*."

"Oh," she seemed surprised. Then she lurched to press her lips against mine and for a moment I thought all would be well. Maybe if I knew it would be the last time I kissed her I would have held it slightly longer.

When we broke off, the barman slammed his drink down on the table; he looked ashen, exactly the way I had. He stormed off. Avellana cast her head down into her hands,

“Oh gods,” she sighed.

I put my arm around her, she pushed it away.

“Sorry, can you go? We can discuss this another time. You’ll forgive me, he won’t.”

What could I do but respect her wishes?

I tried to meet up with her as soon as possible after that, but it was difficult. She took to alcohol even more heavily than she had before and I found myself banned from the gay bar, so I could not seek her there. It is fair to say I became somewhat obsessive about it. When I finally tracked her down it was by watching the online political forums she used, waiting until she logged on and then searching all the free wifi spots in the town before she left. In this way, we finally met in a public library and had our talk over a pile of ancient poetry books.

“I’ve decided to stop seeing you both,” she said. “He demanded that it was just him or nothing, so I told him to get lost. He said he loved me, but I don’t believe him. The trouble is, when you say it...I do.” She reached over and cupped my hands. “I *don’t* love you. So you must see why I can’t keep sleeping with you when you feel like that and I don’t?”

“I don’t see what it changes? I have felt like this for a while. We have been sleeping together with this in my head for months and it hasn’t changed anything. I’ve never asked you to be faithful, I never will. I’ve never asked you to have any feelings for me beyond what you already do.”

She smiled,

“I am quite fond of you.”

Bless her, she did give me a chance to argue my case and we spent almost two hours mulling over the possibilities. I called on past relationship experience, logic, utilitarian morals, and every other relevant facet my mind could churn through. And it was, I think, one of the few arguments I ever won. However, in the deepest part of our hearts we both knew from the beginning that this would not be decided by intellectual arguments.

At the last, when everything was considered, she still said we had to stop seeing each other. And it stung like acid.

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A couple of days later I got a message from the metrication committee. Apparently they were impressed enough with my work to offer me a permanent job in the new Syndicate embassy. I accepted of course; there was nothing keeping me near Avellana anymore. Before I started I had to sign a lot of papers to do with disclosure and security. One of the questions asked was ‘have you ever been a member of, or been approached by, an anti-Syndicate organisation.’ I

pondered for a moment. Did Avellana count? I took my paper to the overseer and pointed to the question.

"I was once a target for recruiting by an anti-Syndicate. They gave me some literature." I showed him the book.

His eyes went wide.

"Who?"

I think I was trying get back at her somehow. I didn't care what would happen to her. Some awkward questions? It wasn't like she had a lot to lose. I think, also, I was trying to prove I was over her; if I was capable of doing that then I was moving on with my life. *Petty, childish*. But I could justify it by telling myself I was just obeying the letter of the law.

They told me I did the right thing. In fact they promoted me within a few weeks.

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A few months later I decided to go back home for a short time and visit old friends. I tried to raise Avellana, but failed. That was nothing unusual. I checked her apartment, but there was no answer. I checked the political forums she used, but she had not been on them in an age. Finally, I checked the gay bar and asked the bartender. He regarded me angrily and said he had not seen her in almost as long as me. Something was really wrong.

I rushed back to my superiors and asked them what they had done about the person I had informed on. They said they had taken 'appropriate measures.' I went to a dozen different people in all manner of positions, but the response was always the same: Appropriate measures. I tried to recant my statement, but they were not interested. Only then did I really realise what I had done.

You know the one thing I never said to her when I was trying to make her stay? Thank you. Thank you Avellana for giving me the best time of my life. And how badly did I betray you for it?

And now the Belt War is underway and there are Syndicate warships in orbit above our heads. They are drafting troops to join the Militia. They are telling us how to survive a scythrial viral bombardment. They are taxing us for the pleasure. 'For our own protection' they say. Will they leave when the war is done with? I doubt it. I think the time is long past for us to take appropriate measures of our own. If only we had listened to Avellana. If only...

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