

Harlequin Valentine

By Neil Gaiman

It is February the Fourteenth, at that hour of the morning when all the children have been taken to school, and the husbands have driven themselves to work, or have been dropped, steambreathing and greatcoated, at the rail station at the edge of the town for the Great Commute, when I pin my heart to Missy's front door.

The heart is a deep dark red that is almost a brown, the colour of liver.

Then I knock on the door, sharply, *rat-a-tat-tat!*

And I grasp my wand, my stick, my oh-so-thrustable and beribboned lance, and I vanish like cooling steam into the chilly air...

Missy opens the door. She looks tired.

"My Columbine," I breathe, but she hears not a word. She turns her head, so she takes in the view from one side of the street to the other, but nothing moves.

A truck rumbles in the distance.

She walks back into the kitchen and I dance, silent as a breeze, as a mouse, as a dream, into the kitchen beside her.

Missy takes a plastic sandwich bag from a paper box in the kitchen drawer.

She takes a bottle of cleaning spray from under the sink.

She pulls off two sections of kitchen towel from the roll on the kitchen counter. Then she walks back to the front door.

She pulls the pin from the painted wood – it was my hat pin, which I had stumbled across... where? I turn the matter over in my head; in Gascony, perhaps? Or Twickenham? Or Prague?

The face on the end of the hat pin is that of a pale Pierrot[*]. She removes the pin from the heart, and puts the heart into the plastic sandwich bag.

She wipes the blood from the door with a squirt of cleaning spray and a rub of paper towel, and she inserts the pin into her lapel, where the little white-faced August face stares out at the cold world with his blind silver eyes and his grave silver lips.

Naples. Now it comes back to me.

I purchased the hat pin in Naples, from an old woman with one eye. She smoked a clay pipe. This was a long time ago.

Missy puts the cleaning utensils down on the kitchen table, then she thrusts her arms through the sleeves of her old blue coat – which was once her mother’s – then she places the sandwich bag with the heart in it determinedly into her pocket, does up the buttons - one, two, three – and sets off down the street.

Secret, secret, quiet as a mouse I follow her, sometimes creeping, sometimes dancing, and she never sees me, not for a moment, just pulls her blue coat more tightly around her, and she walks through the town, and down the old road that leads past the cemetery.

The wind tugs at my hat, and I regret, for a moment, the loss of my hat pin. But I am in love, and this is Valentine’s Day. Sacrifices must be made.

Missy is remembering in her head the other times she has walked into the cemetery, through the tall iron cemetery gates: when her father died; and when they came here as kids at All Hallows’, the whole school mob and caboodle of them, partying and searing each other; and when a secret lover was killed in a three-car pile-up on the interstate, and she walked until the end of the funeral, when the day was all over and done with, and she came in the evening, just before sunset, and laid a white lily on the fresh grave.

Oh, Missy, shall I sing the body and the blood of you, the lips and the eyes? A thousand hearts I would give you as your valentine.

Proudly I wave my staff in the air and dance, singing silently into the gloriousness of me, as we skip together down Cemetery road.

A low grey building, and Missy pushes open the door.

She says Hi and How’s it going to the girl at the desk, who makes no intelligible reply, fresh out of school, and filling in a crossword from a periodical filled with nothing but crosswords page after page of them...

The girl would be making private phone calls on company time if only she had somebody to call, which she doesn’t, and, I see, plain as elephants, she never will. Her face is a mass of blotchy acne pustules and acne scars and she thinks it matters, and talks to nobody.

I see her life spread out before me: She will die, unmarried, and unmolested, of breast cancer in fifteen years’ time, and will be planted under a stone with her name on it in the meadow by Cemetery Road, and the first hands to have touched her breasts will have been those of the pathologist as he cuts out the cauliflower-like stinking growth and mutters, “Jesus, look at the *size* of this thing. Why didn’t she *tell* anyone?” which rather misses the point.

Gently, I kiss her on her spotty cheek, and whisper to her that she is beautiful. Then I tap her once, twice, *thrice*, on the head with my staff, and wrap her with a ribbon.

She stirs and smiles.

Perhaps tonight she will get drunk and dance and offer up her virginity upon Hymen’s altar, meet a young man who cares more for her breasts than for her face, and will one day, stroking those breasts and sucking and rubbing them, say, “Honey, you seen anybody about that lump?” and by then her spots will be long gone, rubbed and kissed and frottaged into oblivion.

But now I have mislaid Missy...

The stench is unbearable, heavy and rancid and wreathed on the air. The fat man in the stained lab coat wears disposable rubber gloves. A dead man is on the table in front of him.

The fat man has not noticed Missy yet. He has made an incision, and now he peels back the skin with a wet, sucking sound, and how dark the brown of it is on the outside, and how pink, pretty the pink of it is on the inside.

Classical music plays from a portable radio, very loudly.

Missy turns the radio off. "Hello, Vernon."

"Hello, Missy. You come for your old job back?"

This is The Doctor[†], I decide, for he is too big, too round, too magnificently well-fed to be Pierrot, too unselfconscious to be Pantaloon[‡].

His face creases with delight to see Missy, and she smiles to see him, and I am jealous; I feel a stab of pain shoot through my heart (currently in a plastic sandwich bag in Missy's coat pocket), sharper than when I stabbed it with my hat pin and stuck it to her door.

And speaking of my own heart...

Missy holds out the plastic bag, "Do you know what this is?"

Vernon peers at it closely. "Heart," he replied. "Kidneys don't have the ventricles, and brains are bigger and squishier. Where'd you get it?"

"I was hoping that *you* could tell me. Doesn't it come from here? Is it your idea of a valentine's card, Vernon? A human heart stuck to my front door?"

"Don't come from here. You want I should call the police?"

Missy shook her head. "I guess not. With *my* luck, they'll decide I'm a serial killer and send me to the chair."

Vernon: "Let's see... adult, in pretty good shape, took care of his heart, cut out by an expert."

I smile proudly at this, and bend down to talk to the dead black man on the table, with his chest all open and his calloused string-bass-plucking fingers.

"Go 'way, Harlequin," he mutters, quietly, not to offend Missy and his doctor. "Don't you go causing trouble here."

"Hush yourself. I will cause trouble wherever I wish," I tell him. "It is my function. But, for a moment, I feel a void about me; I am wistful, almost Pierrotish, which is a poor thing for a harlequin to be.

Oh, Missy, I saw you yesterday in the street, and followed you into Al's Super-Valufoods and More, elation and joy rising within me. In you, I recognized someone who could transport me, take me

from myself.

In you I recognized my valentine.

My Columbine.

I did not sleep last night, and instead I turned the town topsy and turvy, befuddling the unfuddled. I caused three sober bankers to make fools of themselves with drag queens from Madame Zora's Revue and Bar.

I slid into the bedrooms of the sleeping, unseen and unimagined, slipping the evidence of mysterious and exotic trysts into the pockets and under pillows and into crevices, able only to imagine the fun that would ignite the following days as soiled and spilt-crotch fantasy panties would be found poorly hidden under sofa, cushions and in the inner pockets of respectable suits.

But my heart was not in it, and the only face I could see was Missy's.

Oh, Harlequin in love is a sorry creature.

I wonder what she will do with my gift. Some girls spurn my heart, others touch it, kiss it, caress it, punish it with all manner of endearments before they return it to my keeping. Some never even see it.

Missy: "Shall I incinerate it?"

"Might as well. You know where the incinerator is, and I meant what I said about your old job. I need a good lab assistant."

I imagine my heart trickling up to the sky as ashes and smoke, covering the world. I do not know what I think of this, but, her jaw set, Missy shakes her head and she bids goodbye to Vernon the pathologist.

She has thrust my heart into her pocket and she is walking out of the building and up Cemetery Road and back into town.

I caper ahead of her. Interaction would be a fine thing, I decide.

Fitting word to deed I disguise myself as a bent old woman on her way to the market, covering the red spangles of my costume with a tattered cloak, hiding my masked face with a voluminous hood, and at the top of Cemetery Road I step out and block her way.

Marvelous, marvelous, marvelous me, and I say to her, in the voice of the oldest of women, "Spare a copper for a bent old woman, dearie, and I'll tell you a fortune that will make your eyes spin with joy."

"Here."

And I have it in my head to tell her all about the mysterious man she will meet, all dressed in red and yellow, with his domino mask, who will thrill her and love her and never, never leave her (for it is not a good thing to tell your Columbine the *entire* truth), but instead I find myself saying, in a cracked old voice, "Have you ever heard of Harlequin?"

“Yes,” she answers, “character in the Commediadell’arte . Costume covered in little diamond shapes. Wore a mask. I think he was a clown of some sort, wasn’t he?”

I shake my head, beneath my hood. “No clown,” I tell her. “He was...”

And I find that I am about to tell her the truth, so I choke back the words and pretend that I am having the kind of coughing attack, to which elderly women are particularly susceptible.

I wonder if this could be the power of love.

I do not remember it troubling me with other women I thought I had loved, other Columbines I have encountered over centuries now long gone.

I squint through old woman eyes at Missy; she is in her early twenties, and she has lips like a mermaid’s, full and well-defined and certain, and grey eyes, and a certain intensity to her gaze.

“Are you all right?”

I cough and sputter and cough some more and gasp, “Fine, mydearie -duck. I’m just fine, thank you kindly.”

“So. I thought you were going to tell me my fortune.”

“Harlequin has given you his heart. You must discover its beat yourself.” I hear myself saying these words, angry at my trickster tongue for betraying me.

She stares at me, puzzled. I cannot change or vanish while her eyes are upon me, and I feel frozen.

“Look! A rabbit!”

And she turns, follows my pointing finger, and as she takes her eyes off me I disappear – pop! – like a rabbit down a hole.

When she looks back, there’s not a trace of the old fortune-teller lady, which is to say me.

Missy walks on, and I caper after her, but there is not the spring in my step there was earlier in the morning.

Midday, and Missy has walked to Al’s Super-ValuFoods and More, where she buys a small block of cheese, a carton of unconcentrated orange juice, two avocados, and on to the County One Bank, where she withdraws two hundred and seventy-nine dollars and twenty-two cents, which is the total amount of money in her savings account, and I creep after her sweet as sugar and quiet as the grave.

“Morning, Missy...” says the owner of the Salt Shaker Café, when Missy enters.

My heart would have skipped a beat if it were not in the sandwich bag in Missy’s pocket, for this man obviously lusts after her, and my confidence, which is legendary, droops and wilts.

I am Harlequin, I tell myself, in my diamond-covered garments, and the world is my harlequinade. I am Harlequin, who rose from the dead to play his pranks upon the living. I am Harlequin,

in my mask, with my wand.

I whistle to myself, and my confidence rises, hard and full once more.

Missy was saying: "Hey, Harve. Give me a plate of hash browns, and a bottle of ketchup."

"That all?"

"Yes. That'll be perfect, and a glass of water."

I tell myself that the man Harve is Pantaloon, the foolish merchant that I must bamboozle, baffle, confusticate, and confuse.

Perhaps there is a string of sausages in the kitchen.

I resolve to bring delightful, disarray to the world, and to bed luscious Missy before midnight: my Valentine's present to myself.

I imagine myself kissing her lips.

There are a handful of other diners. I amuse myself by swapping their plates while they are not looking, but I have difficulty finding the fun in it.

The waitress ignores Missy, whom she obviously considers entirely Harve's preserve.

Missy sits at the table, and pulls the sandwich bag from her pocket. She places it on the table in front of her.

Harve-the-pantaloon struts over to Missy's table, gives her a glass of water, a plate of hash-browned potatoes, and a bottle of Heinz 57 Varieties Tomato Ketchup.

"And a steak knife," Missy said.

As Harve turned, I stuck out my stick.

He stumbles. He curses, and I feel better, more like the former me.

I goose the waitress as she passes the table of an old man who is reading USA Today while toying with his salad.

She gives the old man a filthy look. I chuckle, and then I find I am feeling most peculiar.

I sit down on the floor, suddenly.

"What's that, honey?" the waitress asks.

"Health food, Charlene," Missy replies, "Builds up iron."

I peep over the tabletop.

She is slicing up small slices of liver-coloured meat on her plate, liberally doused in tomato sauce,

and piling her fork high with hash browns.

Then she chews.

I watch my heart disappearing into her rosebud mouth. My valentine's jest somehow seems less funny.

She pops another scrap of raw gristle cut small into her mouth, and chews it hard, before swallowing.

Charlene, the waitress, goes past once more, with a pot of steaming coffee. "So what's with the raw meat? You anemic?"

Missy replies, "Not anymore."

And as she finishes eating my heart, Missy looks down and sees me sprawled upon the floor. She nods. "Outside. Now."

Then she gets up, and leaves ten dollars beside her plate.

She is sitting on a bench on the sidewalk, waiting for me. It is cold, and the street is almost deserted.

I would caper around her, but it feels so foolish now I know someone is watching.

"You ate my heart." I can hear the petulance in my voice, and it irritates me.

"Yes. Is that why I can see you?"

"I guess." I answered. "Nobody's ever done it before."

"Take off that domino mask. You look stupid."

I did.

"Not much improvement," she says. "Now, give me the hat. And the stick."

"I would prefer not to."

Missy reaches out and plucks my hat from my head, takes my stick from my hand.

She toys with the hat, her long fingers brushing and bending it. Her nails are painted crimson. Then she stretches and smiles, expansively. The poetry has gone from my soul, and the cold February wind makes me shiver.

"It's cold," I say.

"No." Missy replied. "It's perfect, magnificent, marvelous, and magical. It's Valentine's Day, isn't it? Who could be cold upon Valentine's Day? What a fine and fabulous time of the year."

The diamonds are fading from my suit, which is turning ghost-white, Pierrot -white.

“What do I do now?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Fade away, perhaps. Or find another role... a lovelorn swain, perchance, mooning and pining under the pale moon. All you need is a Columbine.”

“*You are* my Columbine.”

“Not anymore. That’s the joy of the harlequinade, after all, isn’t it? We change our costumes. We change our roles.”

She flashes me such a smile, now.

Then she puts my hat, my own hat, my harlequin-hat, up onto her head.

“And you?” I ask.

She tosses the wand into the air: it tumbles and twists in a high arc, red and yellow ribbons twisting and swirling about it, and then it lands neatly, almost silently, back into her hand.

She pushes the tip down to the sidewalk, pushes herself up from the bench in one smooth movement.

She says to me: “I have things to do. Tickets to take. People to dream.”

Then she leans over, and kisses me, full, and hard upon the lips.

Somewhere, a car backfired. I turned, startled, and when I looked back, I was alone on the street. I sat there for several moments, on my own.

“Hey, Pete,” Charlene calls from the doorway, “Have you finished out there yet?”

“Finished? Finished what, Charlene?”

“C’mon. Harve says yourciggie break is over. And you’ll freeze. Back into the kitchen.”

I stared at her. She tossed her pretty hair, and, momentarily, smiled at me.

I adjusted my white clothes, the uniform of the kitchen help, and followed her inside.

It’s Valentine’s Day, I thought. Tell her how you feel. Tell her what you think . But I said nothing, I dared not. I simply followed her inside, a creature of mute longing.

Back in the kitchen, a pile of plates was waiting for me: I began to scrape the leftovers into the pig-bin.

There was a scrap of dark meat on one of the plates, beside some half-finished ketchup-covered hash browns.

It looked almost raw... but I dipped it into the congealing ketchup and, when Harve’s back was turned, I picked it off the plate and chewed it down. It tasted metallic and gristly, but I swallowed it

anyhow, and could not have told you why.

A blob of red ketchup dripped from the plate onto the sleeve of my white uniform, forming one perfect diamond.

I called across the kitchen. "Hey, Charlene, happy Valentine's Day.

And then I started to whistle.

[*]Character in the Commediadell'arte who always gets caught and punished every time Harlequin plays tricks. He dresses all in white, and his face is white as well. Sometimes he is mute. He loves, and longs, and wants. As the English Harlequinade progressed Pierrot became more and more the Clown, but his love for Columbine remains unrequited.

[†]The Doctor is a character of the Commediadell'arte . His character is a man of vast learning, who knows everything and understands nothing. There is no record of his ever curing anyone of any disease; Doctor, in the Italian, merely indicates a man of learning.

[‡]An elderly miser in the Commediadell'arte whose fate is forever to be fooled.