

Toastmaster, Buttermistress

by
Rhys Hughes

I was feeling nervous, so I went to the funfair to relax. That was a mistake. The crowds were small but noisy, and the smells were too mysterious. I wandered among the booths and rides, in the lattice shadow of the rotting rollercoaster. The place was falling apart. I visited every stall, but nothing really tempted me. I accosted a small man with a large hammer.

"Will you invite me to test my strength?" I said.

"No, I just check for structural defects. I'm an engineer, mister. See this rollercoaster? I hit the beams and watch how much falls off. I have a collection of nails at home."

"Why don't they shut it all down?"

He shrugged and dragged his hammer by the shaft, between the tents. Later I saw him standing on the carousel, swinging at the wooden horses. He knocked the head right off a varnished stallion and it went tumbling to the edge of the spinning platform. Maybe a child or centrifugal force flung it out high above the crowd. But it wasn't trampled into the mud. Eventually it found its way into a bed.

I had no right to be nervous and now I felt frustrated instead. Worrying about my job is a luxury, because I'm the best in the business, at least in this city. But there was extra pressure on me today because I had a personal involvement with my clients. I parted the flaps of a tent, seeking solitude. But it was the abode of a mystic, a teller of fortunes. She was dark and exotic above her blank crystal ball. Her hands roamed over its surface.

"Can you guess my career?" I sneered.

"I doubt it. I'm the electrician. They keep having problems with the fuses. This wiring is so old it was used to hang rebels in forgotten civil wars and insurrections."

"That's a poor excuse for avoiding my challenge. I declare you to be a quack and charlatan, also a fraud, sham, mountebank, impostor and swindler. I'll go further and label you a cheat, fake and confidence trickster. How do you live with yourself, hoaxing money off the innocent and gullible? How can you justify taking advantage of the emotions of the recently bereaved? It's a sad, sick and cynical trade you conduct here! I suggest you are too incompetent to answer my question. What do you say to that?"

"You make speeches," she said.

"Why yes! I'm a professional toastmaster, a hired orator. I stand automatically whenever a spoon is tapped against a glass, even if by accident. So your powers are real!"

She shook her head, picked up the crystal ball and fitted it into a socket in the ceiling. It glowed into life, like some kind of lamp. And when she threw her wand down onto the table, I noted its resemblance to a screwdriver. I hurried out.

I passed the Tunnel of Love. It was located in the centre of the funfair. An artificial river, too choppy to be called a canal, ran in through the entrance, went on its hidden way inside the building and came out through the exit, stagnant and oily. I sighed at the symbolism. There were boats shaped like huge lips, just wide enough to accommodate two young lovers. Curiosity overcame my bitterness, and I lingered to see who would pay for the next ride.

A man with unkempt hair and a cheap suit approached the kiosk and bought a ticket. He carried something under one arm. It wasn't a girl. It was a wardrobe mirror. He positioned it on the seat of a boat and climbed in next to it. The attendant cast off the mooring rope and the implausible couple drifted through the opening. The last I saw of the man before he vanished around a corner, he was embracing the mirror and

gazing deeply into the eyes of his own reflection. I don't know if he attempted a kiss, but I should have liked to see how he solved the problem of nose angles.

I tapped the attendant on the shoulder. "Do you get many men going in just with mirrors?"

"Each to his own. There's too much hatred in the world as it is. No need to complain about something so harmless as narcissism. I just take the money. None of my business."

I rubbed my chin. I was embarrassed. It was his business. I waited for the man and his mirror to come out of the exit. I wanted to see how steamed up the glass was. But they didn't emerge. I checked my watch. Still there was no movement at the portals of the exit. I frowned. Why would a man take a mirror into a Tunnel of Love instead of a girl? Wasn't it a waste of time, energy and opportunity? Wasn't it a waste of love? I decided that the man in question was lonely, a failure with women. Clearly he had no choice but to enter the tunnel on his own, with his reflection to provide an illusion of company.

No, that wasn't right. He would have chosen a mannequin or enlarged photograph if the figment was the only thing he needed. He preferred to go into the tunnel with himself. An egotist! I felt superior, because such psychological decadence had nothing to do with me. I was pure, clean, feeling love for other people all the time. For instance, within the hour, I was going to give a speech in honour of two young friends, Haylan Duesing and Bowie Crowtoe, bride and groom, the man blushing even more than the wife, married that very morning. I was the toastmaster for the reception. A special favour, because I had known the pair all their lives. They had been childhood sweethearts and had finally decided to do something large and legal with their love. I loved them both, honestly, truly, and my prepared speech reflected this. It was full of praise for them, a frank admission of how marvellous they were. This other man with his mirror could never possibly understand the beauty of such affection. He was too sunk in petty self-regard.

But I started to doubt this analysis. He had entered the tunnel with a look of genuine passion on his face. He hadn't seemed so forlorn after all. I waited another ten minutes and then walked to the exit. I leaned over the railings and peered inside. It was dark, but something vast and white glimmered just beyond the portals. This side of the building was in a sorry state of repair, with peeling paint and crumbling plaster. The water was topped with a green scum, undisturbed, I surmised, for decades. I twisted my head to obtain a better view of the interior. A dozen yards or so up the exit, a giant web completely blocked the passage. It was so pale it appeared almost artificial, thick cables faintly humming in the gentle, almost imperceptible, breeze which wafted from the tunnel.

A giant web! I craned forward, eyes searching for the spider which had spun it. But I saw nothing, not even a vague silhouette, which might indicate the existence of such a grisly creature. What a weebegone trap! The lovers at the end of their ride would drift straight into the sticky strands of this cruel net, so skilled at sighing they might forget how to scream as the horrid monster scuttled from its vantage, hairy legs balancing lightly on the wires, to sink its fangs into their muscles, numbing them with poison, spinning their shrouds while they remembered how to scream, but only in their minds, for their mouths were frozen, paralysed no less than if they had caught their partners in the arms of another lover, before being dragged off to its larder, perhaps a large cavity in the tunnel wall, still alive! Ghastly! And how fundamentally distasteful for the spider too, to be so cynical and repulsive. Imagine owning knees higher than your head!

I assumed the original builders of this Tunnel of Love had become confused, mixing up its function with that of one of the Ghost Trains so typical of funfairs. Or was the spider really smart enough to devise this opportunistic stratagem to obtain an easy meal? The more I looked, the more the nastiness of the idea diminished, for there were no bones floating on the surface of the canal, and no signs of struggle among the strands. The web was perfect and bare. If anything, it was a little dusty. I was forced to conclude that this in itself wasn't the reason why the man with the mirror hadn't yet emerged. He hadn't been eaten. He was still inside and presumably still in love.

If I was going to solve the enigma, I would have to pay for a ride myself. But I lacked time and a partner. Ah, now my earlier complacency belonged to a wholly different age. It was I who was lonely! I didn't even know what kind of girl I would like best to take into a Tunnel of Love. What would she look like? Auburn hair? A brunette? A blonde? With green eyes, blue, brown? A winsome smile, for sure, and a gentle heart. In other words, nobody I had ever met. I still hoped she was waiting for me in the future, but to wait there she would have to live there, and if she lived there she would always be ahead of me, beyond my reach. And I was running out of time. I consulted my watch again. The ride would have to be postponed until the evening. But if

I could look deeper into the exit, beyond the web, maybe I could ease my curiosity, spy the man and his mirror in the distance. After all, perhaps the facts were mundane. Perhaps it was simply an extremely long tunnel, with hundreds of loops coiled up tight inside the building.

I pulled myself away from the railings and roamed around the other attractions. Many stalls displayed lanterns among the prizes to be won at various games. I offered to buy one at a price favourable to their keepers, but they all declined on principle. If I wanted a lantern, I would have to win one. I played on the coconut shy, the rifle range, the hoopla, but either I was inept or else I won prizes bigger than a lantern. At last, loaded with soft toys, I gave up. I went back to the Tunnel of Love, but I didn't bother to cast these toys at the web, to lure the spider. I approached the kiosk with a question.

"Excuse me, but does anyone ever come out again?"

"Why should they? Are you saying that couples mustn't stay in love for as long as possible? That's the next best thing to forever. Aren't you going to buy a ticket?"

"Not enough time. I have to leave now."

"Nobody to go with, huh? The details are none of my concern. I'm grateful that people still fall in love at all."

"How long is this tunnel exactly? How long is a ride?"

"More than a lifetime, mister. But I didn't design it, so don't ask me. And I'm not a matchmaker. I just take the money. In my spare hours I write epithalamia. Love songs, slush."

"Has anyone ever come out again?"

"No, sir, not from here. Not since it was built, maybe a thousand years ago, maybe longer than that, when the first two paying passengers climbed into a boat. Why do you want them to come out? Jealous, are you? That's too bad. You know how love works, don't you? It's pure passion right at the beginning, hungry lips, fevered glances, tussled hair, lack of concentration on anything else. Romance. Erotic love. Call it what you please. After a period it settles down to a more comfortable situation, a sort of cherishing and respecting. Less frantic urge to entangle limbs every single minute. Then this becomes even calmer and gentle appreciation swamps everything, and that's the start of a gradual decay into taking each other for granted, and then dissatisfaction and the roving eye. Finally it's flings, affairs and divorce. This ride is an analogue of that process. At the exit of most Tunnels of Love you can find mistresses, paramours and alimony. Not this one. The route is simply too long. By the time the first lovers who went in come out, they'll be ancient faithful skeletons."

He said all this, but I had to guess most of it, because I had already left and was hurrying to the hotel and the wedding reception. My mind was a whirlpool of confusion, and this in turn led me to suspect that some such natural phenomenon, a maelstrom in the depths of the tunnel, was responsible for sucking the lovers down before they even reached the web, for like I said, I didn't hear the attendant's theory. Dropping my soft toys, I dashed out of the funfair, along the promenade to the hotel, through the swing-doors and the lobby, into the dancehall, decked out especially for the occasion.

I wasn't late and people were too busy enjoying themselves to notice my unkempt hair, the creases in my suit. The cake had been cut with a knife as wide as a paddle and individual wedges lay wrapped in blue tissue paper as souvenirs for the guests. Because I was a family friend, my wedge was massive, with a candle protruding from it, which I found slightly odd, until I remembered that today was Haylan's birthday, and the wedding the present she had requested from her fiancé, one he had quivered with delight to give.

She was looking radiant, Haylan, with her luminous green eyes and a smile big enough to catch all the summer dew, and russet hair tumbling about her shoulders, and soft powerful hands which always seemed ready to pick daisies, throw snowballs, push bicycles. And Bowie wasn't stale in his appearance either. I admired the way his fringe blew the wrong way in any wind. He was almost worthy of her. I wished both of them the best of luck, and through the medium of my speech I would soon tell them that, in rich language, with elaborate metaphors and rhetorical tricks. It had taken a week to write, to polish the phrases of praise. I was confident they would appreciate my efforts.

By vigorous fanning with the papers which constituted this oration, I evaporated the sweat from my brow. I looked cool and assured as I circulated among the guests. There were a few ladies there who quickened my pulse, but they were all engaged or disinterested. My own true love still hadn't left the future. No matter! I was heading that way myself, one second at a time. Maybe I would catch up with her one day? For the moment, my task was to be charming to everybody. But as I strolled the dancehall, I was discouraged by the mirrors which occupied every wall, with my reflection already inside them, a multiple toastmaster, a bed of wallflowers. Oh, to be picked!

There was a general movement toward the tables. I found myself sitting at the head of the longest one. Plenty of space around me. I would be able to stand without scraping my chair leg on the boards, a sound I despise. Haylan and Bowie were positioned at the table's midpoint, on chairs higher than ours, or else with more cushions. She had detached the unnecessary parts of her wedding dress, the veil, train and lace, and now she looked like a nymph, with a crown of bluebells. Bowie was still in his best suit, but it had taken a battering. His cravat was undone, his collar stained with lipstick, the buttons of his shirt hung on threads. They must have been rehearsing their honeymoon in a backroom.

The abrupt tinkle of spoon on glass crashed into my ears like a comet bouncing on a glacier. I jerked to attention, speech in hand. The room went quiet. All eyes were on me, even those of Haylan and Bowie, though they exchanged glances in their upheld spoons. Normally so glib of tongue, so smooth, so competent, I was suddenly lost. My throat felt dry, my gums too large for my mouth. What was wrong? I was a toastmaster of genius, with matching reputation.

"Ladies and Gentlemen..." I croaked.

I frowned, gasped, and then slowly lifted up my speech, held it between finger and thumb, and tore it into pieces, tiny pieces, the confetti which had already snowed on the newly-weds. But I didn't throw it at them. I dropped the pieces into my glass of champagne, where they swirled, saturated, overflowed. I thrust my triumphant thumbs into the buttonholes of my jacket lapels.

For I had been struck with an astounding insight. I had solved the mystery of the man with the mirror. Or to be more precise, I now knew the secret of self-love, its hidden wisdom. Until this moment I had considered myself a dispenser of love, a generous avatar of love, a reservoir of love, pouring it out among my friends, a mountain of love sending down avalanches to sweep others off their feet before rescue teams might arrive. Selfless, that was the key. Willing, even eager, to forget my own needs in this area to assist others in their romantic endeavours. A personal sacrifice for the sake of love, for love is entirely selfless. That is what we are taught. That is the way, the credo of Cupid.

Now I saw the paucity of this approach, its irrationality. It was a lie, a fraud, an impossibility. If you don't love yourself best of all, how can you possibly love others? The man with the mirror had taught me this. If you don't love yourself, fully, completely, unconditionally, without any regrets or doubts, then you can't love the individual parts which constitute you. And one of those parts is your love for others. And if you don't love your love for others, then you don't really love them. How could I deliver a speech praising Haylan and Bowie and actually mean it unless I first held myself in the highest possible esteem? I had to love myself the most, or my words of love for this couple were worthless.

The finest compliment I could give the bride and groom at this point was to praise myself. For if I left this task undone, my love for them had no basis. Without total self-love, my outward affections were a cheap trick. They couldn't ultimately exist. Thank all the spirits of love that I had realised this in time! How delighted Haylan and Bowie would be by this act, how more deeply it would touch their hearts than my original speech.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," I repeated, as I reasserted control of myself, "I am here to say a few words of praise on this joyous occasion. And who is the rightful object of this praise? Who deserves these words of love the most? Myself, of course! For I am so lovely, so gorgeous, so talented, clever, handsome, witty and wise! Look at me! I ask you: have you ever witnessed so many qualities, so much grace, athleticism, good humour, generosity, sagacity, kindness and tender strength in one man before? I doubt it! Crikey, I'm almost perfect, aren't I? If I wasn't me, I'd sure like to fall on my knees before me, clasp my other knees and propose marriage! I am so wonderful that I bet you can't sit there listening to me without lustful thoughts! Now let me briefly outline the excellence of my body and mind before proceeding to a more detailed examination of various aspects of these twin masterpieces of nature's art. First a general overview of the wonderfulness of my

whole body. Let me begin by saying that when I take a bath..."

It was pure improvisation, and I felt pleased with the result, but for some unfathomable reason it didn't go down so well with my audience. Maybe they didn't consider the logic of what I was saying. Maybe they didn't extrapolate the function of my words to the point where my self-love embraced every part of myself, including my feelings of love for them. Only if I loved myself to an extreme could I validate this outer love. But they didn't take time to think about this. They threw food. Bread rolls launched by hand and globs of trifle catapulted by spoon. They grumbled and hissed and made a fuss. Haylan was grinding her teeth, her green eyes like stars on the horizon shining through the smokes of a volcano, sparkling, encouraging the eruption by lending it just that extra heat it required. Bowie on the other hand seemed crushed. My words had crumpled him down in his chair like a concertina. He wheezed his disappointment.

The missiles soon began to hurt. My speech faltered. A slice of melon struck me across the eyes. I blinked and held up my hands to protect myself. I demanded they consider the logic of what I was saying. They didn't. I was forced to defend myself more assertively. I reached across the table and snatched the knife which had been used to cut the cake. It was serrated and sharp but I didn't employ it as a weapon. I swung it like a bat. The blade was wide enough to deflect the solid missiles. I gave as good as I got, but the crowd didn't applaud my strikes. They jeered. Finally frustrated by their inability to hit me, and running low on ammunition, they stood and started to stalk me, arms outstretched, faces glowering. And all the while I was still trying to tell them how brilliant I was in every way, how desirable, how ravishing.

"Silence him!" I heard a voice command. It belonged to Haylan.

I knew when I was in real danger. It was now. I backed away, still holding the knife in one hand, picking up my wedge of cake with the other. I retreated from the dancehall, through the lobby, where a thoughtful valet slipped a promotional book of matches into my pocket, out of the swing-doors onto the promenade. I turned and fled. I had abandoned any thoughts of claiming my pay. I thought I was safe until I glanced over my shoulder. The guests were in pursuit and they seemed more determined than ever to do me an injury. Haylan was right at the back, dragging along the gibbering Bowie by the hand, accelerating on her powerful, dainty feet, overtaking the other pursuers, her free hand clenched into a fist and armed with rings, diamonds able to cut open any jaw. I whimpered as I ran, finding myself suddenly back in the funfair, surely the perfect place to lose my hunters. I wove between the stalls.

I made the mistake of hugging the shadows. My pursuers kept losing sight of me and pushed into each tent in turn to check if I was hiding within. By this time, Haylan had reached the front of the vengeful mob and was directing operations. Bad news for me, because she was more intelligent than the others, and thus more dangerous. She had borrowed a bicycle from somewhere and had packed Bowie into the basket at the front, delivering him like a parcel as she pedalled and made enquiries at every stall she passed. One of them was the den of the fortune teller, who came out and pointed through the crowds at me. She couldn't have seen where I was headed, so she must have used her mystic powers. But then I remembered she was an electrician. I guess she could sense the shock, the sparks, in my heart.

My pursuers had fanned out, forming a circle around the funfair which shrank from one minute to the next. And I was stuck in the middle. I dipped and ducked in random directions, but you can't throw a noose off the scent. It has no nose, just a knot. I almost ran into a vanguard of guests as I turned a corner. Luckily they didn't see me and I jumped back. They hadn't noticed me because they were bending down to examine a rather alarming object. It was the head of the rotten wooden horse from the carousel. One of them picked it up and I heard him say, "We'll keep this and put it in his bed as a lesson. That's the done thing, isn't it? The most menacing threat?"

I guessed it was only a matter of minutes before they, or more likely Haylan, managed to enlist the aid of the little man with the hammer. And there was no way I could break through the tightening noose and escape by climbing the struts of the antique rollercoaster. I must try to lose them on a ride. But which one? They would simply wait for it to stop and then they would pounce on me.

I searched for a Hall of Mirrors, foolishly assuming it might help to illustrate my point and clear up the misunderstanding. But when I turned the next corner, I found myself back at the Tunnel of Love. It wasn't the entrance side, with the kiosk and boats. I was at the exit and the railings which prevented onlookers from falling into the dirty water. At the entrance, Haylan and Bowie were in the process of buying a ticket. They hadn't seen me, but in another few seconds I would be spotted. There were voices behind me. The scrape of

a hammer dragged by its shaft. The game was finished, unless I did something which probably nobody has ever done before.

Climbing the railings, I jumped over and landed in the water. I kept my balance with difficulty as the green scum lapped my knees. I followed one of the larger ripples into the exit. I passed through the crumbling portals. My eyes adjusted to the murk. I reached the web. Then I saw the spider. It was curled tight in a ball in a recess in the wall. It was pure white and dry. As I passed, my shoulder brushed it and one of its legs snapped off. I felt sorry for the monster at that moment. It had starved to death a long time ago. It must have felt very smug, spinning its giant web at the exit of a Tunnel of Love. But it hadn't reckoned with the unique symbolic route of this particular example of the ride. It had never caught a single victim.

I cut the strands with the cake knife. The web fell aside in tatters, like a bride's hymen. Was this desperate venture my own honeymoon? No, for I was at the exit of love, not at its consummation. It was more in the manner of a straightforward exploit. I was equipped for whatever hazards I might face. I had my knife as a weapon, the cake for my supper, its candle and my book of matches as a source of illumination. I would see how far I could go! It would be lonely.

Or would it? It suddenly occurred to me that travelling the wrong way through a Tunnel of Love might have certain unexpected advantages. If the route really was an extended metaphor for the course of love, then I was starting at the divorce end, where it was right to be alone. As I progressed, or regressed, along this perilous emotional canal, my love for an unknown companion would grow. It would become easy complacency, then gentle appreciation, and after that cherishing and respecting, finally culminating in romantic, erotic, uncontainable passion! I was making the journey of love in reverse! Clearly I would acquire my companion on the way. She was waiting for me inside. Who would it be? Who could it be? What sort of girl might be the perfect match for a toastmaster? Then I remembered Haylan in her boat coming the other way, my nemesis, my friend, my intended. Only time would tell. I pushed on.