

Unrequited Love

by

Gene Wolfe

“Two loves I have, of comfort and despair.”

—Shakespeare

You have no reason to listen to me, but may sigh and turn the page and be none the worse for it. Yet I have every reason to speak out. If this public confession of my innocent guilt lifts my spirits to the slightest degree, it will be well worth the loss of your esteem. You see, I am one who had done wrong while seeking to do good. There are millions like me in that, and most acknowledge no smallest trace of guilt.

“My intentions were good!”

Soon, one hopes, a great, blood-colored hand whose fingers are tipped with claws will close about them and drag them down to Hell.

So it may drag me; and mine *were* good, though I scorn to offer that in my defense. It is results that matter in this world and in every other. My good intentions brought innocent hearts pain that will not end. Each night, once, twice, sometimes three times in a night, I rise and dress and go out to see if they are there.

They are not, but would be if they could—poor simple little beings whose torment I began. Do you understand?

Of course not.

How could you? I will explain everything in order, starting with Roberta.

#

Roberta belonged to the Robinsons, the couple who have the house one door west of mine. I first saw her one May morning walking to school, with her own little laptop in a shiny new bag, the picture of beauty, innocence (there is that word again) and blooming health. She was a ‘bot, of course. Either the Robinsons could not have a child of their own, or were unwilling to undertake the travail and expense of a real child. I could not—I do not—blame them in the least. But I wondered, because I have never had much to do with such ‘bots, about her schooling.

So it was that I struck up a conversation with her one day when I happened to be walking in the same direction. I asked the inevitable, utterly banal question: “Do you like school?”

And Roberta answered, “Oh, yes! It’s fun.”

“Really? What’s your class studying?”

“Oh, you know. The names of the letters and how each one sounds. The color wheel and watercolors. Arithmetic. Stranger danger.”

“I’m no stranger,” I told her.

“Of course you aren’t. You live next door.”

“Exactly. And I’m not about to ask you to go anywhere with me or do anything, though I do enjoy talking to you.”

“That’s good!” She smiled.

“For me, at least. What do you get if you mix black and white?”

“Grey if you mean paint. Brown if you mean people.”

“I meant paint. Blue and yellow?”

“Green.”

“What’s the square root of two hundred and fifty-six?”

“Sixteen.” She looked around at me with a charming little grin. “Only that’s not fair. It’s not first-grade work.”

“Exactly. You must know everything the rest of your class—“

“No, there are three of us.”

“Is there to learn. So how can it be fun for you?”

“Oh, it’s lots of fun!”

“Is it really? What part do you like best.”

“Tutoring. That’s where one of us takes a boy or girl who isn’t doing very well and tries to help him. Or her.” For a moment she looked serious and a little sad. “It’s nearly always a boy, because there are five boys and two girls besides us. Only what I like best is when it’s a girl like me. Sometimes I know I’ve really, truly helped. Helped her and helped Mrs. Morse, too. I like that a lot.”

We had nearly reached the elementary school, so I said, “Well, I hope you get a girl today.”

She said, “So do I! I hope I get Julianne!” and ran into the school.

Not too long after that I met Julianne, and here I intruded. If I bore no guilt until now (though I think I did) I certainly bore it in that.

I saw her shuffle sadly past our house on her way the Robinson’s, a small girl with a pinched face and long black braids. I saw her, too, on her way back home, and could not resist. I went out and walked more or less with her, trying to look as though I were enjoying the sunshine, and contrived to strike up a conversation. “Do you play with Roberta?”

“Sure.” It was mumbled; I shall not mention the mumbling in the future. Everything Julianne said was mumbled.

“It must be fun.”

A sad nod. “She’s my best friend.”

“Do you have many friends?”

She shook her head.

“I’m know I can’t play with you the way another girl would, but I’m Roberta’s neighbor and I’d like to be your friend, too.” I introduced myself.

“I’m Julianne.”

I had been fairly certain of that already.

She sighed. “My father’s a cook. We’re supposed to say chef. But he is. That’s why I’m Julianne. He fixes salads, mostly.”

I said, “A good chef is a treasure among men.”

“Mom says the money’s pretty good.”

“No doubt the salads are, too.”

“So I’m going to get another friend.” The small, pinched face seemed to brighten somewhat. “I’m going to get a puppy. Roberta’s going to have a puppy and I told Mom and Dad, so I’m getting one, too.”

“‘Beauty without vanity, strength without insolence, courage without ferocity, and all the virtues of Man, without his vices.’ Lord Byron said that. I believe his dog was a Newfoundland. Do you know what breed you’ll be getting, Julianne?”

“A robot. Roberta’s going to get a border terrier, though.” For a moment it almost seemed that Julianne smiled. “They can play with each other while we do.”

It left me speechless. Or if I spoke, I do not recall what it was I said or why I said it.

Perhaps I turned at some corner or other, or perhaps Julianne reached her home and went inside. I do not recall that either. I only know that I walked on, alone, filled with a tragic anger. Our gently curving streets offended me. Our neatly finished green lawns, more than half of them of artificial grass, offended me still more. I hated every house I saw; their fresh paint and absurd mixture of styles were more than sufficient to account for any amount of hatred.

Yet I had another, better, reason. I hated then because there was scarcely one that housed two children, and that most housed none.

Like my own.

My kind had built a paradise, of which I was a part. A paradise for machines, in which the human race, though welcome, could not and did not thrive. In and around the filthy huts of the medieval peasants, children ran and shouted, laughed and wept, and no doubt received sturdy buffets when they made too much noise. There the family sang around a table we would scorn. There grandmothers recounted wild tales before the fire, tales full of bold boys who made good and honest country maidens who tricked evil dwarves like me.

Tales that were full of life because the children were, and full of death, too, because each child had to learn that death is life’s shadow.

Here—But I have gone on too long already.

#

A week passed before I spoke to either girl again. As often as I could I watched them out my windows or from my deck. Sometimes they waved to me, and when they did I took care to smile and wave in

return.

For the most part they did not.

Roberta remained the perfection of childhood beauty. Julianne seemed always her sad, pinched self. This though once I heard her laugh, a sound every bit as unnatural as her playmate.

The promised puppies appeared, Roberta's first. It was small and wigglesome, brownish, reddish, and blackish. Both girls embraced and kissed it, Julianne shyly and Roberta often.

Julianne received hers a week or two later. It was larger and seemed to be a caricature of a Dalmatian, white with over-regular black spots and too-large eyes. Perhaps I can best characterize it as resistibly cute, though both girls appeared to adore it. Roberta's puppy played with it as he might have played with a ball or any other inanimate object. I doubt that he knew it was a counterfeit of his own species.

Watching them, I meditated upon a plan. It is because of that plan and its result that I am writing this.

First I seized an opportunity to speak to the girls together. Roberta's puppy had penetrated the hedge that separates the Robinson's back yard from our own. Both girls screamed, jumped up and down, and did little else. I quieted them, assured them that I would capture their small fugitive, and did so by tempting him with scraps of meat.

He was a charming little creature when I held him at last, innocent as are the young of almost every animal, and friendly as are the young of a very few.

I carried him back to the waiting girls, cautioned them against permitting him to escape again (fruitless cautions, as you shall read), and broached my plan. "Have you two ever thought of trading puppies for a few days? A friend and I did it (this was a lie) when I was a boy. He took mine for a week—maybe it was two, I can't remember for sure—and I took his. We both had a lot of fun. We learned something, too."

Roberta asked, "Do you think our parents would let us?"

"I don't see why not, and certainly there could be no harm in asking."

She turned to Julianne. "Do you think you could give up Robber for a week if I gave you Rover?"

Hesitantly, Julianne nodded.

So it came to pass, even as I had planned. Julianne, the human girl, went home with Rover, the flesh-and-blood dog. Roberta, the blond robot girl, remained at home with Robber, the black-and-white robot dog.

I thought it a great improvement, and would fearlessly have predicted that both dogs had found new homes.

In which I was wholly wrong. A few days later, I met Julianne, and she had Robber once more. I petted him, and he wagged his tail and licked my hand.

"He's a nice dog," Julianne said unnecessarily. "He won't bite."

I said, "I didn't imagine he would, but I'm surprised you didn't keep Rover longer."

"I didn't want to. I like Robber better."

“I see. Can you tell me why?”

She shrugged and turned away. “He don’t mess the carpet.”

After that I spoke with Roberta, and for once I did not contrive some supposedly accidental encounter. She was playing with Rover in her back yard, and I simply went to the hedge and told her I wanted to speak to her. After all my pretense, it was a great relief.

“I’m going to pry, Roberta. I’m going to ask you about things that are none of my business. I hope you’ll answer.”

She nodded.

“But if you don’t, I’ll understand. You and Julianne were supposed to exchange dogs for week, weren’t you?”

“Yes. Yes, we were.”

“But it ended after what? Three days?”

“Two.” Roberta would not meet my eyes.

“Was it you who called it off? Or Julianne?”

“It was both of us.” I must have looked doubtful, because she added, “It really was. We were talking at recess, and we both started crying. I—I don’t know why she didn’t like Rover.”

She seemed about to cry again. I kept my voice as soft as I could. “That doesn’t matter.”

“Robber thinks he’s a real dog.” The words held a world of agony.

“Does he?”

“Yes! He’s—he’s a *thing*, but he thinks he’s a real dog.” She turned away and ran into her house.

Glancing out my picture window a few days after that, I saw Dan and Tamara Robinson—and Roberta, too—roaming the neighborhood with flashlights. I went out and asked how I might help, and they explained that Rover was lost.

“Or missing,” I said.

I am not a brilliant man and this was not a brilliant idea, simply what proved to be a useful one. You see, I recalled the sentimental dog stories I had heard or read over the years. Lassie coming home, Grayfriars Bobby, and all the rest. I got Julianne’s address from Roberta, drove over there, and found Rover lying quietly by the side of the house, half hidden by shrubbery, under a window that I would guess was that of Julianne’s bedroom.

God forgive me! I picked him up and carried him home.

#

That should be the end of my story, and I wish it were. Julianne and her mother came to the Robinsons’ the next day to get Robber, whom Roberta had found waiting for her when she left for school. During the weeks that followed, I saw him there twice, his dotted white coat plainly visible as he waited on the Robinsons’ porch.

Twice, as I said. I have never seen him again. Julianne says they keep him chained up.