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I LOVE GIRL

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MIGUEL GALLARDO

I am Oog. I love Girl. Girl loves Boog.

It is bad situation.

Boog and I are very different people. For example, we have different jobs.

My job is Rock Thrower. I will explain what that is. There are many rocks all over the place and people are always tripping on them. So when I became a man, at age eleven, the Old Person said to me, "Get rid of all the rocks." Since that day, ten years ago, I have worked very hard at this. Whenever it is light outside, I am gathering rocks and throwing them off the cliff.

Boog's job is Artist. I will explain what that is. When he became a man, the Old Person said to him, "Cut down the trees so we have space to live." But Boog did not want to do this, so now he smears paint inside caves. He calls his smears "pictures." Everybody likes to look at them. But the person who likes to look at them most is Girl.

I love Girl. I will explain what that is. When I look at her, I

feel sick like I am going to die. I have never had the Great Disease (obviously, because I am still alive). But my uncle described it to me. He said there is a tightness in your chest, you cannot breathe, and you have anger toward the Gods. I was going to ask him to explain more, but then he died. My point is: Girl makes me feel this way, like I am going to die. There are many women in the world. By last count, seven. But she is the only one I ever loved.

Girl lives on Black Mountain. It is called Black Mountain because (1) it is mountain and (2) it is covered in black rocks. Every day, Girl has to climb over the rocks to get to the river. It is too hard. She has small legs and she is often getting stuck. So one day I decided, "I will clear a path from Girl's cave to the river."

I have been working on Girl's path for many years, picking up the black rocks and carrying them away. I never throw her rocks off the cliff like normal rocks. Instead, I put them in a pile next to my cave. I like to look at the pile, because it reminds me of how I am helping Girl. My mother, who I live with, says the pile "has to go." (I worry that she will move the pile, but it is unlikely. After all, she is an elderly thirty-two-year-old woman.)

I have made good progress on Girl's path, but there are still many rocks left. The job would go faster, but I am clearing the path in secret by the light of the moon. The reason is—and this is a hard thing to admit—I am afraid to talk to Girl. If she found out it was me clearing all the rocks, I'm sure she would say something to me like "Hello" or "Hi there." And then I would be in trouble. Because the truth is I am not so good at making words.

Boog is very good at making words. For example, last week he showed off his new picture at the Main Cave. Everyone was expecting it to be a horse or a bear (all his pictures so far have

been horses, bears, or a mix of horses and bears). But this picture was not of any animal. It was just a bunch of red streaks. People were angry.

“I wanted animals,” the Old Person said. “Where are the animals?”

It was bad situation. I thought that Boog would lose his job or maybe be killed by stones. But then Boog stood on a rock and spoke.

“My art is smart,” he said. “And anyone who does not get it is stupid.”

Everyone was quiet. We looked at the Old Person to see what he would say.

The Old Person squinted at the red streaks for a while. Then he rubbed his chin and said, “Oh, yes, now I get it. It is smart. People who do not get it are stupid.”

A few seconds later, everyone else got it.

“It is smart,” they said. “It is smart!”

The only person who did not get it was me. My beard began to sweat. I was scared that someone would ask me to make words about the picture. I headed slowly for the exit. I was almost out of the cave when Boog pointed his finger at me.

“Do you like it, Oog?”

Everyone stopped making words and looked at me.

“It is smart,” I said. I meant for my voice to sound big, but it came out small.

Boog smiled.

“Ah,” he said. “Then why don’t you explain it to us?”

I felt a burning on my skin. It was sort of like when you fall into a cooking fire and your body catches on fire. I looked at my feet and people started laughing.

I looked up at Girl to see if she was one of the ones laughing. She was not (thank Gods). But she could hear all the other people laughing and that was just as bad.

“I am tired from talking to people who are less smart,” Boog said. “I am going to mate with Girl now.”

He took Girl’s hand and started to mate with her. Some people stayed to watch, but most took this as their cue to leave.

On my way out, I heard Girl making sounds. They stayed in my head all night, like an echo in an empty cave.

The next day, I decided to become an Artist. I told my plan to Oog (there are several of us named Oog—I’m sorry if it is confusing) and he said, “You can’t be an Artist. It is hard.”

Oog agreed with him.

“You’re a Rock Thrower,” he said. “Stick with that.”

I was angry at Oog. Partly because he always takes Oog’s side. But mostly because I did not agree with his words.

Maybe Artist is hard job. It is not for me to say. But I would be surprised if it was as hard a job as Rock Thrower.

Throwing rocks is not so easy. For example, five years ago one of my shoulders detached from my arm when I was throwing a boulder off the cliff. And two years after that the other shoulder detached also. I can still throw rocks off the cliff. But now when I throw them I am screaming. Not just once in a while, but constantly. Every time I throw a rock, I am

screaming, loud. I do not even realize I am screaming—it is just part of my life. Another thing is that sometimes I fall off the cliff, which is bad situation.

“I am going to make a picture,” I told the others. “A good one.”

“Who are you going to show it to?” Oog said. “Your mother?”

Everyone laughed: Oog, Oog, Moog, even Oog.

“No,” I said. “I will show it to Girl.”

No one made words after that.

I have never spoken to Girl, but one time she spoke to me. It was a long time ago, when we were still children.

It was the first day of school and we were learning to count. It was confusing. I am very good at some numbers. I understand “one” and “two” very well and I am O.K. with “three.” But when it gets to higher math, like “four” or “five,” I have trouble.

The Old Person had told us each to make a pile of five rocks. I did not know how many that was and it was getting to be my turn. It was bad situation.

The Old Person was about to call on me, when Girl whispered in my ear.

“You have too many rocks,” she said. “You need to take away four.”

I stared at her. I think she could tell from my eyes that I did not have a great grasp of “four.”

“It’s two twos,” she said.

I swallowed. To this day, I do not know what she meant by

this.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I will help you.”

The Old Person was about to look at my pile when Girl stood up and pointed into the forest.

“Predator!” she yelled.

By the time we came back from the Hiding Cave, it was night. On the second day of school, we graduated and I got my sheepskin just like everybody else. I wanted to thank Girl, but I did not know which words to make. So I said nothing.

Girl has a small head, so it is very strange how she fits so many things inside of it. She knows all the numbers: “six,” “eight”—you name it. But she also knows other things nobody else knows.

One time, I followed her down to the river. She was hunting fish in the normal way, by jabbing a stick in the water. After a long time, she caught a small flat fish. I assumed she would do the normal thing (rip off the head and eat the body), but instead she did the strangest thing I have ever seen. She put the stick—with the small fish still on it—back into the river. A short time later, she pulled the stick out. A bigger fish was on the stick. I do not understand how Girl did this. But I have thought a lot about what I saw, and I have developed a theory: she is a witch who knows magic.

Even though she is probably a witch, I still love her. My mother says that when you love someone you love them despite their flaws. For example, my father was not so good at hunting after a monster ate his arms. But my mother continued to mate with him, because she loved him.

Girl must really love Boog, because he has many flaws. He never smiles or shares his meat with other people. He is rude

to the Old Person and will not rub his feet. And he isn't very "down to earth." For example, one day he stood on the big rock and said, "Everyone should worship me, for I am a living God." Maybe he is right. I do not know how all that works. But he doesn't have to say it on the rock.

Boog's worst flaw, though, is that he disrespects Girl. It is subtle, but if you watch him closely you can tell. For example, sometimes he orders her to mate with him in front of crowds. I know this is his right (he is man, she is woman). But it is the way he orders her to mate that I do not like. He makes his voice big and snaps his fingers. It is like he is talking to a dog. If I owned Girl, I would only command her to mate with me in front of crowds if it seemed like she was in the mood to do that.

Boog has a lot going for him. He is very wealthy (three skins). He is maybe a God (unclear). He styles his hair in the new cool way (wet). He invented Art. But I still cannot understand why Girl is with him. As my father used to say, "There must be other monsters in that cave that we don't know about."

I decided to make my picture of a horse, because I knew that was a thing. It took a long time, for many reasons: (1) I could only work nights, because of my rock-throwing job; (2) it was my first time making Art; and (another reason) my mother was watching over my shoulder the whole time and making words. "You are bad at this," she said. "You should stop because you are bad." I love my mother and will always rub her feet, but sometimes I think she does not know how to help.

Finally, after many days of work, I finished my picture. I was about to add my handprint when I heard a familiar laugh.

I turned around; Boog was there.

"What a smart picture," he said, clapping his hands. "You are

really smart.”

I smiled. It was very nice, I thought, for Boog to say nice things about my picture.

“Thank you,” I said.

“I was being *sarcastic*.”

A long time passed. I did not know this word, but was afraid to admit it.

“I am glad you like my picture,” I said.

Boog cursed the Gods under his breath. “The picture is bad,” he said. “O.K.? It stinks. I do not like it.”

I sighed. I was beginning to see what he meant.

My plan had been to show my picture to Girl. But I started to worry that she would not like it. The reviews, so far, were not great.

Oog said, “It is the worst picture made yet by a human.”

Moog said, “It is proof that you are a stupid person.”

The Old Person said, “I always knew you were dumb. It is known by everyone. But this picture makes me realize you are even dumber than it was believed.”

One of the main problems, people explained, was that I had not given the horse any legs. Also, I had given it hands, forgetting that a horse has no hands.

I was proud of the picture when I painted it, but people’s words had made me ashamed. I decided it was best to destroy it, before Girl found out about it.

I grabbed some empty bladders and brought up water from the

river. I was about to splash the painting when I heard that laugh again.

“Don’t destroy it yet,” Boog said. “There is someone who wants to see it.”

He grabbed Girl by the arm and thrust her in front of my picture. It was bad situation.

“Tell Oog what you think of it,” Boog said.

Girl mumbled something, but it was too soft for me to hear.

“Tell him!” Boog ordered.

“I do not like it,” Girl said. “You are not smart. I love Boog and not you.”

I stood there in silence. Hot water came out of my eyeballs.

Boog grabbed one of my bladders, wet his hand, and slicked back his hair. Then he walked over to my pile of black rocks, picked one up, and hurled it against my picture.

“Let’s go,” he said to Girl.

She started to follow him. As she was leaving, she paused to take a rock from my pile. I was afraid she would throw it at my picture, like Boog had. But instead she held it up to her face and squinted at it.

“Let’s go!” Boog shouted.

She followed him into the woods, still holding the rock in her hand.

My mother woke me in the night.

“A monster is here to murder us,” she said.

I nodded. This is usual occurrence.

“What kind of monster? Wolf?”

She shook her head. “It is a clever monster. Listen.”

We were silent for a while; soon, I heard a strange sound. The monster was throwing rocks against the cave, one after the other.

I took my kill stick and headed outside. I saw a figure in the shadows and was about to charge it when the moon appeared suddenly between the clouds.

“Girl?”

She was standing on the edge of the forest, a black rock in her hand.

“Sorry if I scared you,” she said. “I came to say thank you.”

I was confused. “For what?”

“For clearing me a path.”

“How did you know it was me?”

“I took a rock from your pile and compared it with the ones on my mountain. They’re the same kind.”

I walked cautiously toward her.

“Are you a witch?” I asked.

She laughed.

“I’m not a witch! I just used common sense. I mean, there are thousands of black rocks piled up next to your cave.”

I was still confused. She put her hand on my arm and the hairs

on it stood up.

“Thank you for clearing all the rocks,” she said, looking into my eyes. “It is a good path. You are good at clearing the rocks.”

For the second time that night, hot water came out of my eyeballs.

“I’m sorry I said those mean things about your picture,” Girl said. “Boog made me.”

I was shocked; that had not occurred to me. Boog had been clever.

“Does that mean you like my Art?” I asked.

She looked at my horse and hesitated.

“It’s interesting,” she said. “But you know what I really like? Your rock pile.”

She walked over to it. “It’s sort of like a sculpture.”

“What is sculpture?”

“Like a picture in three dimensions.”

Much time passed in silence.

“Can I impregnate you?” I asked.

“What?”

“I know I am not smart like Boog. I do not understand Art and I am bad with the numbers. But I will work hard to clear the rocks for you. And when you have child I will clear the rocks for the child. I will clear all the rocks for you and the child until I am eaten by a monster or die of the Great Disease. I will make you many paths so you can go all the

places you want.”

I paused to catch my breath. It was the most words I had ever made at one time.

“What about Boog?” she said.

I thought about it for a moment.

“I will murder him,” I said.

She smiled and kissed me on the cheek. It was like it had been in my dreams.

We made many words that night. Girl explained that she never really loved Boog. He just seemed like her only option. No one else had ever asked to mate with her. The other six men on earth, including me, had been too afraid.

I confessed that I did not understand Boog’s last picture and she laughed.

“No one did,” she said. “Not even Boog.”

The stars were out and Girl counted them out loud until I fell asleep.

The next day, I took a large rock and struck it against Boog’s head so that his skull cracked open and he died. Afterward, Girl and I went swimming.

We have decided to have many children: one, two—maybe even a higher number.

I love Girl. Girl loves me.

It is good situation. ♦

SIMON RICH
