

Alice under marmalade skies

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Sitting under a tall linden tree, Alice was a little bored. She had just finished her book and she did not know what to do until tea time. She lay down on the grass, taking care to smooth her hair over her shoulders, because now that she was ten, she needed to take some interest in her appearance (her sister had been QUITE CLEAR on that point). However, she was careful to keep her eyes wide open so as not to fall once more into one of those endless dreams she used to have, whose telling had only brought her rude comments or, on the contrary, unseemly attention.

The sky, through the linden's branches, was blue as blue could be, so Alice was surprised to feel a small, cold drop fall on the corner of her chin, then another on the tip of her nose, and then two more in the middle of her forehead.

She sat up hastily, drew her hand across her face, and looked down at her fingertips.

"This is quite curious," she said out loud, for she had kept the habit of addressing herself when there was no one else around to talk to, "but it does seem to be marmalade."

She tasted it, hesitatingly, then exclaimed:

"Orange marmalade! Really! Really! How comical! Alas, I fear I am dreaming once more."

The thought of having to grow large and small again, and run after white rabbits, and fall down at least two thousand miles, and listen to songs almost as long, made her feel tired enough that she settled back down on the grass.

"Oh!" she cried. Beyond the linden tree, enormous clouds were drifting against the blue of the sky, and they were positively orange, shading here and there to darker crescents that looked EXACTLY like candied peel.

"I have never seen such curious clouds before," said Alice, sitting back up. She was smoothing her hair again when a rabbit wearing a funnel ran close by her and disappeared into a coppice on her right. Alice got up with a sigh and approached the coppice, under which a familiar-looking rabbit-hole opened.

"For once, I'm glad I have grown: it is quite impossible for me to fall down to the Queen's croquet-ground again," thought Alice. Not that she did not like croquet, but that particular type of croquet was very difficult to play, especially as the flamingoes and the hedgehogs were hardly obedient.

"Walruses are not very obedient either," said a voice above her. She turned round and saw a Sergeant standing near the coppice, all clad in red, with silver hook and eye fasteners on his velvet outfit that shone in the peculiar orange light, and a funny little black hat that she found most ridiculous (but she did not burst out laughing, because she had already turned ten). The Sergeant wore a short moustache and fine round glasses with smoked lenses, like Mr Carlisle who came to the house from time to time to tune the piano. ("Only he's MUCH more handsome than Mr

Carlisle,” Alice said to herself, although she was hardly accustomed to having an opinion on other people’s faces since her sister had explained to her that it was none of her business.)

“Sir... Sir, I seem to recall that walrus are above all cruel things,” she said in a very small voice. In another moment she blushed, for she had completely forgotten to introduce herself.

“Of course,” she thought, “if one considers that I am almost a young lady, HE should be the one introducing himself... but I believe that, in such a case, it would be good manners for me not to address him altogether; which would be a pity, because I want him very much to tell me why he is wearing such a little hat with such a large uniform.”

“Why cruel?” the Sergeant went on, wiggling his tiny moustache on either side of his mouth. “There are no creatures more peaceful than walrus, apart from hedgehogs of course, and I find you quite IMPERNITENT towards such animals.”

“I’m sorry I have offended you,” said Alice, not feeling too proud. (“Mayhap one of his friends is a walrus, or a family member?” she reflected. “Although this does not seem very likely, for his teeth appear to be quite the right size... the right size for a Sergeant, of course,” she hastened to think, so as not to offend the Sergeant any further. “And I wonder if the word IMPERNITENT is quite correct.”) “But I was told”, she went on, “the story of a Walrus and a Carpenter who fed on oysters and –”

“Have YOU never eaten any?”

“Well,” Alice hesitated, “I might have, but... I had not invited them for a walk first, see?”

“Not at all,” the Sergeant muttered, and, leaning over Alice, he began picking the coppice’s flowers. Alice stood up to watch, and thought they were beautiful flowers, with large petals of yellow and green, as translucent as white mica, and that grew so fast that the Sergeant had to unfold a stepladder and then stand on the platform, and finally raise himself upon tiptoe.

“They grow incredibly high, do they not?” said he in a thoughtful tone while cutting the thick green stalks with silver pincers.

“Oh... yes, quite” said Alice, who was feeling giddy from standing with her head back.

“Would you like to help me carry them to their destination?” said the Sergeant who, having climbed down off the stepladder, was binding the flowers together with the chin strap of his hat.

“Well, yes, if you want,” said Alice. Then she considered a little and added, “unless they are for the Red Queen. Or the Duchess. Or –”

“Haven’t these Ladies offered you impeccable hospitality?” the Sergeant asked in a surprised tone, turning wide, reproachful eyes on her.

Alice faltered a little, then remembered that she was now ten years old and that she had not to let herself be overawed any more:

“No, they have not. They talk loudly, they speak nonsense, they find fault with every sentence I say, and they put far too much pepper in the soup, so that it tickles my nose. And that’s when they’re not after my head.”

“Ah, well,” the Sergeant retorted, “to lose one’s head is not always an unpleasant experience. And what do you have against pepper? Indeed my name is Pepper, and no one has ever told me I tickle.”

He turned his back on her and began to stride across the meadow, with his huge bunch of flowers thrown over his right shoulder, leaving a trail of flattened grass behind him.

“I meant to ask you –” panted Alice (it was all she could do to keep up with him), “I meant to ask you why you are wearing that hat.”

“It is either of two things,” Sergeant Pepper replied with a martial air: “either I am wearing a hat, or I am not. And if I am not, then there’s no question to be asked about my hat. Otherwise: ‘Why aren’t you wearing a hat?’ Now THAT would be a pointless question. And if I AM wearing one –”

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Alice cried out, stamping her foot, which forced her to stop, but fortunately, Sergeant Pepper also stopped at the same time, otherwise they should not have been able to keep up such an interesting conversation. “I shall not bear yet again one of those arguments that bring on nothing but headaches! It would be simpler,” she proceeded in a calmer tone, “if you told me that you are embarrassed by my question, and that you have no intention of answering it. For, indeed, your hat looks surprisingly like... like tonsillitis!”

Sergeant Pepper looked at her with such a pained expression that Alice felt herself blushing to the roots of her hair.

“What are you doing here, if you can only bear reasonable conversations any more?”

Alice almost replied that she had never asked to walk under marmalade clouds with a man wearing a hat that looked like an illness, but she gave it up, being quite busy enough trying not to be left behind, for Sergeant Pepper had resumed his march through the tall grass.

Presently they came to a forest of tangerine trees, and Sergeant Pepper had the greatest difficulty manoeuvring the flowers between the trunks, setting off here and there great showers of tangerines. Soon, rocking horses were crowding around the heaps of fruit, noisily devouring them in a great gnashing of wooden teeth, and Alice kept jumping to the side so that her feet would not get bruised by the rockers that swung back and forth, squirting juice and pips all round.

“At your age,” Sergeant Pepper observed, “you should be wearing red shoes.”

“Why, that would be as ugly as your hat!” replied Alice rudely, for she found the comment oddly improper and did not feel as much inclined to be nice as previously; since, in fact, she had turned ten (sometimes even she found great pleasure in disconcerting the people she was talking to by giving them answers they did not expect).

“Red shoes,” Sergeant Pepper went on imperturbably, “and also a red petticoat.”

“Ah!” Alice exclaimed, and she pulled on her blue skirt, which for the past few days had seemed to her to be shorter than usual, but Sergeant Pepper did not let her go on:

“There was a time when it would have been a red riding hood, so you have no reason to complain. And we must do something about your bodice.”

Alice did not hear that last remark, as busy as she was wondering what this all had to do with the little red riding hood, and whether she should have an opportunity to meet the big bad wolf.

“That would be,” she thought to herself, “a probative experience.”

She did not know what the word PROBATIVE meant, but she had always been fond of nice grand words. Meanwhile, they had reached a bridge by a fountain, whose margin was lined with pies

filled with blue and pink marshmallows. A newspaper taxi was parked at the foot of the bridge: Sergeant Pepper fastened the flowers to the roof rack and opened the door. Then he beckoned to Alice, who was lingering before the pies:

“I fancy the blue marshmallows should make me grow larger, and the pink ones grow smaller, or it should be the reverse, but how can I find out? I might try a little of this one, but if I grow too fast the bridge shall collapse under my weight and I very much risk drowning. Unless, of course, I have grown large enough by that time not to lose my footing...”

Her thoughts were interrupted by Sergeant Pepper, who was gently shaking her shoulder and saying over and over:

“Are you coming? Are you coming? Or the train shall leave without us.”

“What train are you talking about?” murmured Alice, following him, for her shoulder felt oddly stiff. Though she was not surprised, for she believed all taxis inexorably led to trains. So she climbed in the paper taxi, which took them with a gentle sound of ruffled newspapers to a little blue and green railway station alongside which big steam-engines were moored amidst billows of white steam. Plasticine porters, richly adorned with looking-glass fragments, came to take the flowers away, while Sergeant Pepper and Alice sat down side by side in an empty compartment.

“I do not know whether these floating steam-engines shall go very fast,” murmured Alice. But Sergeant Pepper reassured her:

“It is the landscape that moves, you know. All the steam-engines have to do is to remain alongside the platform, and even a steam-engine is smart enough to do that.”

He for one looked perfectly reassured, and he took off his little hat, which he set on his lap.

Alice, in order not to laugh inopportunistically (for the little hat looked more and more like untreated bronchitis), looked out the window: the landscape was indeed passing by, alternating between gardens filled with strawberry plants forever and others in which octopuses grew aplenty. A flight of honey pies came in at the window, crossed the compartment, and flew back out the corridor window without a single pie alighting, to Alice’s great regret.

“I’m glad I didn’t eat any pink or blue marshmallow, for surely I should not have been able to get on the train, I should have been too big to fit in or too little to reach the steps,” mumbled Alice.

“One is always either too big, or too little,” declared Sergeant Pepper in a melancholy voice.

Alice turned round to face him and saw, much to her astonishment, that big bright tears were rolling down his pink cheeks before disappearing into his little moustache.

“You, for instance,” Sergeant Pepper began again after blowing his nose, “are now too big to come here.”

“Why?” asked Alice carelessly.

“After all,” she said to herself in reassurance, “now that I am ten, I have decided that it is pointless to force myself to ask only sensible questions, when so many people do not bother to.”

“Oh, this is a place that doesn’t agree with grown persons,” said Sergeant Pepper. “Here, consider Miss Rigby...”

“Who’s Miss Rigby?”, Alice asked, yawning discreetly, for she felt tired and should have gladly taken a nap on the seat, had it not been very rude to Sergeant Pepper and had the seat not been so terribly uncomfortable, as it was made of varnished black wood with silver hinges. “Is it this... Miss Rigby we’re meeting?”

“Who is she? Alas, she is no more,” said Sergeant Pepper in a funereal voice. “And as to meet her, I do believe we are sitting on her.”

Alice started to her feet and saw that indeed the seat on which she and Sergeant Pepper had taken place looked EXACTLY like a coffin.

She remained speechless for a moment, then cried out:

“But... this is awful! I shall not remain here a moment longer!”

And she hurried out into the corridor, which was yellow and terribly damp. The windows were perfectly round and carefully shut. Pressing her face against one, Alice saw a fish wearing a curly wig on its head swim by. Sergeant Pepper came and rested his face next to hers:

“We’re not in the train any more, are we?” sighed Alice.

“Of course we are. Only the landscape is a submarine one,” Sergeant Pepper replied shortly. “Please try to attend.”

“Oh, my head hurts...” moaned Alice.

“You are decidedly far too big,” grumbled Sergeant Pepper.

“But what danger is there for a big girl here, apart from a headache?”, asked Alice rebelliously, for she found those constant remarks about her size hard to endure, especially since it seemed to her INCREDIBLY stable since the beginning of her dream, and therefore ABSOLUTELY beyond reproach.

“I was talking about your age,” Sergeant Pepper replied in what Alice thought was an INSUFFERABLY peremptory manner. “Do you want to know what befalls grown-ups who venture into Alice’s world? Oh, examples abound. Here, do you know that story my friend Lewis Padgett told me? Do you remember the Jabberwocky poem? That same poem you read backwards, through the looking-glass. Well, rather than just a poem, it is a recipe. To return to the sea.

“I don’t see the point in that,” mumbled Alice, while a bed of mussels mockingly winked their eyes at her.

“Humans never return to the sea, do they? They live and die wherever they spawn. Because they haven’t read the Jabberwocky, which alone holds the key to the way to the sea. Of course, only children can understand it.”

“So how can that harm grown-ups?”

“It harms them in that one day their children read the Jabberwocky and return to the sea, without them. Picture a teddy bear left behind on a bed, and a father sitting at the end of the bed, crying because both his children have just returned to the sea, and have left him alone.”

“Oh, that is a dreadful thing, surely,” whispered Alice, wiping the condensation which her breath had left on the porthole’s freezing glass.

“The Jabberwocky’s song is very, VERY dangerous. Especially in French.”

“And why in French?”, grumbled Alice, who could not differentiate between ‘*j’ai*’ and ‘*je hais*’.

“Because it was translated by Boris Vian, and when a poet translates a poet, you get a poem squared, don’t you?”

“Oh?”

“It is very DANGEROUS. Do not forget that! Nothing is easier to recognise, the poem begins with ‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves’...”

“When I tell my sister this part,” moaned Alice inwardly, “I never shall be able to recall that poem and she shall once more make fun of me. Could it be a bad habit of mine always to relate my dreams to a hard of hearing cat and a sister who laughs at them and then goes on to run them down from the rooftops?”

“You must not, when you are married, let your children read it,” Sergeant Pepper insisted. “And then there’s that story my friend Gahan Wilson wrote, in which we once more come across the Walrus and the Carpenter drinking oysters.”

“Oh, those two, I hate them!” exclaimed Alice. “No one is more deceitful, or more cruel! To invite those poor oysters for a walk, to have them slice the very bread on which they were to be crucified...”

“Well, according to my friend, these oysters were quite human, and the bodies that were found on the beach were very pale.”

“Were they sick?”, inquired Alice.

“I don’t think so, no,” mumbled Sergeant Pepper, sucking on the corner of his moustache, “they were drunk, I believe. And there’s also that song: ‘All the young girls like Alice’.”

“Why should they all like me?” asked Alice worriedly. “I get along well with Mabel and with Ada, but I detest Amy... And anyway, I prefer cats. And there is no such thing as a human oyster.”

Sergeant Pepper gave her a sidelong glance:

“It is not a very respectable song, and it doesn’t end very well. By the way, I was also told a story _”

“I do not want to hear any more,” said Alice sulkily, turning her back on Sergeant Pepper. “Is it my fault that Reverend Dodgson wrote silly stories pretending they were my dreams?”

“Want it or not, a thousand fantasies have added to yours, and they form like... like a gigantic ball of worsted!” said Sergeant Pepper enthusiastically. “Or a spider’s web, in which many innocent people got entangled,” he finished sombrely.

“That is not my affair!” cried Alice who, now that she was ten years old, had decided she would not feel guilty for all the foolish things that were attributed to her any more. “Let everyone look where they’re going, after all! And I hate knitting, and I’m afraid of spiders.”

She purposefully strode down the damp yellow corridor, pushed open the door leading to the next carriage. But rather than in a carriage, she found herself in the engine-driver’s cabin or an

observatory, with thick round windows that plunged into the dark blue of the sea and that passing fluorescent squids caressed with long waxy tentacles.

“So, how are you feeling, my dear?” said a man sitting in front of an instrument panel covered with little blinking lights and turning a huge wheel of polished wood from time to time.

“I feel strangely oppressed,” said Alice in an uncertain voice. In another moment she felt comforted, for she had just recognised her cousin William’s voice.

“Look!” said he. “We’re at the abbey.”

The submarine was moving slowly through a field of multicoloured seaweed, chasing herds of seahorses out of its way, and, far ahead, Alice saw the silhouette of a long abbey in ruins come into view, white and dismal in the twilight.

“Abbey road,” murmured William, pulling several short levers. “And look! Sergeant Pepper’s band! There they are, all four of them...”

Alice saw, on the road in front of them, a gaily coloured brass band marching by, led by four minstrels in sparkling uniforms, and among them was Sergeant Pepper, who played the sousaphone with a big smile: he had taken off his glasses and, really, his eyes twinkled like two kaleidoscopes. Alice thought she recognised all the musicians, the Mouse with the long tail and the Lory, the Duchess and the Dodo, the Baby and the Snark, the White Queen sitting cross-legged on Humpty Dumpty’s head and hitting her own head with a silver ladle...

“...And this is the last time,” finished William, heaving a deep, steaming sigh in the freezing air.

“This is however the first time I’ve had such a sad dream,” said Alice with a lump in her throat. “I keep being told that I’ve got no business here, and certainly I should be better off elsewhere.”

“Really?” William asked her, turning a big Cheshire Cat smile on her.

“Well,” mumbled Alice, blushing, “well, I think so, yes. Or maybe not. That is, apparently I’ve got no business in my own dreams any more. One wonders how I got into this one in the first place,” she finished in a sulky tone, wrapping a strand of hair around her finger.

“That’s because of all the mushrooms, you see...”

“What mushrooms?”

“All these mushrooms. Really, cousin, you oughtn’t to...”

William got up and advanced towards her, while the yellow submarine seemed to sink into ever darker waters, the air kept getting colder, and the sounds of the brass band grew fainter.

“...You oughtn’t to sleep amid these mushrooms.”

Alice opened her eyes and saw William’s smile right above her. She turned her head and found herself nose to cap with a little rounded mushroom that exhaled a curious acid smell.

She sat up, shivering; William put an arm around her shoulders:

“They’re toxic, cousin, and you’ve caught cold.”

“I’ve had another dream. If you want, I can tell you all about it. But only if you don’t mention it to ANYONE...”

While she talked, Alice discreetly pulled on her skirt, which really had a tendency to shorten, these days.

“...And at any rate not to my hag of a sister, nor to that tiresome Mr Dodgson.”

THE END