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Smoke and Mirrors

SHORT FICTIONS AND ILLUSIONS

NEIL GAIMAN

Author of American Gods and the National Bestseller Neverwhere

SMOKE AND MIRRORS

Short Fictions and
Illusions

A NOVEL

NEIL GAIMAN

 HarperCollins e-books



For Ellen Datlow and Steve Jones



But where there's a monster there's a miracle.

— OGDEN NASH, *DRAGONS ARE TOO SELDOM*

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READING THE ENTRAILS:
A RONDEL



“I mean,” she said, “that one can’t help growing older.”

“*One* can’t perhaps,” said Humpty Dumpty, “but *two* can. With proper assistance, you might have left off at seven.”

— LEWIS CARROLL, *THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS*

They’ll call it chance, or luck, or call it Fate—

The cards and stars that tumble as they will.

Tomorrow manifests and brings the bill

For every kiss and kill, the small and great.

You want to know the future, love? Then wait:

I’ll answer your impatient questions. Still—

They’ll call it chance, or luck, or call it Fate,

The cards and stars that tumble as they will.

I’ll come to you tonight, dear, when it’s late,

You will not see me; you may feel a chill.

I'll wait until you sleep, then take my fill,

And that will be your future on a plate.

They'll call it chance, or luck, or call it Fate.



AN INTRODUCTION



Writing is flying in dreams.

When you remember. When you can. When it works.

It's that easy.

— AUTHOR'S NOTEBOOK, FEBRUARY 1992

They do it with mirrors. It's a cliché, of course, but it's also true. Magicians have been using mirrors usually set at a forty-five-degree angle, ever since the Victorians began to manufacture reliable, clear mirrors in quantity, well over a hundred years ago. John Nevil Maskelyne began it, in 1862, with a wardrobe that, thanks to a cunningly placed mirror, concealed more than it revealed.

Mirrors are wonderful things. They appear to tell the truth, to reflect life back out at us; but set a mirror correctly and it will lie so convincingly you'll believe that something has vanished into thin air, that a box filled with doves and flags and spiders is actually empty, that people hidden in the wings or the pit are floating ghosts upon the stage. Angle it right and a mirror becomes a magic casement; it can show you anything you can imagine and maybe a few things you can't.

(The smoke blurs the edges of things.)

Stories are, in one way or another, mirrors. We use them to explain to ourselves how the world works or how it doesn't work. Like mirrors, stories prepare us for the day to come. They distract us from the things in the darkness.

Fantasy—and all fiction is fantasy of one kind or another—is a mirror. A distorting mirror, to be sure, and a concealing mirror, set at forty-five degrees to reality, but it's a mirror nonetheless, which we can use to tell ourselves things we might not otherwise see. (Fairy tales, as G. K. Chesterton once said)

are more than true. Not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be defeated.)

Winter started today. The sky turned gray and the snow began to fall and it did not stop falling until well after dark. I sat in the darkness and watched the snow falling, and the flakes glistened and glimmered as they spun into the light and out again, and I wondered about where stories came from.

This is the kind of thing that you wonder about when you make things up for a living. I remain unconvinced that it is the kind of activity that is a fit occupation for an adult, but it's too late now: I seem to have a career that I enjoy which doesn't involve getting up too early in the morning. (When I was a child, adults would tell me not to make things up, warning me of what would happen if I did. As far as I can tell so far it seems to involve lots of foreign travel and not having to get up too early in the morning.) Most of the stories in this book were written to entertain the various editors who had asked me for tales for specific anthologies ("It's for an anthology of stories about the Holy Grail," ". . . about sex," ". . . of fairy stories retold for adults," ". . . about sex and horror," ". . . of revenge stories," ". . . about superstition," ". . . about more sex"). A few of them were written to amuse myself or, more precisely, to get an idea or an image out of my head and pinned safely down on paper; which is as good a reason for writing as I know: releasing demons, letting them fly. Some of the stories began in idleness: fancies and curiosities that got out of hand.

I once made up a story as a wedding present for some friends. It was about a couple who were given a story as a wedding present. It was not a reassuring story. Having made up the story, I decided that they'd probably prefer a toaster, so I got them a toaster, and to this day have not written the story down. It sits in the back of my head to this day, waiting for someone to get married who would appreciate it.

It occurs to me now (writing this introduction in blue-black fountain pen ink in a black-bound notebook, in case you were wondering) that, although one way or another most of the stories in this book are about love in some form or another, there aren't enough happy stories, stories of properly requited love to balance out all the other kinds you'll find in this book; and indeed, that there are people who don't read introductions. For that matter, some of you out there may be having weddings one day, after all. So for all of you who *do* read introductions, here is the story I did not write. (And if I don't like the story once it's written, I can always cross out this paragraph, and you'll never know that I stopped writing the introduction to start writing a story instead.)

THE WEDDING PRESENT

After all the joys and the headaches of the wedding, after the madness and the magic of it all (not to mention the embarrassment of Belinda's father's after-dinner speech, complete with family slide show), after the honeymoon was literally (although not yet metaphorically) over and before their new suitcases had a chance to fade in the English autumn, Belinda and Gordon got down to the business of unwrapping the wedding presents and writing their thank you letters—thank yous enough for every towel and every toaster, for the juicer and the breadmaker, for the cutlery and the crockery and the

teasmade and the curtains.

“Right,” said Gordon. “That’s the large objects thank-you’d. What’ve we got left?”

“Things in envelopes,” said Belinda. “Checks, I hope.”

There were several checks, a number of gift tokens, and even a £10 book token from Gordon’s Aunt Marie, who was poor as a church mouse, Gordon told Belinda, but a dear, and who had sent him a book token every birthday as long as he could remember. And then, at the very bottom of the pile, there was a large brown businesslike envelope.

“What is it?” asked Belinda.

Gordon opened the flap and pulled out a sheet of paper the color of two-day-old cream, ragged at top and bottom, with typing on one side. The words had been typed with a manual typewriter, something Gordon had not seen in some years. He read the page slowly.

“What is it?” asked Belinda. “Who’s it from?”

“I don’t know,” said Gordon. “Someone who still owns a typewriter. It’s not signed.”

“Is it a letter?”

“Not exactly,” he said, and he scratched the side of his nose and read it again.

“Well,” she said in an exasperated voice (but she was not really exasperated; she was happy. She would wake in the morning and check to see if she were still as happy as she had been when she went to sleep the night before, or when Gordon had woken her in the night by brushing up against her, or when she had woken him. And she was). “Well, what is it?”

“It appears to be a description of our wedding,” he said. “It’s very nicely written. Here,” and he passed it to her.

She looked it over.

It was a crisp day in early October when Gordon Robert Johnson and Belinda Karen Abingdon swore that they would love each other, would support and honor each other as long as they both should live. The bride was radiant and lovely, the groom was nervous, but obviously proud and just as obviously pleased.

That was how it began. It went on to describe the service and the reception clearly, simply, and amusingly.

“How sweet,” she said. “What does it say on the envelope?”

“ ‘Gordon and Belinda’s Wedding,’ ” he read.

“No name? Nothing to indicate who sent it?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Well, it’s very sweet, and it’s very thoughtful,” she said. “Whoever it’s from.”

She looked inside the envelope to see if there was something else inside that they had overlooked, a note from whichever one of her friends (or his, or theirs) had written it, but there wasn’t, so, vaguely relieved that there was one less thank you note to write, she placed the cream sheet of paper back in the envelope, which she placed in a box file, along with a copy of the wedding banquet menu, and the invitations, and the contact sheets for the wedding photographs, and one white rose from the bridal bouquet.

Gordon was an architect, and Belinda was a vet. For each of them what they did was a vocation, not a job. They were in their early twenties. Neither of them had been married before, nor even seriously involved with anyone. They met when Gordon brought his thirteen-year-old golden retriever, Goldie, gray-muzzled and half-paralyzed, to Belinda’s surgery to be put down. He had had the dog since he was a boy and insisted on being with her at the end. Belinda held his hand as he cried, and then, suddenly and unprofessionally, she hugged him, tightly, as if she could squeeze away the pain and the loss and the grief. One of them asked the other if they could meet that evening in the local pub for a drink, and afterward neither of them was sure which of them had proposed it.

The most important thing to know about the first two years of their marriage was this: they were pretty happy. From time to time they would squabble, and every once in a while they would have a blazing row about nothing very much that would end in tearful reconciliations, and they would make love and kiss away the other’s tears and whisper heartfelt apologies into each other’s ears. At the end of the second year, six months after she came off the pill, Brenda found herself pregnant.

Gordon bought her a bracelet studded with tiny rubies, and he turned the spare bedroom into a nursery hanging the wallpaper himself. The wallpaper was covered with nursery rhyme characters, with Little Bo Peep, and Humpty Dumpty, and the Dish Running Away with the Spoon, over and over and over again.

Belinda came home from the hospital, with little Melanie in her carry-cot, and Belinda’s mother came to stay with them for a week, sleeping on the sofa in the lounge.

It was on the third day that Belinda pulled out the box file to show her wedding souvenirs to her mother and to reminisce. Already their wedding seemed like such a long time ago. They smiled at the dried brown thing that had once been a white rose, and clucked over the menu and the invitation. At the bottom of the box was a large brown envelope.

“‘Gordon and Belinda’s Marriage,’ ” read Belinda’s mother.

“It’s a description of our wedding,” said Belinda. “It’s very sweet. It even has a bit in it about Daddy slide show.”

Belinda opened the envelope and pulled out the sheet of cream paper. She read what was typed upon the paper, and made a face. Then she put it away without saying anything.

“Can’t I see it, dear?” asked her mother.

“I think it’s Gordon playing a joke,” said Belinda. “Not in good taste, either.”

Belinda was sitting up in bed that night, breastfeeding Melanie, when she said to Gordon, who was staring at his wife and new daughter with a foolish smile upon his face, “Darling, why did you write those things?”

“What things?”

“In the letter. That wedding thing. You know.”

“I don’t know.”

“It wasn’t funny.”

He sighed. “What are you talking about?”

Belinda pointed to the box file, which she had brought upstairs and placed upon her dressing table. Gordon opened it and took out the envelope. “Did it always say that on the envelope?” he asked. “I thought it said something about our wedding.” Then he took out and read the single sheet of ragged-edged paper, and his forehead creased. “I didn’t write this.” He turned the paper over, staring at the blank side as if expecting to see something else written there.

“You didn’t write it?” she asked. “Really you didn’t?” Gordon shook his head. Belinda wiped a dribble of milk from the baby’s chin. “I believe you,” she said. “I thought you wrote it, but you didn’t.”

“No.”

“Let me see that again,” she said. He passed the paper to her. “This is so weird. I mean, it’s not funny and it’s not even true.”

Typed upon the paper was a brief description of the previous two years for Gordon and Belinda. It had not been a good two years, according to the typed sheet. Six months after they were married, Belinda had been bitten in the cheek by a Pekingese, so badly that the cheek needed to be stitched back together. It had left a nasty scar. Worse than that, nerves had been damaged, and she had begun to drink, perhaps to numb the pain. She suspected that Gordon was revolted by her face, while the new baby, it said, was a desperate attempt to glue the couple together.

“Why would they say this?” she asked.

“They?”

“Whoever wrote this horrid thing.” She ran a finger across her cheek: it was unblemished and unmarked. She was a very beautiful young woman, although she looked tired and fragile now.

“How do you know it’s a ‘they’?”

“I don’t know,” she said, transferring the baby to her left breast. “It seems a sort of ‘they’-ish thing to do. To write that and to swap it for the old one and to wait until one of us read it . . . Come on, little Melanie, there you go, that’s such a fine girl . . .”

“Shall I throw it away?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I think . . . ” She stroked the baby’s forehead. “Hold on to it,” she said. “We might need it for evidence. I wonder if it was something Al organized.” Al was Gordon’s youngest brother.

Gordon put the paper back into the envelope, and he put the envelope back into the box file, which was pushed under the bed and, more or less, forgotten.

Neither of them got much sleep for the next few months, what with the nightly feeds and the continuous crying, for Melanie was a colicky baby. The box file stayed under the bed. And then Gordon was offered a job in Preston, several hundred miles north, and since Belinda was on leave from her job and had no immediate plans to go back to work, she found the idea rather attractive. So they moved.

They found a terraced house on a cobbled street, high and old and deep. Belinda filled in from time to time at a local vet’s, seeing small animals and housepets. When Melanie was eighteen months old, Belinda gave birth to a son, whom they called Kevin after Gordon’s late grandfather.

Gordon was made a full partner in the firm of architects. When Kevin began to go to kindergarten, Belinda went back to work.

The box file was never lost. It was in one of the spare rooms at the top of the house, beneath a teetering pile of copies of *The Architect’s Journal* and *Architectural Review*. Belinda thought about the box file, and what it contained, from time to time, and, one night when Gordon was in Scotland overnight consulting on the remodeling of an ancestral home, she did more than think.

Both of the children were asleep. Belinda went up the stairs into the undecorated part of the house. She moved the magazines and opened the box, which (where it had not been covered by magazines) was thick with two years of undisturbed dust. The envelope still said *Gordon and Belinda’s Marriage* on it, and Belinda honestly did not know if it had ever said anything else.

She took out the paper from the envelope, and she read it. And then she put it away, and sat there, at the top of the house, feeling shaken and sick.

According to the neatly typed message, Kevin, her second child, had not been born; the baby had been miscarried at five months. Since then Belinda had been suffering from frequent attacks of bleak, black depression. Gordon was home rarely, it said, because he was conducting a rather miserable affair with the senior partner in his company, a striking but nervous woman ten years his senior. Belinda was drinking more, and affecting high collars and scarves to hide the spiderweb scar upon her cheek. She and Gordon spoke little, except to argue the small and petty arguments of those who fear the big arguments, knowing that the only things that were left to be said were too huge to be said without destroying both their lives.

Belinda said nothing about the latest version of *Gordon and Belinda’s Marriage* to Gordon. However, he read it himself, or something quite like it, several months later, when Belinda’s mother fell ill, and Belinda went south for a week to help look after her.

On the sheet of paper that Gordon took out of the envelope was a portrait of a marriage similar to the

one that Belinda had read, although, at present, his affair with his boss had ended badly, and his job was now in peril.

Gordon rather liked his boss, but could not imagine himself ever becoming romantically involved with her. He was enjoying his job, although he wanted something that would challenge him more than it did.

Belinda's mother improved, and Belinda came home again within the week. Her husband and children were relieved and delighted to see her.

It was Christmas Eve before Gordon spoke to Belinda about the envelope.

"You've looked at it too, haven't you?" They had crept into the children's bedrooms earlier that evening and filled the hanging Christmas stockings. Gordon had felt euphoric as he had walked through the house, as he stood beside his children's beds, but it was a euphoria tinged with a profound sorrow: the knowledge that such moments of complete happiness could not last; that one could not stop Time.

Belinda knew what he was talking about. "Yes," she said, "I've read it."

"What do you think?"

"Well," she said. "I don't think it's a joke anymore. Not even a sick joke."

"Mm," he said. "Then what is it?"

They sat in the living room at the front of the house with the lights dimmed, and the log burning on the bed of coals cast flickering orange and yellow light about the room.

"I think it really is a wedding present," she told him. "It's the marriage that we aren't having. The bad things are happening there, on the page, not here, in our lives. Instead of living it, we are reading it, knowing it could have gone that way and also that it never did."

"You're saying it's magic, then?" He would not have said it aloud, but it was Christmas Eve, and the lights were down.

"I don't believe in magic," she said, flatly. "It's a wedding present. And I think we should make sure it's kept safe."

On Boxing Day she moved the envelope from the box file to her jewelry drawer, which she kept locked, where it lay flat beneath her necklaces and rings, her bracelets and her brooches.

Spring became summer. Winter became spring.

Gordon was exhausted. By day he worked for clients, designing, and liaising with builders and contractors; by night he would sit up late, working for himself, designing museums and galleries and public buildings for competitions. Sometimes his designs received honorable mentions, and were reproduced in architectural journals.

Belinda was doing more large animal work, which she enjoyed, visiting farmers and inspecting and treating horses, sheep, and cows. Sometimes she would bring the children with her on her rounds.

Her mobile phone rang when she was in a paddock trying to examine a pregnant goat who had, it turned out, no desire to be caught, let alone examined. She retired from the battle, leaving the goat glaring at her from across the field, and thumbed the phone open. “Yes?”

“Guess what?”

“Hello darling. Um. You’ve won the lottery?”

“Nope. Close, though. My design for the British Heritage Museum has made the short list. I’m up against some pretty stiff contenders, though. But I’m on the short list.”

“That’s wonderful!”

“I’ve spoken to Mrs. Fulbright and she’s going to have Sonja baby-sit for us tonight. We’re celebrating.”

“Terrific. Love you,” she said. “Now got to get back to the goat.”

They drank too much champagne over a fine celebratory meal. That night in their bedroom as Belinda removed her earrings, she said, “Shall we see what the wedding present says?”

He looked at her gravely from the bed. He was only wearing his socks. “No, I don’t think so. It’s a special night. Why spoil it?”

She placed her earrings in her jewelry drawer, and locked it. Then she removed her stockings. “I suppose you’re right. I can imagine what it says, anyway. I’m drunk and depressed and you’re a miserable loser. And meanwhile we’re . . . well, actually I *am* a bit tiddly, but that’s not what I mean. It just sits there at the bottom of the drawer, like the portrait in the attic in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.”

“ ‘And it was only by his rings that they knew him.’ Yes. I remember. We read it in school.”

“That’s really what I’m scared of,” she said, pulling on a cotton nightdress. “That the thing on that paper is the real portrait of our marriage at present, and what we’ve got now is just a pretty picture. That it’s real, and we’re not. I mean”—she was speaking intently now, with the gravity of the slightly drunk—“don’t you ever think that it’s too good to be true?”

He nodded. “Sometimes. Tonight, certainly.”

She shivered. “Maybe really I *am* a drunk with a dog bite on my cheek, and you fuck anything that moves and Kevin was never born and—and all that other horrible stuff.”

He stood up, walked over to her, put his arms around her.

“But it isn’t true,” he pointed out. “This is real. You’re real. I’m real. That wedding thing is just a story. It’s just words.” And he kissed her, and held her tightly, and little more was said that night.

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