

Automatic Typewriter

by Brianne Baxtali

"But just *look* at it!" Rowan's voice punched the late summer night like the rapid Morse code of fireflies, just as frantic as for a mate to fall against -- bug for bug; sound to cochlea. "Did you notice this part right here? Right here. See it?"

"Yeah, I've already -- "

"No, you haven't because I'm just noticing it now. Seriously, look at this. Where the Inferior Vena Cava feeds into the right atrium -- there's actually a fair amount of detail there. And is that -- Oh, God! It is! A tiny little Tricuspid Valve! I can't believe it!"

She blinked at him expectantly.

"So, anyway, it was four hours of pain, but I didn't even flinch. Even the part where the paper was going along where my humeral head fits into the glenoid fossa -- uh, that's a ball and socket joint. There's lots of nerve -- Oh! It's like the paper is actually turning off of my shoulder. Every time I move my arm -- Watch this! That's so -- "

"It's just a fucking tattoo," Nigel snapped. "It's a stupid typewriter. You'll have the rest of your life to squeal about it. Like swine."

He knew how she instinctively shrank when he used that phrase. It burned her shoulders like acid, and she could only react with a quiet crumpling sound as her spine turned to elastic and the air escaped her lungs.

"Did you write out the rent check?" he demanded, tapping the calendar on the wall for effect.

"No. But I was sure that it wasn't due until next week."

"We both know how you are. You'll get distracted by some stupid thing, and you'll forget, then where where we be? A little piggy mind like that? You're lucky I'm around to take care of you."

For a moment, Rowan blazed so hot she wondered if she could be successfully detonated in the Nevada desert. She reminded herself that this was love, or at least the closest she had ever come to it.

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"I'm retiring for the night," he concluded, eyeing her with disdain from the kitchen. "You may join me if you've decided to act like a grown-up. There is no room in the bed for children. " he smiled coldly, a counter to the nuclear chain-reaction replicating through her neurons. " Or for swine." He closed the door behind him.

In the past, Rowan's rebound would have been immediate: A scream so deep it seemed to rend the air around her. It wasn't in her nature to be violent, only to be deeply wounded and to howl with pain. And when the residue of that anguish couldn't be forced out through her larynx, it was quietly moved to the blank pages of a notebook.

Unfortunately, Nigel was unpredictable in his coolness. In all his calculation, he regarded Rowan as being emotional and unpredictable, and for this she was worthy of his scorn. He didn't seem to understand that when he drank he became unstable, or more accurately, he didn't remember. Or simply, didn't want to believe -- it was at odds with the character he had built for himself.

But Rowan could recall all the bloody noses, the times the taste of iron filled her mouth as she spat it upon the wall, both arms being pinned behind her and face forced forward into the floor. The plutonium split in her throat, and she would only scream, but never fight back: It would be so much worse since it would interrupt his tidy conception of her. It was true that Rowan was a variable, but the irony was that she was a predictable variable.

It was that word that fired the proton accelerator, though, and all that it implied -- it hurt worse than when he hit her so hard her teeth chattered. Swine. That Rowan was merely an animal, kept in a corner solely for his use, tamed, fed, then someday slaughtered. It wasn't far off from reality: Rowan worked as a cardiac nurse and was solely responsible for rent, groceries, and Nigel's alcoholism. Sometimes, she was allowed to sleep in her own bedroom, but she was often relegated to the couch.

As far back as Rowan could remember, she had wanted to be a writer. But not just any writer -- the type who set the whole world on fire with her worlds; a figure who left a striation on literary history, a

clear mark of before and after. But Nigel was a genius, and there was no way anybody could ever be as smart as he was. True or not, Rowan believed him for convenience. She accepted that he was the better writer and would only construct her own stories when he sank into the sleep of tongueless witches.

Sighing deeply, Rowan lowered herself onto the couch. There was no screaming any more. It didn't help anything. At this point, the only assistance it would be is if she would never have to stop.

At a loss for anything better to do, Rowan wiped the tears away with the back of her hand, gritted her teeth, and prodded herself into something resembling sleep.

Rowan's arm burned and throbbed like the center of a neutron star as it went critical for minutes turned inside-out like hours. Standing in a wall, then huddled underneath the couch, she danced around the rim of consciousness, ripping at the seams of her brain to allow her wakefulness. Looking down at her chest, Rowan was simultaneously horrified and delighted to discover that it contained a dizzying number of nebulae. Like darkness, *she was the universe*.

As the harsh sound of the alarm buzzed, she clawed herself out of sleep. Her arm felt like the worst sunburn of her life. A few seconds of hazy recollection reminded her why: A new tattoo of a typewriter with a heart on the paper.

Except, to her shock, there wasn't a heart on the paper. Instead, it was the outline of a female, filled in with the universe. Rowan was outraged. She had planned that tattoo since she was a teenager and finally worked up the courage to get it permanently inked into her flesh, and it was wrong. How could she have overlooked this?

Angrily, Rowan began to get ready for work. She would have words with the tattoo artist on her lunch break, doubting that anything could be done. How could he have messed up so badly? How could she have been so absentminded?

As she searched for her keys, a neat stack of papers penetrated Rowan's field of vision. At first, she ignored it. Nigel got downright

wrathful if he even suspected that she brushed past his things. But there was something curious about the parchment, something antique and nearly alien. Slowly and quietly, Rowan crept to the paper, almost as if it was a breathing creature, and peered downward.

Snaking across its snowy surface were tidy, ink-black worms in perfect meters, segmented by spaces in Courier font. Rowan narrowed her eyes and blinked several times in disbelief.

"But there's no typewriter anywhere in this apartment," she said aloud.

Until she had met Nigel, Rowan had been told for the entirety of her life that she was a clever girl. Puzzles and riddles knelt in the dirt before her, waiting for her buzzing, labyrinthine brain to untangle them. There was no logical problem Rowan could not solve, and that was often a source of pride.

But this answer was ridiculous.

Rowan bent down to retrieve the top page. Hands shaking, she clutched it at its sides; its margins yielded into a crumple, and the words exploded past her retinas. At first, she could not place them. Their style, their placement -- it was too familiar. She had read something like this before, but she was not familiar with the story, although there was a tugging feeling at the corners of her brain that she knew how it should end.

"I wrote this." There was no mistaking her own hand. But she had no memory of putting this idea to paper, of crafting this, of birthing it, of smiling through tears at its completion when it was finally named.

A chill spread down her spine as she dropped the paper. Rowan slowly turned to examine her tattoo.

A story in which a girl becomes the universe.

The answer was no less ridiculous.

In the three days that followed, the picture being ejected from the typewriter had changed to (in no particular order): A tentacled monster knitting at the bottom of the ocean; A fallen angel with a

broken wing; and a legion of sterilized zombies erupting from a pharmaceutical laboratory. The stories produced involved conjoined twins in Victorian-era Ireland where the survivor had got the heart and was sent to live in the Aran Isles, became an accomplished knitter, and her heartless monster twin eventually claimed her husband through trickery and a very nice sweater; An angel cast from heaven ironically got drunk and fell from a roof, so he presented to an outpatient imaging clinic for x-rays; and a brilliant but socially inept young female scientist created an army of zombies at the behest of the FDA, more or less. As with the first story, Rowan couldn't remember writing any of them. They had simply been waiting patiently for her to wake up.

Her sense of terror could no longer be ignored. Rowan took the day off work and ventured downtown, still hoping that her tattoo had been drawn incorrectly. If it could be fixed, the confusion of the past half-week would only be that.

Arriving at the street where the tattoo parlour was located, Rowan paced the length of the sidewalk for twenty minutes before pulling the business card from her purse and checking the address several times to verify that her memory could be trusted; yes, it could. Unfortunately, it was the storefronts that could not: Where the tattoo parlour was supposed to be was now some odd place that was the Puka Shell Emporium (*For All Your Puka Shell Needs!*). Shaking her head, Rowan entered; they could have information about where the previous owners had gone.

"Good morning, Rowan. How may I help you today?" the girl behind the counter greeted her. Her voice had a vicious quality in the brisk morning, like a ball of honey stuck in the throat. Rowan shivered.

"How did you know my name?"

"I don't know. We've never met," she winked. Rowan studied her closely. Her features were placed squarely with a porcelain structure; her amber eyes were fixed on her and glowing with mischief. Rowan blushed and suddenly felt embarrassed.

"Uh, do I know you?"

“Not enough to be social, no,” she replied.

Rowan read the tag pinned to her shirt. The name shifted with the light: Luminista, Magda, Molly Jo, Bird.

“Do you know anything about the tattoo parlour that used to be here?”

She shrugged. “As far as I know, all we've ever had here are puka shells.”

Rowan narrowed her eyes. “That's not true. Three days ago, I -- “ she glanced at the nametag again and stopped. The girl behind the counter looked at her expectantly.

“...It's a clue, isn't it?”

“Might be.”

“No,” Rowan shook her head. “The obvious answer is a stupid one. There's no way -- “

“Fine,” she smiled icily. “But he's waiting for you. Once you figure it out, he'll see you in the back.”

She stumbled on the words for a solid thirty seconds before ultimately snatching a cheap necklace off a shelf and thrusting it at the girl. “Here. This,” she snarled, pointing. “Just without the shell part.”

“All that matters,” Rowan explained, brushing aside his hand. “Is that you gave me the wrong tattoo. I don't understand what you're doing here with this pooka nonsense. Really, I don't care. I just want the correct thing that'll be on my arm for the rest of my life. That's it. Fix it.”

“But, Rowan Flannery! Why do you think it was so important for your grandparents to warn you about us? Why do you think they'd never allow you out to play without those special stones in your pocket?”

A bleak dread spread through her capillaries, rooting her in place; her blood turned to mercury, and she was unable to move. “...Wait, what?” The inquiry sounded like mud.

“Tell me something, Rowan Flannery: Why do Irish poets have such short lives? Surely, your grandparents told you. In fact, I was

by the window one night as they tucked you into bed with a glass of warm milk and the stories they had brought with them all the way from County Cork. So, I know they *warned* you. I was right there. I heard them. You know this. Go ahead and answer." His voice was gentle and reassuring. There was no trace of malice or anger.

"This has to be a joke, or something."

"Which part?"

"Well, all of it."

"I suppose parts of it could be, but not all of it, no."

"But this doesn't make any sense. The stuff my grandparents told me wasn't *real*."

"Rowan Flannery, it was good enough for them to believe it. Why isn't it good enough for you?"

"*Because it's not real!*" Rowan shouted, annoyed. "There's nothing *real* about it! That's why it's not *good enough!* Maybe two hundred years ago people were happy with fairies being the explanation as to why healthy people suddenly started wasting away and dying, or why babies turned blue and stopped breathing. But I'll take the less romantic tuberculosis and congenital heart defect explanations because they make sense. They can be proven. They're *real*."

"And that's why your stories have always carried so much weight, Rowan Flannery: What most people forget whenever they're writing science fiction is the science part. I've been watching you for a long time, and I've known since you were a little girl that you were good. And, so did your grandparents. This brings us back to my question: Why do Irish poets have such short lives? Just humour me, please."

Rowan shifted in place and mouthed the words several times before she was able to vocalize them. "It has to do with, I don't know, *you guys*, I'm assuming. A lot of the time it's *leanan sidhe*, although once in a while you might hear something about a *pooka*. Maybe a *selkie*, although in those cases I think it's completely accidental."

"Do you know how they die?"

"Yeah. They produce great work until they waste away to nothing. Then the fairy comes and collects their soul, keeping it forever in some kind of soul cage, which sounds like some special kind of hell."

"You know, it's not as easy for us as it used to be," he knelt down in front of her, and Rowan realized that she had been trying her best to avoid looking at him directly. His eyes were opaline, and he was built like a reed. His whitish hair spilled across his face, and Rowan wondered how close it was to his actual appearance. "Not too long ago, just about anything was possible -- people believed it to be, anyway. Your imaginations were much better. Your souls were brighter."

"So it was easier to eat us. Do you expect me to feel bad?"

"Is that what you think we do, Rowan Flannery? My goodness. I apologize because I fear that you misunderstand me, fundamentally. In a sense you might be right, yes. But -- Well, I didn't want to bring this up; unfortunately, you leave me no choice.

"Whatever happened to Rhiannon Tierney?"

"...How could you possibly know about her?"

"Rowan Flannery," he seemed to be quoting something verbatim from long ago. "'You have so much potential. Has anybody ever told you that?' See, that's when you shook your head. I almost couldn't believe it, but your grandparents were dead by then, and that's why I showed up in the first place.

"Tenth grade English class. From the shocked expression on your face, I take it you remember."

Soundlessly, he transformed into a figure she recognized: When her regular teacher had gone on maternity leave, Mr. Glashtyn had finished out the year. He had flashing dark eyes and curly hair. Rowan tried to remember if he always had the pointed ears.

"Son of a bitch," she whispered.

"Miss Rowan Flannery, with just a little encouragement, you could go from being a good writer to a truly great one someday. I'm telling you this now, but you have to figure it out on your own. Of course, there's a lot of things you have to figure out on your own. Here's some Yeats to get you started."

"I'm an idiot. Yeats just gave me the idea for the Rhiannon stories. Not for figuring out -- "

"I loved the Rhiannon stories. They were a little predictable, but you were just a kid, so -- "

"Shut-up!"

"Rowan Flannery, what made you stop writing?"

She didn't know how to answer his question. The thought of it made her uncomfortable; something twisted up to the surface, and she hesitated to give it the satisfaction of a voice. It wasn't something she could admit to herself.

Mr. Glashtyn -- or whoever he was, underneath -- took her by the shoulders. "Underneath every great storyteller is a brilliant soul, glowing and glittering and casting the light in a thousand different directions. Maybe your kind doesn't always see that, but *we* do, Rowan Flannery. And that's why we have stalked and tracked your species for millennia, why we have circled your campfires, why we have sought you out and sat at your feet. We have listened to your stories, we have felt your stories, and we have given you reasons to tell stories. We don't care if they're *true*. We're just interested if they're *good*.

"Like it or not, you can't stop telling stories. You can have a reasonable job like the rest of them, you can drown yourself with responsibilities, you can blot out the sun. But the stories still find you because they want *you* to tell them. As illogical as you may deem that, you know it to be true.

"The stories have been rioting, Rowan Flannery. You hear them. They've been inciting others to violence. They've been tearing the walls down around you, and you think if you hide, if you hold still long enough, they'll stop. But they won't. You know that. You wouldn't have sought to have yourself branded with a typewriter -- a *typewriter* of all things! -- if you didn't.

"But what you have there isn't a simple tattoo." He seized her arm and stretched it straight from her shoulder, examining his work.

"No, what you asked for was very specific, and that's what I gave you. You said 'I want a tattoo of a typewriter. And on the paper that's

coming out of it, I want a heart. But not any heart -- like a stylized heart, or something. I want a *real* heart. I want *my* heart.' Does that sound familiar?"

"Oh, God. What have I done?"

"You've done what any great writer has done," he answered, a smile slowly spreading across his face, sadness dripping from the corners. "Sacrificed your soul for ink."

Screaming, she raced from the shop and down the sidewalk. She couldn't remember how she got back home.

Every night the tattoo changed, and every night it generated a new story. At first, Rowan tried keeping herself up, just to see what would happen. She chugged pots of coffee as if she had known no other thirst; she ingested caffeine pills until she felt like her heart would explode; and still, a comalike sleep would be upon her before dawn.

The manuscripts began to dominate the little space she had to herself in the apartment, so after a month, she sent them off to publishers simply to get rid of them. She was genuinely surprised when the bidding wars started. They offered advances, contracts -- anything she wanted. They didn't care what she did, as long as she was writing for them. Not long after, she was able to quit her job. And uncomfortably soon, Rowan had put that old Byron quote into practice: "One morning I awoke to find myself famous."

"You know, it should be me," Nigel said one day.

"Oh?" Rowan replied noncommittally. The situation had not changed, but with happier things to focus on, she found him easier to ignore.

"I'm the genius, not you."

"I don't know. You don't write much. If you sent something off to publishers, maybe -- "

He struck her with the back of his hand, and she saw the blood fly from her mouth.

"I don't know how you're doing it, but believe me, I've stayed up and watched. All I know is that you're not really writing those stories. You're a fraud. And when they find out -- you're done. It's over."

"But why would you do that?" Rowan asked, the back of her hand pressed to her mouth. "You refuse to get a job. Your rent is paid for. You get to do nothing but act like as much of an asshole as you want. What else could you possibly want?"

"My name on your work because we both know that I deserve it more than you do."

"What? How exactly did you arrive at *that* logic?"

With a sickening crack, Rowan felt her nose shift slightly to the right.

"Because I'm not a goddamn liar, that's why."

She looked at him helplessly from the floor.

"Whatever. I'm going to the bar," he spat and stepped over her.

Ten minutes later, there was a knock at the door. Rowan was unsure if she should answer it. If it was Nigel, he would be angry that she hadn't opened it right away. Otherwise, she had no idea who it could be this late. Even when she had screamed her loudest, nobody had ever come to her aid, and this time, she hadn't made a sound.

The knock came again. It was as deep and heavy as the mahogany itself. Slowly and apprehensively, she raised the latch.

"Rowan Flannery, you're in a state."

"I know."

"Invite me inside so I can devour his soul."

"What? No! You can't come in! Do you think I'm stupid? ...And you can't kill anybody. That would be wrong. Besides, he just *hit* me. I'll be fine. It's wrong, but it's not worth killing -- "

The pooka shook his head. "No, I don't care that he hit you."

"You...don't?"

"Absolutely not. I'd be lying if I said I understood why girls fell in love for stupid reasons -- you included, I'm afraid. But I'm not here about that. I'm here on business."

"Business?" Rowan echoed.

"Yes, I'm protecting my investment. He threatened you, did he not?"

"Well, I'm bleeding all over the place, and you said yourself -- "

"Let me remind you of something, Rowan Flannery. You might not even remember this, but I do. Back when you were a child, before you started school, you had trouble making friends. Nobody wanted to play with you because you were too strange. What did you do instead?"

"Why is this important? My face hurts. It hurts to talk."

"It *is* important. What did you do instead?"

"I used to go into the forest."

"And?"

"I don't know," she sighed

"You *did* have a friend, didn't you?"

"...The Fairy Prince? I made him up."

"And what would you two do?"

"He'd sit on a log and I would tell stories."

"And the Fairy Prince would say 'Rowan Flannery, one day I'll read these stories instead of hearing them.' Do you remember that?"

"I do."

"And you would say 'I don't know.' But the Fairy Prince would say 'I promise. And if anything stands in the way of that, we'll all burn together. That's how much I believe in you.'"

"What does this have to do with -- "

"He threatened to take your stories away. He could beaten you to death, and I wouldn't have interfered. But a writer and her stories? That's a sacred bond. He must be taken care of. A soul that broken cannot continue to inhabit this world." His face turned dark.

"What...how...what will you do?" her voice dropped to a whisper.

“Do you recall what you had been led to believe about us, that we ‘eat’ souls? And I said you were somewhat right?” He smiled cruelly and abruptly.

She shook her head. “Well, he’s not here. And you’re still not allowed into my home.”

“I suppose you have your rules,” he shrugged. “But just say the word, and he’s gone. And by the way, the sooner you sleep, the sooner you’ll feel better. The Fairy Prince always keeps an ear out for Rowan Flannery.”

“We’ll all burn together,” Rowan cleared her throat and closed her door.

After Nigel mysteriously vanished, Rowan couldn’t forget the last thing he had said to her: That she was a fraud. Terrified that somebody would find out, she stopped doing interviews, refused visits from friends, and rarely left her apartment.

It was just as well: She began to fall into comas that stretched on for days and then weeks, the product of which were epic novels and serials. The public couldn’t get enough, and the publishers were in awe that she could produce such quality work so unbelievably quickly. Award after award rolled in; at best, they simply lined her shelf.

There had been a time when she had been excited to see the new picture erupting from the typewriter; now, she rarely checked. She felt bleak and apathetic. Maybe Nigel had been right after all.

One morning, thunder rumbled her into waking. Pulling the sheet up to her chin, she reflected on how much she had always loved thunderstorms. Smiling, she glanced at her shoulder -- for old time’s sake.

It was an anatomical heart.

On the nightstand was a story about a girl with an enchanted typewriter tattoo that produced the most amazing stories, in exchange for her soul. But there was something different this time.

A tear slid down Rowan's cheek as she realized this was the work of a lifetime.

A winding narrative told the tale of a pooka who had spent an eternity of watching writers twist and burn under the weight of their own words. Each one he had fostered, but only one he had loved so fiercely that when he carved a picture onto her flesh, it meant burning his own.

"That's right," Rowan mused. "Fire and iron are the only things that can kill a fairy. I'm sure there was iron in the tattoo gun, not to mention the ink. This thing took four and a half hours. He must've been in terrible pain."

When the writer finally grew tired, when she felt that her soul had worn away, she went to meet him. But it wasn't because he was going to devour her soul or keep it caged forever. It was to display it for all feykind to see and appreciate since the humans had already had their turn. Both worlds would speak her name for long time.

There was a knock on the door. It was as deep and heavy as the mahogany itself. Slowly and apprehensively, Rowan raised the latch.

