

Envy the book

by Stephen Stark

One night in the early spring (when the plot was beginning to take shape), Ann Miles Grayson had something of an epiphany. They had, the three of them, just eaten dinner, and Robert and Robbie were talking.

For her, at least, epiphanies tended to be about what you already knew, even if only subconsciously, and they tended to happen when you found some kind of sensible narrative wrapper for subconscious brain flotsam. The discovery was in putting what you already knew together.

The epiphany was this: Envy the book. And it came as she watched her husband and her son.

Robbie was telling Robert about a character he had just made up for his planet. Robbie would be eight in early June, and he had made up an entire planet, which he carried around in his head. Most of the residents of said planet were superheroes of some sort or other. Everyone had powers. This one was a man who had lost a leg and had done some experiments with lizard DNA because lizards have regenerative powers, and he hoped his leg would grow back. And while it did, he also began to develop certain lizard-like powers, such as being able to climb up walls, like Spiderman, or a gecko.

The planet (as in, 'You know, Power Planet, the planet I made up?') was based on things he had read in his encyclopedic collection of encyclopedic books on animals, seen in *Ben-10*, *Spiderman*, *Batman*, and countless other cartoons and comics and bits of information from everyday life. Ann's theory was that this invented world was his own personal transitional object. Some kids had blankets or miserably worn stuffed animals. Robbie had a planet. Her son was not one to do anything but think big. And but so anyway, anything that piqued his imagination, anything that worried him, all of it became part of Power Planet. She admired his imagination, but worried sometimes because he was such a geek.

Worried that his fantasy life with the planet was a sign of incipient mental illness, because of the way sometimes he'd be like some kind of very youthful ancient mystic totally and completely tethered to and channeling another world. The pediatrician had assured her that it was all normal. That he'd grow out of it.

His father hasn't, she'd said jokingly. The pediatrician knew Robert, had read *The _____*, and liked him. Well, she said, At least he's found a way to make money off it.

Ann had smiled, but said no more, because he wasn't—at least any more—making money off it.

This particular evening, Robert was 'perilously close' to finishing *The Sprawling Novel* (he got perilously close every few months and then went back to desperation for the intervening periods).

And so now, Robert was anxious to go back to his work on the novel, which he had left in the morning to go to work, to come home and make dinner, to help with homework. He said: Robbie, dude, can we talk about this later? I can't think about your imaginary friends right now. I have to go play with my *own* imaginary friends.

Clearly, this was meant as a joke, but equally clear was the essential truth of it.

And clearly, he was blowing Robbie off. The thing about this was that Robbie was totally cool about it. He got it in a way that Ann never would. But also from her point of view, Robert was *there* for Robbie the way he never was for her.

It was late and Robbie needed to go to bed anyway, and Robert descended into the basement to work—leaving her with the dishes, with putting Robbie to bed, with the bills that needed to be paid. Once, during an argument, she had said, *It's like there's another woman, except she doesn't exist*. Which sometimes it really did feel like, a betrayal, being thrown over for someone else. The muse.

She could have shot the muse.

Frank, her therapist, had said that it was as if sometime around The Cataclysm he had perhaps unconsciously stopped at that place until he could right everything, at least in terms of his career as a novelist, and make it all new again. He, Robert, had hit some kind of

mental pause button. Except the world had not paused. Only he had. She and Robbie and life itself had gone on. In rewriting and rewriting *The Sprawling Novel*, he was also trying to rewrite the narrative of his own life

, which clearly he had felt had gone horribly awry.

During that same or another similar argument, he had said, with almost hyperventilative desperation, *It's all I've got, Ann.*

What about *us?*, she had shot back, almost screaming, exclamation points flying, and Ann not really listening, or not really caring to listen.

That's not what I mean and you know it.

And so it came to her: Envy the book.

This was early March. The air was unseasonably warm and the windows were open and fresh air was souging through the house. And she had felt, suddenly and with great clarity, that if she were a character in one of Robert's stories, then he would have lavished far more attention on her than he did on her own real-life self. And it came to her, in a strangely objective sense, There has to be more than this. This is not what I want. More than a second-class life with a man who lived semi-full-time in his own invented world.

You read biographies about authors or artists or musicians and the toll it took on them to produce this or that work. How their lives were dedicated to that other world of creation. But you never heard about the toll it took on their families. (Well, actually, you did, but whatever.)

And she knew then that it was going to have to end.

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Ann here: There's an interesting bizarreness to this. A multivalent thing that I think you're getting close to capturing. Now I actually am a character in one of your stories. Except I'm not me—I.

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Charlie Burns here: Actually, it's quite astonishing that Mrs. Grayson is just picking up on this now. The interesting thing about this 'multivalence' is that even though 'Ann' is a character in a Robert story, he still fails to control her. Instead of a more

deterministic approach—in which 'Ann' will be the 'Ann' that he desires, or 'Ann' will be the 'Ann' he commands her to be, she is in fact much more stochastic, in the same way that the story is oddly both deterministic and stochastic.

But in this I don't see any sort of success. Instead, I see an inability on Robert's part to grab hold of his narrative and shape it to his liking—which it goes without saying is also a failure to shape Mrs. Grayson to his liking. A failure even to know what his liking might be.

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Ann here: So essentially your position is that I should be Robert's plaything? That I should do and say what Robert wants me to do or say?

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That's essentially my position, yes, and what you are failing to grasp is that this is not 'Ann' qua 'the real Ann,' but 'the real Ann' qua Robert's *invented* 'Ann.' An invention that could have been whatever he wanted, and yet is not. Is chained, in fact, to 'the real Ann.'

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If that's the case, then you are not 'the real Charlie Burns,' either. But an invention of Robert's that should do as he is told.

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This is a 'truth' that I acknowledge. How could I be otherwise? Sadly, in these pages, I am too often ridiculed and made to look the fool, but the difference is that I—that is to say 'Charlie Burns'—understand that I am an invention. This is a fundamental truth of all relationships, romantic and otherwise. Even in Mrs. Grayson's actual marriage, she is an 'invention' of her husband's, a set of stories he tells himself. Likewise he is the same in Mrs. Grayson's own mind.

