

“Impatient Griselda” by Margaret Atwood

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Do you all have your comfort blankets? We tried to provide the right sizes. I am sorry some of them are washcloths — we ran out.

And your snacks? I regret that we could not arrange to have them cooked, as you call it, but the nourishment is more complete without this cooking that you do. If you put all of the snack into your ingestion apparatus — your, as you call it, mouth — the blood will not drip on the floor. That is what we do at home.

I regret that we do not have any snacks that are what you call vegan. We could not interpret this word.

You don’t have to eat them if you don’t want to.

Please stop whispering, at the back there. And stop whimpering, and take your thumb out of your mouth, Sir-Madam. You must set a good example to the children.

No, you are not the children, Madam-Sir. You are 42. Among us you would be the children, but you are not from our planet or even our galaxy. Thank you, Sir or Madam.

I use both because quite frankly I can’t tell the difference. We do not have such limited arrangements on our planet.

Yes, I know I look like what you call an octopus, little young entity. I have seen pictures of these amicable beings. If the way I appear truly disturbs you, you may close your eyes. It would allow you to pay better attention to the story, in any case.

No, you may not leave the quarantine room. The plague is out there. It would be too dangerous for you, though not for me. We do not have that type of microbe on our planet.

I am sorry there is no what you call a toilet. We ourselves utilize all ingested nourishment for fuel, so we have no need for such receptacles. We did order one what you call a toilet for you, but we are told there is a shortage. You could try out the window. It is a long way down, so please do not try to jump.

It’s not fun for me, either, Madam-Sir. I was sent here as part of an intergalactical-crises aid package.

I did not have a choice, being a mere entertainer and thus low in status. And this simultaneous translation device I have been issued is not the best quality. As we have already experienced together, you do not understand my jokes. But as you say, half an oblong wheat-flour product is better than none.

Now. The story.

I was told to tell you a story, and now I will tell you one. This story is an ancient Earth story, or so I understand. It is called “Impatient Griselda.”

Once there were some twin sisters. They were of low status. Their names were Patient Griselda and Impatient Griselda. They were pleasing in appearance. They were Madams and not Sirs. They were known as Pat and Imp. Griselda was what you call their last name.

Excuse me, Sir-Madam? Sir, you say? Yes?

No, there was not only one. There were two. Who is telling this story? I am. So there were two.

One day a rich person of high status, who was a Sir and a thing called a Duke, came riding by on a — came riding by, on a — if you have enough legs you don't have to do this riding by, but Sir had only two legs, like the rest of you. He saw Pat watering the — doing something outside the hovel in which she lived, and he said: "Come with me, Pat. People tell me I must get married so I can copulate legitimately and produce a little Duke." He was unable to just send out a pseudopod, you see.

A pseudopod, Madam. Or Sir. Surely you know what that is! You are an adult!

I will explain it later.

The Duke said: "I know you are of low status, Pat, but that is why I want to marry you rather than someone of high status. A high-status Madam would have ideas, but you have none. I can boss you around and humiliate you as much as I want, and you will feel so lowly that you won't say boo. Or boohoo. Or anything. And if you refuse me, I will have your head chopped off."

This was very alarming, so Patient Griselda said yes, and the Duke scooped her up onto his ... I'm sorry, we don't have a word for that, so the translation device is of no help. Onto his snack. Why are you all laughing? What do you think snacks do before they become snacks?

I shall continue the story, but I do counsel you not to annoy me unduly. Sometimes I get hangry. It means hunger makes me angry, or anger makes me hungry. One or the other. We do have a word for that in our language.

So, with the Duke holding onto Patient Griselda's attractive abdomen very tightly so she wouldn't fall off his — so she wouldn't fall off, they rode away to his palace.

Impatient Griselda had been listening behind the door. That Duke is a terrible person, she said to herself. And he is preparing to behave very badly to my beloved twin sister, Patient. I will disguise myself as a young Sir and get a job working in the Duke's vast food-preparation chamber so I can keep an eye on things.

So Impatient Griselda worked as what you call a scullery boy in the Duke's food-preparation chamber, where she or he witnessed all kinds of waste — fur and feet simply discarded, can you imagine that, and bones, after being boiled, tossed out as well — but he or she also heard all kinds of gossip. Much of the gossip was about how badly the Duke was treating his new Duchess. He was rude to her in public, he made her wear clothes that did not suit her, he knocked her around and he told her that all the bad things he was doing to her were her own fault. But Patient never said boo.

Impatient Griselda was both dismayed and angry at this news. She or he arranged to meet Patient Griselda one day when she was moping in the garden, and revealed her true identity. The two of them performed an affectionate bodily gesture, and Impatient said, "How can you let him treat you like that?"

"A receptacle for drinking liquid that is half full is better than one that is half empty," Pat said. "I have two beautiful pseudopods. Anyway, he is testing my patience."

"In other words, he is seeing how far he can go," Imp said.

Pat sighed. "What choice do I have? He would not hesitate to kill me if I give him an excuse. If I say boo, he'll cut off my head. He's got the knife."

"We'll see about that," Imp said. "There are a lot of knives in the food-preparation chamber, and I have now had much practice in using them. Ask the Duke if he would do you the honor of meeting you for an evening stroll in this very garden, tonight."

"I am afraid to," Pat said. "He might consider this request the equivalent of saying boo."

"In that case, let's change clothes," Imp said. "And I will do it myself." So Imp put on the Duchess's robes and Pat put on the clothing of the scullery boy, and off they went to their separate places in the palace.

At dinner, the Duke announced to the supposed Pat that he had killed her two beautiful pseudopods, to which she said nothing. She knew in any case that he was bluffing, having heard from another scullery boy that the pseudopods had been spirited away to a safe location. Those in the food-preparation chamber always knew everything.

The Duke then added that the next day he was going to kick Patient out of the palace naked — we do not have this naked on our planet, but I understand that here it is a shameful thing to be seen in public without your vestments. After everyone had jeered at Patience and wastefully pelted her with rotting snack parts, he said he intended to marry someone else, younger and prettier than Pat.

"As you wish, my lord," the supposed Patient said, "but first I have a surprise for you."

The Duke was already surprised simply to hear her speak.

"Indeed?" he said, curling his facial antennae.

"Yes, admired and always-right Sir," Imp said in a tone of voice that signaled a prelude to pseudopod excretion. "It is a special gift for you, in return for your great beneficence to me during our, alas, too short period of cohabitation. Please do me the honor of joining me in the garden this evening so we can have consolation sex once more, before I am deprived of your shining presence forever."

The Duke found this proposition both bold and piquant.

Piquant. It is one of your words. It means sticking a skewer into something. I am sorry I cannot explain it further. It is an Earth word, after all, not a word from my language. You will have to ask around.

"That is bold and piquant," the Duke said. "I'd always thought you were a dishrag and a doormat, but now it seems, underneath that whey face of yours, you are a slut, a trollop, a dollymop, a tart, a floozy, a tramp, a hussy and a whore."

Yes, Madam-Sir, there are indeed a lot of words like that in your language.

"I agree, my lord," Imp said. "I would never contradict you."

"I shall see you in the garden after the sun has set," the Duke said. This was going to be more fun than usual, he thought. Maybe his soi-disant wife would show a little action for a change, instead of just lying there like a plank.

Imp went off to seek the scullery boy, namely Pat. Together they selected a long, sharp knife. Imp hid it in her brocaded sleeve, and Pat concealed herself behind a shrub.

“Well met by moonlight, my lord,” Imp said when the Duke appeared in the shadows, already unbuttoning that portion of his clothing behind which his organ of pleasure was habitually concealed. I have not understood this part of the story very well, since on our planet the organ of pleasure is located behind the ear and is always in plain view. This makes things far easier, as we can see for ourselves whether attraction has been generated and reciprocated.

“Take off your gown or I’ll rip it off, whore,” the Duke said.

“With pleasure, my lord,” Imp said. Approaching him with a smile, she drew the knife from her richly ornamented sleeve and cut his throat, as she had cut the throat of many a snack during the course of her scullery-boy labors. He uttered barely a grunt. Then the two sisters performed an act of bodily affection, and then they ate the Duke all up — bones, brocaded robes and all.

Excuse me? What is WTF? Sorry, I don’t understand.

Yes, Madam-Sir, I admit that this was a cross-cultural moment. I was simply saying what I myself would have done in their place. But storytelling does help us understand one another across our social and historical and evolutionary chasms, don’t you think?

After that, the twin sisters located the two beautiful pseudopods, and there was a joyful reunion, and they all lived happily in the palace. A few suspicious relatives of the Duke came sniffing around, but the sisters ate them too.

The end.

Speak up, Sir-Madam. You didn’t like this ending? It is not the usual one? Then which ending do you prefer?

Oh. No, I believe that ending is for a different story. Not one that interests me. I would tell that one badly. But I have told this one well, I believe — well enough to hold your attention, you must admit. You even stopped whimpering. That is just as well, as the whimpering was very irritating, not to mention tempting. On my planet, only snacks whimper. Those who are not snacks do not whimper.

Now, you must excuse me. I have several other quarantined groups on my list, and it is my job to help them pass the time, as I have helped you pass it. Yes, Madam-Sir, it would have passed anyway, but it would not have passed so quickly.

Now I’ll just ooze out underneath the door. It is so useful not to have a skeleton. Indeed, Sir-Madam, I hope the plague will be over soon, too. Then I can get back to my normal life.

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Margaret Atwood is a Canadian novelist, essayist and poet. Her latest novel, “The Testaments,” will be published in paperback in September. Her new collection of poems, “Dearly,” will be published in November.