The Girl in the Ostrich Cart

By

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A lonely conjurer desperate for true love

pays a high price when a spell goes awry.

Ostrich farming can be a dangerous profession.

A kick from a male ostrich can be as deadly as a gator bite. My father, a cigarette dangling from his lip, would slide a hood over the ostrich’s head before harvesting the feathers, because the feeble-minded bird wouldn’t kick what he couldn’t see.

Having observed this for some time, I realized that in order to get your way, a person needed to employ whatever means necessary to distract your opponent. Even if that opponent was your own father. I watched him use guile and cunning to get what he wanted. As a cripple, guile and cunning were all I had. That, and magic.

I was born in a bedroom of the farmhouse, far from doctors or any sort of modern medicine that might have saved my mother’s life. Even though she was a conjurer, there was no spell to stop the bleeding and repair her torn insides. Eula, her twin sister and also a conjurer, sat at my mother’s bedside. As the red stain on the sheets grew and grew, Eula promised my mother she would teach me the ways of The Enchantment. As my mother coasted out of this consciousness, my father yanked me into mine, lame legs first.

My time was spent in lessons with Aunt Eula – music, arithmetic, spells and incantations, cooking. But for what? No man would ever marry me, nor could I take a job. I was like an ostrich with no feathers. Pointless.

Each day, I would be wheeled outside for fresh air, allowed to take a spin in the ostrich-pulled cart my father built for me. It was on one of those treks outdoors when I met Fletcher Ward, our new ostrich wrangler.

We connected instantly, much to my father’s chagrin. Father would confine me to my room or send Fletcher to the other side of the farm. This only made us crush harder.

“You’ll get no silly ideas about that boy, Flora,” Father insisted. I agreed, only because there was nothing silly about my ideas. The next evening during my cooking class with Aunt Eula, I shared with her what Father said.

“We’ll place a spell,” she decided. She rolled me up to the table and placed a giant bowl in front of herself. Gathering handfuls of herbs, she stirred them around the bowl with her fingers. She then recited the spell:

*Magical Moonlight,*

*Aid us in this spell tonight.*

*Unite true love as it should be,*

*Silence those who don’t agree.*

We rolled cigarettes with sprinklings of the enchanted herbs and placed them into Father’s smoking tin. Then, we went about cooking the meat pie.

“What will it do? The spell?” I whispered, as Aunt Eula showed me the proper method for crimping a pie crust.

“It’s a simple wish-granter. Whatever you wish, he will abide,” she said, wiping her brow with the top of her sleeve. Just then, father burst through the screen door, his hand wrapped in a bloodied rag. “I’ll get the kit,” Aunt Eula said.

“Is it terrible?” I asked. He unwrapped his hand at the sink, sucking in air at the sight of his wound. “Damn bird got me with his beak.”

The screen door squealed again, and Fletcher entered. “Sir,” he said. “You okay?” He was speaking to Father, but looking at me. And I was looking at him. “’Evening, Flora,” he said.

Father suddenly forgot all about his hand. He re-wrapped it and nudged Fletcher back toward the door. “Just a flesh wound,” Father said. “Nothing more. Go on home now.”

But Fletcher resisted him, his eyes settled on me. “It was my fault, Flora. Should’ve mended that hole in the hood. Hope I haven’t upset you.”

Father stomped his boot. “I’ll thank you to say goodnight!”

“Father, your manners,” I scolded him, rolling my chair to the stove. “Tea, Fletcher?”

Fletcher squeezed past Father and filled the kettle at the sink. Father stood in shock. After a moment, he reached for his smoking tin on the counter, and awkwardly lit one of the enchanted cigarettes. Aunt Eula returned with the first-aid kit and pushed Father into a seat.

“Careful!” he hissed, as Aunt Eula examined the hand. Fletcher rolled me back to the table, his hand almost touching my shoulder. I was dizzy with his nearness. Father’s cigarette smoke swirled around the ceiling.

Having Fletcher so close solidified my resolve. I was enraptured. Just as the ostrich’s eyes are covered so that we can rob him of his most valuable treasure, I would have to blind Father, so he wouldn’t have to witness the loss of his.

Father pushed Eula aside and banged on the table. “I won’t have this!” he roared.

For the first time in my 17 years, I raised my voice to Father. “I wish you didn’t love me so!” I cried.

In the space of a breath, the air changed. The lights flickered. Father’s eyes deadened and his brow puckered.

“Flora, what did you do?” Aunt Eula whispered.

Fletcher felt the change, too. He scooped me up and burst through the kitchen door, knocking over Father’s chair in his mad dash. Fletcher raced toward the ostrich pen as Father came out the door. I looked over Fletcher’s shoulder to see Father, aiming his rifle at us.

Fletcher rushed into the ostrich pen. The birds were instantly spooked---- running wild, their useless wings flapping about, precious feathers flying everywhere. Father stormed the gate, took a squared-off stance and pressed his cheek into the stock of the gun.

Before he could pull the trigger, a herd of ostriches barreled over him, tossing Father like a ragdoll, turning him into pulp. Fletcher laid me down against the fence, then rolled onto his back, his breathing fast and demanding. Aunt Eula came out of the house, holding her mouth.

I dragged myself over to where Father lie.

His smoking tin, now a crumpled mass of metal, was half-buried in the mud beside him.