

The Commandment

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Brontë enthusiasts tend to be a bit fanatical. A university hosts their conference each summer, and grown men and women—not just scholars, but librarians and secretaries and retirees—pay for the privilege to live in cramped dorm rooms for a week, eat lousy food and attend lectures on *Villette* and *Agnes Grey* and storm imagery in *Wuthering Heights*.

Greg and the young woman had each attended conferences in the past. Two years ago they had gotten into an animated discussion on how Grace Poole adds to the Gothic elements of *Jane Eyre*. Greg was fully dressed, but the woman wore a robe. Her hair was wet, and she clutched a bag full of toiletries.

“Oh!” he said. “I guess this floor is coed.”

“Yes,” she said. “I was feeling sweaty after the plane. The shower is kinda crummy, but it did the trick.” Her robe fell open ever so slightly, and Greg actively managed not to gaze down at her breasts. “There’s another at the end of the hall, but I couldn’t tell which was for which,” she said.

“What was that?”

“The bathrooms.”

“Oh! Yes.”

“One must be for women and one for men, but there were no signs, so I just picked one.”

“Of course,” he said. “What you have to do, I guess.”

“Rebecca.”

“Right. Grace Poole and all that. I remember.”

“I wasn’t sure you remembered my name,” she said. He hadn’t.

“Greg,” he said, extending his hand.

“I know. We missed you last year.”

“That’s flattering,” he said. Her robe had fallen open a small amount more.

“Well, I’ll see you at dinner.” She continued down the corridor to her room.

Greg walked to the bathroom, went inside, then noticed one of the shower stalls was wet. A pleasant aroma. Shampoo. Herbal.

He was surprised he had forgotten Rebecca’s name, in fact forgotten her completely. There had been other things on his mind, of course. But he remembered now her excitement over *Jane Eyre*, how her eyes sparkled when she spoke, and how she hurriedly shoveled food into her mouth during dinner, as if eating were a ridiculous absurdity when there was literature to discuss.

When he went down to the cafeteria, she wasn’t there. He ended up sitting with an elderly Canadian man.

“There you are,” said a voice behind him. “Mind if I join you?”

Greg turned to offer a seat to Rebecca. She placed her tray down beside his. “Are you feeling better?” Greg asked.

“Much, thank you. There’s music tonight, I hear.”

The elderly man continued explaining his theory on the Gondal saga, but Greg found it difficult to pay attention. The man excused himself.

“He’s a character,” Rebecca remarked after the old man had left.

Greg nodded.

"I don't know how I can take them all sometimes," she said. "The Society's so... well... geriatric."

Greg laughed.

"That's why I'm glad you're here," she said. "Someone at least close to my own age."

"Are you implying I'm older than you?"

"I don't know. How old are you? Or are you old enough not to tell anymore?"

"Certainly not," he said. "So long as you're not."

"No. No. Not at all."

"And you are?"

"I'll write it down," she said, reaching for a napkin.

"Then I'll write mine down, too."

"If you show me yours, I'll show you mine."

"Something like that," he said with a laugh. They wrote down numbers and exchanged napkins.

"Thirty-two? I would have guessed you were my age."

He opened her napkin. "You are not sixteen," he said.

"Well, I feel sixteen. Doesn't that count?"

They stood next to each other at the opening toast as the President of the Society gave a long-winded ode to the enduring power of the Brontës. Greg kept glancing over at Rebecca as the speech droned on. She caught him gazing at her and smiled.

Afterward, they sat together as an ensemble performed period music. Greg noticed Rebecca closed her eyes as they played, taking in the sounds of the instruments. He wondered what was going on in her mind as she listened.

When the concert ended, everyone began to file out of the room.

"Where are people going?" Greg asked.

"Apparently, they've opened up the college bar for the conference," Rebecca said. "There's nothing more pathetic than a bunch of gray-haired Brontë fans plastered out of their minds."

"I take it you're not going."

"No. It seems a shame to turn in early, though. I slept on the plane, so I'm wide awake."

"Up for something different?"

"What do you mean by different?"

"Find out," he said.

She smiled. "Okay."

Greg wasn't sure where he was taking her as he led Rebecca to the edge of campus. Then he remembered passing the place. "How are your shoes?"

"Fine," she said. "Are we going far?"

"Not far, but... you'll see."

Music poured out the door as someone stumbled to join smokers around the entrance.

"What kind of place is this?"

"It's a swing-dance club."

"I don't," she said. "I don't swing dance."

"I'll teach you."

"But I can't," she said. "I've never done anything like it."

"And you never will, if you don't try. You don't have to. But if you never try, you'll never know if you like it, will you?"

She hesitated.

“Give it one dance. If you don’t like it, we’ll leave.”

He led her inside and onto the dance floor. The place was packed. She glanced around, then turned to Greg just in time to see him give her a gracious bow. She laughed and took his hand.

“Balance your weight against mine,” he said. “When I pull out, you pull out. When I push in, you push in. There. Like that.”

They stayed for much longer than just one dance. It amazed Greg how quickly Rebecca caught on. It had taken him forever to learn. As a particularly vigorous number came to a close, Rebecca started to cheer and clap her hands. “I’m thirsty! Let’s get some water.”

She reached out and grabbed Greg by the hand and led him through the crowd. That’s when he noticed the band around her finger. He hadn’t seen it before. Had she not been wearing it? No. She must have been. Perhaps he hadn’t wanted to see it.

It wasn’t necessarily a wedding ring. It could have been something else. Lots of unmarried women wear all sorts of rings. But a vague memory from two years ago came creeping back into his head.

They ended up getting a couple of drinks then sitting down at a table by the wall. “I haven’t had this much fun in years,” she said.

“Me neither.”

“Scott never does anything like this.”

“Scott?”

“My husband.”

There was his answer.

“He’s an engineer. Very smart. Sweet. But can’t dance to save his life.”

“That’s a shame. You’re a fabulous dancer.”

“I am not! I just have fun. That’s all.”

“That’s what makes you so good at it,” he said.

“I don’t get much practice, though.”

“Does Scott like the Brontë’s?”

“All he reads is science fiction. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. I read science fiction, too. But there are some things... some things I love so much... that he’ll never understand. You know what I mean?”

“Hmm,” said Greg.

“What about you?” she said. “Weren’t you engaged or something?”

“Was,” he said.

“What happened?”

“Things... didn’t turn out the way I thought they would.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said.

Greg sat in silence and finished his drink. A new song began to play.

“That music,” she said. “I know it. This piece.”

“Glenn Miller. Serenade in Blue.”

“Let’s dance,” she said. And they did.

The next morning, Rebecca woke up feeling ill. Her period was late again. Perhaps she would head to the drugstore during the first lecture. Probably nothing to worry about.

She skipped breakfast, hoping she would feel better after a bit more time in bed, then got up and showered in time for the first lecture. It was on the French Revolution and how the Brontës had reacted to it in their writing. She had really come to get a good seat for the second lecture. The second one was on *Jane Eyre*.

Afterward, they broke for lunch. She looked around for a friendly face and spotted Greg walking around with his tray. “Over here!” she said. He gave her a curious look, then joined her at a table.

"I had a really great time last night," she said.

"Me too."

"Did you go to the lectures this morning?"

"Yes."

"What did you think?"

He seemed reticent at first, but after he started speaking about the lectures and the Brontës, and particularly *Jane Eyre*, all that dropped away.

"So I have to ask you," she said. "This is really embarrassing, but I have to know."

"Yes?"

"It's kind of personal, but...."

"Go on."

"*Jane Eyre*... or *Wuthering Heights*?"

"*Jane Eyre*," he said.

"Yes!" she shrieked. "There are so many damned Emily freaks here. I don't care what the critics say. It's just a better novel."

"Here's one for you," he said. "*Agnes Grey*... or *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*?"

"*Agnes Grey*," she said.

"No!" he shouted.

"What do you mean? *Agnes Grey* is so much better."

"Oh, please!"

"Well, sorry," she said. "I like it."

"Fine, fine. You're allowed. But tell me... *Shirley*... or *Villette*?"

"Hands down," she said. "*Villette*."

"Thank you."

“Let’s see,” she said. “This one’s more for women, but... Rochester or Heathcliff?”

Greg smiled. “I don’t think I’m qualified to answer that one. You?”

“Rochester.”

“Why?”

“There’s something more... upstanding. Decent. Rochester’s capable of anything, the most heinous crimes, and yet... deep down, you know, when push comes to shove, he’ll do the right thing.”

“Rochester it is then,” he said.

They met again at dinner, and she asked him if the dance club was open that night.

“What, you want to go again?”

“It was such fun,” she said. “And I was just starting to get the hang of it. I’ll forget it all if I don’t go again.”

“You sure you want to do this?”

“Or do what? Get drunk with a bunch of retired school teachers at the bar?”

“I’ll have to change.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “I’ll wait.”

She stood outside his room as he got ready. The door opened, and she looked at him and laughed.

“What?”

“That tie.”

“Too much?”

“It’s perfect,” she said. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Dancing with Greg was amazing. Through her hands, she could feel the weight of his entire body—the entire body through just his hands. Why couldn’t Scott dance like this? Why couldn’t Scott dance at all?

Sure, it had been late. But that didn't mean anything. It was probably nothing. Still, she should go to the drugstore tomorrow. Just in case.

"I'm not ready for this," she thought. "I want to dance. God, why haven't I danced more in my life?" She thought of Scott and how quickly he retreated from the dance floor at their wedding. Then, the strangest thing happened. The image of Bertha came into her mind. Bertha Mason, the madwoman from *Jane Eyre*. Now why had she thought of that? Why would Scott make her think of Bertha Mason?

She felt the strength in Greg's arms as they danced. Yet for all his strength, he was so graceful. There was a beauty in his movement. Not only did this strong, intelligent man talk with her about the books she enjoyed more than anything else, but even his movements seemed to be perfection, if not perfection to the world, perfection to her.

They paused for a couple of drinks. "We should start thinking about getting back," he said.

"No," she said. "Not yet. Just a little longer."

She loved Scott. He was a good man. He would never do anything to hurt her. He was so gentle. So kind.

"Just a little longer," she said. "Please."

The next day, Greg didn't pay much attention to the morning lectures. He kept glancing around, looking for Rebecca. He didn't know whether he wanted to see her or not, but when she wasn't there, it was like an emptiness opened up inside his stomach.

At lunch, there was still no Rebecca. He sat with the Canadian man he had spoken with earlier, but he kept expecting to turn around and find Rebecca right there behind him.

In the afternoon there was a panel discussion on 19th-century publishing issues. He saw Rebecca walk in late and sneak to the back row. He turned around, and she gave him a little wave.

Rebecca walked up to him after the discussion. "Hey there," she said.

"We missed you this morning."

"I wasn't feeling too hot. Slept in late, then went to the drug store."

"It do the trick?"

"I didn't actually take anything," she said. "Just knowing it's there can help, though."

"Join you for dinner then?"

Eating the warmed-over cafeteria food, they spoke in short sentences and paused for long sips of water. Rebecca poked at her meatloaf with a fork.

"I don't know if I'm coming back next year," she said.

"Really?"

"I always have fun, but... there are so many people here... widows and widowers... older people whose children have grown... I don't always feel like I belong."

"If that's the case, I don't belong, either."

"You're different," she said. "Very different. Besides, if... never mind."

He gazed at her dark hair as it hung down over her face. "Would you..." he began. "You don't have to, but... do you want to...?"

She looked up at him. "Yes?"

"Would you like to go dancing tonight?"

"Of course," she said.

That night, as he was clearing away their drinks, Rebecca ran off without a word. She reappeared after a moment. "Where'd you go?" he asked.

"I made a request," she said.

Greg listened as the music began. Serenade in Blue.

"Let's dance," she said.

That night, as he was alone in bed, it occurred to Greg that he was committing a sin. Which one was it? It had been so long since he had even thought of such things. Perhaps he should have paid more attention in Sunday School. Was it eight? Nine? Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife.

Her husband—Scott, was it? He was a good man. From what Greg could tell, anyway. Was it a crime not to know Acton from Ellis? Was it a crime not to dance?

He found himself fantasizing about what would happen if Scott died in a tragic accident. Rebecca would be distraught. She would show up at the next Brontë conference, inconsolable. He would be there. She would cry on his shoulder.

But the more he thought about it, the more stupid he realized it all was. Rebecca was married, and that was that.

He couldn't stop thinking about the tender curve of her face. The contour of her breasts.

The next morning Rebecca was ill again and went to the bathroom and vomited. She returned to her room and looked at the bag from the drug store still sitting on the dresser. She had been hoping—praying—that she wouldn't have to use it. She found it comical how much she now longed

to have her period, something she had hated since a teenager. But it hadn't come. She would have to take the test.

"These things don't work, anyway," she thought while opening the box. No matter what the result, she would go to the doctor after she got back, just to be sure. Yes. Even if it came out positive, that didn't mean anything.

The wait was excruciating. She wasn't ready. She didn't know when she would be ready, but it wasn't now. She was just beginning to live herself.

She hated Scott. His goofy smile and his blank stares and his childish love for Marion Zimmer Bradley. (How could he fucking read her?) No. She loved Scott. She knew she did. But when she swore to be his forever, she hadn't realized just how long that really was.

If they had a child together, it would bind them, no matter what. Even if they separated, even if they divorced, they would still have the child. Scott would always be a part of her life.

And she wanted Scott. She wanted him right now, holding her hand as she waited. She just didn't want this. Not now. Not when she had just met....

What was the use of it all? The week would go the same way no matter what the test said. She would thank Greg for a lovely time, she would say good-bye, she would go back home and....

It was time. She looked at the result of the test. Positive. "This should be the happiest day of my life," she thought and cried bitterly.

It took some time to regain her composure and go downstairs for lunch. There was Greg, waving at her with a big smile. She didn't want to see him—not now. But she knew she would have to.

"Are you okay?" he said.

"Sure," she said. "I'm fine."

"You missed a great lecture on the history of Haworth."

She was silent.

"This afternoon is the Society's business meeting. It'll probably be boring."

She ate for a moment without speaking, then looked up at him.

"Let's not go," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Forget the business meeting. I'm never coming to another one of these again. Let's go dancing. Let's go to the park. Let's do anything but sit and sit and sit. I'm tired of sitting."

They left their lunches half-eaten and found a patch of grass where nothing had yet been built. They both laid down on the soft ground. It was a beautiful day, and the sun poured onto them from a cloudless sky.

"Are you really not coming back?"

"I can't," she said.

"Why not?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Can I do anything?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Read to me."

"What do you want me to read?"

"Anything," she said. "Anything at all. Just... don't stop."

He took out a copy of *Jane Eyre* and opened it up. He picked a spot and began reading from the opening of the chapter.

"Some time in the afternoon I raised my head, and looking round and seeing the western sun gilding the sign of its decline on the wall, I asked, 'What am I to do?'"

He stopped and looked at Rebecca. She continued to gaze up at the sky. He continued to read.

“But the answer my mind gave—‘Leave Thornfield at once’—was so prompt, so dread, that I stopped my ears. I said I could not bear such words now.”

Rebecca began to cry.

“‘That I am not Edward Rochester’s bride is the least part of my woe,’ I alleged: ‘that I have wakened out of most glorious dreams, and found them all void and vain, is a horror I could bear and master...’”

“Stop,” she said faintly.

“...but that I must leave him decidedly, instantly, entirely, is intolerable. I cannot do it.”

“Stop,” she said. They sat in silence for a moment. She did not try to hide her tears. “Stop.”

He put the book down next to her. “Rebecca,” he said, “there’s something I have to tell you.”

“No.”

“There’s something I have to tell you. I won’t be coming back next year either. I can’t. If I came back... it would only make me think of... of...”

“Don’t,” she said.

“Rebecca,” he said, “I have to tell you... what you mean to me. Seeing you here again, talking with you, dancing with you, just being here on the grass—”

“Don’t say it,” she said.

“Rebecca, I—”

“Don’t say it!” She hurled the book at him and fled.

The following morning, they ate at opposite ends of the dining hall. They passed each other on their way back to their rooms but did not acknowledge one another.

Greg knew he had been wrong. What he had said, in and of itself, was harmless, but he knew better than that. He had crossed an invisible boundary, and there was no going back. He wasn't sure if she really would not return to the Brontë conference, but he knew that he never could.

The President of the Society gave a farewell speech to close the conference, and the attendees went upstairs to gather their bags. Greg approached her from behind as she was leaving. "Rebecca," he said. She turned around. "Rebecca," he said, "I'm sorry."

She stood there, staring at him blankly as people filed past. He wanted some reaction, any reaction, but her face was like granite. Finally, she spoke. "Me, too."

"Are you taking the bus to the airport?"

"Yes," she said.

"Can I—can I join you?"

She nodded.

They sat next to each other the whole way on the bus. Neither spoke. They arrived at the terminal and discovered their gates were near each other, but Rebecca's flight left an hour earlier than his.

"I have to go to my gate," she said. She did not move.

"Can I keep you company?" he asked.

She nodded. "Please."

No one knows what Greg thought as he stood with her at the gate, just as no one knows what was going on in Rebecca's mind as she waited for her plane. But the attendant was there at the counter, and she saw what happened.

A youngish couple, attractive, but ordinary, stood staring at the gate. They watched as passengers disembarked, and they continued to wait as the aircraft was cleaned and refueled. At last, the attendant announced pre-boarding would begin for first-class passengers, medallion members, and any travelers with special needs. They waited.

Official boarding began with passengers in group one. They waited. The attendant invited passengers from groups one and two to board the aircraft. They waited. The attendant invited groups one through three to board the aircraft. "That's mine," said the woman. They did not move.

"Now boarding all groups, all passengers," announced the attendant. They did not move. The attendant noticed the couple standing there, clutching at their carry-on bags. "Is this your flight?" she said. The woman nodded. Still, she did not move. "It'll be leaving in a couple minutes," the attendant said. The woman nodded.

A new song started to play in the piped-in music the airport provided. The attendant didn't recognize it at all, but she watched as the woman looked to the man. He smiled faintly, then bowed. He took her hands, and the two began to dance. Passengers hurried by. Announcements blared over the loudspeaker. Still, the couple did not let go. They continued to dance.

"You have to get on now," said the attendant. They ignored her. "Ma'am," she said, "you have to get on the plane." They danced. "Ma'am, that was the *final* call. The final call."

Both were weeping now as they embraced, clutching one another in their arms.

“You have to get on the plane,” the attendant commanded. “I’m sorry, but you *must* get on the plane.”

They released each other. The woman picked up her bags and—tears on her face—turned away and walked down the ramp to her flight. □