

Roger Zelazny. Love Is an Imaginary Number

They should have known that they could not keep me bound forever. Probably they did, which is why there was always Stella.

I lay there staring over at her, arm outstretched above her head, masses of messed blond hair framing her sleeping face. She was more than wife to me: she was warden. How blind of me not to have realized it sooner!

But then, what else had they done to me?

They had made me to forget what I was.

Because I was like them but not of them they had bound me to this time and this place.

They had made me to forget. They had nailed me with love.

I stood up and the last chains fell away.

A single bar of moonlight lay upon the floor of the bedchamber. I passed through it to where my clothing was hung.

There was a faint music playing in the distance. That was what had done it. It had been so long since I had heard that music...

How had they trapped me?

That little kingdom, ages ago, some Other, where I had introduced gunpowder-- Yes! That was the place! They had trapped me there with my Other-made monk's hood and my classical Latin.

Then brainsmash and binding to this Otherwhen.

I chuckled softly as I finished dressing. How long had I lived in this place? Forty-five years of memory--but how much of it counterfeit?

The hall mirror showed me a middle-aged man, slightly obese, hair thinning, wearing a red sport shirt and black slacks.

The music was growing louder, the music only I could hear: guitars, and the steady _thump_ of a leather drum.

My different drummer, aye! Mate me with an angel and you still do not make me a saint, my comrades!

I made myself young and strong again.

Then I descended the stair to the living room, moved to the bar, poured out a glass of wine, sipped it until the music reached its fullest intensity, then gulped the remainder and dashed the glass to the floor. I was free!

I turned to go, and there was a sound overhead.

Stella had awakened.

The telephone rang. It hung there on the wall and rang and rang until I could stand it no longer.

"You have done it again," said that old, familiar voice.

"Do not go hard with the woman," said I. "She could not watch me

always."

"It will be better if you stay right where you are," said the voice.
"It will save us both much trouble."

"Good night," I said, and hung up.

The receiver snapped itself around my wrist and the cord became a chain fastened to a ring-bolt in the wall. How childish of them!

I heard Stella dressing upstairs. I moved eighteen steps sidewise from There, to the place where my scaled limb slid easily from out the vines looped about it.

Then, back again to the living room and out the front door. I needed a mount.

I backed the convertible out of the garage. It was the faster of the two cars. Then out onto the nighted highway, and then a sound of thunder overhead.

It was a Piper Cub, sweeping in low, out of control. I slammed on the brakes and it came on, shearing treetops and snapping telephone lines, to crash in the middle of the street half a block ahead of me. I took a sharp left turn into an alley, and then onto the next street paralleling my own.

If they wanted to play it that way, well--I am not exactly without resources along those lines myself. I was pleased that they had done it first, though.

I headed out into the country, to where I could build up a head of steam.

Lights appeared in my rearview mirror.

Them?

Too soon.

It was either just another car headed this way, or it was Stella.

Prudence, as the Greek Chorus says, is better than imprudence.

I shifted, not gears.

I was whipping along in a lower, more powerful car.

Again, I shifted.

I was driving from the wrong side of the vehicle and headed up the wrong side of the highway.

Again.

No wheels. My car sped forward on a cushion of air, above a beaten and dilapidated highway. All the buildings I passed were of metal. No wood or stone or brick had gone into the construction of anything I saw.

On the long curve behind me, a pair of headlights appeared.

I killed my own lights and shifted, again and again, and again.

I shot through the air, high above a great swampland, stringing sonic booms like beads along the thread of my trail. Then another shift, and I

shot low over the steaming land where great reptiles raised their heads like beanstalks from out their wallows. The sun stood high in this world, like an acetylene torch in the heavens. I held the struggling vehicle together by an act of will and waited for pursuit. There was none.

I shifted again...

There was a black forest reaching almost to the foot of the high hill upon which the ancient castle stood. I was mounted on a hippogriff, flying, and garbed in the manner of a warrior-mage. I steered my mount to a landing within the forest.

"Become a horse," I ordered, giving the proper guide-word.

Then I was mounted upon a black stallion, trotting along the trail which twisted through the dark forest.

Should I remain here and fight them with magic, or move on and meet them in a world where science prevailed?

Or should I beat a circuitous route from here to some distant Other, hoping to elude them completely?

My questions answered themselves.

There came a clatter of hoofs at my back, and a knight appeared: he was mounted upon a tall, proud steed; he wore burnished armor; upon his shield was set a cross of red.

"You have come far enough," he said. "Draw rein!"

The blade he bore upraised was a wicked and gleaming weapon, until I transformed it into a serpent. He dropped it then, and it slithered off into the underbrush.

"You were saying...?"

"Why don't you give up?" he asked. "Join us, or quit trying?"

"Why don't you give up? Quit them and join with me? We could change many times and places together. You have the ability, and the training..."

By then he was close enough to lunge, in an attempt to unhorse me with the edge of his shield.

I gestured and his horse stumbled, casting him to the ground.

"Everywhere you go, plagues and wars follow at your heels!" he gasped.

"All progress demands payment. These are the growing pains of which you speak, not the final results."

"Fool! There is no such thing as progress! Not as you see it! What good are all the machines and ideas you unloose in their cultures, if you do not change the men themselves?"

"Thought and mechanism advances; men follow slowly," I said, and I dismounted and moved to his side. "All that your kind seek is a perpetual Dark Age on all planes of existence. Still, I am sorry for what I must do."

I unsheathed the knife at my belt and slipped it through his visor, but the helm was empty. He had escaped into another Place, teaching me once again the futility of arguing with an ethical evolutionary.

I remounted and rode on.

After a time, there came again the sound of hoofs at my back.

I spoke another word, which mounted me upon a sleek unicorn, to move at blinding speed through the dark wood. The pursuit continued, however.

Finally, I came upon a small clearing, a cairn piled high in its center. I recognized it as a place of power, so I dismounted and freed the unicorn, which promptly vanished.

I climbed the cairn and sat at its top. I lit a cigar and waited. I had not expected to be located so soon, and it irritated me. I would confront this pursuer here.

A sleek gray mare entered the clearing.

"Stella!"

"Get down from there!" she cried. "They are preparing to unleash an assault any moment now!"

"Amen," I said. "I am ready for it."

"They outnumber you! They always have! You will lose to them again, and again and again, so long as you persist in fighting. Come down and come away with me. It may not be too late!"

"Me, retire?" I asked. "I'm an institution. They would soon be out of crusades without me. Think of the boredom--"

A bolt of lightning dropped from the sky, but it veered away from my cairn and fried a nearby tree.

"They've started!"

"Then get out of here, girl. This isn't your fight."

"You're mine!"

"I'm my own! Nobody else's! Don't forget it!"

"I love you!"

"You betrayed me!"

"No. You say that you love humanity."

"I do."

"I don't believe you! You couldn't, after all you've done to it!"

I raised my hand. "I banish thee from this Now and Here," I said, and I was alone again.

More lightnings descended, charring the ground about me.

I shook my fist.

"Don't you ever give up? Give me a century of peace to work with them, and I'll show you a world that you don't believe could exist!" I cried.

In answer, the ground began to tremble.

I fought them. I hurled their lightnings back in their faces. When the winds arose, I bent them inside-out. But the earth continued to shake, and cracks appeared at the foot of the cairn.

"Show yourselves!" I cried. "Come at me one at a time, and I'll teach you of the power I wield!"

But the ground opened up and the cairn came apart.

I fell into darkness.

I was running. I had shifted three times, and I was a furred creature now with a pack howling at my heels, eyes like fiery headlights, fangs like swords.

I was slithering among the dark roots of the banyan, and the long-billed criers were probing after my scaly body...

I was darting on the wings of a hummingbird and I heard the cry of a hawk...

I was swimming through blackness and there came a tentacle...

I broadcast away, peaking and troughing at a high frequency.

I met with static.

I was falling and they were all around me.

I was taken, as a fish is taken in a net. I was snared, bound...

I heard her weeping somewhere.

"Why do you try, again and ever again?" she asked. "Why can you not be content with me, with a life of peace and leisure? Do you not remember what they have done to you in the past? Were not your days with me infinitely better?"

"No!" I cried.

"I love you," she said.

"Such love is an imaginary number," I told her, and I was raised from where I lay and borne away.

She followed behind, weeping.

"I pleaded with them to give you a chance at peace, but you threw that gift in my face."

"The peace of the eunuch; the peace of lobotomy, lotus and Thorazine," I said. "No, better they work their wills upon me and let their truth give forth its lies as they do."

"Can you really say that and mean it?" she asked. "Have you already forgotten the sun of the Caucasus--the vulture tearing at your side, day after hot red day?"

"I do not forget," I said, "but I curse them. I will oppose them until the ends of When and Wherever, and someday I shall win."

"I love you," she said.

"How can you say that and mean it?"

"Fool!" came a chorus of voices, as I was laid upon this rock in this cavern and chained.

All day long a bound serpent spits venom into my face, and she holds a pan to catch it. It is only when the woman who betrayed me must empty that pan that it spits into my eyes and I scream.

But I will come free again, to aid long-suffering mankind with my many gifts, and there will be a trembling on high that day I end my bondage. Until then, I can only watch the delicate, unbearable bars of her fingers across the bottom of that pan, and scream each time she takes them away.