



Love: A Cautionary Tale

Or, an extremely long short story about the treachery
of love spells and one fairy named Cockscomb.

by Becca Evans



fig. 1: two deluded lovers laboring under erroneous perceptions of falsely conjured emotions. Immediate medical counsel advised.

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for my mom,
who loves me even when little compels her to do so,
and forgives me when cats like me more than her.

ONCE UPON A TIME...

Despite public belief, there still were fairies in the forest. Particularly in the parts between towns where the wood was allowed to grow particularly thick and children with slingshots weren't in abundance. Admittedly, the creatures were few and far between, a result of the Parliamentary Ban on Magickal Acts brought against them a century ago when everyone largely decided that making people fall in love with each other for one's own amusement was kind of a creepy move. The fairies had taken this good-naturedly enough at the time, shrugging with a sort of "fair enough" gesture and a carefree smile, but over time this had really cut into their productivity. On the pie chart of the distribution of a fairy's working hours, "making people fall in love (to calamitous yet ultimately beneficial results)" was the biggest slice by far. The next closest were "making shoes for unthankful and desensitized shoemakers" and "flying around mystically and giggling occasionally (for atmosphere)," neither of which held a candle to a good, old-fashioned frenzy of love confusion. So, occasionally, just every so often, a fairy would fall off the wagon. They figured, as long as they were in an isolated enough area, and no powerful heads of state were involved, there wouldn't be any sort of fuss. It wasn't that they *had* to do it. No. They could quit anytime they wanted. Definitely.

The fairy Cockscomb crouched between two limbs of a tall birch tree, smoking a dog-ended cigarette. Fairies are traditionally named after flowers and plants, and Cockscomb would want it stated that the cockscomb is a lovely red-frilled bloom that symbolizes "singularity," "loquaciousness," and "geniality." He would also point out that he is the youngest of 500 siblings, and that flower-name motifs grow thin after the first hundred or so. If you waited around longer, he would next eagerly produce a somewhat weathered page from *Lawrence Baylash's Illustrated Almanac of Flora and Fauna* that he kept in his back pocket for safekeeping, just to make sure you believed him.

For now, however, he was temporarily relieved of the burden of explaining his name, being otherwise occupied by listening. He could hear footsteps, and footsteps meant mortals, and mortals meant *v fun* .

Giana pulled her overly stuffed suitcase in the direction she had guessed the train station the most likely to be. She guessed that she would have about an hour until her mother discovered the sack of potatoes she had left in her bed as a decoy.

She spent all night fashioning it, although the exact reason for it still baffled her. She presumed that a potato-sack-Giana would be just as much cause for alarm as an empty bed. But it was definitely tradition to leave a sack of something in your bed when running away from home, and Giana believed very strongly in tradition. Just as the sheet-rope she used to escape her window wasn't strictly necessary for a one-story cottage, Giana made one and climbed down it all the same. Things were a tradition for a reason, and she wasn't going to take any chances.

She dragged the heavy leather case behind her, creating somewhat of a trail in the pine-needled forest floor. Aside from a few pairs of pants Giana had stockpiled by way of theft from her younger brothers and one voluptuous hat (because there were always cases in which one would be in need of a fancy hat) the luggage was almost entirely filled with law books she'd pilfered from the library, guessing, correctly, that they'd never be missed.

Lawyers were not a common occurrence in Bogg's Hollow, and lady lawyers even less so. Giana was aware of this fact because it was one that was frequently shouted at her when she was caught doing something as insurrectionary as reading. Usually what would happen next was that the book would be removed and a needle and thread would be pointedly placed into her hands as a sort of heavy-handed suggestion about the kinds of things Giana's aspirations should contain. And so Giana was off to the great capital of Genoa, where she heard ladies were doing all sorts of radical things. She heard they read frequently there, and very rarely had sewing implements forced upon them. But first, she had to find her way to the train station...

A little bit away in a different part of the forest, which was virtually indiscernible from the first part, because it was really all just trees when you got down to it, Stock paused to look at the picture again. It was a lovely portrait of Emmeline, her golden locks flowing and her limpid eyes sparkling and all of the other good things a girl could have in a portrait.

He kept stopping to look at it so that he could remind himself what exactly he was walking so far for. It was true love, after all. Mad, hysterical, unequivocally frantic love. The only thing, as far as Stock was concerned, that was worth walking seven leagues for. A little farther and he would be at the train. And then in sweet Emmeline's arms. He probably would already be at the train station, but periodically stopping to gaze at his love's visage and sigh was really taking a chunk of time. He was so enraptured in her portrait that he hardly noticed

the bustling, determined form with frizzled brown hair huffing its way towards him.

There was one person who did notice this. The fairy Cockscomb rolled his eyes from his perch. What did you expect to happen to you, he said to himself, being very rarely in a situation to speak to anyone else. Being young and beautiful and walking through a forest, was there any clearer way to ask for trouble? He twitched two fingers and a helpful breeze turned the girl a few degrees to the left, pointing her in the direction of the young man. Much to the disappointment of the fairy Cockscomb, Giana's nose was still buried in the map she had brought along, being what men in her village had described, in smaller words, as almost frustratingly sensible. With a beleaguered sigh, Cockscomb gestured to the boy. Stock looked up from the portrait of his beloved to find himself almost inexplicably tripping through the woods at a decent clip. He tripped for so long that he had time to look down at his own shoes and wonder why he couldn't stop and what casual tree root could have sent him this unreasonably far. However, this looking down did prevent him from noticing that there was, in fact, someone towards, and subsequently into, whom he was tripping.

Giana had little time to do anything but find herself entangled in a mass of limbs and filled with the conviction that someone would be apologizing for it before being confronted with the most beautiful face she had ever seen. She found it almost impossibly beautiful, in fact, in a way that, had she ever been to the Caribbean Islands, she would have found not asimilar to being drunk on rum. She was filled with a confidence that she had only ever felt one other time, while reading her first book on law: an absolute certainty that for the world to make any sense at all it had better include the thing before her. Giana was confident that this face, and the boy it was ultimately attached to, should be hers. She tried to quickly work out a sentence that, when spoken, would reflect this revelation.

"Hi," she said, intelligently.

Stock, having arrived at similar groundbreaking deductions, responded in kind.

"Oh, hey." After a moment of reflection, he decided additional information would be helpful, and added, "I didn't see you there."

"Yeah, I didn't either," Giana returned. After another meaningful pause, she chose to branch out from the "who saw whom" topic, which was running a bit dry.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked insightfully.

"Looking for the train station," Stock supplied, quite proud of himself for

his memory recall.

“Me too!” exclaimed Giana, excited to have found some common ground.

The two young people spent a moment chuckling to each other over nothing in particular. Giana became aware that the drunken feeling she was experiencing, which she could best describe as being somewhat sticky and purple, if feelings had a color, was growing. The same was true of Stock, and was made evident in their next volley of words.

“You pretty.”

“Like your... head.”

Giana became aware that her vision was blurring, and was rather less concerned by this phenomenon than she would normally have been, convinced as she was that the only thing that currently mattered was that the handsome man not leave.

“Your hair... good.”

The handsome man continued to not leave, and so Giana lost consciousness full of a pleasant sort of security she probably shouldn't have had the right to feel.

Giana became slowly aware of the pine needles pricking into her back, and of the fact that the sunlight that was attempting to burrow its way into her brain via her eyelids was either lower or higher than it should be, although she couldn't be sure which. She next became aware of a vague stirring, moaning sound being emitted from somewhere on her left. The part of her brain that stored memories of handsome strangers kicked in around the same time as the part that stored her deep convictions that her ambitions outranked romantic fantasies, and she hoped deeply that the sounds were some sort of nonthreatening wild boar that would take a liking to her and drag her to safety. The part of Giana's brain that spent its days combatting unrealistic optimism wiped away this thought, and Giana reluctantly opened her eyes.

She was confronted with a boy that was nowhere near as dazzling as she remembered him. He was now, inexplicably, dressed in formal wear, which made her suspicious that more time had passed than she had originally thought.

However much shock and confusion Giana was currently processing, it was almost definitely surpassed by Stock's as he regained sight and was confronted almost immediately by a slightly angry looking, frizzy-haired girl in a wedding dress.

Stock screamed, indicating Giana's dress. After a moment of indignance at being screamed at, she followed his gaze to her outfit and screamed as well. She screamed again, noting that the boy's outfit was exactly the type of garment one would wear at one's own wedding, and then screamed once more out of general displeasure with the situation.

"Who are you," the young man asked slowly, "And why are you?"

"Do not say it," Giana cut him off.

"... wearing a wedding dress," he continued, not being the most adept at stopping a train of thought already in motion.

Giana slumped back to the forest floor, hoping that in the best case she would wake up already on the train she had been hoping to catch, or at the very least that some woodland-dwelling creature would bite and subsequently poison her before she had to deal with her current situation. She waited patiently as both things failed to happen, and begrudgingly redirected her attention to the earnest looking, if inconvenient, boy who was now standing to her side.

"I so, completely, do not have time to do this."

"What?" Stock asked, not entirely the quickest on the uptake of current events.

"This is not happening," Giana continued her thought, not allowing herself to be interrupted, "I have to go be a lawyer. Or at the least read a whole book without having it thrown in a river."

Stock sat down next to her, attempting to comfort what he saw to be a damsel in distress, though her distresses sounded like utter nonsense to him.

"Hey. It's gonna be okay." Giana shrugged off the boy's comfort, both physically and metaphorically.

"How is any of this okay?"

"I know we lost, what, a day, maybe? But I'm sure the train is still running."

Giana slowly looked at him. It occurred to her that he was not placing emphasis on the proper disaster in his attempts to comfort her. She spoke slowly, her voice barely above a growl.

"What's your name?"

"Stock."

"That's nice. Stock, what do you?"

"What's your name?"

She sighed. "Giana. What do you think?"

“That’s a pretty name!”

“Okay.” She clasped her hands in front of her, a strategy she had picked up for handling her siblings that didn’t work particularly well, and tried to push through.

“Why, Stock, do you think that we are in the woods, wearing wedding clothes that match?”

And suddenly the part of Stock’s brain that had still been asleep, confident as it always was that things were going to be okay, woke up and alerted him that this may not in fact be the case.

“Wait…”

Giana, being from a pastoral village in the somewhat distant past in an alternate universe altogether, had never heard the *ding* of a toaster oven when it has finished toasting an English muffin, but if she had then it would have reminded her almost exactly of the noise Stock’s brain seemed to make in the following seconds. She decided to stop speaking and just let his panicked look take its course, which turned out to be a good call in the series of frantic pacing motions that followed.

“I can’t be married, I’m engaged. Wait. Emmeline. Oh my god, I cheated on Emmeline!” Stock’s body, no longer able to handle Stock’s brain, collapsed to the forest floor. It next decided to do a bit of moaning. After a handful of moments, as it became obvious that this problem was not going to resolve itself and that the sun was eventually going to set, Giana decided to step in. She had never had much practice in comforting a person, coming as she did from a family where physical and emotional weakness were more often than not cleverly planned tactical moves to spring attacks on unsuspecting Gianas. She reached out her hand, recalling that physical touch was usually employed when giving comfort, but couldn’t settle upon where to set it and ended up putting it back in her lap for safekeeping.

“Look,” she said, aiming for a tone that said “maternal and friendly” but instead stayed more or less at her usual pitch of thinly veiled indifference, “it’s going to be okay. Can you remember anything that happened?”

“No,” Stock sniffled.

“I can’t either.” She sighed. And then very quickly un-sighed, as her brain narrowed down the list of things that cause one to lose consciousness and wake up madly in marriage. It was then her turn to pace frantically.

“Never go into the woods. Never go into the woods. Why would I go into the woods?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Fairies!” She exclaimed, rounding on him. “Obviously. They did this.”

“Fairies?” Stock’s brow furrowed. “But those aren’t real. Are they?”

Giana looked at him pointedly.

“Are you sure there’s not a more reasonable explanation?”

“Like what?”

Stock hesitated.

“Weevils,” he said, after a long pause.

“Weevils.”

“Yes,” he said, feeling himself losing ground by the second. “I’ve heard they’re a big problem in this part of the country...”

“Not for this kind of thing. Damn!” she exclaimed suddenly, causing Stock to jump backwards due to the volume as well as the impropriety. “My grandfather said so many insane things. Why did he have to be right about this one?”

Stock kicked at some grass ineffectively. “Why do fairies have to turn out to be real right when I’m going through the woods?” He sighed sadly. “I have to get back to my fiancé.” He paused. “Well, she’s pretty much a fiancée. It’s basically like we’re already engaged, I just have to...” He unconsciously patted his pocket and discovered it alarmingly devoid of engagement rings. Giana slapped at a mosquito that had chosen the wrong day to try and take Giana’s blood, and it was then that Stock was afforded a view of his engagement ring, placed firmly on her hand.

“My ring! Give it!” he shouted, springing at her. Sheer force of momentum kept Stock tumbling into Giana, but the second that his skin touched hers he forgot exactly what it was he had been doing. He became presently aware that the most beautiful being he had ever seen was in front of him, well, under him, now, but all the same. He was also conscious of a sort of peculiar tingling feeling, purple, if he had to put a color to it. Next he was conscious of nothing at all.

Stock blinked awake, filled with an uncomfortable sense of familiarity with this type of situation.

“So, physical touch is a big no,” he heard from a distance of no less than 8 feet. He looked up to see Giana already awake, perched in a tree branch, giving Stock the amount of space usually reserved for dangerous jungle predators and those suffering from leprosy.

“What happened?”

“I’m assuming the same thing that happened last time.”

He looked at her, then at himself, and found that they were both still in wedding clothes.

“At least it doesn’t look like we made any more bad decisions...” He blinked. “Unless... You don’t think you’re...” Stock’s eyes got wide. “With child?”

This comment was met with a level of silence routinely found in morgues, but somehow less friendly.

“I was just asking,” Stock rubbed the back of his neck. “Okay. We need a plan. Break spell, get divorce. Right?”

“Find key,” she finished, raising her arm to show a hefty-looking chain that ran from her to him.

“What,” Stock made use of what was fast becoming his most-used word.

“I guess we wanted to stay together forever,” she said in a tone so cold that several plants around her got confused about what season it was and set about dying then and there.

“Look, the lock is shaped like a heart,” Stock said, not having managed to master the acidic tone that Giana had spent her life perfecting. He jiggled his handcuff pensively.

“I bet if we put some butter on these, they’d slide right off.”

Giana looked at him.

“I mean,” he continued, “If we were some place that had butter around.” He slumped. “What do we do?”

“I don’t know,” she responded suddenly tense, her eyes fixed to Stock’s left. “Ask him.”

Stock turned and was met with the sight of a tiny-yet-overfed-looking man with wings stuffed into an even tinier doublet and garters. Stock screamed, obviously, the fairy Cockscomb not being a sight anyone should have to see upon waking. Or ever. Giana made a dive for the fairy, but he dodged her and disappeared, giggling, into the trees.

“Who was that?” Stock asked.

“Probably our fairy,” Giana returned, brushing some leaves off of her dress.

“How can you be sure?”

Giana decided to leave some dirt on her dress as a symbol of her

umbrage towards a universe that apparently would stop at nothing to see her wed.

“No, you’re right, it could definitely be just a random, incredibly creepy small man hiding in the underbrush and giggling a lot. It was wrong to jump to conclusions. We should put more thought toward your weevil theory instead.”

Stock, having not grown up with any sisters, was incapable of obtaining a firm grasp on which tones indicated derision.

“Should we chase him, maybe?”

“Yeah.”

The newlyweds took off into the thicket where the fairy Cockscomb had disappeared.

Three hours later, Giana was wondering what kind of animal life would emerge once the sun finally set. She kicked herself for the umpteenth time for failing to have packed her copy of *Baylash’s Almanac*, which would have been filled with helpful insight as to which creatures would be trying to snack upon her later. She happened to be thinking pretty intensely about this matter, half because her personal philosophy towards life could be summed up with the statement “If I don’t worry about it, who will?” The other half of the reason could definitely be pinned to the boy walking beside her whom she was fervently trying to ignore out of this dimension.

The boy was making this hard.

“So,” Stock spoke, completely unaware of the fact that his companion was trying to summon an almanac out of the air through sheer force of will, “Love spells, huh?” Giana nodded her affirmation that they were, in fact, “huh.”

“Have you ever been under one of these before?” he continued, social cues not having been something his primary education had covered. “I haven’t, but I think I’m doing okay with it. I’m pretty big, so it’s probably not as effective on me. Plus, my love for Emmeline is so powerful and strong it’s probably blocking the spell’s effectiveness.”

Giana looked at him. “Do you want your hand back, then?”

Stock looked down to realize that his hand was extended toward her, his fingers trying their very hardest to reach hers. He moved his hand back towards himself, grasping it firmly with his other, more obedient, hand. He coughed quite a bit, because at some point in the past his body had come up with the notion that coughing heals all social discomfort. This was, and continued to be, almost completely without factual basis.

“Uh,” Stock swung his arm as if he had just been engaging in some sort of strenuous sport activity, another instinct his body had formed for situations like these for no reason whatsoever.

“So-”

“You start sentences with ‘so’ a lot, are you aware?”

“No, I don’t,” some unknown reason compelled him to resist.

“You absolutely do,” she replied.

“So?” he responded, unwisely.

After a silence that lasted long enough for Giana to begin harboring a faint hope about its longevity, Stock made another attempt.

“S-... Anyways, do you have any hobbies?”

Giana’s brain groaned, but Giana, thankfully, did not.

“I’m just trying to make it to Genoa, so I can study law.”

“Wow,” replied Stock. “A lady lawyer. What does your family think of that?”

Giana kicked at an acorn. “Who’s to say.”

“You didn’t ask them?”

“I am the master of my own fate!” she exclaimed in a moment of passion. “Also, they might not know I’m gone yet,” she added, much more quietly.

“Ooooooh, a runaway,” Stock said, as if a principal might emerge from the shrubbery at any moment and take Giana to detention. Giana made a face that, had there been any roving principals in the area, would definitely have earned her more than a few demerits.

“I wasn’t really given a choice. Father wanted to marry me-“ She rolled her eyes at Stock’s shocked expression. “Off,” she continued, “wanted to marry me off. To someone else.”

“Oh,” Stock said, his eyebrows rejoining the rest of his face after their short departure to his hairline. “Why don’t you want to get married? Marriage is awesome. That’s why I’m doing it.”

Giana made a face that, if facial expressions made sounds, would definitely have registered as a *squirk*. “I want to do things, not just be married. Like, what does your fiancé do?”

Stock’s mouth, which had been waiting for an opportunity to talk about Emmeline for hours, and on a larger scale, weeks, ran with this opportunity.

“Oh, Emmeline is perfect! She’s got eyes that twinkle and laughter like bells-“ He paused for the briefest of moments. “Actually, I don’t know why I’m saying any of this, I have a poem on me that says everything-“

Giana spoke with haste. “No, but, what does she *do* ? With her time. What is she passionate about?”

Stock huffed, his arm wedged elbow-deep in his jacket, rustling around for his epistle of devotion. “Emmeline doesn’t *do* anything. She just *is* perfect. Look, you’ll understand when I read you the poem.”

With this, Stock produced a quite lengthy scroll out of his pocket. “Part One: In Which My Lovely Emmeline Is To Be Compared To Bodies Of Water.”

The sun hung low in the sky as Stock and Giana plodded along in a stony silence. The poetry reading had been short-lived, having ended when Giana suggested several alternate uses for Stock’s love scroll in a tone which could be described most graciously as “combative.” Giana did not find the silence as rewarding as she had imagined. After a few minutes of walking, looking at trees, looking at the sky and scratching the back of her neck intermittently, she opened her mouth.

“So...” she squinted at nothing in particular, which caused a nearby squirrel that happened to be in her line of sight to feel quite self-conscious, “do you still think we’re on the right track? To find the fairy?”

Stock responded to this with a long, droopy shrug that somehow tapped into the universal dog body language for “I’m sure you have at least one extra sausage in there but instead you’re going to let me starve, you monster.” Giana couldn’t place why exactly she was suddenly reminded of her childhood terrier Biscuits, or why she felt so guilty, but she didn’t like it.

“It’s probably going to be pretty hard to find this guy, isn’t it. Fairies. They’re a tricky bunch. My grandfather always said, ‘don’t trust a fairy.’ He wouldn’t even let us go into town for the annual play they were putting on, because there were fairies in it. And we said, ‘Grandad, those are actors, not real fairies,’ but he said they were close enough, as far as he was concerned, and-”

She looked up at Stock, who now resembled a dog that not only had been denied sausages but that had subsequently caught word of an impending bath.

“Are you going to talk at all, or do I have to keep doing the entire conversation by myself? Because I am not great at talking.”

Stock looked at her, some of the puppy-ness receding. “Don’t you want to be a lawyer? That’s mostly talking, isn’t it?”

“No it’s not,” Giana replied, hoping that her blush of annoyance would cover up the blush of relief that he was talking again, “That’s just arguing. Anyone

can argue.”

“Right,” Stock responded, not necessarily proving her point.

“Anyway,” Giana continued, easing into her new role as leader apparent of the conversation. “What do you do? Other than ‘be in love?’”

“Well, being in love does take up a fair amount of free time,” Stock replied, ticking off his fingers, “between thinking about your love, sighing about your love, writing to your love, writing *about* your love...”

“Okay, alright,” Giana waved him off, beginning almost instantly to regret all the work she had put in to make him start talking again.

“I like to paint,” he said, his earnestness almost causing Giana to miss a step.

“One of my brothers is a painter,” she replied. “It’s good money, if you pick the right houses.”

“No, I meant, like, fruit and stuff. Beautiful ladies. Landscapes.”

“I knew what you meant. That’s sort of... far-fetched, though, isn’t it?”

“Far-fetched? You’re a *woman* from *Bogg’sHollow* who wants to be a *lawyer* .”

Giana conceded, though she felt that all the italics in his statement were excessive.

Stock looked up at the moon thoughtfully. “Fairies aren’t nocturnal, are they? They’re... what’s the opposite of nocturnal?”

“Um,” responded Giana behind him.

“It’s, what, probably day-turnal, or something like that, right?”

“Uh,” Giana replied.

“If you don’t know it, you don’t have to contribute,” Stock said. He looked backwards to see that it was not, in fact, his search for an antonym that was causing Giana’s distress as much as it was the large, silver-haired wolf that had appeared behind them. Stock pursed his lips.

“Wolves,” he said, thoughtfully.

“Yes?” Giana responded, not quite at home with the conversation and trying her hardest not to move.

“What is it you’re supposed to do with them? Punch it in the nose, I think. Or, play dead, maybe?”

Giana shot him a disparaging look and he heard her mumble a string of words that ended with “almanac.” Mumbling turned out to not be on the wolf’s list of approved behaviors while being menaced, because it caused the creature to snap its jaws at Giana threateningly.

“Wait,” Stock said to Giana, suddenly.

“What?” Giana hissed.

“You don’t think it talks, do you?”

The venom in Giana’s voice caused even the wolf to take a half-step back.

“Why on earth,” she whisper-shouted, “would it be able to talk?”

“I don’t know, you’ve got fairies, I don’t think it’s so crazy to think that the animals would be able to-“

“NO!”

Stock grabbed Giana and whisked her out of wolf’s jaw-snapping range.

“Fine!” Stock shouted back, pinching the bridge of his nose. “All right. Nose is sharks, dead is bears... what’s wolves?”

Giana gave another shout to alert Stock that the wolf was drawing close. Stock snapped his fingers. “OH!”

He proceeded to put his hands on Giana’s waist and lift her into the air, something that, if most of her energy weren’t preoccupied with its wolf-evasion duties, would definitely have earned him some heavy bruising.

“Make yourself bigger!” Stock shouted. Giana, whose improvisation skills were greatly augmented by her proximity to glistening wolf jaws, roared menacingly and raised her arms above her head.

“Rawr! I am so much bigger than you, which you should be quite concerned by, wolf!”

The wolf looked conflicted for a moment, gave a sniff, and then walked away at a slow enough pace to indicate that the performance, while working, still left a lot to be desired. Stock, having expended all of the energy he had gleaned from eating forest berries that day, collapsed, taking Giana with him. The two looked at each other for a long moment.

“Diurnal,” Giana uttered.

“Huh?” said Stock.

“The opposite of nocturnal. It’s diurnal.”

She leapt up off of Stock, increasing the distance between them the maximum that the chain would allow.

“Nice one,” said Stock, rolling onto his back. “I think I’ve had my fill of dangerous encounters for the day.” He pointed at the moon. “And if fairies are...”

“Diurnal,” Giana contributed.

“Then we might as well get some sleep,” Stock finished, moving to rest his back against a tree. Giana nodded.

“And also we should probably snuggle. For warmth reasons,” Stock added, yawning to add additional nonchalance to the comment.

“Absolutely not,” said Giana, keeping the chain between them taut. “I think the spell is making you weaker. It’s definitely getting stronger on me.” She moved to the opposite side of the tree Stock was lying against. “So we should also probably not look at each other anymore.”

“Okay,” came the response from the other side of the tree.

“And also not speak because sometimes I think your voice is cute too,” Giana added, working overtime to hide the embarrassment in her voice.

“Aw, really?” Stock called.

“Shut up,” Giana said, closing her eyes. “I mean,” she said, her tone a bit softer, “Good night.”

“Goodnight,” Stock said, tugging on the chain twice, “love you.”

“That’s not funny.”

“It’s a little funny.”

Giana was awoken by the chain around her wrist rattling an annoying amount. She rolled around to the other side of the tree, where her anger at being woken up was immediately eclipsed by the effort it required for her brain to process what her freshly opened eyes were seeing. It appeared, at first glance, to be a gigantic spider’s web, Stock standing at its center like an awkward, gangly Black Widow. He saw her, waved, and began to bob and weave his way out of the web to her. She looked closer; the web was made out of leaves, lichen, and vines. In the center was a pile of fruit.

“Good morning,” Stock smiled, apparently feeling no urgency to explain himself. Giana did her best to expedite the process.

“What?” She asked.

He leaned in and whispered conspiratorially. “It’s a trap.” He beamed. “For the fairy! I didn’t know what to use as bait, but I figured they have to like fruit, right? Because who doesn’t, really.” His face darkened briefly. “Except prunes,” he uttered.

Giana interrupted whatever prune-related trauma he was reliving in his head to make further inquiries. “Why?”

“It’s going to work! My brothers used traps to catch creatures all the time.”

He clapped his hands together and sat cross-legged against a tree, looking over his

creation. “And now we wait.”

Giana interrupted his reverie with a slight cough. “I had a...” she debated the truthfulness of her next statement before pushing through, “similar... idea.”

Stock looked up at her. “Was the fruit a bad call?”

“No, the fruit was fine. But let’s think. Why did the fairy do this to us?”

“It wasn’t because he wanted fruit was it?” Stock banged his fist against the tree trunk. “Damn my eyes, we played right into his hand!”

“No,” Giana forged through as calmly as could be expected of her, “I think what they always want is a happy ending.”

“Huh?” Stock responded, still no-doubt considering his fruit.

“So...” She said, hoping to at some point be able to jump on his train of thought and redirect it to a more helpful station. This resolutely failed to happen.

“Apricots would have been better, huh.”

She sighed heavily.

Oh, my dear Stock,” Giana projected loudly enough to hear her own voice echoed back to her through the trees, “ I am so glad that we have found each other at long last. I know that this started as a spell, but now I am sure that my feelings are real! Let us stay married for ever and ever!”

“Mmm, yes,” Stock responded woodenly, “We truly are in love. What a happy and joyous day for us both!”

Stock proceeded to make “noises of jubilee,” as the script Giana had written them dictated, which involved a lot of *harrumph-*ing and arm waving. Thankfully, before Stock ran out of breath from doing both at once, he was interrupted by a slow clapping behind him.

The fairy had appeared and was applauding, with a proud smile on his face. He looked as though he were about to speak, but unfortunately these words would never be heard as Giana chose this moment to clothesline the little man with her chain, pinning him to the ground.

“Undo this,” she said simply, coming to stand over him. The fairy wriggled, which proved to be an exceptionally unpleasant thing to witness.

“If it’s actions you seek,
on the part of the fairies,
you must answer these riddles,
and answer them fairly.”

Giana rolled her eyes at the slant-rhyme. “It’s gonna be like that, huh?”

“Riddles?” Stock asked, to Giana’s exasperation. The fairy’s eyes lit up, like when a nephew is asked to perform the only saxophone solo he’s memorized at a party.

“Riddles three I have for thee.”

Without hesitation, Giana picked the fairy Cockscomb up by the neck and shook him vigorously.

“Riddles two I have for you?” he amended, the end of his sentence being distorted by the additional shaking Giana had already busied herself applying.

“Riddles... one? I have-”

“Just undo it!” Giana shouted.

Stock came up behind Giana.

“Wait,” he told her. “I wanted to hear what he was going to rhyme with ‘one.’”

Giana held the fairy Cockscomb still for a long moment. Both of them looked at the fairy expectantly. Cockscomb, incredibly unused to undivided attention, tried to continue.

“Riddles one I have for...”

He gave up.

“Fine. State your request for the fairy Cockscomb.”

“Cockscomb?” Stock asked.

“That is Cockscomb’s name.” He tried in vain to reach for the almanac page in his back pocket, but was interrupted by another shake from Giana.

“Ugh, I hate fairies so much.” She held him up to her eye, to highlight how serious she was. “Look,” she growled, “We want you to get us back to normal. Divorce us, break these chains, unspell us.”

The fairy risked being shaken again, hazarding an impish grin.

“Break your bondage, I can do.

Reverse your vows, I can too.”

Giana and Stock shared a relieved glance.

“But,” continued the fairy, “reverse the spell...” He trailed off, causing Giana to finish his statement for him.

“You can also do, because if you don’t then I’m going to plant you here in the forest dirt like a poppy?”

The fairy Cockscomb’s next verse was rushed in his haste to avoid being

planted.

“Though miles many you’ve traversed,
a magic spell can’t be reversed,
laws of conservation clearly state,
magic must stay once it is placed,”

Giana’s grip tightened alarmingly around the fairy’s tiny neck, causing him to abort the “yea, verily” he had intended to add at the end for effect.

“Wait,” Stock said thoughtfully, “it can’t be undone, but could you transfer it? Move the spell off of us and onto someone else?”

“I suppose,” answered the fairy, unable to muster his usual elaborate language due to the damage being inflicted on his windpipe. “But who?”

“My fiancé and me,” Stock answered.

Giana’s grip loosened on the fairy, allowing him enough airflow to conjure more of his chirpy fairy dialogue. “If you wished to move the spell, I could do so for you, and wish you well,” he sang.

Giana was no longer looking at the fairy, but at Stock.

“It would work out okay,” he said to her in a tone he hoped would count as reassuring, “I’m supposed to be in love with her anyway, right? I don’t know if we have very many other choices,” he added after she continued to stare.

The fairy Cockscomb, not hugely successful at reading emotional currents, attempted a sad little caper. “Say no more, just state your wish, and Cockscomb will bring you wedded bliss!”

“So,” Stock made a valiant effort to meet the creature’s eyes, which appeared to be pointed in two completely contrary directions, “you can make us not be in love anymore?”

“I can change the spell, if that’s what you mean,” answered Cockscomb.

“That’s what he said.” Giana considered administering several more shakes, but the fairy Cockscomb was suddenly white hot, causing her to release him with a gasp. The odd creature made some humming noises, and a bolt of purple energy hit them both in the chest.

Giana felt as if she had been turned into a sieve, with all of her thoughts and feelings rushing out of her in an instant, with only some of them returning in the next. She looked blearily at her wrist, where her handcuff had disintegrated. She glanced over to Stock, who was lying on the ground a few feet away.

“Are you all right?” she asked him.

Stock made an attempt at an indifferent wave, which would have worked better if his arm weren't partially numb. "I'm fine," he responded, "Honestly I think my tolerance for this kind of thing is just higher than- oh, wait, this actually hurts quite a bit, ow, ow, owwww..."

He rolled on his side, yowling alarmingly.

"Where does it hurt?" Giana asked, hovering her hands over his body to mimic some sort of helpfulness. Stock took a deep breath inward.

"My HEAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRTTTTTTTT," he answered in a melodramatic bellow.

Giana rolled her eyes as Stock began to roll around on the ground, his body attempting, rather dramatically, to imitate the turmoil of his emotions.

Giana looked over her shoulder at the fairy Cockscomb. "Can you get us back to the train station?" she asked, her voice barely audible over the sound of Stock's love-yowls.

"No," the fairy answered.

"Really?"

"Well, I mean, I suppose I could. But I won't. Bye!"

With these words the fairy Cockscomb vanished once more into the woods. Giana sighed, looking back at her travel partner who was hard at work rubbing a tree branch against a rock. She squatted down beside him.

"What are you doing?"

Stock looked up at her, his eyes full of emotion so earnest it was difficult to look at. "Every tree in this clearing that does not bear the name of my sweet Emmeline is a blasphemy!"

"Okay," said Giana, trying to gently pry the branch out of Stock's clenched fist, "but that, you see, is a rock..."

In response, Stock sank to his knees, fists shaking at the sky, and bellowed. "EMMELINE!"

Giana sighed, and then heard a rip occur somewhere in the masses of white chiffon that still engulfed her.

"He couldn't have given us our normal clothes back?" she asked of no one in particular.

It was now several hours later. If you had asked Giana to estimate how many hours she had spent marching through the woods with a lovesick madman, she would have answered a thousand, because that was exactly how long it had felt. In

reality it was closer to ten, but knowing that would have in no way decreased her suffering.

She was currently plodding along several yards behind Stock, who was leading the way, waving around a tree branch he had fashioned into a walking stick. Giana hoped desperately that this behavior was part of the spell, but something deep inside told her that this was not the case.

“Giana, I only hope that someday you can find a love as profound, deep, and ultimately meaningful as the one that binds me to Emmeline,” Stock declared, waving his walking stick authoritatively.

Giana, who had given up on acknowledging his insanity, just nodded gruffly.

“Sure.”

“But,” Stock continued, “it’ll be hard.”

“Yep.”

“Cause no one is as good as Emmeline is.”

The part of Giana’s brain that tried to preserve wasted effort went on its ten-minute break, causing her to attempt actual discourse with Stock.

“What are your three favorite things about her?”

Stock took a breath. “She’s beautiful, she’s got great fashion sense, and she loves me. Boom.”

Giana’s sense of self-preservation joined the energy-saving part of her brain at the water cooler.

“What are your next three favorite things about her?”

“She’s lovely, she’s got excellent table manners, and she usually listens to me when I talk. I can do this all day.”

Giana knew from experience that this was, in fact, entirely true.

“At lease you’re consistent,” she mumbled. “Do you want to take some time to quietly reflect on your massive love for Emmeline for a while?” she asked, full of a hope that was almost charmingly misplaced.

Stock thought for a moment.

“No,” he responded. “I think I wanna shout her name from the treetops again, though.”

“Great,” responded Giana.

It was later again, and Stock found himself once again regaining consciousness in a pile of leaves.

“That wasn’t that bad,” said Stock, to which Giana responded with a

snort to end all snorts. “Where are we?”

“The woods still,” Giana replied, her back to him as she worked to light a fire.

“Aw,” Stock responded, having hoped that he would have missed that part. “Why do my hands hurt?”

“That might have been,” Giana rolled her eyes, attention still on the branches that refused to catch flame, “when you tried to ‘climb the tallest tree in the forest to prove yourself worthy of Emmeline’s love.’”

Stock looked up from his hands. “Did I do it?”

“Yes,” Giana responded.

“Nice.

“I mean, it had fallen down first, though..”

“How close are we?” Stock changed the subject rapidly.

“Not far,” Giana said. “But it was getting dark and you had passed out from singing Emmeline’s praises too hard, so I started making camp.”

“Great!” responded Stock. At just that moment, five elapsed minutes of passive aggression finally made its impact on his love-addled brain. “Are you okay?”

Giana attempted a carefree shrug, which ended in a shiver, which was unintentional but still felt somehow aimed at the stubborn pile of sticks. Stock reached over to her, causing her to dodge him out of instinct.

“I just wanted to warm you up,” he said, the confused puppy in him again creeping to the surface. “I can touch you now, right?” In response Giana made an evasive gesture that turned into another long series of shivers. She begrudgingly accepted Stock’s warmth, hoping that her facial expression conveyed that it was for survival alone.

Stock started rubbing her arms, trying to generate some heat. “Are you excited?”

“Trust me, it would take more than- oh, about becoming a lawyer? Yes. Extremely.”

Stock nodded. “Good. How many books are you going to read?”

The mention of books wiped away the last holds of Giana’s harbored resentment, and most of her memories of Stock’s singing voice.

“All of them,” she smiled. “I hear the libraries there are so massive and nice that you have to use a ladder to get to all the books, and they don’t even allow goats inside!”

She brushed some hair behind her ear, regaining some of her former detachedness.

“And you? I guess you’re going to be super married soon, huh?”

“Oh yeah,” Stock responded, still trying to warm Giana up. “So married.”

“And then what?”

“Just, ya know. Marital things. Being married. Nuptials, and all.”

“Maybe some painting, too?”

Stock yawned. “Maybe.”

Giana yawned too. “Good. You deserve to have more than one dream.”

They gazed into the place where ideally there would have been a fire.

Stock spent some time trying to think of something meaningful to say in response, but failed. He considered parroting her words back and adding a “too” to the end but ultimately decided against it, hoping that a meaningful silence would be better. Giana somehow sensed that he had chosen not to speak rather than repeating what she just said and adding a “too” to the end and appreciated his choice immensely. Imaginary embers continued to theoretically crackle as the two sat in what may have been the first comfortable silence they’d ever managed to achieve.

Giana woke up snuggling with Stock. She then spent her next few seconds of consciousness making it look as if she had not been snuggling with Stock.

“Let’s go,” she called to him after having reached a safe distance from the scene of the crime.

“Muh,” Stock answered, following with a string of indiscernible mumbles before creating a pile of leaves to fill the space Giana had vacated and continuing to doze. Giana considered invoking the name of Emmeline to get him up and moving, but she wasn’t sure she could handle any more of spellbound Stock and decided to just kick him a bit instead, which was surprisingly almost as effective.

“Muh,” Stock repeated as he rose to his feet. His brain woke up several minutes after his body, which is when he became conscious enough to complain.

“Why are we moving so fast?” he asked, struggling to keep pace with Giana’s steps, which, despite her legs being several inches shorter, were somehow leaving Stock in the dust.

“No time to waste,” Giana responded, not bothering to look back. “We need to get you back to your precious Em- ” she stopped herself, fearing an adverse reaction. “Fiancé,” she finished.

“Right,” Stock responded, already winded from matching her speed.

Soon, the first signs of the town became visible. They in fact became visible very rapidly, as Giana had not decreased her hustle at all. Behind her by a good 10 yards, Stock was beginning to wonder if something was wrong.

“Is something wrong?” he called to her.

“What?” she responded, the distance having quieted his voice substantially. She reluctantly waited for him to draw closer to her.

“Are you mad about something?” he asked.

“No,” she responded, and, despite all evidence to the contrary, continued, “I am perfectly happy. Oh look, there’s the train station. Goodbye forever.”

“What’s going on? You got what you wanted. You get to to be a lawyer in Genoa now.”

“Yeah, and you get to marry your beautiful, lovely, fashionable Emmeline,” she answered.

Stock knew from the tone that they were having an argument, but the words weren’t at all giving him an indication as to what it was about.

“What’s your problem?” he asked, believing, rather misguidedly, that brevity was the key to good communication. He began to realize, as the waves of shouting began, that he might need a more nuanced strategy in the future.

Meanwhile, about a hundred yards away, incredibly tiny fashion pumps were stepping off of a train and onto a platform. Under a beautiful silk bonnet, an impeccable nose sniffed the air, and two twinkling blue eyes took in their new surroundings. A perfectly formed ear caught the sound of a familiar voice, raised in an argument of some sort, and two immaculate legs, bound together in an intricate gown, took impossibly tiny, yet immensely graceful, steps in the direction of the voice.

“And I don’t even think you know her, apart from being able to catalog every single one of her *flawless* features, and-”

“Are you saying you don’t think I really love her?”

“Oh, I am sure you *think* you do.”

“Look, I’m sorry if you’re jealous-”

“I am not jealous of your stupid boring love life-”

“Stop being a child.”

Before Giana could appreciate the irony of being called a child by a person of whom her most recent memory was attempting to write a love letter on a rock with a stick, her eye was caught by something sultry in the distance. Stock followed her gaze to the lithe, gazelle-like form that was approaching them.

“Emmeline. Of course. My loved one whom I love.”

Emmeline spoke, obviously, with a voice like a crystal bell or possibly a flock of doves.

“Why are you guys wearing matching wedding costumes, that’s weird.” If she had had bubble gum, she would have smacked it at Giana.

“This,” Stock said, gesturing at Giana, “is Giana, my homely forest guide.”

Giana rolled her eyes. “Thanks for that. I’m gonna head out now, be homely somewhere else and wait for the next train. Or whatever.” She walked past Stock, pausing briefly to stare at Emmeline’s eyes. Upon doing so she found that they did, in fact, sparkle.

“Of course,” she said to herself before stalking off towards the town. Stock looked away from Giana, looking extremely hard into Emmeline’s eyes.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Emmeline pouted.

“Just checking to make sure I’m insanely in love with you,” he said. He took her hands. “Yep,” he added, after a few more seconds of staring. “I sure am.”

And it was true. He very much was. He was very ecstatically in love with her. Incredibly so, in fact. He knew this because this was what every fiber of his physical being was screaming at him. His entire attention was on the undeniably perfect creature standing before him, allowing no time to think of anything else. Even if it did have time, it definitely wouldn’t be to think about the frizzy-haired and argumentative waif who was currently stomping away.

“You won’t believe what happened to me on the train up here,” Emmeline told him. Stock thought about the rest of his life, which would consist of being in love with this woman who looked like the most popular angel in heaven who was also a cheerleader and listening to her voice that sounded the way a harp looked.

“What happened?” he asked her.

“Well, when I got on, I got a seat in a row all by myself, so I could have my bag next to me, and I had it that way for the first leg of the trip, but then this woman chose to sit in my row instead of any of the other rows, and so I had to move my bag. But she only stayed for a few stops, and that was all right, but then a few stops later...”

Stock hung on her every word. He had no choice. Something just below his sternum, his heart, he guessed, was pushing him toward the woman he loved. His thoughts, which felt as if they were absolutely coated in something gooey and purple, were all devoted to clinging to her voice, her words, and her lovely face, absolutely compelling him upon pain of death not to consider how things had felt different just a little while earlier with a different girl.

“... but obviously, I didn’t say any of this out loud, so he didn’t know that he heard my name wrong!”

Stock continued the nodding he had been doing for the duration of her gripping train story. Emmeline waited for a few moments for him to do something different, and then let out a cough that sounded like a chime made from the shells of only the prettiest and most popular mollusks.

“So, I’m here, anyway. What was so urgent that it couldn’t be said in a letter?” Emmeline asked in her dove voice, the perfection of which Stock was almost gratefully aware. He stopped nodding.

“Oh,” Stock said. “Well, as a matter of fact...” He felt at his pocket where the ring was supposed to be, before remembering that the ring was still in a place where it definitely should not have been. He groaned.

“I will be,” he patted Emmeline on the hand again, “right back. I just have to have a word with my homely forest guide.”

A few streets away, Giana was wondering when, exactly, the remainders of the spell would wear off. She so far had noticed that she was still thinking of Stock quite a bit and had felt compelled to cry multiple times. She made a note to sue the fairy Cockscomb, at some point in the future when she knew more about these things, for lasting damages. She wanted to be fully operational for her arrival in Genoa and subsequent interment into the world of academia, and the fact that her thoughts, no doubt entirely for magical reasons, kept drifting back to a certain lanky brown-haired boy, were not at all helpful. Hoping to self medicate, she found herself at a gigantic bookstore which would have represented a serious day-filler for any of Giana’s neighbors who were devoted to throwing books into rivers. She sat at the counter and slapped it sullenly.

“Give me a biography, tall,” she uttered. After a few moments a thick volume slid down the counter at her. She cracked it open and attempted to drown her sorrows in the smell of the ink and the longer words like “lugubrious.” She was distracted by a glimmer emanating from her left hand. She looked at it and then growled as if her hand itself had betrayed her. She angrily slid a bookmark into the biography then pushed her stool away from the counter, stomping back out into the street.

“Stupid smitten idiot, now I have to track him down, with his dumb face, and his stupid fiancé that he’s not even engaged to and her ridiculous perfect porcelain skin...”

“Infuriating, stubborn wench, always storming off,” Stock mumbled. “With her frizzy hair and her big ambitions...” he took a breath. “And her stupid knowledge... And that damn-“

“Fairy, where did it get off, casting a spell on us? Forcing me to be trapped with that dumb, besotted-“

“Smart,” Stock ran out of breath and also synonyms at roughly the same time.

“Ignorant, impractical, irrational,” Giana, for her part, was suffering from no shortage of words, her first toy having been a thesaurus she had found propping up a wobbly table at the butcher’s shop when she was six.

“Um... smart,” Stock was still struggling as he rounded the next corner.

“...bravado-filled, ignominious maniac-“ Giana rounded the opposite corner.

“You!”

“You!”

Giana made a note to sue the fairy Cockscomb for double the amount she had originally had in mind. He should have been ashamed of how badly he had botched the spell removal. He had left so many feelings behind, the idiot...

Stock was experiencing a similar frustration as he looked at Giana. When he had been bewitched, he had recalled what felt like gooey purple sinews growing over so many of his thoughts and feelings. What he only now realized in their absence was that in those places there were also other strings that felt smaller, cleaner, red, if he had to give them a color.

“This is so unfair,” he mumbled.

“What?” Giana glared at him, using every bit of self-control she had not to try to physically claw the feelings out from under her skin.

He sighed loudly. “After all that, how am I still in love with you?”

Giana was simultaneously the most and least surprised she had ever been.

“Right?” she responded. “That fairy is such a hack. I’m going to sue the wings off of him.”

“You should,” responded Stock, happy to have found a common enemy. There was a brief silence that stretched the thirty feet down the alleyway from one to the other.

“It might take a while, though,” she said. “I still need to get licensed, and all.”

“Of course,” Stock responded. “These things take time.”

More silence.

“I have your ring,” called Giana across the alley.

“I know,” Stock replied.

“If you wanted it back, or-“

The end of her sentence was cut off by an entirely unsurprising physiological reaction human beings who are madly in love tend to have when in close proximity to each other.

Whole minutes later, Giana took a breath.

“Do you want your ring back?”

“Maybe hold on to it for a while.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah-“ it was Stock’s turn to be cut off.

Back by the train station, Emmeline had been on her own for ten minutes.

Because Emmeline was who she was, this meant that she had already had a small following configure itself around her. She had rejected several on-the-spot proposals of marriage and one offering of a wagon full of gold. One hopeful street urchin was fanning her emphatically, while a second was using a sheet to shield her from the sun.

“If you wouldn’t mind tilting your head to the left a bit, miss.”

Emmeline acquiesced. She often had local artists beg to paint her, and she had always been a fan of supporting local art. She wondered when Stock would be returning, but not too anxiously.

