

Aimelie

When Rod mentioned Aimelie, which seldom occurred, people who didn't know her, which was most of the people he knew, thought he was saying "Emily". Fair enough—that's what he'd thought when he first heard her name spoken. By then, he was already smitten. Not that he ever let on or said anything to her—or to anyone else—about his feelings for her. He was old enough to be her grandfather, for crissakes, and never for a moment considered alienating her and her family by declaring his feelings.

The problem—*was it a problem? It could become a problem. Call it a problem*—arose from an exceptional combination of characteristics: Aimelie was beautiful—Rod noticed that immediately, and, even though he recognized that an individual's appearance has nothing to do with the person's value as a human being, he could not help responding emotionally to beauty, whether in a person, a sunrise, a waterfall, a horse, a mountain, or anything else. Rod was a sucker for beauty.

Aimelie was not just beautiful, she was exceptionally intelligent—he'd discovered that over the ensuing two years and delighted in the quality her intelligence lent to their exchanges. But that was not all: Aimelie was also exceptionally thoughtful and . . . *good*, a wonderful person. Rod had learned early to share relationships beautiful women and with intelligent women and with nice women. He even learned to deal with those less common women who possessed two of those traits. A woman—or, for that matter, a man—possessing all three appeared so rarely, that he never got enough practice to keep from being overwhelmed, even if the woman was a teenager.

Rod had met Aimelie—at an equestrian event in which Rod's daughter and Aimelie's sister were riding—and been struck by her foudroyant beauty. Despite his intellectual recognition that beauty has nothing to do with a person's worth, he couldn't prevent himself

from responding to Aimelie's emotions. Aimelie's face, not in classical proportions but perfect in Rod's eyes, her almost-blonde light brown hair, her gorgeous eyes, her irresistible smile all stirred feelings in him that went far beyond mere lust.

Over the next two years, Rod encountered Aimelie in a variety of situations—equestrian, social, and academic—and grew to appreciate her other charms. He recognized early and appreciated her articulate and witty conversations. Later, he felt impressed by her extensive knowledge and wide-ranging interests, from the sciences to literature, the arts to caring for her family's many animals, politics to music.

People who knew Rod and his family called them “homeschoolers”. Rod didn't much like that term because *school* was the last thing he wanted to impose on his children. He thought of them—the kids, of course, but, for that matter, the whole family—as *home learners*. Rod observed that he learned as much as his children did in almost every activity they undertook together—not the same things, of course, but equally important. He learned about himself, about his kids, about kids in general, about ways of learning, and even about different ways of looking at topics he already knew well.

Both Rod and Ingrid, his wife, put a great deal of time and energy into helping their kids learn. Every one of the children surpassed the standard curriculum's expectations for their ages, the two older ones achieving excellent results more than a year ahead of their age cohorts. Nobody ever called them bookworms, though, because they all participated enthusiastically in many outside interests. Transporting the kids from their rural home to the various activities led Rod to refer to himself often as a full-time chauffeur.

Because Rod genuinely—albeit covertly—cared about Aimelie, he adopted the habit of mentally throwing a protective blanket of love over the hill where Aimelie's family lived, every time he drove or rode past. He imagined casting a sort of imaginary cape over the hill to keep Aimelie safe and ensure she always felt, and was, loved. A scientist by inclination as

well as training, Rod never took his behavior seriously but thought the whole idea nothing more than a fantasy. He was in love, though, and figured the fantasy couldn't do anyone any harm, so he kept on casting his imaginary magic cloak.

Rod didn't know, couldn't know, that the magic seemed to work. Even after major family scenes or when both her parents rebuked her, which happened about as often as it does in other families, Aimelie never felt completely rejected. She always drifted off to sleep feeling loved and safe. And she was.

When Aimelie fell from a ladder because one of the rungs broke, she landed on the family's dog instead of the garage's concrete floor. The event left both her and the dog sore and unhappy but essentially uninjured. Had the dog not broken her fall, Aimelie would have suffered a broken hip or worse. OK, dogs like to hang out with their humans, so maybe his presence didn't mean anything—but he tended to share his presence equally among family members. That represents a one-in-seven chance or about fourteen percent or at least six-to-one odds against the dog's being there at that moment.

Or the time an enormous branch fell from a tree and crushed the tent in which Aimelie had been sleeping—she'd been in that spot almost nine hours and had gone into the house for less than five minutes. That looks like more than one hundred to one or about 0.9%. There were many other examples, but the odds of those two both occurring run about one in a thousand or 0.0013%—not impossible, but twenty times worse than the chance of a win at roulette. A rational observer might insist, perhaps correctly, on chalking those and many other episodes up to coincidence. Even so, calamity avoided Aimelie. She seemed to live a charmed life.

Not so, Rod. Oh, he avoided serious injury and illness, probably largely due to his cautious nature, as his children mostly did, too, and he enjoyed great relationships with all of them. The rest of his domestic environment, however, produced an enormous amount of

stress for him and the kids. His relationship with his wife was volatile from the beginning, but he loved Ingrid and hung in for the long haul. After twelve years, the reason for the volatility came to light, when their family doctor referred Ingrid to a psychiatrist who returned a diagnosis of BPD. Or MDP, or cyclothymia—the formal term seemed to vary with nomenclature fashion or from practitioner to practitioner—“with comorbid anxiety and eating disorders”.

Over the ensuing six years, a series of MDs and psychologists prescribed benzodiazepines, Modafinil, valproate, Divalproex (under the name Epival), Olanzapine (under the name Zyprexa), Seroquel (under the name Quetiapine), armodafinil, Risperidone (under the name Risperdal), lamotrigine (usually under the brand name Lamictal), and occasionally Topiramate as an adjunct to other drugs. The one that worked most consistently, though, was lithium. Rod researched all the drugs prescribed for Ingrid and felt concerned about the listed side effects of every one of them. Because of the lithium's effectiveness, the doctors favored it over alternatives, but Rod worried about its possible long term adverse effects on Ingrid's thyroid and kidneys.

In response to Rod's concerns, one doctor prescribed a combination of lithium and lamotrigine, which seemed to be the most effective of all in helping Ingrid to keep herself stable. Fortunately, the doctor initiated the lamotrigine very gradually and thereby avoided causing the rash that can be a serious side effect. Even with the best of medications, though, their domestic life fell far short of any sort of ideal. Ingrid still subjected her family to explosive episodes, but they became less intense and less violent. Between those episodes, she often went around in a zombie-like state, always tired and not interested in anything.

The emotional closeness Rod sought and nurtured in their first years together, still tried to nurture but with less effect, seemed to recede ever further. Sharing—thoughts, ideas, cuddles, opinions, observations, activities—never seemed as important to Ingrid as they did

to Rod, but now their sharing seemed mostly to revolve around which brand of chicken feed to buy for Ingrid's hundred-odd exotic show chickens or who was going to pick up which kid when. They never indulged in as much sexual sharing as Rod's appetite preferred, and the medications did not help in that regard. Rod would have liked to share the joys and pleasures of intercourse at least daily, but Ingrid seemed to prefer a schedule—and she did like schedules—of ten or twelve times a year. Only Rod's enduring love for Ingrid kept him from finding another lover.

Did Rod love Ingrid more than he loved Aimelie? Difficult to say. He wondered about that himself sometimes but shied away from digging deep enough to find a definitive answer. He loved them both, it's safe to say, and his kids, too. People who knew Rod said he embodied a lot of energy, and he did. He embodied a lot of love, too, and usually expressed it. In the course of a quarter of a century, he figured out that, after the well-being of his children—and not unrelated to that—the two dominant motifs of his life were sharing and making people feel better.

Rod liked making people happy—the members of his family, his friends, his neighbors, acquaintances, total strangers—he felt gratified, felt he justified his existence when he made someone feel good. If someone felt sad, he wanted to—and usually managed to—make them feel better; if someone felt happy, he wanted to make them feel even happier. All of that mattered most to Rod in the context of Ingrid and their children.

Sharing seemed to Rod to be the essential reason for existing. The reason for a conversation: sharing. For making music: sharing. For making love: sharing. For writing stories: sharing. For making beautiful paintings or photographs: sharing. *Why do we do what we do*, Rod thought: *sharing*. He didn't share his disappointment at the decrease in physical and emotional closeness between him and Ingrid, but only because he didn't want to make her feel worse.

When Ingrid packed up and returned to her native Utrecht—not the city but an outlying community called Kerckebosch—Rod didn't want to add to her stress by trying to talk her into staying. At the same time, he wanted her to stay and didn't want her to think he wanted her to go. The conflict left him stressed and confused, almost disoriented, trying to figure out what to do, what to say. In the end, he told her about once a day but being careful to say it as gently and pressure-free as possible. His telling her made no difference: Ingrid's mind remained set on returning to her childhood home.

The first few weeks after Ingrid's departure dragged slowly and painfully for the remaining members of the family. For the kids' sake, Rod pulled himself together—at least on the surface—after the first few days, although he still felt bereft and worried about both Ingrid and the kids. Betty, their eldest daughter, recovered first, even before her dad. She felt abandoned but knew intellectually that her mom's departure stemmed from Ingrid's own issues and was not about Betty. She recognized and accepted her grief and resentment but elected to accept the new situation and move on. Rod made the transition from pretending to be OK to actually feeling OK at least most of the time after about ten months. He recognized that his feelings included an element of relief.

Rod and Betty helped the others deal with their sadness and anger for the next several months until she left to matriculate at the state university. By then, the other kids were doing OK, and Rod was learning to be both dad and mom. He managed to carry on his usual work and other tasks and also to do most of the cleaning and laundry and meal preparation and all the shopping.

When Rod ran into Aimelie in the supermarket in town, he realized with a shock that he hadn't thought of her in weeks. Despite Aimelie's smile and friendly greeting, dismay smacked Rod in the face when he saw that a sling supported her left arm.

“Omigosh! What happened to you?” he asked.

“Rocket's girth snapped, and I fell off and broke my arm.”

Rod felt a chill run through him, although he hid it and offered conventional condolences. For the first time in four years, he had neglected to throw his mental cloak of protection over Aimelie and her home, and for the first time in four years, she suffered a serious injury. Coincidence? Probably, but Rod felt upset and guilty.

His love for Ingrid and pain at her departure notwithstanding, Rod loved Aimelie and wanted to protect her. From their meeting in the supermarket onward, he made a point of driving by her family's front gate, whenever it wasn't significantly out of his way, and casting his—imaginary?—mental cloak over their land and home any time he went anywhere.

Almost two years elapsed with Rod working hard at being both mom and dad to his kids while still earning a living for them all. He saw Aimelie and various members of her family a couple times a month and continued to cast his imaginary spell over their place. Rod felt relieved and gratified, and a little sheepish about those feelings, that she suffered no further significant accidents or illnesses.

Aimelie's impressive intelligence presaged her matriculation at a worthy university. In a conversation with her and her dad at an equestrian event, Rod learned that she and her family had begun making such plans weeks earlier. She applied to the “local” university—in the nearest city, only four hours' drive away from their remote rural community—and to two prestigious universities overseas. Although more prosperous than most families in the area, Aimelie's parents thought they needed to base their choice at least in part on the availability of scholarship money.

Aimelie told Rod she didn't have any strong opinions about any of the three universities and felt comfortable basing her choice on financial aid offers. Because Aimelie rarely put a great deal of effort into her schoolwork, her grades, while very good, did not place her at the top of her class. Fortunately, her SAT scores made admissions officers sit up

and take notice, and all three of her chosen universities accepted her.

All three also offered her full-tuition scholarships, but only the relatively local one offered scholarship funding for accommodation and books. The choice occasioned many long conversations involving Aimelie and her parents, which Rod heard about in chance meetings with various members of the family. After a month of discussion, she decided, with her parents' encouragement, to enroll at the one university she didn't have to buy an airplane ticket to reach.

Rod learned of Aimelie's decision directly from her: he bumped into her in town early one afternoon and took her out for a smoothie. They surprised themselves by enjoying a delightful conversation that lasted more than an hour. As they parted, Rod permitted himself to tell Aimelie he'd miss her. She told Rod she'd miss him, too, but hoped to see him when she came home for visits.

He didn't get to see Aimelie on her first visit home—he was swamped with work, and she spent almost the whole time with her parents and siblings—but hoped he might on her next visit. Mid-way through the second term, Rod heard from a friend of a friend that Aimelie had been admitted to a hospital in the city. He 'phoned Aimelie's parents in a panic and learned a taxi driver cut a corner too sharply, mounted the curb where Aimelie waited for the traffic light to change, and knocked her down. According to Aimelie's parents, she suffered only a broken arm but the doctors wanted to keep her overnight for observation in case of a head injury.

Thinking back two years, Rod experienced what Yogi Berra called “*deja vu all over again*”. *Was this just another coincidence*, he wondered. Could there possibly be anything real about the imaginary cloak of love and protection he cast over her home so many times? She seemed safe from all harm as long as he cast his imaginary magic spell over her.

Ron cursed himself for a fool, but felt an urgent need to move to—or at least

near—the city in order to protect the woman he loved. Without explaining his real motivation for the move, he discussed it with his children. He told them they would eventually return to their rural retreat and persuaded them he could find a place near the city that they could enjoy almost as much. Rod's skills made finding work easy for him, so arranging a contract consulting job in the city took little time. Before Aimelie returned to the university at the end of the mid-year break, Rod leased an older house on an acre two miles outside the edge of the urban area.

When he saw Aimelie in the course of her visit home, he told her about his family's move and said he hoped he could take her out for a smoothie in city. She said she'd like that and gave him her address and 'phone number. After that, Rod drove past her dormitory at least once a week and cast what he thought of as his non-magic spell. He also took Aimelie out for a smoothie and lunch on the Wednesday of the third week of the term and two or three times a month thereafter.

Three-and-a-half years later, his bank account considerably enlarged by his working in the city for such an extended period, he sat next to Aimelie's parents at her graduation ceremony. In the meantime, she had attended the high school graduation—a short train ride from the university—of Rod's daughter with whom Aimelie's sister used to ride in horse events. In the last several lunches Rod shared with Aimelie, they discussed graduate schools and her post-graduation plans. She said she intended to take a year off and travel before continuing to grad school.

Rod went into panic mode. *My gawd*, he thought, *am I going to have to propose to her so I can be near her and keep her safe?* He didn't do that, of course, but he did worry. Should he tell her why he moved to the city? No, that sounded too ridiculous. But if he followed her overseas, she might think he was stalking her. What the hell could he do?

After almost four years of steady and lucrative consulting work, Rod could afford to

take his kids on an extended overseas vacation—maybe even visit their mother, which she'd been asking him to do. If he bumped into Aimelie, though, she would probably think he was some kind of creepy wierdo. The alternative, skulking around as if he really were stalking her, did not seem an acceptable option. At his wits' end, Rod decided to move himself and his children back to their rural home and then discuss the possibility of a vacation overseas with them.

Over the course of the summer, Rod got to take Aimelie to lunch-and-a-smoothie five times. The last time, he offered to drive her to the city, if her parents couldn't get away. She thanked him but said they planned to take her. Two days before her departure, however, her grandmother—her dad's mom—became gravely ill, and Aimelie's parents asked if she could get one of her friends to take her to the airport. She rang Rod, and they arranged for him to deliver her to the airport three hours before flight time to avoid any last-minute problems and allow time for him to take her to the other terminal for a bite to eat at the only decent restaurant there.

Rod persuaded Betty to look after the younger kids for the day and made a point of getting to sleep early the night before the trip. He picked Aimelie up before dawn, accepted her parents' thanks, and set out on the four-and-a-half-hour drive to the airport. Once they reached the main highway, they made good time and enjoyed their usual wide-ranging conversation. As he drove and chatted, Rod wove an imaginary suit of love and protective armor around Aimelie.

An hour from the city, they came up behind a line of stopped cars—so long they couldn't see the front of it. Having allowed a two-plus hour cushion, Ron didn't feel especially worried. He turned off the motor, got out to ask what was happening, and learned that a fatal multi-vehicle accident three hundred yards before the next exit had led the police to close the city-bound lanes for at least an hour, maybe two. Knowing six miles of stopped

vehicles sat between him and the accident severely compromised Rod's equanimity. He contemplated making a U-turn and heading back up the freeway to the nearest exit. He knew that from there he could take the old road to the next interchange and get back on the freeway beyond the accident. The concrete centre barrier meant he would have to drive twelve miles going the wrong direction on the city-bound side, so he and Aimelie waited.

The police opened the road ninety minutes later, and Rod proceeded as fast as the backed-up traffic allowed. Once the traffic thinned, he urged his companion to keep a sharp eye out for police and stayed ten clicks above the speed limit. They reached the outskirts of the city—not far, coincidentally, from where Rod and his kids lived while Aimelie attended college—with barely enough time to reach the airport before her scheduled departure. How they could manage the check-in, they didn't know. As he drove, Rod suggested Aimelie 'phone the airline and see what they could do.

“I didn't bring my cellphone,” she said, “'cause I can't use it overseas anyway.”

“Here, use mine,” he said, handing the 'phone to her. “Explain the situation and see what they say.”

Getting through to a real, live human passenger agent at the airport took fifteen minutes, but that passenger agent proved as accommodating as possible in the circumstances. She suggested Aimelie ring her as they approached the airport and provided a direct number to call. The agent also told Aimelie how to find her and offered to escort Aimelie to the gate with her luggage—because all the other luggage would already have been loaded.

Rod drove directly into the expensive valet parking area nearest the departure counters and raced into the terminal with Aimelie. True to her word, the passenger agent spotted them and walked quickly with them to the security barrier.

“We may be too late,” she said, “but we'll get you out to the gate as fast as we can. They might still be keeping the doors open for you.”

Rod and Aimelie exchanged a quick hug before she passed through the scanners. He felt an almost overpowering urge to tell her of his love but instead said the same thing he had said for years to Ingrid and his children, whenever any of them went anywhere without him: “Please be careful.”

Aimelie held him in her embrace longer than he expected, then stroked his beard and looked as if she was about to say something. The obvious fidgeting of the passenger agent commandeered the moment and stole the opportunity, so Aimelie hurried to the scanner and stepped through. Rod waved to her, and Aimeilie waved back and blew him a kiss as she disappeared along the corridor with the passenger agent. Wanting to watch Aimelie's flight take off, Rod climbed the stairs to the observation deck.

Rod watched a tug pushing the huge 'plane away from the terminal building unaware Aimelie had reached the gate with the passenger agent only to find the aircraft's doors already closed. He didn't know she, too, now stood watching the tug push the huge 'plane out onto the apron as she listened to the passenger agent's apologies.

Rod stood by the glass walls upstairs in the observation area and watched the big bird taxi, hurtle down the runway, lift off, and retract its landing gear. Moments later, it looked like a miniature toy airplane climbing through the morning sky three miles away, when it suddenly disappeared in a bright flash. Rod thought perhaps the rising sun glinting off the fuselage had dazzled his eyes, but search, as he might the 'plane, seemed to have vanished. Fifteen seconds later the muffled “boom” of a distant explosion rattled the airport's windows.

Bio:

A full-time professional entertainer and musician, Harlan Yarbrough has written five novels, three novellas (two published), three novelettes (two published), and eighty-some short stories, of which fifty-seven have appeared in sixty-four literary journals in ten countries. Her short story “While The Iron Is Hot” won the Fair Australia Prize.