

Augie & The Green Knight



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my readers - Ty Franck, Michael Johnson, Rosemary Mosco, Alex Roederer, and Mark Saffian. Extra thanks to Rosemary, Alex, and Mark who each read the book way too many times. I have likely removed some parts that you loved and added some things you'll hate, and for that I apologize.

Thank you to my team, Michael Johnson and Amanda Rossi, for doing all the stuff I'm bad at so I could do all the stuff I'm good at.

Thank you to Kristyn Keene, whose notes had a major influence on the second half of this book.

Thank you to George Rohac, who helped make this book pretty and keep its author sane.

Thank you to all the backers on Kickstarter. I am perpetually amazed and humbled by how many people turn out for me on a regular basis. I hope I am working hard enough to deserve it.

Thank you to my wife, Kelly Weinersmith, who has been enthusiastic about this book since she read the first few thousand words.

And, thank you to Alabama in autumn, which helped me come up with this idea. You almost make up for Alabama in summer.

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Printed in the United States of America

Manufacturing by Shanghai Offset Printing Products LTD.
Weinersmith, Zach.
Augie and the Green Knight.
ISBN 978-0-9785016-9-3.
SMBC, LLC. www.smbc-comics.com

Co-Published with Breadpig, Inc

Cover and illustrations by Boulet.

For Ada Marie

Augie & The Green Knight

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Chapter 1

“HAHAHAHAHA!” was the noise coming from Augie’s mouth.

The local news had just declared school canceled due to a freak snowstorm. Augie rubbed her palms together as she eyed the gathering clouds. “Snow, snow, snow,” she incanted, “blanket my foes.”

Mom and Dad’s bosses had not cancelled work, since today was not Armageddon, and now it was too late notice to get a babysitter. At least, it was too late to get one for Augie—it might’ve been possible to get a babysitter for some other child.

Augie’s father had already called every babysitter in the area and all had said no. This may have been because it was five in the morning, but it also may have been because of the sound of Augie cackling and chanting as her father tried to

explain what a well-behaved child she was. When the babysitters asked about the insane laughter, Dad insisted that it was just an insane goose that had wandered into the house. But, since everyone knows geese don't ever yell "IT'S MINE! ALL MINE, AT LAST! AHAHAHAHAHAHA!" Dad got no takers.

Augie's parents both had important presentations at their offices that day, which could not be missed. Presentations, in case you've never done them, are sort of like spoilers on sedans. Most people are pretty sure they do something, but can't say specifically what, and the people who insist on having them are weird. Mind you, Augie knew all about spoilers, but whenever she started talking about the downforce equation, adults stopped the conversation in order to praise her intelligence, which made it all but impossible to speak.

"D-do you think..." said her mother, unconsciously clutching her blouse, "do you think we could leave Augie home alone for just a few hours?"

"AHAHAHAHAHA!" Augie noted.

They both looked at her. She was a very smart child, but even more concerning, she was very resourceful. Dad cleared his throat, which is anatomically how dads put their Dad Voice into operational mode.

"Augie. You're a good girl," said Dad. This was more hope than truth. "You're nine and a half."



“NINE,” she corrected. She hated how adults never rounded down to the nearest integer when talking to children.

“Nine,” said Dad. He then spoke very slowly and very seriously. “Your mother and I will be away for a few hours, and we’ll need you to stay out of trouble. We’re going to lock the doors, and you are not to go outside. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Will you do that?” asked Mom.

“AHAHAHAHAHAHA!” replied Augie.

“Let’s take her sled with us,” said Dad.

Chapter 2

Augie slipped her hand into the sleeve of her oversized sweater and squeaked its wool across the window by the front door. Through the port-hole she'd made in the frost, she watched the dark brown Buick push through the snow and turn the corner past the mailbox.

Once Mom and Dad were out of sight, Augie ran across the house to her room. It was a small room, made smaller by her collection of Important Things. For example, she had 14 books of pressed flowers, though the jury is still out as to whether she enjoyed pressed flowers for the beauty or for the crushing. Perhaps it was both, but so far as I know there isn't yet a word in English that conveys the combination.¹

1 Some possible options are Crushliness, Smashination, and Pummelegance.



Augie also had a small family of gerbils whom she had trained to spin wheels connected to a dynamo, which powered a rock tumbler, which supplied rocks for her tank of mangrove rivulus. She was a big fan of these rivulus since their offspring are clones, and having an army of clones is an excellent way to ward off bullies at school.²

On her bed was a furry yellow blanket with large dark eyes sewn into the top, modeled after the Io moth.³ The fake eyes served to ward off common bedroom predators, such as bed-goblins and closet-bears.

She knocked *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* off the dresser to get a better look out her curtained window. She'd done this so many times that a number of pages had been lost, ren-

2 Mangrove rivulus are, to be technical, isogenic, and then only under certain circumstances. However, most bullies are unaware of the distinction.

3 *Automeris io*, a beautiful insect found in North America.



dering the title completely inaccurate. Out the window was the forest. It was an old forest, originally named after George Washington, but he hadn't been here in years, so she'd renamed it Augustawoods.

She inhaled the cold air near the window and smiled. The woods needed her.

She went to her closet for her Field Naturalist Kit. It contained the following items:

1 Guide to Local Flora and Fauna

1 Pair of Sports Goggles

1 Scarf

1 Hat with ear flaps, given to her by her aunt the biologist and thereby endowed with all her powers

1 Jacket

2 Mittens, mathematically equivalent to 1 mitten pair, mathematically equivalent to $\frac{1}{2}$ of a quadrumitten, mathematically equivalent to $\frac{1}{4}$ of an octomitten.

1 Net

1 Compass

1 Watch

$\frac{1}{2}$ of a Quadruboots

1 Spyglass

1 Motion Detector

60 Candy Bars, no caramel

1 Backpack

1 Gas Burner

1 Hot Plate

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1 Handkerchief

30 Spare Candy Bars, no caramel

1 Teacup

1 Canteen

1 Pair of Noise-Cancelling Earbuds, to be used in case any people of Mom's generation play their "music"

1 Lantern, powered by the user's choice of battery, hand crank, or photovoltaics

1 Augiehand of Tea Leaves (one Augiehand is, currently, about equal to $\frac{1}{3}$ Dadhand or Momhand)



She forced up the window, threw her bulging pack over the side, and leapt out into the cold morning. Across the field were the beautiful mysterious trees.⁴

⁴ "Mysterious" may sound a bit fanciful, but roughly speaking, a 100-acre plot of woods produces one ton of green biomass every single day. When was the last time you changed by a ton in one day?

Chapter 3

As Augie ran on through the snow and pressed on between the trees, she was surprised to feel the air growing warmer and warmer, as if in her excitement she'd outrun the snow.

The forest was green-beautiful and red-beautiful and brown-beautiful and yellow-beautiful, and she knew that just beyond the Augustabrush there was a blue-beautiful creek. She liked the feeling of being in a complete ecosystem—flies buzzing, spiders spinning, squirrels hopping, moss mossing.

Here, it was a perfect fall day—the kind of day where time kicks back, relaxes, and lets you know that this day doesn't have to count, so you may as well just enjoy it. The wind murmured through the trees and branches, strong enough to make Augie's hair dance in front of her face, but gen-

tle enough to not make her shiver. She relished each crunch of leaf, hoot of owl, and squawk of her lungs as she pretended she was a lizard. This was a favorite pastime of hers, but don't judge her too harshly. I bet you're just as weird when no one's looking.

It was about an hour into her trek that Augie noticed something strange. She'd been through the Augustawoods hundreds of times. She knew the genus and species of everything from the Animalia to the Plantae to the Fungus to the Otherwiseae. But there was a tree she didn't recognize. It was thick and tall and needled, much like a pine. But unlike a pine, its bark was a dark shade of green. Blue-green lichens grew up its trunk, not in random clumps, but in little curls and curves, as if painted by a child. She walked toward the tree, but somehow it seemed to stay the same distance away.

She walked faster, but even as other trees passed her, the strange green tree never seemed to change position. So she walked around it in a circle, which was stranger still. The side which she first saw of the tree was the side she saw at every angle. It was as if the whole world were a great wheel with this one odd tree as its hub.

Augie adjusted her sports goggles. She was frustrated. It was one thing to defy the laws of biology, but defying the laws of geometry was downright



condescending. Augie removed 1/4 of her quadrumitten and picked up a heavy gray rock from the ground. She threw it at the tree, and it made a loud hollow thunk as it scattered a patch of green bark.

“OW!” said a deep voice. Deep as thunder. Deep as the forest.

“WHO THROWS A ROCK AT A MYSTERY TREE?!” it shouted with indignation.

Augie pointed a finger at a nearby squirrel, who scurried under a fallen branch.

“CAN’T I HAVE JUST ONE DAY AS A SENSE-DEFYING MYSTERY TREE WITHOUT GETTING ROCKS THROWN AT ME?!”

Augie pointed accusingly at a sparrow and mouthed, “it was her.” The sparrow looked back in irritation and fluttered away.

The green tree’s needles retracted into its branches, which retracted into its limbs, which retracted into its trunk. Its roots surged out and pressed down into the ground, lifting its entire body up, which was now shaped like a large and rather rotund man of middle age.

“MAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” he shouted. “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” he continued. “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaa’am, it’s nice to meet you, good day. I’m the Green Knight.”

Chapter 4

The Green Knight was a giant. His skin was a brown shade of green, with little freckles which on closer inspection proved to be mushrooms. His hair and beard were quite long, made of moss studded with pinecones, acorns, little bones, and what appeared to be a fishbowl with a small eel in it. The eel looked reserved but friendly.

The Green Knight had a great green belt around his waist, made of bark, and down his back was a matching bark cape. He wore no shoes, but the moss on the top of his feet provided ample covering, and his toenails reached far past the tips of his big round toes.

He wore a kilt made of tangled vines, and on his head was a small cap with three giant antlers. His shirt was a green wool sweater.

“That’s a nice sweater,” said Augie.

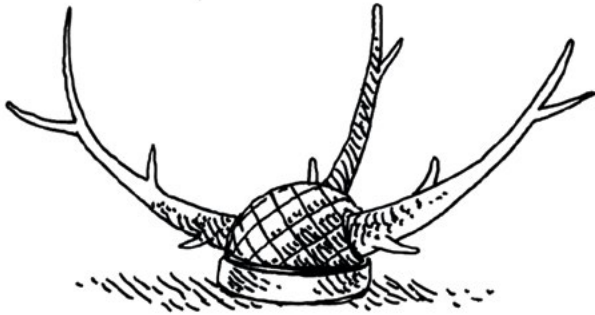
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“My mom made it,” said the giant with pride.

“Who’s your mom?”

“A green sheep, obviously.”

Augie didn’t entirely agree that this was obvious, but she was willing to let it go since the Green Knight, she now noticed, had a massive green axe tied to his back.



“What brings you to my forest?” he asked.

“It’s my forest,” she said.

“Oh, is it? Then how come my name’s on it?”

He pointed to a nearby oak, on which was written “Mr. The Green Knight, Esq.”

She pointed to a nearby birch, on which was written “Augusta Frankmacher, Esq.”

The Green Knight stroked his beard, which frightened the reserved but friendly eel. “Well,” said the giant knight, “it seems we have equal claim here. What say we split it 50-50?”

He put out his hand to shake. Augie removed a slug from it, then shook.



“So,” she said, “would you like to hike with me? My parents are away for a few hours, so the laws of humanity may make no claim upon me.”

“Why, I’d be delighted,” said the Green Knight. “I can show you the creatures of the forest.”

Augie figured she knew the forest better than this strange green giant, thanks to the benefits of modern science. She said as much, but the giant just laughed and said “Why is the dawn forever telling the dusk how to shine?”

Augie lowered her eyebrows. She didn’t like the metaphor. “The dawn reads a lot,” she said.

The Green Knight picked her up by her jacket and placed her on his back. She leaned against the axe, which was damp but warmed by the body heat of the giant.

The giant walked through the forest with Augie atop him, and his footsteps were surprisingly quiet despite his big wobbly strides. Soon, they came across a buttercup growing by itself in a patch of soft dirt that had somehow escaped the cold.

“Now,” said the Green Knight. “If you are so very smart, Augusta of the dawn, what is that?”

Breathlessly, she replied “That is, of course, *Ranunculus bulbosus*, commonly known as a St. Anthony’s turnip.”

“Wrong!” said the giant. “Ha! Wildly wrong. No, that flower’s name is Frank. It’s commonly known as Frank.”

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“What?” said Augie. “No. No, no, no, that’s RANUNCULUS BULBOSUS, commonly known as St. Anthony’s turnip.”

The green giant sat down on his haunches, almost causing Augie to fall off.

“Hey, Frank!” he said to the flower. He turned his head and smirked at Augie.

But the flower, like many flowers, did nothing. The sedentary lifestyle of flowers is well-documented.

“FRANK!” he shouted. But the only sound was the burbling of the creek and the echo of “Frank-frank-frank-frank-frank” through the trees. The Green Knight was beginning to look embarrassed. He blushed purple, then breathed in and shouted “FRAANKLIIIIIIIIIIIIIIINNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN!”

The giant was so loud that the trees shook and a whole canopy of dry leaves floated down, yellow and orange. But, the buttercup barely wobbled.

Augie thrust out her chest triumphantly and smiled at the giant.

The giant flicked the flower with his pinkie.

“OW!” said the flower. “I’M SLEEPING!”

Augie’s jaw dropped.

“WHAT DO YOU WANT?” said the flower. “UGH! Well, I guess I’m up now!” it whined.

Frank stretched out its leaves and inhaled

through its stomata.

“What’s your name?” asked the Green Knight.

“It’s Frank!” said the irritable buttercup. “And don’t act like you don’t know it’s Frank, because I heard you say my name a bunch of times before you flicked me.”

The giant looked at Augie. “See?”

Augie drew herself up, ready to defend her scientific integrity. “I was talking about its nomenclature. Its classification. It is of the genus *Ranunculus*, and is specifically a bulbous *Ranunculus*.”

The giant patted her head like she was a particularly unintelligent pet.

“It’s Frank. Specifically, it’s Frank.”

“I’m talking,” she said, starting to spit and slur her words together, “I’m talking about what TYPE it is. You may have a name for this particular flower, but it’s hardly informative to have a name for every single one!”

“I’m not the one who has a name for him,” said the giant. “It’s just his name. His mom named him Frank.”

At this point the giant noticed another flower about ten yards away and called out, “Oh, hey Mrs. Glendower!”

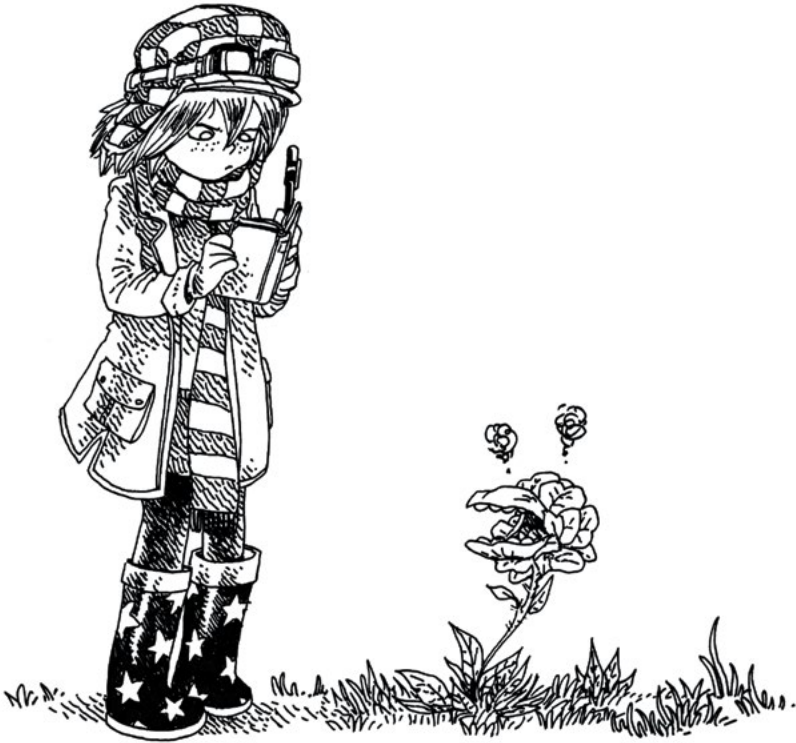
She didn’t reply.

By this time, Augie had realized the problem. The Green Knight’s system was actually quite useful for him, since he knew all the plants indi-

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vidually. In fact, Augie had a similar system for people. After all, if someone asked you who your parents were, it'd be rather strange for you to say "Oh, they're humans." But still, she refused to call a flower Frank. The very idea was absurd, so she decided to simply drop the topic and be courteous.

"Nice to meet you," she said. "I'm sorry we woke you up."



Frank made a certain gesture with his petals that you and I don't recognize, but which is really quite vulgar in the vegetable kingdom. The giant and Augie took it as an indication that they

should leave, and so they departed for the creek.

They were about to meet an elderly rock who swore he was the one who defeated Goliath despite some young brat getting all the credit, but the Green Knight realized he was running very late for an appointment.

“Where are you going?” asked Augie.

“I have to be at King Arthur’s court,” he said. “They don’t know it yet, but we’re playing the beheading game for Christmas!”

“The what?”

“The beheading game.”

“Do people get beheaded in the beheading game?”

“HO HO HO!” the giant laughed. “HA HA HA, oh my, no no no, not many.”

Augie was about to ask about the “not many” part, or for that matter how Christmas had wandered into Autumn, when the Green Knight pressed one of his nostrils, then blew through the other, making a noise somewhere between a bugle and a didgeridoo. “WUBBA-WUBBA-WUBBA-WEEEEEE!”

Augie looked down from her perch atop the giant as the ground beneath them rose up and formed into a giant green pony. Every bit of it was green. Its hair was blue-green moss, its eyes were the color of pine needles at night, its hooves were like unpolished jade, and its saddle and harness

were bark, the color of a bullfrog's back.

"KYAH!" shouted the knight, and they were off galloping through the woods. Augie tried doing the nose trick to see if she too could summon a pony, but she just ended up needing the handkerchief from her kit.

Although the green horse's great hooves must have weighed 50 pounds apiece, they padded gently against the spongy forest ground. On they went, dashing over the streams and brooks, into sinkholes and out through caves, up hills and down valleys. Augie watched the sun fall and fall and fall and tried to think of excuses to give her parents to explain why she was riding around on a giant green axeman well past her bedtime. Nothing sprung to mind, so she decided to relax a bit and enjoy herself.

"What's the horse's name?" she asked.

"Frank," said the Green Knight.

Augie began to wonder about the naming system in this strange land when, in the distance, the warm red lights of a castle's windows rose into view.



Chapter 5

It was an old castle, with lichens and moss and even small trees growing in the crevices of its stone walls. By now the sun was low, and there was a fine fiery glow coming from each window and turret. Small triangular red flags with gold fringes flicked and flapped, and Augie heard the distant sounds of merrymaking. This was the castle of Arthur and his knights.

Now, before I go on, you have to understand some things about knighthood. Knighthood sounds wonderful from the outside, but it's a bit like being a superhero without a secret identity. You can't simply just do anything, since you've got to behave like a superhero wherever you go. Knights are bound by the code of chivalry, which is aptly called a "code" since it is complex and confusing, and what exactly you get out of it is a se-

cret to people who don't understand it. Knights must eat a certain way, drink a certain way, speak a certain way. They are so concerned with their reputations that knights often get into great rows over minor matters, like poor taste in music or wearing the wrong shoes. It's a bit like a room full of teenagers, only everyone has swords.

It was just such a group of knights who were holding a festival that evening as The Green Knight (who was more a knight by heredity than profession) tapped at the front gate with his massive fist. This had the unfortunate effect of shattering the door into wood fragments and bent iron. However, on the plus side, there was now no need to gather attention.

Augie was used to being introduced to adults by her parents and not by giant green maniacs, so she wasn't entirely sure how to react. She looked down at 150 knights sitting at a great round table piled high with meats and pies and pastries, and ale and wine and mead. At the far end of the room was the king. He was clearly the king because he had both the largest chair and the largest hat. He had a well-kempt white beard and a hard pointy nose with a rosy tip. The queen was nearby, copper-haired and clothed in a gown of deep purple velvet. Her name was Guinevere.

Everyone stared at the door-smashing newcomers. The room was silent, save for the crackle



of the dozen fireplaces.

“MERRY CHRISTMAS!” shouted the Green Knight.

There was no response but the echo.

Augie leaned down to the Green Knight’s ear and whispered, “I think they’re waiting for you to introduce me, too.”

“What’s your name?” he whispered back.

“Augie. No, Augusta. Say Augusta.”

“Do you have a title?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Make one up.”

“Doctor.”

“You’re too young to be a doctor.”

“I *will* be a doctor. Might as well get some mileage out of it now!”

The Green Knight started to retort when King Arthur stood up. “WHO ARE YOU?!” he shouted.

“Come on! Introduce me!” whispered Augie.

The Green Knight cleared his throat and bowed. “I am the Green Knight, and this is my associate, Doctor Augie No Augusta Say Augusta.”

Augie sighed.

“And what brings you here?” asked the King.

The Green Knight flourished his hand and said, “I have heard far and wide of the bravery of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.”

Upon hearing this statement, the knights felt it was proper to express humility, and they shouted

things like “Oh, not I,” and “I am but a man doing his duty,” and “Surely he’s speaking of Gaheris or Ywain or Glistnir, but not myself!”

The giant continued. “And I wish to issue a challenge to the bravest of you!”

This statement prompted the knights to fall over one another proclaiming their greatness, shouting things like “I defeated the Tarasque of Manosque!” and “My sword has drunk the blood of a thousand fiends!” and “I have the highest slaying average among professional knights!”

The giant was happy at this display of bravery. “Very well then!” he said. “I propose a game in which I and one of you take turns beheading each other!”

At this point, the knights started in with short speeches on the value of lasting peace. “Well, we really must stop the cycle of violence,” they said, and “Christmas is a day of goodwill, is it not?” and “Can’t we all just get along?”

This was embarrassing to King Arthur, who prided himself on having the greatest knights in the land. He stood up on his spindly legs, weighed down by gold and jewels and heavy furs, and shouted, “Will none accept the challenge? Will you rely on your king, already tested in battle a thousand times, to stretch his neck before the falling blade while you eat his bread and drink his wine?”

There was some discussion on this issue, lasting for a few minutes and reaching no decisive conclusion.

“Well,” said the Green Knight, “I see I have here a room of beardless boys and not grown-up MEN, responsible and honorable enough to have axe fights with strangers!”

The knights were embarrassed. King Arthur’s eyes grew watery and he groaned.

The Green Knight tried encouragement. “He who stands to face me may wield my axe!” he said, holding it aloft. “Its name... is Frank!”

Augie was beginning to suspect how the giant knew the name of that buttercup.

The king looked about at his merry warriors and felt ashamed. “IS THERE NO ONE?! WILL YOU ALL SHOW YOURSELVES TO BE COWARDS?” he bellowed.

There was some debate on that issue as well. The knights were in the midst of noting the many pros and the one rather large con, when a young knight named Gawain stood up.

Now, Gawain, you must understand, was not the best of knights. That was Lancelot, but Lancelot was currently rampaging through the north of France on a diplomatic mission. Gawain was the sort of person who is good to work with because he is competent, but annoying to work with because he keeps a precise tally of every one of

his achievements and is forever informing you exactly how many push-ups he did last night. His knighting was uninspired, but he knew this and was motivated by it. Gawain saw protection of the king as duty, and he was one of those simple souls who believe that things like duty and honor are not subject to momentary concerns, like avoiding decapitation.

“THERE IS!” shouted Gawain, responding to the king. The passage of time had made this statement unclear, so he was obliged to clarify. “THERE IS NOT NO ONE. There is... SOME-ONE. I’m... it’s me. ME! GAWAIN!”

This brave proclamation was greeted with a loud mixture of huzzahs and accusations of brown-nosing as Gawain stood up from his seat and saluted the king.

Augie leaned toward the Green Knight’s ear and whispered, “Are you crazy? Do you not understand that if you get beheaded you DIE?”

“Don’t be silly,” he said. “That’d be like saying if I pull your arm off you won’t be able to move it.”

“I won’t!” she said, putting her arms behind her back.

“Have you even tried?” he said.

“No pulling off arms!” she shouted.

By now, Gawain stood before the Green Knight, sword in hand. The Green Knight smiled and reached back for his axe. He rested against it like

a cane as he searched through his kilt pocket. The axe was a good foot taller than Gawain, who looked it over and tried not to frown as the Green Knight pulled a stone out of his pocket and started sharpening the edge of the blade.

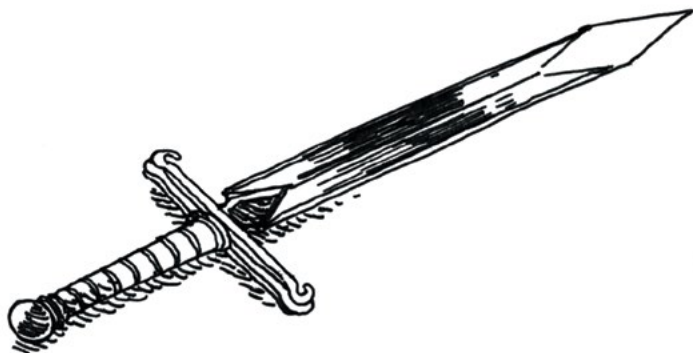
SKRTCH! SKRTCH! SKRTCH! went the sharpening.

“Just a moment,” said the Green Knight.

SKRTCH! SKRTCH! SKRTCH!

“So,” said the Green Knight, not realizing he was showering sparks down at Gawain, “you want to get beheaded first or second?”

Gawain gulped. He looked at the giant axe. He looked at his own sword, which suddenly looked like a needle to him. He looked back at the other knights, but none would meet his gaze. Would it be cowardly to go second? Or... or would it be even braver, since his life was riding entirely on his swordsmanship?



“I, um, uh, that’s... well—” he began.

“Or maybe a coin flip?” asked the Green Knight.

“I’ll go first!” shouted Gawain.

“Wonderful!” said the Green Knight, who put a final spitshine on Frank the axe. “Your weapon or mine?”

“How much does the axe weigh?” asked Gawain. Before the Green Knight responded, he added “Because, you know, I can bench 500 pounds. Easy.”

The Green Knight had never considered the weight of his axe, but he saw that Gawain was nervous and tried to put him at ease. “It is heavy enough that when it beheads, it always makes a clean stroke of it!”

This did not improve Gawain’s mood. But, he took hold of the axe and with a great heave he lifted it above his head.

“You know, in my house we usually just play Scrabble at Christmas!” Augie shouted. “Anyone up for Scrabble?!”

But no one paid her any mind. They all just watched, transfixed, as the Green Knight lowered down onto his belly and laid his head on the cold stone floor. “Is this good for you?” he asked, pulling back his cloak to show his brown-green neck with little mushrooms growing on it.

“S-sure,” said Gawain, struggling to keep the axe aloft. The Green Knight tried to be encouraging, and said, “You’re doing great! Now, on three, go for it. And a-one and a-two and... a-three!”

The knights gasped. The king growled. The queen fainted. The giant smiled impatiently. Augie said, “Settlers of Catan is a good boardgame, too!”

WHOOSH was the sound of the axe cutting through the air.

Chapter 6

The axe was so heavy and sharp that it cut right through the Green Knight's neck and cracked the stone floor. When the echo of metal on rock subsided, the room was as quiet as an ant's footsteps. Gawain released the vibrating axe handle.

His hands were trembling and he felt dizzy and very thirsty. He stepped back, aghast at what he'd done. The head tumbled for a few yards until it came to a stop and seemed to smile at him.

"Good show!" said the Green Knight's head.

The Green Knight's body leapt to its feet, picked up the head, and held it by the hair. With its other arm, it reached out a hand to Gawain.

Everyone in the court stared in silence.

"Good show, Sir Knight!" said the giant's head as his body shook Gawain's limp hand.

"So..." said Gawain, wondering if there were

any chance of a do-over.

“One year from this day,” the Green Knight announced, “you must appear at my castle, Green Chapel, where I shall return the brave favor you did for me. All hail, Sir... what was your name?”

“Gawain,” he squeaked.

“All hail Sir Gawain the Brave!”

Gawain asked if a two-out-of-three situation were out of the question, but his voice was drowned out by the bright huzzahs of the royal court. He sighed, slumped his shoulders, and returned to his seat to join in the feast. The knights sitting beside him carried on as if nothing had happened (after all, nothing of consequence had happened to them). But out of courtesy they agreed to abstain from phrases like “to get ahead” and “to lose one’s head” for the next half hour.

Gawain knew he would later feel a sense of pride in his knightly behavior, but for the moment he simply rubbed his neck and realized how nice it is to have a physical link between your head and body.

The Green Knight bowed and strapped the great axe back to his sweater. He placed Augie on his shoulders, and then returned his head to its proper place. By accident, he’d put the head on backward so that it was looking straight at Augie as his enormous nose poked her middle.

“Your head’s on backward,” she said, trying not



to appear horrified beyond belief.

“I’ll be darned if a little girl will tell me how to put my head on!” he said. Then he noticed the tag on his sweater and turned his head forward. He smiled at the court and took a great bow, which caused his head to fall off and tumble down in front of King Arthur, who fainted from sheer disgust.

“Sorry! Sorry! This always happens at the worst time, doesn’t it?” asked the Green Knight’s head. He was met with silence. His body slinked over, picked up his head, and then held it like it was a hat and tipped it to the court. This was so shocking that the king and queen both unfainted, shouted “YE GADS!” and fainted again.

“It’s time to go,” whispered Augie. The Green Knight agreed. He edged out of the hall and past the castle gates as his neck and head stitched themselves back together. The Green Knight smiled as he took skipping steps away from the castle under the stars and crescent moon.

It was much darker now, and it became darker still as they went farther and farther into the woods. Soon, the only light was from the fireflies and will-o’-the-wisps that flashed in the darkness. Augie smiled at the beautiful night, but her smile was stretched by worry.

Augie’s parents would no doubt be displeased about all this. Between the late hour and the be-

heading, she'd broken at least two rules. Though, technically speaking, there was no rule against beheading, her recent activity might be considered to have violated the spirit of the "behave yourself" rule.

She figured it'd be better to wait till morning before returning home. Mom and Dad would say yes to pretty much anything if you got to them before coffee. In any case, she was perfectly safe, and now there was a situation to deal with. She had to convince the giant Green Knight that beheading was a fairly serious matter. If she failed, brave Sir Gawain would be killed.



Meanwhile, back at Arthur's castle, things were merry once again. The king and queen had recovered and the festivities had doubled in boisterousness, as if to make up for the lost half hour.

"Ahh," said the king, "It's never Christmas until something magical happens, eh everyone?"

They all toasted this, though Gawain was a bit less enthusiastic. But, as the night wore on, the moon and the supply of ale went low, and he regained his spirits. After all, the average life ex-

pectancy of an adult knight is better measured in months than years.

In fact, considering your typical magical prophecy, knowing you have one year to live is a pretty good deal. Magical prophecies are rarely good. Note, for example, that Arthur knew the prophecy that he would one day be betrayed by his favorite knight. Or consider the famous wizard, Merlyn, who knew the prophecy that he would one day be trapped by his beloved. Or consider Sir Bottomwobbel, who knew the prophecy that his glorious name would one day sound amusing to children. Poor Sir Bottomwobbel. Oh, poor, poor Sir Bottomwobbel, and all the little Bottomwobbels who came after.

Yes, by comparison Gawain was quite lucky. And so, even he raised a glass of gratitude and humility on that Christmas Eve.

Chapter 7

As the Green Knight's horse galloped through the woods, Augie struggled to stay awake. Today had been the third busiest day of her life. The first busiest was a Halloween where, at the last minute, she decided to dress as Bertrand Russell, which required her to first prove that $1+1=2$ before she was willing to wear two shoes. After all, if $1+1$ does not equal 2, whenever you look at your feet, you might have 14 feet or 50 feet or negative a million feet or more feet than a finite universe could contain. If that happened, there'd be no end to the "feets of strength" puns Dad would make, and that would be intolerable.

The other more busy day was when she was born, but that day was sort of a tag team between her and Mom, so it wasn't so bad. "Although," she thought every time she heard the story, "the way

Mom describes it, you'd think 72 hours was ten years."

As the great horse glided past the trees, the gentle rocking motion and near-silence of the woods lulled her from consciousness. She fell into a wonderful dream. It was the dream where she received the Nobel Prize for developments in plasma physics, and then the prize was made of peanut butter and chocolate. Not that weird chocolate you get during holidays either—the good stuff. She gave a brief speech on the importance of muon husbandry to the audience, at which point she was given Dominion Over Jupiter as a special award, and then she won the Olympics. All of it.

Some time later, a finger of light tapped at her eyelids. She blinked, squinted, wiped her eyes, and looked out at the pink dawn. Near the rising sun, she saw a beautiful castle. Like the Green Knight and his horse, the castle was all green. It had green bricks, green doors, green windows, a moat of green water, greenfish (which are like goldfish, but purple), green flags, green pinnacles, and green-armored guards. One group of green guards got paid in green gold, while the other was paid in green diamonds. This payment discrepancy ensured that the knights were always green with envy. After all, the grass is always greener.⁵

5 The second pun was gratuitous and is a source of great shame to the author.



The giant horse slowed to a trot as they approached the green wooden doors at Green Chapel. The Green Knight punched the doors, shattering them. This must've been a frequent occurrence, because the little hobgoblins who ran out to rebuild them didn't seem fazed at all.

Inside the castle walls was the most magnificent city Augie had seen in her life. "It's more magnificent than Trenton," she gasped, "or even Baltimore."

Augie's parents weren't big on travel.

The castle's interior buildings were made of trees—great thick green trees with stout branches. The twisting limbs were worked into bridges to move between buildings and over waterways. There were sweet chestnut trees, flush with fruit and bioluminescent mustard greens which emitted a faint glow along the fern-lined roads.

As the Green Knight promenaded through town, the many castle-dwellers came out to greet him. He instantly assumed a kingly air, leaning his head back so far that he couldn't see forward. This had the effect of smooshing Augie behind his head and coating her in moist, matted hair, which smelled like an unhappy mixture of incense and swamp mold. He reached into his beard for green candies and tossed them to his people as he strode by.

Nobody actually wants to eat food from a beard,

so most of the hobgoblins and elves and kobolds pretended to eat the candy and then later hid it under the couch.

In the center of the castle court was the great hall of Green Chapel. It was a tall building, whose archway was made of entwined branches of a lychee tree. Under normal circumstances, Augie would've questioned the energy efficiency of growing tropical plants in this hemisphere. As it was, she was quite hungry, so she grabbed a few of the fruits as they went and wolfed them down. She hadn't eaten in 24 hours, unless you count the 60 candy bars, no caramel.

The great hall was a long, high-ceilinged room. At the far end was a throne made of a shaped pecan tree. The floorboards were also living wood, as were the frames of many paintings of the Green Knight's ancestors. The paintings themselves weren't made of trees, but the mustaches on them were. It wasn't clear if this was intended by the artists or if willow trees just have an excellent sense of humor.

The giant dismounted, walked to his throne and sat back, nearly smooshing Augie behind him. Augie jumped off at the last moment and fell into his beard, the interior of which was remarkably spacious, containing several large, Egyptian-style burial chambers, a display of plesiosaur bones, a robot from the 1939 New York World's Fair, and

four dogs playing poker. She stuck her head back out of the beard just in time to see a royal procession enter the hallway. At a glance, Augie could tell they were not local to Green Chapel. This was a foreign delegation.

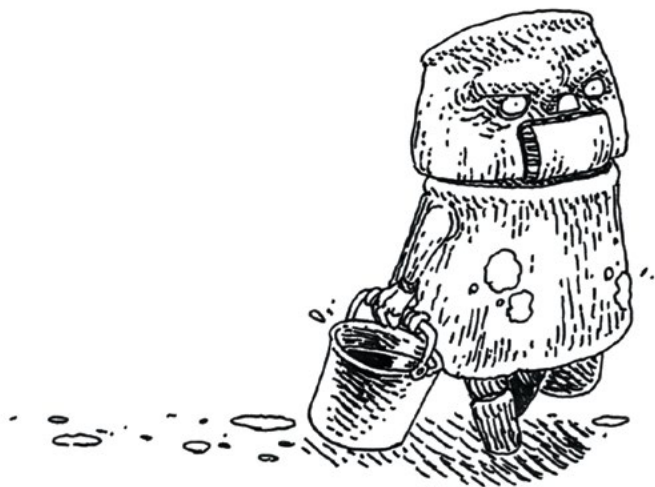
Tiny yellow-haired men in fancy white and gold uniforms came first, followed by strange birds with the heads of human women. They unfortunately still had the minds of birds and kept pecking at seeds and saying “BIRD! BIRD! BIRD!” which is what most birds mean to say when they say “squawk.”



Little blocky wooden creatures made hollow sounds as they clopped behind the ladybirds. They had large grumpy faces and carried buckets

of water. This was apparently because they were followed by firebirds, whose bodies looked like flaming comets and threatened constantly to burn down the whole building. The firebirds' squawks sounded like typical birdsong, but translated to "Sorry, everyone! I'm not doing it on purpose!"

In the center of the procession was a log cabin on giant chicken legs. It walked before the Green Knight, then opened its curved wooden door. Out tumbled an old lady in a bulky lace dress, studded with diamonds and amber.



She pulled back a bright patterned shawl, and her long, leathery nose poked out past two all-black eyes. She hissed horribly. "They call me Baba Yaga! Mother Bone-Legs! Spirit of the tundra. Stalker in the night. Fever-dream of a thousand thousand children. Haunter of—"



“BIRD! BIRD!” shouted one of the bird-ladies.

“Shh!” said the old woman. “Not while I’m talking!”

“BIRD!” protested the bird-lady. “BIRD! BIRD! BIRD!” The wood men chased her away with buckets of water as Baba Yaga sighed.

“What brings you here?” asked the Green Knight.

“We have a problem that none of our sages have managed to solve,” she said in her shrill turkey-like voice. “So, we have ventured abroad in search of an answer.” She turned to one side and waved her left hand.

Forward came a small monk in a dark robe. His hood covered most of his head, so that the only visible features of his face were the many distinct wrinkle lines under his eyes and on the sides of his mouth. Under his right arm he carried a large dusty leather-bound book.

Baba Yaga kept her eyes on the Green Knight as she shouted, “Recite the tale of Solomon and the baby!”

The old monk cleared his throat and opened the great book, which wafted the smell of library mildew around the room. “Once there were two women who both claimed to be the mother of a child. As neither would admit to lying, they brought the child before Solomon, who was wise. After a good deal of thought, he decreed that they should split

the child in two and give each mother a half.”

Now, Baba Yaga wasn’t an expert on humans, so she thought the tale should end here. However, she had been recently surprised to find that it continued.

“Whereupon the woman who was the child’s real mother was so horrified at the thought, she agreed to give the child to the false mother just so it could live. This showed Solomon who was the real mother after all.”

The monk bowed and retreated behind the parade.

The Green Knight rubbed his head in confusion. “Why not just split the kid? Then everyone gets half the kid.”

“Yes, that part is a little strange,” said Baba Yaga. “The humans in my kingdom have an odd phobia for being split in two. I found this out during a game of Twister that ended very awkwardly.”

At this point, Augie felt the desire to speak up and explain a thing or two about humans. But, she decided it’d be more prudent to wait and see how they decided on the splitting-in-two question before making her presence felt.

“Anyway,” said Baba Yaga, “it’s a good method whenever two moms claim the same child. We’ve been using it for a few months and it works reasonably well.”



“So, what’s the problem?” asked the Green Knight.

“Well, the problem is I’ve just had three human mothers come to me with a dispute over one child.”

The Green Knight thought this over, and then said, “Why not suggest splitting the child three ways and then see who says not to do that?”

“Well, suppose I don’t split it evenly. The actual human mother might be all right with splitting the kid three ways as long as she got, say, 40% of it.”

Augie, being a kid herself, was quite glad she was currently hidden in the beard.

Baba Yaga continued. “When we have only two, we can just tell one mom to split the kid and the other mom to make the first choice. That way it’s all fair. But how do we do that for 3 mothers? Or for that matter 4 or 5 or 6?”

The Green Knight grimaced at the prospect of a hard math problem. But, inside his beard, Augie was smiling and her heart was racing. Baba Yaga’s problem had several solutions, depending on a number of questions, like whether you could make infinite slices or whether the top of a baby is much different from the bottom of a baby.

“Our wise ones have come to no solution on this problem,” said Baba Yaga. Then, she snapped her fingers.

Seven firebirds came before her and flared their

wings. They let out a wild high shriek as a ball of flame formed between them and leapt into the air. The little blocky men clattered forward to put out the fire, and when the gray fog cleared, there were seven golden eggs. Each egg opened to reveal a machine of great genius. The first produced a bird that sang and moved. The second had a miniature steam-powered locomotive. The third had a ballerina dancing. The fourth had a young lady watering a knight's horse. The fifth was a clock that told time in three cities and also time until the end of the universe. The sixth played "A Musical Snuffbox" by Anatoly Liadov. And the last of the seven contained a mechanical gnome who lived in a small hovel and spent all his time complaining about how ostentatious the other six were.

The Green Knight's eyes grew wide. He licked his lips and rubbed his palms together.

"If you can solve the problem," said the old woman, "you may have these seven eggs."

Augie climbed up to the Green Knight's ear and whispered, "Take the eggs! I know the answer!"

"Oh," said the Green Knight. "You're still here?"

"Yes! And, if you make me your advisor, I'll help you!"

Chapter 8

A few hours later, Augie had worked out a solution on a blackboard tree. Details of the solution have been left to the appendix at the end of this book, but the solution is quite simple for situations that don't involve infinite moms.⁶

Baba Yaga liked the solution quite a bit, but found it rather odd, since it didn't involve splitting the baby at all. There are many ways to solve this problem, of course, but Augie had only presented solutions that kept the baby intact. She was just courteous that way.

"I hereby give these eggs to Green Chapel!" Baba Yaga shrieked. She turned to enter her walking log cabin, but she stopped just as her hand

⁶ Please do not remove the appendix unless it becomes inflamed.

touched its wooden surface. She turned toward Augie, smiled, and reached into her pocket. From there, she pulled out a simple golden amulet with three rough-hewn translucent blue stones set into it. She tossed it to the little girl.

“It’s beautiful,” said Augie.

“They’re questing stones, which you will need in your time here. I see you are intelligent. Perhaps very intelligent. But you must have wisdom, too. Intelligence is syrup. Wisdom is a maple.”

She made a high-pitched nasal sort of laugh, pulled her cloak up, and walked through the door of her chicken-legged cabin. Its bony chicken legs trotted back out the door and the procession of strange creatures followed.

The Green Knight smiled, grabbed the eggs, and handed them off to his chef to make breakfast. He then began the ceremony of appointment, in which Augie would be made Advisor to the Court of Green Chapel.

“Before we go ahead...” Augie began. “Does the ceremony involve any beheading?”

“Hmm,” said the Green Knight. “Do you want any?”

“Not really, no.”

“Well, if memory serves, it’s either no beheading, or maybe it was just a little beheading.”

“Let’s do a no-beheading version, just in case.”

“Very well,” said the giant, with just a hint of

disappointment. He reached into his beard, from which he pulled a shiny green scepter. Augie was an accomplished metallurgist, but she'd never seen a substance quite like this one. It looked like green gold, only when you got close to it, it appeared to shimmer and wobble like a pool of water.

"What's that?" she asked.

"The scepter? It's Frank."

Augie was starting to get annoyed with the whole Frank thing.

"I mean what metal is it?"

"The metal is also Frank. In its elemental form."

"AHA!" said Augie. "WRONG. I am familiar with the entire periodic table, and there is no element named Frank! You've been making up the whole Frank thing."

"The Frank thing?" asked the giant.

"Everything here is named Frank!" she shouted.

The giant looked genuinely confused to hear his future advisor talk this way. "Why on Earth do you think everything is named Frank here?"

"The first six things I asked about were named Frank!"

"Oh my. Well, that's silly. I suppose if you saw six ducks in a row, you'd assume everything after them was more ducks!"

"No. In fact humans have a joke about that. In

the number pi, the set of six 9s in a row is called the Feynman point. The idea is you count to that point, then say ‘999999, and so on’ and everyone gets the wrong idea.”

“Oh, come on. Humans don’t have a joke like that.”

“Yes, we do!”

“We’ll see about that,” shouted the giant. “Bring in my court human!”

A human was brought in by a few of the court kobolds. He was dressed in what appeared to be a forest faerie attempt at human clothing. He had jeans made of pressed bluebonnets and a wool shirt with “#1 local sports team” stitched on its front.

“Do you have such a joke?” asked the giant.

“Never heard of it,” said the court human, shrugging.

“Thank you, Frank. Dismissed.”

Augie scowled.

“Enough of this,” said the Green Knight. “Let us lower the scepter of appointment.”

He bopped her on the head with the green scepter, and a seed fell out of her hair. It landed on her shirtsleeve and sprouted into a vine. The vine branched out in tiny thread-like tendrils, which wove themselves into a fabric, which grew into a sash that read “ADVISOR.”

Augie, it must be conceded, was a bit vain, and

this sash suited her quite well. She stroked the back of her hand over its rough surface.

“Well?” asked the Green Knight. “What do you advise?”

This was Augie’s chance to rescue Gawain.

“The first order of business is that you must stop beheading things.”

The Green Knight narrowed his eyes and smirked. This suggestion seemed like a bunch of New Age fluff to him, but then again she had been right about the whole baby-splitting thing.

“Go on,” he said.

“It’s completely barbaric!” she shouted. “You can’t go around beheading knights.”

“I don’t think you know what ‘can’t’ means,” said the giant.

This was going to be harder than Augie thought. The Green Knight didn’t have any inkling about why a knight might want to keep his head, or for that matter why a leader might not want to chop off good people’s heads willy-nilly. She not only had to explain beheading to him, she had to convince him of an entire system of sensible rules.

“What we need here,” she said, “is a whole civilizing program for you.”

“And what, pray tell, needs to be civilized about me?” asked the giant. He was getting irritated now.

“How many knights have you beheaded?”

“Most of them.”

“Are there ever any true victors in war?”

“Yes. Usually one. Me.”

“What’s your favorite meal?”

“Bread made from the bones of my enemies. With butter and cinnamon. Is this going somewhere?”

Augie squinted at the giant. There was so little time to fix him. Why, it’d taken most of Augie’s life thus far to civilize Mom and Dad. She thought back on those difficult years.

For instance, starting around age 5, she became concerned with their literacy, so she had them practice reading to her every night before bed. It was adorable how Mom would sound out all the words, stumbling only occasionally when she had to read a sentence with odd syllables, like “The fifth fifer filed for fifty fair farthings,” or when she had to read made-up words, like “schwoxindoxin-cladjutrubbinbonkerschwox.”

Getting Dad to learn math was even harder. Augie would do schoolwork and have Dad check it so he could work on his understanding. Dad was beginning to grasp the rudiments. Of course, he was a bit slower than Augie, but really you can’t expect much from parents these days with all the media competing for their attention span.

However, the Green Knight was quite a bit less civilized than Augie’s parents, and time was quite



a bit more short. It was now only 11 months until Gawain would arrive, and the Green Knight had every intention to lop his head off.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m going to start with four basic principles of civilization. 1) Ethics is based on consent. 2) Victims shall not mete out vengeance themselves. 3) Government serves the will of the people. 4) Giant unwashed beards are gross.”

The fourth was a recent addition.

The giant cleared his throat to offer a rebuttal.

“1) Ethics is based on what the king wants right this second. 2) Having victims avenge themselves cuts down the budget for police. 3) The government serves the will of the people TO the people, and if they don’t obey, they are crushed. 4) I washed this beard in fertilizer just last week, which is why it looks so luxurious.”

The beard wriggled in a showy manner. The reserved but friendly eel in the beard stuck its tongue out at Augie. Faintly, Augie heard the sound of a poker-playing dog shouting, “WOO! Royal flush!” and taking a lot of chips off the table.

It was going to be a long 11 months.

Chapter 9

Since Gawain had accepted the challenge he'd gained a great reputation for gentility, and he was trying to adjust to this. Gentility is largely about scowling, putting your shoulders back, and saying "indeed." Unfortunately for Gawain, he was not very good at this. He was both sincere and eager, and these things are never fashionable among important people, especially when they are in public.

In the early part of the year, he had spent several months strength-training before he realized that strength would probably not help. After all, he had cleaved the Green Knight's head clean off and it had done no good. He decided that he must improve his ability at defeating green things.

To this end, he ordered his squire to deliver as many green things as possible so that he could

test their valor in combat. The squire hunted around the castle and brought back grass, limes, and poison ivy.

The grass was dispatched easily, putting up hardly any defense at all.

“Weakling,” said Gawain, as he wiped the chlorophyll from his blade.

The lime was also an unworthy foe, though it managed to spit citric acid into Gawain’s eyes. He was in no real danger, but it is in the knightly nature to be a bit dramatic, so he composed a few ballads on the dreadful impermanence of being and the vicissitudes of an upright life.

I’ll spare you the details, but here’s the least regrettable quatrain from a poem entitled “I Am But a Man:”

*Oh, villain of the the citrus kingdom!
Mine eyes, with sourness you stinged ‘em!
And since the sting most stingly stang,
I’ll be revenged! You’ll be meringue!*

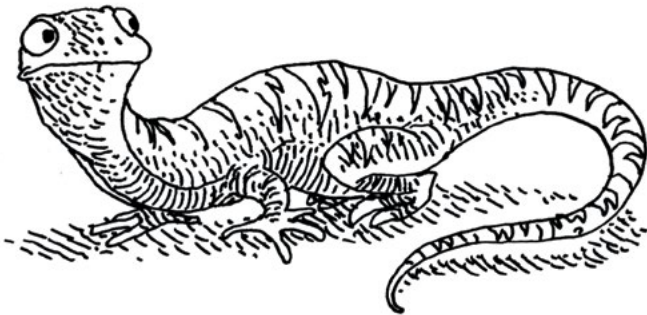
Once defeated, the fruitly foe was made into a lime and meringue pie. Revenge was the sweetest part, except for the sugar.

The poison ivy was a much more treacherous enemy, but Gawain should have known better than to head-butt a plant. He came out victorious, but he is no longer a believer in the notion of

“victory at any cost.”

Having bested three green plants, Gawain commanded his squire to bring three green animals. The squire located a few common fauna—a frog, a newt, and an amphisbaena. One of those animals may sound unfamiliar, so if you’ve never seen a frog, it’s like a goat, but with the head of a lizard and the body of a grasshopper. The newt was a cauldron-ready cooking newt, and the amphisbaena was pretty much your run-of-the-mill amphisbaena.

He faced off against the newt first. Gawain was about 400 times the newt’s height, and so he was forced to put it up on a table to make eye contact. Eye contact is a manner of intimidation often employed by knights, but it doesn’t work well on newts, since their eyes are on the sides of their heads.



After a few moments spent flitting back and forth between the left and right sides of the newt’s head, Gawain was irritated enough to begin the

combat.

He reached for his scabbard and pulled forth his blade, Galatine, which was covered in ancient runes. The runes were from a long-lost language, but were said to mean “All blade sales are final.”

He took a step back, raised his sword high, then swung down, lopping off the newt’s tail.

“OW!” said the newt, though it wasn’t a very passionate “ow.” It was more the kind of drawn-out “owwwwww” you use when you’ve stepped on a toy someone else has left out, and that someone is two rooms away, but you still want that someone to hear of your suffering.

Gawain was taken aback. He’d never heard a newt talk! He was a knight from a more simple place and time than you, when man and beast were more similar, so he had heard many other animals talk. He’d heard badgers talk and geese talk, and he once knew a hedgehog who was so well-spoken that he’d made a very good income as a personal injury attorney. But a newt? Never.

“Owwwww!” insisted the newt, annoyed at Gawain’s blank stare.

“Sorry,” said Gawain. “I didn’t know you could talk. If I’d known you were intelligent, I’d have dueled you in a more gentlemanly manner, like jousting.”

“Dueling is a sport for imbeciles,” said the newt. “Now, explain to me what I’m doing here, and



spare me any metaphysics. I was pulled by your thug from an important monograph on whether correlation and causality are correlated causally or correlationally!”

Gawain blinked.

The newt’s tail was already beginning to re-grow when Gawain said, “Well, I’m trying to fight a giant green knight. I cut off his head and he lived, and now he’s supposed to cut off mine. So, I’m already strong enough to fight him in the usual manner. Seriously. I can deadlift 500 pounds, no sweat. I’m not kidding either, I’ll show you.”

“I believe you,” said the newt, but it was too late. Gawain was already lifting a stone bench up and down while sweating and insisting over and over that “you’ve got to max the burn when you’re pumping stone.”

When the knight was finally finished, he looked to the newt for approval. The newt only stared at him, a little bored. This was hard for Gawain, as approval was something he would always seek and crave. It was why he, at that time, had many friends but no very close friends.

“You were talking about fighting a giant green knight,” said the newt.

“Oh, yes,” said Gawain. “Well, the giant part doesn’t appear to be a problem, so I’m focusing on the green part. I’m battling all sorts of green things to try to learn their defense methods.”

“That’s foolish,” said the newt. “Yes, I am green, but I’m not green for the same reason as a lime is green. It’d be like training to battle a potato because both the potato and the giant have eyes.”

Gawain thought this over. In his slow-working mind, it occurred to him that, in fact, the giant did have eyes just like a potato, and so perhaps he should be dueling potatoes as well. But, he relaxed once he remembered that he’d defeated a potato in combat at breakfast that morning. Here, the newt interrupted Gawain’s thought process.

“You say there’s a giant? It may be some fabulous mammalian anomaly,” said the newt. “May I suggest then that instead of dueling or cooking me, you employ me to advise you on your quest? I have seen many things, and as a newt, I am much closer to Nature than you are, which will make me a useful companion. I am also a philosopher.” That last part was said with great sorrow and dignity.

Gawain mulled over the newt’s offer and it pleased him, partially because he thought a “philosopher” was someone who offers floss, but also because Gawain was aware that his brain was not a quick one, so even the help of such a small creature might be useful. Then, a thought disturbed him.

“Wait,” said Gawain. “If a newt is so wise, perhaps I should also get the advice of the frog.”

The newt looked at Gawain like he had said something very stupid.

“He’s a frog,” said the newt.

“... So?”

“So, it’s... I can’t believe I have to explain this. A frog can’t talk. How in the world is it supposed to advise you? It’s just a frog.”

Gawain looked over to the frog, whose eyes stared in opposite directions vacantly. It croaked and soiled itself without changing expression.

“Maybe that’s just a frog’s way of saying hello,” Gawain suggested.

The frog then thought it saw a bug and shot out its tongue. The bug turned out to be a shadow, but the frog’s tongue stuck to a very cold stone on the castle wall, where it hung like a stretched-out piece of gum. The frog looked bored by all of this.

“Okay, well, what about the amphisbaena?” Gawain asked.

The newt looked even more incredulous.

“It’s just an amphisbaena. It just sits around all day scorgling its bittletap.”

Gawain looked at the amphisbaena. It was indeed doing so.

“Gross,” said Gawain as he looked back at the newt. “All right then, hop up, floss-offerer!”

“Philosopher,” said the newt as he jumped onto Gawain’s shoulder. “And,” he said, exhaling, “call me Newt.”

The knight found something very reassuring in the newt's tired confidence.

"I think we may become the best of friends," said Gawain.

"I don't believe in friends," said the newt. "The more you hold, the more may drop, you know. Let's keep it professional."

Gawain nodded his head, but he couldn't help but be hurt by the newt's denial of friendship. He looked a bit sad, but this did not bother the stoical newt, who said, "You will understand when you are older and have known loss. Feelings are a distraction to a great reasoner. Now then! First order of business. How long until you are due at the palace of the Green Knight?"

"Couple months," said Gawain.

"And where is it?" asked the newt.

Gawain shrugged. The newt sighed.

Chapter 10

We go back a few months now, where we see Augusta, who was only two months into civilizing the Green Knight and meeting with only limited success.⁷ It was proving difficult to civilize the giant directly, so she was now trying to create a civilization around him to do the work for her.

She paced back and forth before the giant, who sat on his throne. After a great deal of pacing, Augie lifted her head, thrust a finger into the air, and then said with great aplomb, “The first thing you must do to establish a civilized society is to determine which economic modes are allowed.”

7 It has been pointed out to me that this story does not proceed chronologically and that you humans may find that problematic. Well, deal with it.¹

1 This is an experiment to see if footnoted footnotes are possible. Please return to your story in progress, but do check back later to see if it has persisted.

The Green Knight nodded at this, though he didn't understand the sentence so much as the individual words. Augie continued.

"Now, I propose we implement a system of laissez-faire capitalism, along the lines proposed by Adam Smith."

"What is that?" asked the giant.

"Well, the idea is that the individual acts for her own benefit, and the invisible hand of the market produces good results for society."

"No, no," said the Green Knight. "We already have an invisible hand at the market. His name is Handrew. Ugh, he's terrible. Always pinching people when they aren't looking and making rude invisible gestures. I'm not entirely certain about the gestures, but I have a feeling. No, one invisible hand is enough, thank you."

Augie hadn't anticipated that response, but she reasoned that any system would do, and now was no time to get too finicky about the details. "Perhaps it'd be better to have a more communal economy," she suggested.

"Yes, indeed," said the giant, who for some reason thought "communal" meant there'd be pizza.

Augie smiled. "In that case, we should abolish private property so nobody owns anything."

"Interesting," said the giant. "But we basically already have that. I'm the boss here, so I own all the property. So, instead of nobody owning things,

only one body owns things. So, we're only off by one, and that's close enough."

Augie smirked and narrowed her eyes. "What to do, what to do..." she thought. "How is it that Grandpa always gets Dad to obey him, even though Dad is bigger and tougher, and there's no law that says Grandpa's in charge?"

That was it! She didn't need a whole complicated system to civilize the Green Knight. She just needed to teach the Green Knight manners.

Manners, when you get down to it, are really quite simple. You invent a set of rules to govern behavior, then roll your eyes at people who don't know about the rules. Once you do that, you've accepted that rules exist even when it's nobody's job to enforce them. And, once you do that, you might just be open to having "no beheadings allowed" be one of the rules.

In her official capacity as advisor, Augie scheduled a dinner for that evening.



It was a fine cold winter night, quiet but for the occasional hoot of an owl or scorgle of an amphisbaena. The moon was high and glowed pale blue,

making the castle moat shimmer and the green plants look almost white.

In the Green Knight's dining hall there was a great wooden table, formed of many intertwined fruit trees, such that from any seat, one might pluck a plum or fig or cherry, even at this cold time of year. On each side of the hall there was a roaring fireplace, made of stone carved to show various adventures of the Green Knight. One of them was very recently sculpted and pictured the Green Knight holding Gawain's head and giving a thumbs-up. It had not been approved by Augie.

As the moon rose high, a number of important guests from town settled in to eat. There were creatures of all sorts at dinner. Selkies, who are half-human and half-seal, sat in little birdbath seats that were pulled up to the table. Elves, dressed in silk and gold, sat politely, enjoying the wood-woven building. A few of the seats appeared to be empty, but they were in fact chair-turtles, which look exactly like chairs. The problem with chair-turtles is that they are nearsighted and they like sitting on chairs so they often end up sitting on each other. If you have enough chair-turtles in the same room, pretty soon you'll have an infinitely tall stack of them. This violates the laws of reality, and (often) the structure of the building's roof. Fortunately, the dinner invitation to the chair-turtles had specified that they might

only bring a finite number of guests, otherwise it'd be turtles all the way up.

The guests chattered away in their various strange languages until all at once the fireplaces went out.

"Welcome," bellowed the Green Knight from the darkness.

The room began to grow brighter. The guests looked up to see that several thousand vines were lowering down. Each vine was studded with small bulbous growths, which emitted a pleasant yellow light. The light grew brighter and brighter until just when you could see the person next to you, the fireplaces suddenly roared back. At the head of the table sat the Green Knight and Augie.

"I am your ruler, the Green Knight. This is my advisor, whose name is 'Augusta Just Say Augusta Frankmacher And Nothing Else Because That's My Name.'" Augie sighed in her mind and breathed slowly. To calm herself, she visualized the day when she would shock the mathematical world with Frankmacher's triviality theorem.⁸ Then, she would get a Fields Medal and enough money for a million candy bars, no caramel.

8 Frankmacher's triviality theorem states that all theorems are triviality true, including Frankmacher's theorem. This is a perfect mathematical theorem because it proves itself. The only potential problem is that it proves its opposite. Fortunately, it is trivially true that this isn't a problem.

Augie and the Green Knight

“Thank you for the introduction,” she said. “You may call me Augusta, for short. Everyone please be seated.”

“You will note,” said Augie, a wicked grin creasing her face, “that there are two forks by your plates. One fork is a regular fork. The other is a salad fork.”

The guests looked at each other in confusion. Well, except for the nearsighted chair-turtles, who looked at inanimate objects in confusion.

The selkie leader looked up and asked “Which fork is which? They look the same.”

“Surely, you know which fork is a salad fork, sir,” said Augie.

Augie and the Green Knight had worked out a system in advance. The salad fork had a tiny circle inscribed in its bottom tip, but it was so small and subtle that the dinner guests searched in vain for the difference.

“AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” Augie cackled as her guests squirmed.

“It’s this one!” said the Green Knight, who with great pride held up the wrong fork.

Augie quickly decided that the fork WITHOUT the tiny circle was the salad fork.

“Uh... yes. Precisely,” said Augie.

The Green Knight didn’t see the point in any of this, and yet he found he suddenly felt superior to the elves and selkies and chair-turtles who

had no idea that, obviously, the salad fork was the one without the tiny circle. “Poor uncouth fools,” he thought as he used the salad fork to catapult tomatoes from the bowl to his mouth. It worked about half the time.

“Good enough,” thought Augie.

And that was the way in which civilization got its foot in the door of Green Chapel. The Green Knight was still the ruler of the land, but through the simple use of a salad fork Augie had shown him that there are rules that exist outside the power of rulers. Mind you, the fork rule was probably a bad rule, but she reasoned that if she could get a stupid rule established, she could improve it over time, since that’s basically how all legal systems work.

Augie smiled, grabbed up a handful of lettuce and ate it happily, before realizing everyone was staring at her. She picked up the salad fork.

Chapter 11

It was November when Newt and Gawain set out for Green Chapel. They had hoped the green giant's steed had left footprints, but their quarry had used powerful forest magic on his horse, and it left no trace.

Fortunately, the Green Knight had not used powerful forest magic on himself, so there was a very distinct trail of beard hair and candy bar wrappers. Newt made a note in a tiny notebook:

“If don't die horribly, have discussion with insane giant about littering.”

They followed the trail all the way to the edge of the forest. By then, it was late in the day, and Newt suggested they wait until the next morning before going off into the murky woods.

“Aw, come on!” shouted Gawain. “Let's go now!”

“It's too dark,” said the newt. “Patience.”

But patience was not a virtue Gawain had ever mastered. He'd tried to acquire patience several times, but always got bored and quit partway through.

But, as the newt refused to enter the woods at night time, Gawain was obliged to sit and wait.

Now, if you had to sit and wait, you would probably just amuse yourself with a computer of some kind, but Gawain had no computer or television or even a radio. Perhaps he would've read muscle magazines, but the printing press hadn't been invented yet in his world. Magazines were carefully calligraphed by monks and sages, and were very costly and hard to come by. For instance, there was only one known issue of *Fitness World* Volume 4, and it was in the undersea rubble of the Library of Alexandria.

So, Gawain decided to work on his muscles by doing a large number of push-ups. He always intended to do only 10, but he couldn't count, so he ended up doing many hundreds and being very fit. This may sound silly, but in essence, it is how most human achievements occur.

Newt sat on the knight's back, reading a very very tiny copy of *The Hobbit: Edition for Amphibians, Lizards, and Snakes*. He read late into the night, until the pages were illuminated only by the moonlight reflected in Gawain's helmet. Gawain had long since stopped his exercise, and now

was snoring loudly. Newt was just at the part in his book where the noble dragon devours all the dwarves and hobbits and humans, keeps all the gold, and lives happily ever after.⁹ With that happy thought, he finally fell asleep.



They awoke just as the sun came over the horizon. Although they had slept a good distance from the forest edge, they now seemed to be on its periphery. This worried the newt, but before he could voice his concerns, Gawain was on his way into the woods. You see, Gawain rarely noticed little changes in his surroundings, which was why he was very happy and had, at one point or another, broken just about every bone in his body.

The creatures of this mysterious forest were subtle beings, and so there were no tracks or trails even in the fresh snow that coated the edge of the woods. The whole area appeared very empty to

9 Newt's favorite part was the dragon's poem:

One sniff to smell them all.
One snarl to meet 'em.
One trick to trap them all,
And in the darkness eat 'em!

Gawain and Newt. As they went deeper and deeper, the canopy of the trees blocked out more of the sun, and the denser trees forced the two travelers to take a more zigzaggy path.

An owl hooted from above. A wolf bayed somewhere behind. An amphisbaena scorgled ominously. Time became hard to reckon, and although they thought they had not been traveling long, they soon felt very sleepy and decided to make camp.

Gawain gathered some dry twigs and started a small fire. He bundled his cloak into a pillow as the flickering flame illuminated nearby trees, but little else. Newt was afraid because Newt was intelligent and could imagine all sorts of horrible things in the darkness. "It is not the darkness that frightens," he said. "It is that which lurks there!"

But Gawain did not hear, because he was already asleep and dreaming about beating Lance-lot at jousting. Newt knew this because Gawain was talking in his sleep, chanting out a spelling of his name, and spelling it wrong. "G-A-W! A-Y-N! Ga-wayn, Ga-wayn he will win!"

And, strange to say, in Gawain's simpleness and strength Newt found a good deal of comfort. He walked over to his large companion, made sure Gawain was fast asleep, and then curled into the knight's arm.



They awoke sometime later, and to their surprise it was still dark. The forest seemed stranger and murkier now. The woods were dense and dark and seemed to close about them like a shrinking cave. Camelot seemed very distant now.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Gawain.

“Why not?” asked Newt.

Gawain hadn’t thought of that, and now he too was afraid. He suddenly became more aware of his surroundings—the coarse cloak around his neck, the moist grass, the soft spongy earth.

Then, in the distance, he saw a faint blue light.

“Look at that!” he said as he leapt to his feet and took off running for it. Newt clung to his shoulders.

“Really?” Newt shouted. “You can’t just run at every mystery light you see in the creepy forest! Didn’t your mom ever tell you that?!”

But it was too late. Newt clung to Gawain’s shoulder as the knight hurtled through the woods.

As they drew closer, it became apparent that it was not a nearby small light, but a very distant large light. It grew larger and larger until it was

a great blue castle, the color of moonlight, or of the very hot part inside of a candle flame.

The knight was so excited that he didn't notice a small man in a blue cloak.

"Stop!" he said in his falsetto voice.

Gawain used his commanding knight voice to say, "Who are you, traveler?"

"Forsooth!" said the small man, because that's how most sentences start with mysterious travelers, "I know full well the sort of farer you be, who fully enjoys not being beheaded."

Gawain smiled in amazement. "How did you know!?"

"The place to which you go is called Green Chapel, and its king is the Green Knight. He's got this weird thing about wanting green stuff, which is to say he's crazy. Be it churl or chaplain who goes by that place, he chops them up!"

"Does he always do that?" asked Gawain. But the traveler ignored him.

"And if you should show yourself in that place," said the strange man, "surely you will be killed. Forsooth I say you must flee far from here, for fear you will not live long."

"Yeah, but if I leave," said Gawain, "everyone will say I'm a wimp. My whole thing is NOT being a wimp."

Newt looked at Gawain and whispered, "Can I have a word with you, in private?"

Gawain and the newt walked away from the mysterious traveler and talked in low voices.

“You didn’t say you were doing this to not look like a wimp!” said the newt.

“What other reason is there to do anything?” asked Gawain.

“Love, peace, beauty, truth, happiness, fun, whimsy, adventure, joy, responsibility...”

“Okay, but other than that stuff?”

Newt sighed. But, he looked in Gawain’s eyes and he thought he understood. It is almost impossible to understand why other people do things because we all have favorite feelings and favorite ways of getting those feelings. So, it is sometimes your duty to understand that what makes another person happy is not what makes you happy, and what makes another person sad is not what makes you sad. The little newt knew that what made Gawain happy was not safety or quiet or a good book, like it was for him. What Gawain wanted was to feel that he was a good knight.

“This is a terrible idea,” said Newt, with a sigh. “I’ll help.”

They turned to the traveler.

“I must go to Green Chapel,” said Gawain. “And whatever befalls me there, I will endure.”

Gawain didn’t know some of the words he just said, but Lancelot had said them once, and they had sounded very impressive. The traveler smiled

and nodded.

He held up a very small hand and pointed to the blue castle beyond.

Chapter 12

We once again go back a few months to find Augie at the court of Green Chapel.

You may recall that the Green Knight had been civilized earlier that year by Augie. He was taking to civilization rather well. He now wore a top hat, had a sensible four-door sedan, and checked his stock portfolio every morning. Mind you, these things couldn't readily be acquired in this faerie world, so the top hat was in fact a hobgoblin named Tophat whose job it was to sit on the Green Knight's head, and the sensible four-door sedan was a horse who neither had doors nor was sensible, and the stock portfolio was a piece of paper with the word "stock" written on it over and over.

Now that he seemed to accept the rules of civility, she hoped to show him that chopping off an

innocent man's head is decidedly uncivil.

"Sir Knight?" she said, with great dignity.

"Yes, my advisor?" the knight replied, doffing his hobgoblin. This did not go terribly well, as hobgoblins hate to be doffed.



"Sir, you may recall we will soon be visited by Gawain of King Arthur's Round Table."

The knight scrunched up his face as if he were considering something deeply. He talked quickly, like a businessman with a lot on his mind.

"Ah, yes," said the knight as he looked over his portfolio. "Lovely fellow. Looking forward to it."

"And you're planning to behead him."

"Yes, yes, indeed I am," he said, putting on reading glasses and squinting at the paper. "Highlight of the season, I should say."

"Don't you think it might be bad if we did that?"

"No, no, can't say I do."

"But if we behead him without a trial, that'll make us uncivilized. If we're uncivilized, we're no better than barbarians. If we're no better than

barbarians, I don't know where we'll get you espresso."

As it happened, the knight was sipping his espresso at that moment (which was in fact just a cup of swamp mud), and he spat it out.

"We mustn't become barbarians then!" he said. "If we become barbarians, why I'll eat my hat!"

At this point, Tophat the hobgoblin finally fled from the kingdom in search of a better job.



"Compromise," said Augie. She then went up to one of the stone walls and wrote:

YOU CAN ONLY BEHEAD PEOPLE
WHO DESERVE IT.

She turned toward the giant and smiled with hope.

"That's fine," said the Green Knight. "He deserves a beheading. A big showy one. He was very

brave.”

“That’s not what I meant!” said Augie. “Humans don’t like being beheaded. That’s why you can’t just do it. It has to be the right situation.”

“WHAT? The right situation? But we already use particular situations. Like, in this case, the situation is that I really, really want to behead the knight. Like, a LOT.”

“No, I mean I think it has to be a particular situation!”

“Ohhhhhh!” said the knight. “You mean Christmas!”

Augie mashed her face into her palms. She harrumphed very loudly and then paced back and forth with her hands behind her back, grinding out the problem in her head. She looked at the knight, who happily “read” the upside-down “stock portfolio.” And then she understood.

She had gotten the Green Knight to agree that rules ought to exist, but he didn’t understand why those rules existed. To him, each rule existed in isolation. And, it was hard to reason with him because he’d grown up in this insane world of witches and talking flowers and magic. How, she wondered, could she give him the education of a lifetime in just a few months?

And then she felt a strange warmth in her pocket. There, she found the golden amulet that Baba Yaga had given her. One of the three blue stones

now emitted a tiny but powerful spotlight. The Green Knight looked up from his portfolio, just as a ghostly voice vibrated the little gem.

“Go to the great Juniper, and find the great reasoners.”

“What does that mean?” she asked. But the first questing stone had already disappeared, leaving behind only a puff of smoke and a faint clean smell, like a chlorinated pool.

Augie called out for the court human. “FRANK!”

Frank the human ran around the corner, dressed in a business suit, as befitted a civilized servant. Unfortunately, business suits were in short supply here, so a business suit had just been painted on a burlap sack he wore. And, by “painted on,” I mean someone had written “business suit” on it.

“I need to go on a quest! I am told there is a great tree, where dwell the greatest reasoners in the land,” said Augie. “Where are they?”

“That’s easy,” said Frank. “The Cedar-bugs. They live in a giant tree in the woods just outside town.”

Augie turned toward the giant.

“Sir Knight! I wish to take you on a journey that’ll make you an even more just ruler than you are now!”

The knight grabbed his axe and stood up. “Very well,” he said. “Let it never be said that I was unconcerned with justice. In fact, if anyone says

that, off with their heads!”

Fortunately, Frank had left the room, so the order died in the air of the great hall.



Augie rode on the Green Knight's back, leaning on his big cold axe and gripping his thick ropey hair. From up here, she could look down to see the dappled brown and red and green treetops - the patchwork sweater the earth wears when it starts to get cold. As the sun went low and blossomed pink, it cast long shadows on the tall trees, so that the little forest creatures below were spotted with the scant light that made its way between the leaves. Ahead she saw the great tree—a Juniper leviathan, helical and gnarled.

Just as she could almost reach to touch it, the giant bent his knees and they descended through the canopy. There, at the bottom of the tree were great roots, grown about a very old stone building, half-buried in the ground below. Augie dismounted. The stone was dark gray and coated with roots and moss, and little streamlets filled up many of its cracks.

“I'll go first,” said Augie. It was one of her favor-



ite phrases, though it would nearly get her eaten by a megalodon 12 years later.

Augie and the Green Knight looked into the darkness. At the end of a short inlet, there was a huge door. A sign in front read “You must be THIS REASONABLE to enter,” and had an arrow pointing to a painting of Aristotle.

“Pfft,” said Augie, as she walked toward the door. “What kind of reasoner believes two objects in a vacuum fall at the same rate. Am I right?”

The Green Knight was uncertain.

“Now,” said Augie in a whisper, “We’re new here, so we don’t want to just barge on in.”

Needless to say, by the time she’d finished this sentence, the knight had already kicked the door into shards. Light came through the gap and filled the passage, and when the two questers’ eyes had adjusted, they saw a massive cylindrical chamber full of strange spidery creatures made of wood, each with a round body and long wooden legs.



Thousands of Cedar-bugs stared at the two newcomers. Augie was reminded of the time they’d burst into Camelot, and she decided that she’d do

the introductions this time.

“How would you like me to introduce you?” she asked.

The Green Knight thought a moment and then said, “The Green Knight, no—say Sir the Green Knight. Sir.”

“Got it,” said Augie. She cleared her throat. “INTRODUCING! Dr. Augusta Frankmacher and her advisee... Sir the Green Knight.”

The Cedar-bugs inched toward her with their smooth, careful steps. There were thousands of them, moving in eerie unison. The Green Knight, looking quite perturbed, leaned in to Augie.

“Why didn’t you say ‘The Green Knight No Say Sir The Green Knight Sir,’ like I asked?

Before she could respond, one of the Cedar-bugs came within a few feet of her and leaned down so that its eyeless body was near her face. “What do you want, Dr. Augusta Frankmacher?” it asked in its clarinet-like monotone.

“To see your leader,” she said.

“That door was our leader. You destroyed her!”

“WHAT?” Augie shouted. “OH WOW! I AM SO SORRY! I DIDN’T KNOW—”

“Just kidding.”

“Just... it was a joke? If it was a joke, why didn’t you laugh?”

“Silence is how we laugh.”

“Oh,” she said. “Are you laughing now?”

“Not any more. Silence is also how we stay quiet.”

Thousands of Cedar-bugs nodded in unison.

“All right then,” she said, mentally recovering now. “Uh... oh! Right. Are you the most logical species in the land?”

“Yes.”

“So, if my companion here had a question on something, you would give the right answer?”

“Yes.”

Augie turned to the knight, smiled smugly, and mouthed “Watch this.” She remembered the debacle with Frank the buttercup. Now, it was her turn to be right.

“Imagine you’re chopping off a knight’s head,” she said.

“Very well,” said the Cedar-bug.

“Would you require, say, a trial to determine if he truly deserves to get his head chopped off?”

She turned to the Green Knight and raised her eyebrows knowingly. The Green Knight crossed his arms as he awaited an answer.

“No,” said the Cedar-bug.

“Exactl... WAIT, WHAT?” shouted Augie. “OF COURSE YOU WOULD!”

The Green Knight’s neck craned forward, and his grin was so big it looked like he had a thousand teeth.

“AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!” said the Green

Knight. “HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA.”

“Just so you know,” said the nearby Cedar-bug, “we’re all laughing at you, too.”

This was all quite unpleasant for Augie as she looked out on all the silent wooden creatures.

She had assumed she was right about the trial. She pretty much always assumed she was right, because she pretty much was always right. In fact, the few times in her life she’d assumed that she was wrong, she turned out to be right about that.

“Well, what do you do when someone is bad?” she asked.

“What is bad?” responded the Cedar-bug.

“Aha!” shouted the little girl. There was the problem. Augie had been right about the need for trials, at least as long as the question was applied to regular people. But in the ant-like perfection of the Cedar-bugs, concepts like “deserving” were irrelevant. She turned to the Green Knight.

“Listen! They don’t try to determine who deserves what because they don’t need to! If you’re all perfectly reasonable machines, nobody has to be made to understand anything or punished for bad behavior or rewarded for good behavior. This sort of thing never comes up. But people like us aren’t perfect that way. We can’t always tell what’s right or what’s wrong. That’s why we need trials!”

The Green Knight stared at her for a moment,

nodding his head as if in agreement, and then in a glorious sing-song, he shouted, "I WAS RIGHT AND YOU WERE WRONG! I WAS RIGHT AND YOU WERE WRONG!"

Augie wondered if this was how the Romans felt as their civilization crumbled. She narrowed her eyes in annoyance as the Cedar-bug skittered back to work. She heard the echo of the Green Knight's phlegmy cackle, "BAHAHAHA!" and she was very, very annoyed.

She noticed that the Green Knight happened to be sitting on the edge of a long concrete bridge that had been built across the wide middle of the chamber. He was so big that the ground beneath him looked like it wanted to give way. Augie walked over to a crack, waited till she thought nobody was looking, and gave the ground a great big kick.

Snap! The concrete broke, the bridge crumbled, and the Green Knight tumbled down a hundred feet to the bottom, where he landed with so much force that the entire chamber shook.

Augie wasn't too worried about her friend; she'd seen him survive decapitation, so a little slide down some rock didn't seem too dangerous. She sat on her haunches and slid down into the bowl-shaped bottom until she arrived at the trough, where the giant lay on his back.

She rolled a large rock off of the giant's face and

looked him over. He squinted, spat out a few pebbles and gray dust and said, "Is this quest about done?"

"Give it a minute," she said.

Just then, a mob of thousands of Cedar-bugs showed up. They skittered about the place, stepping ticklishly over the Green Knight's body as they examined the area. There were so many now that he couldn't lift his body up. A Cedar-bug walked up to the giant's face and asked, "Why did you break our bridge?"

The giant looked scared and hesitated. The chamber was silent.

"Oh, wait, are you guys laughing?" asked the Green Knight.

"NO!" the Cedar-bug shouted. It almost sounded mad.

"Advisor?" said the Green Knight, looking to Augie for help.

"Don't worry," she said, as she turned toward the crowd of Cedar-bugs. "Ahem. May I suggest: You should destroy the Green Knight, so he can't do this again."

"You're not a great advisor," shouted the giant. The reserved but friendly eel in his beard cast Augie a nasty look.

The Cedar-bugs began to whirl about in their spidery way, chanting, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" They gathered into a hideous clump, which grew higher and

higher until it looked like the tail of a scorpion. The point of the tail bent down toward the Green Knight until it nearly touched his forehead.

“Wait!” shouted Augie. “I have an even better idea. What if instead of destroying him, we consider the situation a little!”

The Cedar-bugs pulled back a few inches.

“The Green Knight would rather not be destroyed,” said Augie.

“Correct!” shouted the knight.

“And the purpose of destroying the Green Knight was to get rid of him. How about instead, he just promises to send people to fix the bridge, and then to never come back?”

The Cedar-bugs were silent.

“Are you laughing?” asked Augie.



If you had been watching from outside the tree, you would’ve seen a great Green Knight fly out of the front door as if he were a cannonball. You would have seen him followed by a little girl, looking very pleased with herself.

The Green Knight spat out some dust, and said “Okay, I’m starting to see the whole situations

thing a little better.”

The two returned to Green Chapel that evening. The Green Knight ordered a cup of espresso, and Augie went to the stone wall, where she had written:

YOU CAN ONLY BEHEAD PEOPLE
WHO DESERVE IT.

She now amended it to:

YOU CAN ONLY BEHEAD PEOPLE WHO
DESERVE IT IF THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE
SOLUTION.

“All right,” said the Green Knight, as he dusted off his beard and sipped at his swamp mud.

“So,” said Augie. “We shouldn’t behead Gawain.”

The Green Knight was silent. Augie waited for a reply for a few seconds, but got nothing.

“Sorry,” said the giant. “I was doing a Cedar-bug laugh. HAHAAHAHAHA!”

Augie looked annoyed.

“Gawain beheaded me!” shouted the giant. “What other way to reward him could we possibly use?”

He rubbed his hand gingerly over the blade of his axe. Augie put her fists on her forehead. She was going to have to think harder.

Chapter 13

The castle was very large and very bright and very beautiful, with its pale blue bricks reflecting the light of the moon. When Gawain and Newt drew near, the front drawbridge of the castle came down gently onto the grass below.

To the amazement of Newt, immediately within the gate stood a lord and lady surrounded by a procession of guards, all dressed in blue satin. The lord was wide and pink of skin, with a tall golden crown and a vast cotton-white beard that seemed to burst from his face. The lady had bright orange hair and freckles and a great big smile, and you could tell from her tanned powerful arms that she liked the outdoors.

Newt noticed that it was strange to see a lord and lady at the castle gate, but Gawain noticed something more subtle. He did not know what it

was, but he felt it in his heart that this lady was strange. The brain is the more versatile organ, but the heart tuned properly is the more sensitive.

Gawain's big heart told him that the lady was both alluring and dangerous. This was very bad because Gawain found alluringness dangerous and dangerousness alluring. But, Gawain was careful not to react too strongly to his heart. A knight with great honor must take care listening to his heart, or he will find himself fighting a duel every ten minutes or so. He bowed low and said, "I am Gawain, Knight of the Round Table."

The lord smiled. "And we are Lord and Lady Bertilak. Won't you come in for hospitality? We almost never get visitors. It's a terrible location, but you can't beat the property tax."

Gawain wasn't sure what to do, but then Lady Bertilak said, "We have cake."

"It shall be eaten!" said Gawain.¹⁰

"Wait!" Newt said in a hoarse whisper. "We're on a quest! We've only got a little time left!"

"OH! Oh, right," said Gawain. He turned toward the lord. "Hey, have you seen an enormous green knight on an enormous green horse living in an enormous green castle?"

"Of course!" said the lord. "The Green Knight. Handsome fellow. Luxurious beard. He lives a few

¹⁰ The brain may be versatile and the heart may be sensitive, but the stomach is where most decisions are made.



blocks up the way. When are you due to see him?”

“Christmas,” said Gawain.

“That’s only a few days away,” said the lady.

Newt and Gawain looked at each other. Had they been in the forest longer than they’d imagined? Gawain thought it must have been some sort of forest magic, but Newt was pretty sure they just shouldn’t have trusted Gawain’s homemade calendars before they set off.

The lord smiled and said, “If you stay with us and partake of our hospitality for a few days, we’ll take you up to Green Chapel in time for Christmas.”

Gawain was rather fond of cake, and by now the newt was resigned to just going with events as they came, so they agreed to stay at Castle Bertilak.

The lord and lady turned about and their blue satin guards made way. Gawain and Newt followed them into the castle, which was lovely but austere. Its interior contained many small wooden huts, though none of them seemed to have any light within. In fact, the whole area was dark, except for where the moonlight shone off the fallen snow on the grass and walls and ceilings. This was a bit distressing for Gawain, who had only known the cheerful and charming castle at Camelot, but he kept himself warm with happy thoughts, like seeing cake, being served cake, eating cake, and

fondly recalling having eaten cake.

They soon arrived at a tall, cold marble building. Its stone doors opened out, and to the pleasant surprise of the travelers, the interior was warm and inviting, lined with roaring fires and tables eager for wintertime delicacies. But, on top of one table was a small goblinish creature in a chef's hat and apron, wailing in his high-pitched voice.

"What's the matter?" asked Lord Bertilak.

"Thieves!" cried the chef. "Roast-nappers! There will be no roast for our Christmas festivities."

"Who steals a roast?" asked Newt.

Gawain's sword made a metallic vibration as he loosed it from its scabbard.

"I will find the thieves. By my blood, I will not return until I have their heads! I'll do it, too. I'm tough. I can do like 100 push-ups in two minutes flat."

"That won't be necessar—" the lord started to say, but it was too late.

"It's in the wrist," Gawain huffed. "Pressure on the wrist, not on the hand. Works the whole body. Work it! WOOH!"

Gawain finished and said, "See that? No sweat. Told you about the push-ups. You all saw that."

The lady said, "Two-handed push-ups are weak! Watch this!"

What followed was a contest of dueling work-

outs. The lady did one-handed push-ups, so Gawain did one-finger push-ups, so the lady did push-ups using only her face, so Gawain did push-ups using only half of his face.

“Zounds!” shouted the lady. “I’ve never seen that before.”

Gawain smiled, though the right side of his head was flattened and pink.

“Very impressive,” the Lord said kindly, nodding just enough to bare the ruddy top of his head over his crown. “I don’t think we’ll be needing your services with the thief. May I suggest we use your considerable skill to hunt up a new roast?”

Gawain had a brief conference with Newt, which largely centered around the exact definition of the word “considerable,” and whether it is a compliment. That being completed, Gawain agreed to hunt on behalf of Lord Bertilak.

This was the agreement they made: Lord Bertilak would allow Gawain to hunt in his private forest, and Gawain would bring back to the castle whatever he acquired on the hunt. Lady Bertilak would go along to guide Gawain and keep him company.

This arrangement made Gawain rather nervous. You see, in the world of lords and ladies, the rules are very strange. Regular folks like you and I will often shake hands or exchange hugs and kisses. But, the bodies of lords and ladies are con-

sidered to be sacred, and so can only be touched by certain people. It's sort of like when you're on a long trip and your brother or sister won't stop touching you and you say, "STOP TOUCHING ME," except that if you were a lady or lord, you could have your sibling beheaded for it. This may sound delightful, but you might come to regret it in the long run.

Being a knight, Gawain was compelled to say yes to Lord Bertilak's hospitality, even though it scared him. And so, that afternoon, he and Lady Bertilak and Newt rode out into the woods near the castle. They were looking for a rare phytozooan.¹¹

The particular phytozooan in question was known as the "vegetable lamb." It was a peculiar invasive plant that came from Tartary through a nearby port. At its base were large lanceolate leaves, out of which grew a thick brown stalk with a texture somewhere between bamboo and rubber. At the top was a fruit which very closely resembled a lamb. As the fruit grew to maturity, the stalk would bend forward so that the "lamb" could graze on the nearby grass. This allowed it to grow larger and larger, until one day it grew big enough to dislodge itself and run off into the

11 A phytozooan is a plant that behaves like an animal, which is to say it is the opposite of a computer programmer.

woods.¹²

As they made their way through the woods, Gawain couldn't help but notice that Lady Bertilak looked beautiful and noble astride a white horse. She wore a large loose dress of white silk and taffeta, with the sleeves cut off, and had a green girdle around her waist. Her hair glittered in the sun and hung about her face in delicate ringlets.



The lady made Gawain nervous. He could tell by her bearing that she was more educated than he. Most of his previous conversations in life were

12 It was a very good thing that Augie was not on the hunting trip, as she would have certainly noted that the vegetable lamb is an evolutionary impossibility, only to have the vegetable lamb give her a short lecture on horizontal gene transfer, which would have resulted in her demanding a DNA sample, which is considered poor form almost everywhere.

about how much stone he could bench, or about how much ale he could drink, or the grossest thing that'd ever been up his nose. He figured gentlewomen were not interested in the first two, and though they were probably interested in the third, they would be compelled by their high rank to deny it.

So, the two of them rode their horses in silence, occasionally smiling at each other. Lady Bertilak's smile was mischievous—like the look you might make if you were hiding a bucket of toads behind your back while your dad was asking where you'd been all day. Gawain's smile was a funny sort of scrunching-up of the right side of his face so that his cheek nearly pressed his eye shut.

"I hear," said the lady, "you are the most powerful of knights."

"You have heard more or less correctly," said Gawain, nervously thinking of Lancelot.

Newt found this all very dull and silly, so he turned around in his saddlebag to look the other way. He did not like to share his companion with this strange lady.

As Newt turned around, he noticed a small patch of vegetable wolves, which are a phytozooan you're probably already familiar with. Vegetable wolves are a sure sign that vegetable lambs are nearby. Newt, against his better judgment, decided to help make Gawain look impressive by whis-



pering in his ear, “Go left.”

Gawain subtly turned to Newt. Newt winked. Gawain nodded, smiled furtively, and winked back.

“M’lady, I believe we’ll want to go left now.”

Gawain turned to his right and at once collided with the lady’s horse.



Soon, they were packing up large succulent vegetable lambs. Lady Bertilak was impressed with Gawain’s tracking skills. In fact, she was so impressed she gave him a great big hug.

He froze. Every muscle in his body stretched taut. Gawain felt like a frog in front of a speeding car. Hugging a noble lady like this was a huge indiscretion. But, perhaps it was also an indiscretion to not hug back? The strong arms of Lady Bertilak felt like the embrace of a boa. In most circumstances, Gawain defeated bad things by swinging his sword. But, even if he could reach it, it wasn’t clear what he’d stab to get out of this.

Then, she gave him a kiss on the cheek.

He patted her on the back and mumbled, “Err... right back at ya,” then disengaged and hopped on

his horse, which he figured was too high for the lady to reach.

As they trotted through the woods, Newt ran up to Gawain's ear.



“WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT?” he whispered.

“What?” asked Gawain, also whispering.

“The KISS. You can’t get KISSED by nobility!
AND SHE’S MARRIED NOBILITY.”

“I didn’t want the KISS!”

“You *got* it. You have to give it to Lord Bertilak!”

“What?”

“You agreed to give whatever you got on the trip
to Lord Bertilak. And you got a kiss!”

This was so shocking, Gawain forgot to whisper
and shouted, “NO, LIZARD¹³, NO!”

“Everything all right?” asked the lady.

“FINE!” shouted Gawain.

13 Of course, a newt is actually an amphibian, not a lizard.

“If you don’t do it,” said the newt, “you’ve broken the knightly code.”

Gawain whispered back, “I can’t kiss Lord Bertilak! It’ll be weird! And, it also violates the code.”

“It does not! The lord agreed to it. The only knightly action to take is to go to the lord, kiss him, and hope he doesn’t ask why.”

At this, Gawain began to jitter and look side to side. He felt sick and dizzy. “CURSE YOUR WISDOM, TINY FRIEND!” he shouted.

“Is everything okay?” asked Lady Bertilak. She looked concerned now.

“Fine! Fine!” said Gawain. He changed the subject to the first thing that came to mind. “Hey, you wanna hear about the grossest thing that ever went up my nose?”

The newt sighed and closed the flap of the saddlebag over his head.

Chapter 14

Augie paced back in forth in front of the wall that read:

YOU CAN ONLY BEHEAD PEOPLE WHO
DESERVE IT, IF THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE
SOLUTION

How would you know if another solution was acceptable? In her opinion, some other solution was probably always better, except perhaps in the case of people who pronounce “nuclear” as “nookular.” But it wasn’t enough that her opinion forbade beheading. She needed other people to understand. There had to be some sort of procedure that didn’t just involve the Green Knight saying “Let’s do it!”

“What we need is a trial!” she shouted. “A test

to determine if Gawain ought to be beheaded!”

“How about a coin toss?” offered the giant.

“A... a coin toss? How in the world is that a good trial?”

“Well, the coin has a head on one side, which will allow for a lot of head-related punning.”

Augie thought this an excellent point, but probably not quite a sufficient basis for beheading.

“Too random,” she said.

The Green Knight thought deeply. “How about if we flipped two coins?”

It was apparent that the Green Knight was not a particularly good designer of rules. But Augie wasn’t certain what rule to impose either. According to the Green Knight’s spies, Gawain still hadn’t yet set out, because he was too busy talking with a tiny amphibian, but he would probably be going soon. Augie paced and paced but couldn’t think of either a good trial or how she might go about getting the giant to agree to it.

It was in just that moment of confusion that the golden amulet in her pocket began to glow once again. The pale blue light shone out through her clothes, and she picked up the amulet, which was almost too hot to hold.

The Green Knight leaned over as a spectral voice whispered from the amulet, “By the sea, find the beautiful makers.” The voice drifted away and the stone vanished.

“Frank the human!” she shouted.

Frank ran out, wearing a barrel marked “Tuxedo.”

“I’m going to a formal event tonight,” he said.

“I must go on a second quest. Who are the greatest makers in this land? I am told they live by the sea.”

Frank rubbed his stubbly beard and tapped his hands on the copper rim of the barrel.

“Ah, of course. You’ll want the Sea-Gnomes! Ah, they’re a fascinating bunch. They live out at the chalk cliffs. Each is about the size of a grain of rice and lives for only a hundred seconds.”

“Seconds? How do they get anything done?”

“Their experience of time is different, so they see us as very slow while we see them as very fast. Also, they don’t take lunch breaks.”

Augie had difficulty processing the idea of skipping lunch, and decided the Sea-Gnomes must be fascinating indeed.

She turned to the Green Knight, who was just beginning to put his feet up and relax.

“Another quest is in order!” she shouted.

The Green Knight spat out his espresso all over Frank’s barrel.

“This is a rental!” shouted Frank.



A cool breeze fluttered Augie and the giant's clothes as they looked out over the chalky white cliffs. With their mossy tops, the cliffs looked like big pieces of white cake with green frosting, which had been sliced into pieces by rainfall over millions of years.

A wide set of stairs were cut from the side of a cliff, descending hundreds of feet, bone white.

Augie ran her hands over the chalky walls. She knew formations like these didn't happen simply or quickly. They were the skeletons of billions and billions of tiny little coccolithophores. If you've never seen one, well, that's typical because human eyes can't see them. But, if you have a scanning tunneling electron microscope, you'll see that they look like little balls covered in round shields. Here, each ball of shields had lived its short life, then left a tiny skeleton that would last far longer than the remains of most human beings. With her little finger, Augie touched them by the thousands.

Down and down and down the stairs, they descended all the way to Sea-Gnome Beach below. It was vast and white-sanded, with a gentle foamy

ocean caressing its shore. It was almost disconcertingly pretty—without any of the odd smells or washing-up of the sea. For a moment, she feared the inhabitants had died out.

But, as the beach came into focus, she saw a thousand spiral-shaped mounds, each about an inch high and a foot wide, all packed tightly together. Each spiral came out from a central point, looping around and around, until it terminated in a little tiny tower about the size of your thumb. These odd little spirals were the homes of the master designers—the Sea-Gnomes.

Augie didn't know what to say, but she was about done with trying to do introductions, so she simply called out "Hello! I wish to speak to the ruler of the Sea-Gnomes!"

She heard a very short squeak. It sounded something like "Hvvp!" Later, it would turn out that this was a long speech, written in verse, but which was said much too fast for Augie to hear. It was rather verbose, but here is a sample to give you a flavor of it:

*You're just too big, oh giant beast!
So sorry, we can't hold a feast!
And anyway, I'll be deceased,
Ere you reply to me.*

But hear the words that I do preach,

Augie and the Green Knight

*And kindly do what I beseech:
Please keep your sandals off the beach.
It's private property.*

Of course, Augie didn't catch that. She just heard "HVVP!" But remember, the Sea-Gnomes were great designers, and they quickly designed a solution. One Sea-Gnome at a time would spend half a second of its life (equivalent to about six months of yours) slowly pronouncing one letter of a word. It wasn't easy. Imagine saying "OOOOOOO OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO" for six months, to a giant unresponsive face. It was slow tedious work, but that was the sort of work Sea-Gnomes liked doing.

After a moment, Augie and the Green Knight heard a patchwork voice say, "Hello, and welcome to Sea-Gnome Beach. This sentence was begun by the Great and Ancient King Bathos Bathyerg IV, the great leader of the noble lineage of the Bathyergs, and this middle part here was added by decree of his Great and Ancient daughter Queen Bathetta II of the noble lineage of the Bathyergs, and it shall be finished by her daughter, Sally, the Great and Ancient leader of the noble lineage of

the Bathyergs.”

“This is cool!” said Augie.

She had to think fast. Each second was a year in Sea-Gnome time. But she had so many questions. If they were so fast, how did their brains work? Human brains transmit signals fairly fast, but they have to work with chemicals, so there are speed limits. Sea-Gnomes must have something better, like minds made of metal or pure energy or crystal or who knows what? And how did their bodies work? Weird things start happening when tubes get too small. Did their bodies have capillaries in them like human bodies? And how did they evolve? And what did they look like close-up?

Before she could say anything, the Green Knight blurted out, “Why spirals?” Augie would’ve been annoyed, but this was actually a very good question.

“It is a nice shape for a home,” said the Sea-Gnomes.

“But... it’s a terrible shape for a home!” said Augie.

“Why?” asked the little voice.

“Well, suppose you’re in the middle of the spiral, and you want to get out to see the beach from the little tower. You’ve got to walk your whole life just to get there! It’d be much more sensible to have, say, concentric circles with lots of paths between.”

Augie smiled a big smile and was very pleased

with herself. Here were the greatest designers in the land, who'd had millions of generations to settle on a housing style, and she and her friend had just shown them up. Mind you, the Green Knight had meant to follow up by saying, "You should shape your houses like my face," but he'd fortunately never had the opportunity.

The Sea-Gnomes did not reply immediately. In fact, the pause went on for half a Sea-Gnome lifetime. Then, the spirals began to reshape, slowly, almost imperceptibly, into circles within circles, just as Augie suggested. The circles budded off into each other, so each ring was connected to each other ring at many points.

Then, one of the circles nearby suddenly disappeared. Then it reappeared. And then it disappeared. And she watched as this happened over and over and over in different spots, until the beach looked like a pale checkerboard whose squares were constantly switching color.

"What's happening?" she asked. It was many seconds before a voice spoke.

"The spirals..." it said. "They were... good. We never should have lost them. We are born in the center of the spiral. If you want to reach the big tower in your lifetime, you must walk the entire spiral. This was not efficient, but it meant that everyone knew everyone else. But, when the circles were built, it was no longer necessary to see

everyone. There were always shortcuts. In time, people fractured and separated. Became tribes. Became enemies. We're fighting now. We are all at war."

"CHANGE BACK!" she shouted. "CHANGE BACK!"

Even the Green Knight looked upset.

The circles began to break and combine and change shape. One would swell up while its neighbors shrank. One would grow tall only to fall apart. And then, all at once, the beach was flat and motionless.

Augie stared, open-mouthed. Her tongue felt very dry and she clutched her sash so hard that she tore holes in it. She felt sad and foolish and guilty, like the feeling you get when you're at a neighbor's house and you break something precious.

"FOOLED YOU!" shouted a high-pitched voice.

"WHAT?!" Augie and the giant shouted at the same time.

The flat beach reshaped into its previous spiral arrangement.

"Ha!" said the voice. "We fooled you. We made you think you destroyed an ancient civilization by accident."

"NOT FUNNY," shouted Augie.

"A little funny," said the giant.

"You thought you knew better than us," said the

voice. "But, you took no time to understand this world before you tried to change it. You thought a house was just a shelter. You saw only what the eye sees."

Augie hadn't quite recovered, so the poetical language wasn't really hitting her.

"IT WAS A PRANK?" she shouted, eyes wide.

"Yes. A very good one," said the voice.

"How... how many generations did it take?"

"Fifteen," said the voice. "Ah... I only wish my grampa's grampa's grampa's grampa could see the look on your face right now!"

Augie ran a hand through her hair and sighed through clenched teeth. This was turning out to be an unusual day.

"I came to ask for help designing a law," she said.

"And, you have received your help," said the voice.

All at once, the sand in front of her rose up like a great wave. It heaved Augie and the Green Knight off the beach, back up onto the green-topped cliffs. She landed in his soft, mossy hair.

The Green Knight dusted off his knees. "Next time we go on a quest, I'm bringing a mattress to land on."



Back at Green Chapel, Augie stared at the chalkboard.

YOU CAN ONLY BEHEAD PEOPLE WHO
DESERVE IT, IF THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE
SOLUTION

“We must consider what the point of the beheading game was,” she said, half to herself. “That’s the wisdom. We can’t just pick any solution. It has to consider time and place. What is the point?”

“Ah! Aha!” shouted the giant. “This one I know. The point is to see who beheads the best!”

“That is the apparent reason for the test.” she said. “But what does the test do?”

The giant looked very confused.

Augie continued. “What if the test isn’t about beheading, but about the knight’s code? You see?! The whole value of the knight’s code of honor is that it doesn’t waver. If the knight gives his word, he must follow through. If we let Gawain off the hook, we’re breaking the code!”

“Plus, we don’t get to behead him,” said the knight.

Augie ignored this.

“Gawain performed bravely in combat and was completely unaware of what the consequence would be. But he gave his word and now intends to stand by it. You see? The beheading game has a value we must respect. It shows that the knight’s code is above the momentary desire of the individual. If Gawain doesn’t follow through, the code breaks down, and things will be much worse for everyone. THAT’S why the game exists!”

“I’m pretty sure about this one,” said the Green Knight. “The point of the beheading game is to make Christmas more fun.”

“So, even though we’re civilized, we can’t just stop the game. The game is useful. But, perhaps if we really really understand the game, we can make it better. We can change the game to make it... more gentle.”

To the Green Knight, this was sort of like saying, “We should change chocolate milk to involve less chocolate and less milk.”

“Then what do you propose?” he asked.

She ran to the wall and changed the rule:

YOU CAN ONLY BEHEAD PEOPLE WHO
DESERVE IT, IF THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE
SOLUTION THAT CAN JUSTLY TAKE THE
PLACE OF THE BEHEADING

“If we can keep the Knight’s Code without beheading Gawain, then we’ll have succeeded. We must allow him to prove his chivalry by some other means.”

“How?” asked the giant.

“I don’t know how,” said Augie. “It’s hard enough to figure out why!”

Chapter 15

Gawain and Lady Bertilak dismounted their horses just outside the dining hall of Lord Bertilak. The sky was purpling with sunset as a few lazy clouds straggled west toward the horizon. Flakes of snow flitted in the dark like stray dandelion pips, and it was the kind of evening where everything feels soft and blurry and lovely but a little sad. All beautiful things are a little sad, in the way of a sandcastle as you drive away from it.

The dining hall was guarded by two of the men in blue satin. They uncrossed long halberds, bowed, and opened the door. Lady Bertilak walked on the tips of her feet, the tendons of her ankles flexing and bending with the perfection of a predatory cat. Gawain walked more like an ox. Well, like an ox attempting bipedalism for the first time while carrying several hundred pounds of roast.

Lord Bertilak came forth, followed by eager servants and cooks, who grabbed the vegetable lamb.

“Welcome back, Sir Knight,” said Lord Bertilak. “I trust you’ve given me back all that you got.”

Gawain pursed his lips, sighed deeply, then walked forward and gave Lord Bertilak a great big kiss.

“Yes, m’lord,” said Gawain. “I have.”

Lord Bertilak looked flustered and said “I... well, is this the sort of thing one does in King Arthur’s court?”

“Uh... yes?” Gawain began. Then the newt whispered in his ear. Gawain added: “Yes, but they changed the tradition just after I left so don’t try it if you go there.” The newt whispered again. “Unless you’re nobility, which you are, in which case it might be fine.” The newt whispered again and Gawain said, “I’d also like to subtly bring up the topic of whether you have any newt food.”

“I’ll be in my room,” said the newt with a sigh, before he headed to one of the saddlebags.

The lord beamed at Gawain. “You are a good knight, Sir Gawain. We have food for any friend of yours!”

Gawain smiled. He had managed to not lie to the lord, and bonus—he was about to receive cake as promised.





The feast and the company were magnificent. Many draughts were drunk and much roast was eaten. The lord was boisterous and the lady was clever, and the taciturn satin guards let loose and joined in the humor and merrymaking as night fell. Gawain, somewhat to his surprise, found even he was quite charming. Having received no punishment for embracing the Lord, he felt like you probably feel when you survive a particularly tall roller coaster. And, when it was his turn to toast the company, Newt whispered a passage to him from the great poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar:

*“I can show a broad back and a jolly deep chest,
But who argues now on appearance?
A blow or a thrust or a stumble at best
May send me to-day to my clearance
Then it’s heigho for the things I love
My mother’ll be soon wearing sable,
But give me my horse and my dog and my glass,
And a bright eye over the table.”*

Everyone raised a glass, and at that moment Gawain happened to catch the bright eye of Lady

Bertilak. She was beautiful and forbidden, and at once the ancient phrase “Noli me tangere!”¹⁴ echoed through his mind. Unfortunately, he didn’t speak Latin, so he had no idea what that meant. He should have looked away, but he was captivated.

“GAWAIN!” shouted Lord Bertilak.

The revelers fell silent and turned toward the knight, who felt moisture gathering under his arms and neck.

Lord Bertilak took a great drink from his goblet of wine and set it down forcefully.

“Will you do us the honor of hunting again in the morning?” he asked.

Gawain exhaled and smiled. “The honor is all mine,” he said. “But I must get some sleep if I am to hunt tomorrow. Thank you for your hospitality, and I promise an even finer roast tomorrow.” Gawain nodded and headed out of the hall, taking care not to meet the eyes of the red-haired lady.



In the morning, Lady Bertilak and Gawain set

14 “Do not touch me!” Though, of course this sounds better in Latin.

out once again on horseback to find the vegetable lamb.

“Isn’t it this way?” said the lady. She pointed to where they’d found roast last time.

“I think... I think perhaps it’d be more sporting to look elsewhere.”

“How can you be more sporting with a plant?” she asked with a laugh.

Gawain knew she was right, but he had wanted the journey to be longer. He desperately feared another embrace from the beautiful lady, and if the hunt were a short one, there’d be ample time before they were due back at court. Worse still, Newt was snoring away in Gawain’s saddlebag and wouldn’t be there to advise and chaperone him on the journey.

Gawain gulped and licked his lips, taking care not to meet the lady’s eyes.

“Very well, m’lady,” he said as they cantered off.

In a short while, they were in a small clearing where they found dozens of ripe vegetable lambs.

“Perfect!” said the lady as she dismounted.

Gawain did not follow suit.

“Why don’t you get down from your horse?” she asked.

Normally, at this point Gawain would rely on Newt for the right words, but Newt was still fast asleep.

“Ladies first,” he said.

She crooked an eyebrow and looked at him.

"I'm... already off my horse," she said.

"Well then, I see you're quite the equestrian," he said as he stepped down.

"You're an odd one," said Lady Bertilak with a smile.

"An odd one? Why do you say that?" asked Gawain, who immediately started shaking his saddlebag and in a hoarse whisper shouting, "WAKE UP TALKING LIZARD! WAKE UP TALKING LIZARD!"

"Let's get some roast!" said the lady.

Gawain sighed. It was such a lovely day out, and if things went as they often do for knights, he would only live another week. The wind blew the cold snowy branches, which moved about in their sleepy winter way. The air was so clear that but for the trees they could have seen miles in any direction. A narrow creek burbled nearby, reminding Gawain of the canals he dug to make rain-rivers as a boy. He looked at the lady.

"Yes, let's get some roast!" he said, his voice unstrained for the first time today.

He set about gathering the vegetable lambs from their rubbery stalks. This was no easy task, but Gawain was one of those fine people who love work because they know the finest bedding is a sore back.¹⁵

15 I personally cannot confirm or deny this. I prefer pillows.

As he was pulling a stalk taut in order to cut it, Gawain's grip slipped, and he cut the knuckle of his thumb. Gawain was a genteel person, but he felt the sudden urge to unleash a torrent of profanity so profound that it'd leave the land devoid of animal life for epochs. However, there was a lady in sight, so instead he said, "Dear me, I seem to have nicked myself," and then twitched a little.

"Uh oh," said the lady. She came over with Gawain's saddlebag, opened it, and pulled out a long piece of linen which she wrapped around the wound.

By now, Newt was coming to his senses, albeit with a bad headache. He poked his head out of the bag and scowled at the bright light of the sun that peeked through tree branches and reflected off the snow.

Gawain was impressed with the lady's gentleness. She carefully stanchd the flow of blood without making the pain any worse. Gawain looked down to see how bad it was. The lady, misunderstanding, kissed his left cheek.

He froze.

She kissed the other cheek.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!" shouted Gawain.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!" shouted the newt.

"Hm?" asked the lady.

"AaaAAAAaaaAAAAAaAH!" replied the knight.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" said the

newt as Gawain packed up the roasts.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” said Gawain as he got on his horse.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” they both said as they rode off back to the castle.

Lady Bertilak got on her horse and followed him. She watched in confusion as he picked up the newt from his saddlebag and began to whisper to it.

A half hour later, Gawain arrived at Castle Bertilak, rode in, dismounted, walked into the lord’s throne room, and gave him a big kiss on each cheek.

“Happy December 23rd!” he shouted. Newt gave him a thumbs-up.

Before the lord could respond, Gawain pulled out several big burlap sacks of vegetable lamb and placed them on the feasting table.

The lord touched his cheeks and raised his eyebrows so high they went behind his crown. “You Camelot folks have some funny traditions.”



Night had fallen, and there was another great

feast which dwarfed the first one in its majesty. The table was set with all manner of beautiful dishes. The company and conversation were delightful. A trio of trained amphisbaenas scorgled in a most amusing fashion. It was the first scorgling Gawain had ever enjoyed.

But he didn't enjoy it much, for he was so agitated by his desire to do his duty. He wanted to be honorable, but he felt love welling up in him like the boiling water in a covered stewpot. His fingers shook and his nose felt numb and his forehead was sweaty. So he was completely unprepared when he was asked to make a toast. He looked around for Newt, but Newt was currently trying to impress a small green anole with his knowledge of fine wines.

Gawain grabbed his glass, stood up, and looked out at the room. There were guards in blue satin everywhere, as well as the many noble people who made up the court. At the head of the table were Lord and Lady Bertilak, who smiled at him.

"Friends!" he shouted. "I think you are all great. Really, wow, really great. Especially great is the lord. Also great is the lady, whose company I really enjoy, but that's not a big deal because I like lots of women and men and also lizards, so, you know, I have lots of friends."

Gawain's mouth was very dry now, and he almost took a sip of his drink before finishing the

toast. The lady could see he was in trouble, so she stood up.

“A lovely toast, Sir Gawain!” she said. Everyone cheered and downed their goblets. “As you gave back everything you received, we know you to be a noble knight.”

Gawain nodded, but avoided eye contact.

“And so,” the lady went on, “we ask you to come out hunting for one more night.”

“I have never been so happy as I am at this moment!” shouted Gawain, looking as if he were passing a gallstone. “If you’ll excuse me, I must get to bed early once more, so that I will be successful tomorrow.”

At that, Gawain stood up as fast as he could, grabbed the newt away from his conversation with the anole (which wasn’t going well anyway, as anoles can’t talk), and ran to his sleeping chamber.

Chapter 16

We return again to Augie a few months back, as she struggled to find a way to create a trial for Gawain. Once again, she paced before the words she'd scrawled on the stone wall.

YOU CAN ONLY BEHEAD PEOPLE WHO
DESERVE IT, IF THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE
SOLUTION THAT CAN JUSTLY TAKE THE
PLACE OF THE BEHEADING

For so long, she'd been staring at that proclamation, unable to convert it into an action that would preserve the knight's code and preserve Gawain. Time dragged on. Weeks passed. Spies of the Green Knight reported that Gawain had just set out from Camelot. But, so far, Augie hadn't come up with anything. She kept hoping that the

third questing stone would light up, but it remained stubborn.

All the while, she could see civilization falling away from the giant. He wore no top hat, real or otherwise. He drank swamp mud, rather than swamp mud which he pretended was espresso. Worst of all, where he once had read fake stock reports, he now read fake tabloids.

Augie looked at him and sighed.

She went out through the lush courtyard of Green Chapel, down the wide boulevards where the elves and kobolds worked and played. She saw a pair of elves walking arm-in-arm and she thought of her parents, and how she hadn't seen them for a whole year. She wondered how they'd changed during that time. Adults change so fast. Had Dad's hair gone grayer? Had Mom's? How many wrinkles would there be in their chubby little cheeks?

She remembered how warm the house had been on winter nights and how sometimes Grandpa would visit and bake pumpkin pie for everyone. She could smell the molasses and the cardamom. She began to grow worried. Did they miss her? Had they forgotten her? Had they remembered to save all the presents she was due from her birthday and holidays this year?

She was tired of being here. Tired of spending all her time planning. She had run off into the

woods for a wild adventure, and instead she ended up spending a year trying to convince this giant oaf to not do something awful! She should be having fantastic journeys, not being cooped up in this one weird castle! She pulled the golden amulet out of her pocket and heaved it against the castle wall.

“It’s not fair!” she shouted. “It’s not...”

The amulet was facing down, but a small amount of light was visible just beneath its golden surface.

Augie raced to it, picked it up, and dusted it off. At last, the voice came one last time, distant and ghostly. “Quest for glory, on the obsidian island,” it whispered. The final stone faded out, leaving just a golden amulet with three empty settings.

Augie thrust it into her pocket and ran to the great hall, where the knight was shaking his head over some fake celebrity gossip. “How could you DO that, Brad?” he said.

“FRAAAANK!” shouted Augie.

Frank ran out in a burlap sack marked “Bathing suit.”

“It’s not too revealing, is it?” he asked.

It covered him head to toe.

“Not at all.”

He exhaled in relief.

“Tell me about the obsidian island.”

“The obsidian island?” he said, his eyes wide.

“They say there’s an evil damsel who kidnapped a noble dragon and... or was it the other way around? I don’t remember, but there’s a hoard of treasure there that knights have been trying to reach for decades.”

“What happens to them?” asked Augie.

Frank solemnly drew a finger across his neck.

“They get poked in the neck?” asked the giant.

“They are killed!” shouted Frank. “I mean, maybe they get poked in the neck, too. I don’t know. But it’s dangerous.”

This was all the endorsement Augie needed to hear.

“Get your axe,” she said to the Green Knight. “It’s time for glory and treasure!”



Augie stood on the prow of a long wooden boat, the wind whipping her scarf, as the Green Knight paddled, using his massive green hands. The black cone of a volcanic island loomed over the horizon.

Before they reached the shore, they saw a small sailboat, much smaller, also going toward the island. In the boat, there was a man. He was really a beautiful man, with a perfect black goatee and

long wavy black hair, and shining black armor inlaid with gold. He noticed them and bowed with great flourish.

“Are you in distress, m’lady?” he called out.

“Me?” she asked, pointing at herself.

“Yes! Is that giant kidnapping you?”

“Ohhh, oh, no. He’s my friend.”

“Clearly he has forced you to say this against your will!”

This annoyed the giant, who reached out and crushed the man’s boat with his fist.

Now, you might think the man would cast about swimming this way and that, but he was in fact wearing about 80 pounds of armor, so he just sunk.

“Get him back out!” said Augie.

“Why?”

“Because you are civilized, and we agreed trials were important before executions.”

The giant reached into the water, fished about, and pulled out the strange man. He looked like a fancy cat who’d just been given its first bath, and he coughed and spluttered and shot sea water all over Augie.

When he regained his breath, he said, “Nice to meet everyone.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Augie. She nudged the giant.

“Uh, nice to meet you, yes.”

The giant placed the soaked little man on the prow of their boat. The man said, "My name is Sir Glistnir! I am the greatest knight who ever lived."

"Then how come I never heard of you?" asked Augie.

The smile faded from Glistnir's lips. He turned his head down and clenched his fists as if in pain. "I have had to keep many secrets for my country, so I have not made my deeds public."

"What deeds?" she asked.

He looked up again. "Well, remember when Galahad found the Holy Grail?"

"Sure," she said.

"That was me."

"No, that was Galahad."

"That's just what they want you to believe."

At this point the giant let out a massive groaning sigh, whereupon Sir Glistnir withdrew his sword and assumed a fighting stance.

"Dost thou scoff at Glistnir? If it be scoffing, then—"

The giant flicked the sword out of his hand and into the ocean.

"I am satisfied that you learned your lesson," said the man.

The Green Knight was about to flick Glistnir himself into the ocean, so Augie changed the subject.

"What are you doing out at sea?" she asked.

“I come for the treasure! The golden hoard of Obsidian Island.”

“Oh, good!” said Augie. “We’re doing the same thing.”

Glistnir’s eyes lit up. “And we have the giant on our side?” he asked.

The Green Knight nodded.

Glistnir briefly did a happy dance before straightening up, narrowing his eyes, and saying “Yes, it is well. A little girl like yourself won’t be much use on a quest like this.”

The Green Knight went to flick Glistnir again, but Augie pulled her giant friend aside.

“Just be patient,” she said. “We broke his boat, so we have to help him.”

They looked over to see Glistnir admiring himself in two hand-mirrors at once.

“Maybe we’ll leave him on the island,” she added.



The prow of the ship broke into the moist sand of the island, and the three travelers hopped out. The beach was shallow, and there were many rocks, and the only apparent life on the island

was washed-up seaweed and the occasional patch of moss. Ahead of them was a tall black mountain with steep obsidian sides.

“How do we get up there?” asked Augie.

“I could scale the wall with my bare hands!” shouted Glistnir.

“Really?” said the giant. He wanted to see this.

“Yes, most of the time,” said Glistnir. “Not here, though. This mountain is only about a thousand feet high, and I’ve already done that, and Sir Glistnir never does the same thing twice.”

“What?” Augie shouted. “Nothing the same twice? What about walking? You’ve walked lots of different times.”

Glistnir thought for a moment.

“Never the same way, though!” he declared. He then began walking in a wobbly side-to-side manner. “Perhaps you didn’t notice.”

Augie and the Green Knight rolled their eyes in synchronization.

Before she could say anything, Augie heard a hideous sound, as if someone had recorded a long thunderclap and played it back at high speed.

“SKREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!” went the dragon’s shriek.

The air about them became very hot. Augie turned to look up, but was knocked to her feet. Everything went black. She thought she was unconscious, but then she smelled the musty, mossy

scent of the giant, and knew he was shielding her. She heard another muffled “SKREEEE!” and then the giant stood up.

Augie jumped to her feet and looked back to see the giant’s back was on fire.

“Go jump in the ocean!” she shouted.

The Green Knight thought she was insulting him, and retorted, “Well, YOU go jump in a lake.”

Augie turned to see the dragon zoom away from them. It was a great big dragon, with giant feathery wing-arms and long fangs.¹⁶

“SKREEEE!” went the horrid scream of the dragon as it flared out its wings and caught the light of the sun.

“It’ll have to slow down to turn!” shouted Augie. “Hit it with a rock before it can make another pass!”

The Green Knight grabbed a nearby rock, reared back, and heaved it forth at the dragon, striking it right in the head, so that it fell from the sky onto the beach.

The Green Knight was still on fire, and the fire was growing. Augie shouted, “Hey! I bet I can make a better sand-angel than you!” She then flopped on her back in the moist snow and moved her arms and legs back and forth as fast as possible. The giant did likewise, extinguishing the

16 You may think of dragons as green and scaly, but that’s hardly an evolutionarily sound viewpoint.

flame.

Augie looked around for Glistnir, and saw him lying motionless on the ground. She ran to him and gingerly touched his armor. It was still cold. She lifted his visor and checked his pulse. The great Sir Glistnir had fainted.

Augie smiled at the Green Knight.

“Dragons!” she said. “Treasure!”

“Can we agree that I made the best sand-angel?” asked the Green Knight.

“Fine!” she said. “Just hurry up!”

They ran down the beach to where the great beast had fallen. The giant stopped partway. Augie did not know why, so she kept going. When she saw what the giant saw, she was very sad.

There was the great beast, its eyes shut in pain, with one of its great wing-arms bent at an unnatural angle and one of its great fangs knocked out of its mouth. A motherly woman of middle age wearing an old, once-beautiful gown bent over, stroking the great feathery head.

“Are... are you the evil dragon?” asked Augie. “Or is it the damsel who’s evil?”

Usually in stories like this, it’s the evil-looking person who’s evil. But the dragon just looked hurt, and the princess wasn’t the right age to be evil. If you read books, villains tend to be either in the 35-45 year-old age range, or over 70. Augie figured the younger villains were raising small evil

children and the ones in between were too busy paying evil mortgages and saving for evil university. This woman looked to be in her 50s.

“Evil?” shouted the middle-aged woman. “EVIL? You come here and throw a rock at my pet dragon and you’re asking who the evil one is?”

“He tried to light us on fire!” said Augie.

The woman gave her a mean look. “He’s a dragon! He’s like a big puppy. That’s how dragons kiss!”

Augie stepped a little to the side of the dragon’s mouth. “We can set his arm,” she said. “It looks broken.”

The woman hesitated. The dragon turned to look up to see Augie, and his motion rotated the broken arm. The great beast cried in a very guttural and almost human way.

The woman looked at the hurt dragon, whose bloodshot eyes were reflexively hidden behind a thin nictitating membrane. She looked at Augie, hesitated, and then motioned for her to come.

Augie had the Green Knight fetch a long piece of driftwood from the beach, and she used an old rope from the giant’s beard to fasten it to the broken wing. It was slow work.

“I am Gyda,” said the woman, her fists clenched. Augie could see her chewing her cheek to avoid saying more.

“I am Augie, and this is the Green Knight.”

Gyda nodded without breaking eye contact.

“Why are you here?” she asked slowly.

“I...” Augie tried to remember. “For glory and treasure, I guess.” It felt silly now.

“If that’s all you want, take it!” shouted the woman. “There’s heaps of gold up in the mountain. Take it! Take your glory and go. Take the tooth you knocked out of my friend’s head, and show it to your friends! He can’t eat with it any more. So there! There’s your glory.”

Augie was a good person, and she knew Gyda spoke from a place of hurt, but yet she was very tempted. With that gold, she could do so much. She could buy her parents a better house, and she could build that particle accelerator she’d been wanting to make for years. And, let’s not forget that the gold to chocolate conversion ratio is about 1 to 1,200.

And then there was the tooth. She felt bad for what had happened, but then the dragon had seemed to attack them. And here was this glorious fang, looking like a fossil from the Cretaceous period. Imagine how popular she’d be at the Natural History Museum. Imagine doing genetic analysis on a real live dragon tooth!

But then she looked over at the dragon, whose face was still worry-worn. It hit her all at once that he must be an old dragon now, seeing as the damsel was in middle age.

She exhaled and she bit her lip and she dug one



boot hard in the sand. And she made the choice she did not want to make.



“Listen,” she said. “We came here with a knight named Glistnir. He’s the biggest bragger I’ve ever met, and right now he’s passed out over there on the beach.”

Glistnir snored audibly from across the beach. He was in a deep sleep and muttering to himself, first in baritone, “My name is Sir Glistnir, fair maid, and I have come to rescue you,” then in falsetto: “My gosh, Sir Glistnir, you’re so handsome and brave and is your beard just naturally that luxurious?” He then made kissing motions with his mouth.

“Ew,” said Augie.

“What good is he?” asked Gyda.

The Green Knight listened intently for this an-

swer.

“Let’s do this,” said Augie, with just a hint of a sigh. “We tell him that when he saw the dragon, he flew into a righteous rage. He defeated the dragon and took the treasure. He wasn’t able to save the princess, but he recovered this tooth as proof. We’ll say he fought so furiously that he passed out. We’ll load him up with treasure, and take him away. He’ll tell everyone everywhere, and he’ll show off his gold and his prize tooth. And then, nobody will bother you here any more.”

As Gyda thought this over, the Green Knight shouted, “But he’s a terrible liar! Nobody will believe him!”

Augie looked at him. “I don’t understand,” she said. “How are those two statements related? Do you ever read about politics?”

Before the giant could respond, Augie held up her hand. “We have to do the good thing. We have to do the good thing even though we can’t tell anyone or get glory for it. Love, and be silent. Even though it hurts.”

Just then, Glistnir made more smooching sounds.

“It hurts a lot,” she added.



After a few hours, the small boat was laden with gold and jewels. As the Green Knight dumped in one final armful, Augie went to say goodbye and apologize once more to the woman.

Gyda looked sternly at the little girl. In her wrinkled hands, she had a green girdle, made of beautiful silk. Unlike her dress, the girdle looked clean and unscathed.

“Come here,” said Gyda in a sweet voice that reminded her of Grandma.

Augie walked over to Gyda, whereupon Gyda flicked her hard right in the nose.

“Ow!” said Augie.

Gyda flicked her in the nose again, this time much harder.

“OW!” Augie shouted.

“You invaded my island,” said Gyda. “So, I hurt you once. Then you injured my beloved, so I hurt you again. Then you took my treasure.”

Gyda stared at the little girl, balling up her fists.

“So...” Augie said, moving her hand over her nose.

“But then you helped me. So, I figure that cancels one out. You got two out of three, and that’s good enough.” Gyda then untied the girdle from her waist and held it out.

“Here’s something for you, because you may have saved us from a lot of trouble.” Gyda looked annoyed. “Don’t you hesitate. Take it before I change my mind, because I sure won’t say thank you!”

Augie took the girdle. It was soft and lovely. She nodded toward Gyda, but Gyda had already turned away.

The little girl walked back toward the boat, clutching the silk girdle so that it couldn’t fly away. Her eyes were wide and she walked with a clumsy gait. Her mind was racing.

The Green Knight tossed Glistnir onto the gold. His head made a metallic twang as it bounced off a golden scepter. “That two out of three thing was lucky,” he said.

“Fractions! Hahahaha! Why didn’t I think of fractions sooner?” said Augie.

This was an odd thing to say, even for Augie. But, by now, the giant was used to strange outbursts from the little girl.

The Green Knight pushed off from the shore, and just as they were far enough from the island that there couldn’t possibly be any danger, the sleeping knight awoke. I’ll spare you the scene of Augie telling him of his heroic deeds. However, so you don’t go away completely unhorrorified, here are a couple stanzas from his 14,000-line poem, “Glistniriad.”

*Huzzah for the knight of the ages!
Yes, Glistnir's the knight that's for me!
Huzzah say the heroes and sages,
He's perfect! And what a goatee!*

*One day, great Sir Glistnir went questing.
His companions all were afeard.
A dangerous foe was he besting.
And wow! Have I mentioned his beard?*



They dumped Glistnir on the shore and headed home.

The Green Knight was pleasantly surprised at how good he felt to have come home without any treasure or fame. There is a deep feeling of comfort that comes with doing good without expecting praise or even recognition. It is something like the emotional equivalent of being very wealthy but not concerned with fine clothing or big houses. That is what the Green Knight experienced as he plopped into his big soft throne by the glowing fireplace. It was a new feeling for him, and he indulged in it, smiling and stroking his beard.

Augie smiled, too, as she ran to the wall, which read:

YOU CAN ONLY BEHEAD PEOPLE WHO
DESERVE IT, IF THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE
SOLUTION THAT CAN JUSTLY TAKE THE
PLACE OF THE BEHEADING

“Listen!” she shouted. “I’ve got the alternative! Hahahaha!” shouted Augie. “We just have to make him prove that he was willing to uphold the knightly code. Then nothing is broken! And what is the knightly code? It’s about self-denial. It’s about giving up things you want in order to do good! This is the alternative. He must show that the knightly code is as serious to him as his life. If he can do that, we can spare him AND spare the code.”

The Green Knight wasn’t sure he liked this idea.

“If it works, you can feel as noble as you feel now, and society won’t descend into anarchy!”

The Green Knight didn’t know all of these words. In fact, he thought “society” was a type of pasta. But he was feeling quite good at the moment, and so he listened to his eccentric little advisor.

“When Gawain comes near, I’ll go before him as a mysterious traveler and tell him it’s dangerous.

If he goes on, that shows he is brave.

“Then we will arrange for him to meet a mysterious lord and lady. Of course, they will be hamsters or something and we’ll use magic to make them look like a lord and lady. Gawain will have to stay with them for hospitality, and they’ll send him to get food for feasts. And they’ll tell Gawain that he must must give to the king whatever he gets on the hunt. But, the lady will go with him. And the lady will be Gawain’s ideal match.”

“Like, she’ll have pretty bows and stuff?” said the Green Knight.

“Blech. Who wants that?” said Augie. So you see, in some ways she was not so different from Gawain. She continued her plan. “Now, they’ll go out, and she’ll give him a kiss. I know it’s gross, but stay with me on this.

“After that, by his own promise he’ll have to give the kiss to the lord, even though it will feel very improper. And, he’ll have to not kiss the lady back, even though it will seem very desirable. See?! Gawain will have to forego love and comfort in order to obey the knightly code!”

“If he can withstand three nights of this, with more kisses each night, we will give him one last test. He will receive a magical object that protects the wearer from harm. This, too, he must give back, even though it would save him from beheading.

Augie and the Green Knight

“If he can deny himself love, comfort, and safety, all for the sake of the code, then we know the code still stands. The beheading is not necessary.”

The Green Knight mulled this over. On the one hand, he liked the idea of being a dignified and civilized ruler. On the other hand, beheading was the best part of Christmas. Then a thought occurred to him.

“What if he fails the test?”

“Uh...” said Augie.

The Green Knight smiled, jumped to his feet, and grabbed his axe.

“Then it’s a civilized beheading!” he shouted as he began to dance and hoot.

Chapter 17

It was the morning of December 24th, back at Castle Bertilak. Lady Bertilak and Gawain set out once again, and once again came to the lush patch of vegetable lambs near the creek. This time, as they packed up their lambs, Gawain knew the kisses were coming, so he steeled himself for it.

As she approached him, he closed his eyes and covered his mouth just in case.

“Are my kisses so terrible?” asked the lady.

“They are like fire,” said Gawain.

“In that they are both alluring and dangerous?” she asked.

Gawain was thinking more about how he didn’t like getting fire on his face, but this metaphor was much better, so he nodded.

Three times she kissed his cheek, and three

times he blushed.¹⁷ And then, she stepped away.

Having endured this, Gawain smiled broadly. He had resisted the beautiful lady, and he was pleased with his fortitude and his goodness. He exhaled.

“Shall we go back?” he asked.

“Of course!” she said. “But first, I want to give you a gift. I know tomorrow you must travel to Green Chapel to meet your fate.”

At her waist, he now saw a silky green girdle. She unknotted it and handed it to the knight.

“This girdle protects its wearer from harm. So long as you have it on your body, no weapon can harm you.”

Newt looked on from the saddlebag as Gawain’s eyes went wide. The little amphibian wished he could help, but even he didn’t know what to do now. Gawain coveted this object. It was everything he wanted in life—a token of affection from a beautiful lady who could do push-ups off her face, and a way to keep his head connected to his neck.

Here, the great knight faltered. Feeling like a burglar, he snatched it up and tied it around his

17 Perhaps it should be noted here that you really mustn’t behave like Lady Bertilak, going around kissing people who’d rather not have it. We must try to forgive Lady Bertilak, on the grounds that she had only been human for a few weeks at this point, and after all, she was attempting to save Gawain from losing his head.

waist under his shirt. He did not know it, but behind a nearby tree a little girl watched in horror.



That night in Castle Bertilak there was a third magnificent feast. Gawain knew it might be his last night on Earth, so he spent it having good conversation and eating good food. At the height of the merriment, he walked to Lord Bertilak and said, “I wish to give you something.”

The lord had drunk a bit too much ale this night, and so he simply shouted back, “Give it here, knight!” Gawain kissed him one, two, three times. The entire chamber erupted in joy and laughter. Gawain smiled, but he felt the girdle around his middle as if it were tightening.

The knightly thing would be to give over the girdle. But if he gave over the girdle, he might be beheaded tomorrow. If he got beheaded, he’d probably have to stop being a knight. Were there any knights who didn’t have heads back at Camelot? He thought about it, but no one sprang to mind. Maybe Ywain? No, wait, that big round thing on Ywain’s neck was a head.

As the wheels slowly turned in Gawain’s mind,

the wheels of Lord Bertilak's mind ground to a halt. He passed out with drink, fell on the floor, and begin snoring immediately. A blue satin guard placed a blue satin pillow under his head. Now there was no way to give him the full fruit of the hunt.

Gawain looked around for the lady. Perhaps he could give her the girdle. Or maybe he could just borrow it for a day and give it to the lord later. That'd break the promise to give back what he got each night, but it'd only break it a little. Not really a break even. A fracture. A bend. A bruise.

She was gone. He looked all around the dining hall, but saw only the tired happy revelers and the cold stone walls.



The next morning, Gawain awoke in his chamber. It was very cold outside his blankets, and he felt very light, like a leaf that might blow away if the wrong wind struck him. He put on his armor to feel more solid and stable.

He gathered his things and put Newt on his shoulder as he walked downstairs. He had expected to see the lord or lady in the great hall,

but there was only a single blue satin guard, with a veil covering his face. The whole castle was cold and drafty, like it had been uninhabited for a long time. Gawain was simple enough that he didn't find this eerie.

"Working hard or hardly working?" he asked.

The satin guard did not respond. He stood and walked past the knight and Newt. They followed.

After a short walk, they came to the front gate, which opened itself before the satin guard. Ahead was an unfamiliar horse with no rider. The guard pointed toward the horse.

"That's a horse," said Gawain.

The satin guard sighed and pointed again.

"It's called a horse."

The guard pointed at Gawain, then pointed at the horse.

"No, I'm just a guy," said Gawain.

"I think he wants us to get on the horse," said Newt.

The satin guard pointed at Newt with his other hand. Gawain shrugged and shook his head at the guard.

"I don't see why you have to be all weird and mysterious about it," said Gawain.

The faceless guard sighed and went back into the castle as its doors closed.

Newt hopped on Gawain's shoulder as Gawain mounted the horse, which immediately set off at

a trot into the woods. Soon they were deep into the forest, and the canopy was so dense that very little light penetrated. The woods were very foggy, so that Newt and Gawain could scarcely see more than a few arm's lengths in any direction.

Deep in the woods, the horse came to a very large oak. At the bottom of the oak was a small box of sandwiches marked "eat me." Gawain remembered well the rule his mother had taught him—that one should never take food from strangers. However, Gawain knew plenty of oak trees, and no oak tree had ever made a bad sandwich for him, so he thought this time might be an exception.

Newt came out of his saddlebag just as Gawain was wiping crumbs from his visor, and said, "Did you... did you just eat a mystery sandwich?"

"No!" said Gawain. "I ate three mystery sandwiches."

"You can't just eat sandwiches you find. What if something's wrong with them?"

"Well, in point of fact, the third one was a little dry, but that's no reason not to eat it."

"But what if they were poisoned?"

"Then I wouldn't eat them."

"But suppose they were poisoned and you didn't know it."

"Who would poison a sandwich? That'd completely ruin it. Then you couldn't eat it for fear of



poisoning.”

Gawain had a great deal of respect for the newt, but today his logic was just lousy.

“Let me know if you get a stomachache,” said the newt.

Just as Gawain finished the last crumb of his sandwiches, the horse turned around and began trotting right back the way he came.

“Excuse me, horse!” said Gawain. “Excuse me!”

The horse didn’t respond.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Gawain. “I believe we’re backtracking right now.”

“Horses don’t talk,” said the newt.

“Right. Right.” said Gawain.

And so, they trotted on. As far as either could tell, they were heading right back the way they came. Of course, traveling in any direction would’ve looked about the same, since they were moving through such thick fog. But Gawain had an excellent sense of direction, and he was practically positive they would just wind up back at Castle Bertilak, and by then it would be too late for the beheading.

“Don’t go too fast,” he said to the horse.

The horse walked on through the mist. Newt wanted to talk to Gawain, but any conversation he might start would be too light to be appropriate or too heavy to be comfortable. So they went in silence, through the non-space of undifferenti-

ated trees.

Soon, too soon, they found themselves at a clearing. A vast castle loomed before them. It was great and green and looked very much like Castle Bertilak, only covered in beautiful foliage.

As he drew closer, the castle drawbridge lowered down with a great THUNK. There, standing in the gate were Augie and the Green Knight. Augie looked nervous. The Green Knight looked eager, stroking his axe like it was a puppy.

Chapter 18

Now, you would think that Sir Gawain would be afraid, but although he was a bit scared, he mostly felt shame at the girdle around his waist. It felt as if it had grown tighter than when he first wore it, and it seemed to be itchy, and he uselessly scratched at the middle of his armor.

“Welcome, Sir Gawain!” said the Green Knight, who bowed before the newcomer.

Gawain stepped down from his horse and also bowed.

“Are you prepared to meet your end of the bargain?” asked the Green Knight.

“I am,” said Gawain.

The Green Knight smiled, and stood aside. Gawain grabbed the saddlebag containing Newt and entered Green Chapel. As he went, a familiar-looking girl named Augie glowered at him,

and he did not know why.

The Green Knight lifted Augie onto his shoulder as Gawain lifted the newt onto his own.

Augie whispered to the Green Knight, "We can still skip the beheading!"

"What about all your philosophizing earlier?" he replied. "What about the meaning of the beheading game?"

"I was kidding! Kidding! Sometimes I do literary critique for fun!"

This was obviously false, and the Green Knight just smiled.

"I'm afraid I must do what the situation warrants," said the great green giant. "The test was given. The test was failed."

Gawain meanwhile chatted with the newt.

"I'm going to remove the girdle," said Gawain.

"WHAT?" asked Newt. "You mean like... next time you take a shower?"

"Before the beheading."

"You understand that the beheading won't go nearly as well without it, don't you?"

"I'm a knight, Newt! If I am beheaded, then I was a knight. If I am saved by magic, I was never anything!"

"I feel like we're not dealing with the issue of having your head cut off as directly as we might be."

Gawain wanted to argue more, but he was rath-

er biased in favor of the newt winning this debate. He quit talking and rolled up into his thoughts. He thought and he thought, but he could find no justification for him to wear the girdle.

Newt knew Gawain very well by now and knew that he was a good and simple man. He knew that logic was no good here, because it was a matter of honor. He knew Gawain would not keep the girdle, even to save his own neck. So, the little newt tried something less logical.

“If you were gone,” he said, “I would miss you.”



Augie and the Green Knight and Gawain and the newt walked through Green Chapel as the sun began to set. About them the many kobolds and elves and hobgoblins labored at their businesses, but they all stopped as the four strange figures passed by. Gawain and Augie both wore frowns, while the newt and the giant smiled.

Soon they were at the great doors of the great hall. The Green Knight smashed the door to bits and allowed Gawain to enter first.



There, Gawain saw a wondrous tableau. The great hall, which as we said was almost entirely built of natural vegetation, was lit up by the faint green glow of bioluminescent mushrooms and low-burning fireplace logs. In a way, it reminded him of Camelot, but the hall here was much quieter and much stranger and much colder.

“Saved you a seat!” said the Green Knight, pointing toward the beheading platform.

Augie flicked the Green Knight’s ear and said “Not funny!”



As the Green Knight pulled out his axe, the blade of which was as sharp as broken glass, Gawain removed his helmet, walked up the dais, and sat. Before him was an iron anvil on which he was to place his neck. Below the anvil was a pillow to catch his head.

The Green Knight put Augie down, and she sat in one of the wood-woven chairs of the great hall. She had the urge to cry, but she felt empty and dry and her muscles hurt with agitation. The newt walked over to the table beside her. From the way his head was situated, you'd think he was looking at Gawain, but a newt's eyes are on the sides of its head, so he was actually looking away.

Gawain gulped and laid his head on the anvil. He felt the heat of his body go into the cold metal as the shadow of the axe-wielding giant rose before him. He closed his eyes. He pursed his lips. He clenched his fists.

And then he scrunched up his shoulders as he heard the whoosh of the axe through air.

FWOOSH!

But the blade did not fall. Gawain looked over his shoulder to see the Green Knight had halted partway.

"Ha!" said the Green Knight. "You flinched!"

"Sorry! Sorry!" said Gawain. "I must've had an itch or something."

If this reaction seems strange to you, well, it

also seemed strange to Augie and the newt. But, you must remember that Gawain placed a lot of value on his honor, and so he was embarrassed to flinch.

“Do-over!” shouted Gawain. Newt looked on in disbelief, muttering, “Oh, for the love of...” to himself.

Once again, Gawain put his neck on the anvil, looking down at the soft green pillow below. Once again, the shadow of the Green Knight loomed over him. Once again he heard the sudden whoosh of air.

FWOOSH!

His arms flew out involuntarily.

“YOU FLINCHED AGAIN!”

“I did not!”

“Did too!”

“Did not!”

The Green Knight turned to Augie and shouted, “Tell him he flinched!”

Augie, who could barely speak at this point, squeaked out, “Yeah, but you—”

“HA!” said the Green Knight.

“Okay, okay, one more time,” said Gawain. “I’ve got it.”

Augie nearly passed out, as she had not inhaled in the last two minutes. She took a very deep breath as the giant raised his great axe one more time. Newt’s body tensed so hard that he shook.

This time, Gawain did not look at the shadow of the axe. He closed his eyes. He tried to imagine something pleasant, but all he could think of was despair and shame at the green girdle about his body. But as he felt that shame, he also thought of his friend Newt and the obligation he had to him. You see, obligations are not lists of behaviors, but connections between many people and ideas, and often the loosening of one creates tension in another. And Gawain was not flinching out of fear for his head. He was flinching because when he heard the whoosh of the axe, he felt the green girdle around his middle as if it were barbed wire. But, for a friend, he would wear those barbs.

So this time, as the axe went up, Gawain thought not of his lost dignity, but of the little green newt who had been his lone companion throughout a hard year. In that reminiscence he grew lost, and so he did not hear the twist of shoes on wood as the giant swung down the axe, and he did not hear the blade cutting through air as it descended toward his neck, and he did not realize what was happening until he felt something very cold at the back of his head. And then he felt something very warm.

He realized that he should be feeling a pillow right now, but there was nothing. “Oh, DRAT,” he thought. “Not only am I beheaded, but I didn’t even land right. I bet I look very foolish right now.”

But he looked around to see he was still on the anvil. He felt the back of his neck.

“OW!” he said. He looked at his hand, and there was a spot of blood on it.

“Just a little nick on the back of the neck,” said the Green Knight.

Augie smiled broadly.

“You are now free to defend yourself,” said the giant.

Gawain stood up suddenly and grabbed his sword from its sheath. But just then the great green giant altered his form to that of Lord Bertilak. Gawain looked in amazement and then in slow realization. The Green Knight smiled and then changed back to his great green form.

“You were Lord Bertilak,” said Gawain. “It was a trick.”

Gawain turned to Augie.

“And you were Lady Bertilak!” he shouted.

“No,” she said. “Ew. I was the mysterious traveler. The lady was a hamster with a spell on it.” She held out a hamster.

“Who’s a good hamster?” she cooed, feeding it some seeds.

“Huh,” said Gawain, stroking his chin. “And I guess you were the ones who put out the sandwiches, too.”



“Sandwiches?” asked Augie.

“The ones in the woods,” said Gawain. “I found some sandwiches and I ate them.”

“You can’t just find sandwiches and eat them,” said Augie.

“That’s what I said!” shouted Newt.

This didn’t bother Gawain much, though, because he had just realized something. He turned to the Green Knight, who still held his great axe.. “So, you knew about the girdle...”

“Yes,” said the giant. “You gave back the first kiss because you were honorable, and the second two kisses because you were more honorable still. But on the third night, though you gave back the three kisses, you kept the green girdle, which as you can see from the cut on your neck was not really magical at all.”

“Whoops,” said the newt.

“But,” said the giant, “I am a civilized ruler, you

see.” He smiled at Augie. “You gave back three and two and one kisses, keeping only the girdle for yourself. That’s six out of seven, so I spared you six-sevenths of your neck.”

“Fractions,” Augie said. “Is there anything they can’t do?”

Gawain reddened a little as Frank the human came over to bandage up his neck. Newt hopped off the table and ran to help. As a small creature, he could handle the details better.

“I failed as a knight,” said Gawain. “AND I kissed a hamster.” Gawain looked very sad. He closed his visor so nobody would see as he began to cry a little.

Augie went over to the Green Knight and whispered to him. The Green Knight smiled and nodded, and Augie ran to Gawain to flip open his visor.

Gawain made a great effort to not appear to be crying, putting on his deepest voice and saying, “Forsooth, my visor!” Then his lower lip protruded and began to wobble.

“Don’t cry,” said Augie. “We have decided to reward you with two magical things. First, you must take the green girdle with you. It will remind you to always keep to your knightly code in the future.”

“The reward is shame?” asked Gawain.

Augie continued, “We have endowed it with real

magic, so that it really will protect you from harm as long as you wear it.”

As she said this, Gawain felt the girdle loosen about his body.

“Second...” she said with a smile. Then she turned around to present Lady Bertilak, once again in her human form. Unfortunately, they had returned her to human form just as she had finished stuffing her cheeks with hamster pellets. It would take her a good few minutes to finish eating, so she simply signed “I love you” with her hands.

This was all a little strange, but Gawain reasoned that if he could be best friends with a newt, he could be in love with a hamster turned human. And anyway, how often do you meet a lady who can do push-ups off her face?

“Thank you,” said Gawain. He still felt the sting of his failure, but he knew that he had erred on behalf of a friend. In that, there was honor, too.

The Green Knight smiled and then as he had done in the Augustawoods a year ago, pressed one of his nostrils and blew through the other, sounding something like the awkward offspring of a bugle and didgeridoo.

“WUBBA-WUBBA-WUBBA-WEEEEEE!”

The 12 fireplaces of the great hall blossomed in flame, illuminating walls and the tall ceiling. The many servants of the Green Knight came forth

Augie and the Green Knight

with plates full of delicious things, great in variety, yet all green.

Augie, Newt, Gawain, and the giant all took their seats as court guests, as one more feast, happier than all the others put together, commenced.

“Ahh,” said Gawain. “It’s never Christmas until something magical happens.”



Chapter 19

After a few days of feasting and merriment, Gawain and Newt and the hamster-turned-lady (whose real name was Scruffles) left. As Green Chapel returned to normalcy, Augie knew it was time to go home.

She'd been gone from home for a year, so it was likely her parents would have noticed her absence by now. She probably also had a backlog of homework tall enough to reach Neptune. Though come to think of it, after this year in this strange land, she found herself longing for a quiet evening writing a book report with a mug of hot chocolate.

She also knew that her powers over this kingdom were limited. She was a wild creature herself, but she thought this kingdom could do with a bit less wildness, for safety reasons. And yet she noticed that the Green Knight had stopped pre-

tending to read his stock portfolio and had started using his hands to eat again, and to be honest, he looked all the better for it.¹⁸ For there are beast things and there are people things and you cannot make one into the other any more than you can turn back the ocean from the shore. “At least not yet,” thought Augie, as she made a note to herself to see if she could mechanically turn back the ocean from the shore.

“It’s time,” she said to her giant friend.

“I know,” he replied.



Soon, they were back in the green Augustawoods, and Augie could tell by the foliage—the blueberry bushes, the fiddleheads, the paper birch trees—

18 One is reminded of Oliver St. John Gogarty’s poem, which, like many great poems, is directed at an anonymous goose. It ends thus:

*Oh, have you quite forgot,
The flights outbreasting thought
Before this homely lot
Half tamed your pinions?
The mountains and the stars
Were once your only bars,
And where the north wind soars
Were your dominions.*



that she was very near home.

“Let me off here,” she said. The Green Knight gently plucked the girl from behind his neck and set her on the spongy ground.

“Will I see you again, strange one?” asked the giant.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I would like it very much.”

The Green Knight smiled. A vine grew up under him, then turned in on itself until it formed a solid mass which became his great green horse.

“Farewell,” said the giant as the horse turned around and galloped into the woods. She wanted to make a lingering goodbye, but she knew any words she said would be spoken to the forest and not to her strange green friend.

And just like that, Augie was once again by herself, listening to the hum and buzz and burble and chirp of the woods.

Nearby, she saw a familiar buttercup, and she knelt down beside it.

“You are *Ranunculus bulbosus*,” she said. “But you are also Frank.”

The buttercup seemed to nod, but perhaps it was only the wind.

When Augie stood up, she saw her old walking trail behind her and knew she was just a short run from the home she had left a year earlier. She followed the trail, and her nostalgia for its snow-

moist brown surface and its tall sweet-scented pines gave it an air of magic more profound than any she'd felt in the green giant's country. For memories are magic, too. They are the wand the present waves over the past.

Augie walked down the trail, and as she went, the scenery became less and less snow-coated, taking on the gentle fiery tone of autumn. She loved the sound of crunching leaves underfoot, and she found herself taking big impatient strides. When she got to her room window, she was surprised to see it had been left open. When she climbed in, all her things were still there. Her rivulus were still swimming, unchanged in size. Her Complete Works of Chaucer was still in pieces on the floor. She checked her computer, only to see that today was the same day she'd left one year ago. She walked over to her wall, where she marked off changes in her height, only to find she hadn't grown a millimeter.

It occurred to her that she should've saved a memento from her grand adventure. "Ah!" she shouted. She reached into her pocket for the golden amulet that had held the questing stones. But, there she found only a small maple leaf. She smiled. It was a little furled and a little broken, but it was still fine and autumnal. It would stay this way for a long time in her book of crushed flowers.



Moving back across her room, she looked out the window. There were the tall pines, swaying slightly, dark and insouciant. She felt something new then as she stood and stared and heard the sound of Mom and Dad's Buick turning back onto their drive. She felt something sad, but with a sweet essence. She wanted to leave and to be at home, too.

It was not merely the tension between two wants that she felt, mind you, for everyone has that feeling often. No, it was a particular feeling which has no name—the desire to return and to stay, with both desires bound by the knowledge that one cannot really do either. This feeling is the little inheritance we get from the passing away of our years, and it is a sad thing when it is gotten by a child, but it is a very sad thing when it is not gotten until one is old.

And so it was that in the faerie world Augie got her first taste of grownupness.

It tasted okay.

The End

Appendix

For this appendix, we consider a solution proposed by Dr. Steven Brams in his book “Biblical Games.” Here, we will explain the solution for two mothers in plain language and then extend it for any quantity of mothers.

For the purposes of simplification, we will assume parents behave rationally.

For Two Mothers

Suppose you have two mothers claiming to be the mother of a particular child. One mother is lying and one is telling the truth, but you do not know which is which. Let’s also suppose you don’t have access to any genetic testing equipment and you’re too busy to go check whose house smells more like diapers. You need a way to get each mother to tell the truth by giving them the right incentives.

Then you have a bright idea.

Appendix

You tell them that if only one mother claims the child, she gets it. But, if both mothers claim the child, the child goes to a fancy orphanage, and both mothers must pay for its upkeep. This leaves four possible outcomes:

- 1) Only the true mother claims the baby, in which case she gets the baby. Hooray.
- 2) Both claim the baby, in which case the baby goes to the fancy orphanage. This is bad for the true mother, but it is extremely bad for the false mother. She is now, at no gain, paying for the upkeep of her rival's child. The true mother sends her kid to a fancy orphanage at half price!
- 3) Only the false mother claims the baby, in which case the the false mother gets the baby. Admittedly, this option is a bit odd, but if this situation arises perhaps the outcome isn't all that bad.
- 4) No one claims the baby, which of course would never happen because babies are precious.

Cases (3) and (4) are irrelevant if we assume mothers like having their children around. If the true mother will always claim the baby, we need only consider cases (1) and (2). In these cases, the only reasonable choice for the false mother is to disclaim the baby.

For Three Mothers

The three-mother problem is very similar, only you have nine solutions. However, if we once again assume that the real mother will always claim the child, the number of distinct solutions reduces to three:

- 1) Only the true mother claims the baby.
- 2) The true mother claims the baby and only one false mother claims the baby
- 3) All three claim the baby.

If all false mothers are approximately the same, they each face the same choice: Pay the upkeep of a rival's child or get nothing. Therefore, the two false mothers should rationally withdraw their claims, leaving us again with the true mother getting the baby.

For Yet More Mothers

It is easy to see how this problem can be extended. For each new claimant, there are 2^n possible outcomes, but for each false mother there is only one choice: pay for a rival's child or walk away.

A Problem: The Limit as the Number of Mothers Goes to Infinity

Suppose the yearly cost of upkeep, k , is constant. It follows that the yearly cost of upkeep per mother can be stated simply:

$$C(m) = k/m,$$

where C is the individual yearly payment and m is the number of mothers.

If we take the limit of C as m approaches infinity (i.e., the Momularity commences), we reach a disturbing conclusion—the yearly upkeep cost per mother falls to zero. That is, the more claimants there are, the lower the penalty for lying. As the number of mothers grows very vast (for visualization purposes, imagine the bleachers at a school volleyball game), the false mothers cease to pay a meaningful penalty for making their claim.

This problem may be technically insoluble. However, given the state of quantum computing and the limits of artificial intelligence, it seems probable that the Momularity will not be a major issue any time this year.

However, if at some point infinite mothers do claim a single child, the limit problem can be fixed by simply making k a linear function of m , such that k/m never gets out of hand. What exactly that function would mean in the real world is open to conjecture, but anything that requires each mom to perform an additional service would

work. For example, as part of her upkeep fee, each mother could be required to give a yearly batch of cookies to the first person she sees on January 1. This would potentially result in an infinite cookie “problem,” which I would be happy to resolve.

