The Gilded Box

By Julia Galt

Despite focusing a scope of worldly abilities to the task, Richard couldn’t get her voice- plaintive and final- from dizzying his every thought.

Like the scratching of a record in the crescendo of Bach, or a kiss interrupted by yellowed, gnashing teeth, her ghostly whisper decidedly spoiled any comparative pleasantness he’d stumbled across since she’d left seven days, five hours, and thirty-nine minutes ago. The number was precise- he’d confirmed it on his pocket-watch.

The only sign she’d ever been there at all was the gilded jewelry box- sourced and purchased, for a grand sum indeed, at a charming Parisian boutique near the Champs-Élysées- already gathering dust on the vanity.

Sara.

Richard took a swig from one of the twenty-nine rare bottles of Chateau d’Yquem he kept tucked away in spare bedroom five (quite foul, actually- but who said being rich came without problems?).

“Frobisher,” he barked rudely. “Fetch me my slippers.”

The butler tottered in hairlessly. Richard was frequently astounded by the incompetence of this small, sad little man, and today was no exception.

“Not the maroon pair, you imbecile,” Richard admonished. “I’ve already worn those.”

Frobisher meekly returned with a suitable set (chartreuse- a versatile hue).

The interaction fatigued the weary Richard. With the weight of the world and five pounds in Tiffany & Co. cufflinks weighing heavily upon him, he began the lengthy stroll to the other side of the room.

“Where did it all go wrong?” he pondered. “Surely I gave her everything she could ever desire?”

The list, indeed, was long.

A Thoroughbred racehorse, descended from the legendary steed Lexington. A loud automobile. A Smith & Wesson hunting rifle. Four wardrobes worth of attractively tailored negligées. The damned jewelry box.

But perhaps Sara had simply been too immature to appreciate the scope of his affections. She was, after all, forty-three years younger than him.

“Yes...” Richard mused. “Yes, that’s surely it.”

“Women” he added sagely, for Frobisher’s impotent benefit.

He’d reached the jewelry box at last. The rich tortoiseshell exterior still bore fingerprints- *her* fingerprints. Richard could recognize them anywhere. They were simply more feminine, more modest, more attractively timid than the average fingerprint. He let out a wistful sigh.

“My sweet Sarborhh- Sara,” he slurred.

Copious amounts of spirits had endowed him with a kind of youthful vigor he’d not had since Sara had left. With turgid, clumsy hands, Richard pried open the lid.

The shock- the horror- the smooth velvet was marred by *trash*- a folded piece of parchment paper, tucked almost out of sight amongst the crimson splendour.

What the *devil* had she been thinking, using a Remi Cocobolo vintage as a trash can?

“Oho!” spluttered Richard, as small black characters swam into sight. “A dispatch?”

With shaking hands (Nerves? The drink? Bad caviar?) he unfolded it, and read. Forgot, momentarily, what he was doing. Read again.

“Froshbisher,” he garbled. “Ready the steeds.”

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Within the hour, they were whisking o’er the rolling hills of King, pelted intermittently by the small, sharp stones kicked up by Anschutz and Friedrich’s hooves. Richard, sober from an invigorating ice bath, estimated they were going approximately 2 mph.

“Can’t you prod the damned things,” he complained. “Make them trot with a bit more vim?”

“We would have been there already, sir, if we’d taken the car,” replied Frobisher, quite audaciously.

“Nonsense,” said Richard. “Everyone knows horses are the superior implement of transportation. Turn here.”

“Here, sir?”

“Her note said she’d be waiting by the large oak tree,” said Richard impatiently.

As they pulled up to the tree in question, Sara emerged, golem-like, from the thicket. Judging by the copious filth on her now-destroyed Madame Frink dress and the dead rabbit swinging from her fist, it was clear she’d been there for some time.

“God be damned, Sara,” said Richard, withdrawing his eyes uncomfortably, as though beholding a particularly foul roadkill. “You look a fright.”

“If you hadn’t taken so long to read my note, I wouldn’t be here at all,” she shot back.

“I was, er, otherwise occupied,” Richard replied guiltily. “Besides, you could have left it in a more visible location. In case you forgot, I don’t wear jewelry.”

“Except, of course, my Rolex Oyster,” he felt compelled to add, for no particular reason.

“It was symbolic, see,” said Sara, tearing off a mouthful of rabbit leg. “You put too much in store by money, so I stored it *in* money.”

“Hardly wit you’d find in the pages of Byron,” scoffed Richard. “And taking pride in one’s wealth doesn’t equivalate, automatically, to pomp or snobbery. I would know, seeing as I’m worth the range of 3 to 4 million.”

But even as he spoke the words, memory of choosing King as his home because it aligned him, in some unique way, with the royal family swam unwittingly to the surface. Perhaps there was a small, infinitesimal inch of intelligence in her words.

“Tell you this, old girl,” he said bracingly. “Let’s go back, have a nosh. In the morning we’ll head to my Glencairn chateau. It’s a few hundred less in square feet.”

“Perhaps another time,” Sarah replied. “I’m otherwise engaged.”

Richard had commenced enough hunting jaunts with the Eatons to recognize a pump-action Remington Model 17 shotgun when he saw one- and so he did, with the shrewd eye of a true huntsman, when Sara withdrew one from the folds of her dress and aimed it at his midsection.

“Tally ho, Frobisher,” Richard commanded, once the shock subsided. “Dispatch this duplicitous filly.”

But lightening had struck twice, and Richard had been- quite unwittingly- scorched. The adulterous butler had drawn his own firearm, and the barrel was aligned with Richard’s aquiline nose.

“No, don’t think I will,” said Frobisher- but something about him- good lord in heaven- was different.

“You’re not British?” Richard was almost more appalled that he’d hired a common man from Barrie than he was by his potentially imminent death. “You viper!”

“Did you remember the box?” asked Sara, ignoring him.

The man formerly known as Frobisher reached into his pants and withdrew the slightly damp jewelry box. Deftly, he peeled back the velvet interior. Richard felt the icy cold drip of fear trickle down his spine, slow as molasses.

Hidden at the bottom of the box was a whole tree’s worth of paper: bank notes, and mounds of them. Richard didn’t have to lean in closer to know they represented almost all of his prodigious savings.

“Divorce can be expensive, Rich,” said Sara coolly. “Just be glad we’re not taking the house.”

And just like that, quick as a spring dragonfly– or the legendary Man o’ War, rounding the racetrack- they were gone, whisked into the forest deep, as lost to him as his dearly departed first wife (of seven) Emma-Lou-Jane.

Richard mournfully poured the last few drops of Chateau d’Yquem down his throat. It occurred to him, too late, that he could have used the bottle to club both assailants into submission. The realization that he *could* have bested them, if he really wanted to, was heartening.

With a spring in his step, Richard set off home.