Love may be a many-splendored thing, but in writer Brittany Muscarella’s Weird Words entry “Love,” it’s just a shade or two less so. Enjoy…

“Love”

“That one! She’s perfect!” Dieter Love indicated an antique armchair in the far corner of the store. An aged dust cloth hung over the chair’s left side, partially obscuring the dark green fabric punctuated with soft pink rosebuds.

The proprietor of the little shop nodded. “A beauty, sir. An excellent addition to any room!”

“I know. She calls to me. ‘Dieter,’ says she, ‘Oh, Dieter, put down thy pen and finish thine rooms. Finish them with me!’ ”

“Ah, the graceful tongue of a poet. Redecorating, are we?” The old man scribbled a receipt for the purchase. “Twenty-six dollars.”

“*Artist*, if you please,” Dieter corrected. “I have recently taken up residence in a peaceful

neighborhood nearby. I intend to complete my manuscript there. But the décor abhors me! The previous owner of the place was very distasteful.”

“Understood, sir.” The older man took his payment, gave Dieter his receipt, and pushed open a nearby door. A bell chimed. “Let me hold this for you.”

Once home, Dieter situated the chair in the downstairs parlor at the edge of the rug. Along with the ancient grandfather clock that stood in the corner, this rug was the sole item of the house’s original décor that Dieter had decided to keep. He had imported his own carefully selected pieces and placed them throughout the house according to an artistic vision he had received three evenings prior as he worked on his manuscript. The scheme was elegant, tasteful, full of artful arrangements and refined details that made his mouth water. It made even his new maid, Krissa, question his decision to write over design.

This particular room had been missing something since he had arrived at the house. He had wracked his brain these past three days as he searched for the elusive item that might fill the void; today, this thing had fallen into his lap when he had walked into that antique furniture shop. Beautiful chair.

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“Oh, my Elizabeth,” John breathed into her soft auburn curls. “My darling love, as beautiful and inconstant as the moon, as Spring!”

Elizabeth lifted her face to him, her deep green skirts rustling in the light summer breeze. She had tucked one of the roses they were picking in the fields that afternoon behind her ear; the touch of its tender stem felt like a lover’s caress against the pale curve of her neck. Her golden eyes searched his own imploring gaze for a long time, but finally she spoke, and the sun seemed to carry her words to him on its sparkling rays.

“This may never be, Mr. Hart,” she sighed, suppressing the longing sob that hid deep within her slender throat. “You must let me go!”

Dieter’s fingers paused on the keys of his typewriter. Something wasn’t right; he felt it in the air, smelled it. He turned and stared into the darkness. Nothing whatever.

A crystalline tear welled up in John Hart’s eye. “Say it isn’t so, Elizabeth! Why must you go away from me? I dream that you are Mrs. Elizabeth Hart!”

“And so I shall be,” Elizabeth cooed, resting a soft palm on his cheek, “forever in your dreams, my love.” She turned, a whirlwind of green, to hide the regret and despair in her eyes. John grabbed her arm and pulled her to his chest. She struggled against him. “Let me go, John! Please!”

“Never! You are my love, my only love!” His eyes were feverish with his desire to keep her, but she mustered all her feminine strength and tore herself from that desperate grasp.

There it was again! Something moving like an itch on his brain. For months he had been in his rooms, working night and day at the manuscript that would bring him artistic fame. The only interruptions had come from the maid, asking about supper or laundry or other useless nonsense. For all these long and lonely months he had been undisturbed: what force was just *now* trying to keep him from finishing these last few lines? His finger punched the next key.

Sobbing, Elizabeth ran down the path toward her father’s old white plantation house, looking back not once at the good man she was abandoning.

“Elizabeth! No! My dear.” But John’s outstretched fingers could carry her back to him no more than could the wind. John inhaled a shuddering breath, watching with longing as the dainty rose from Elizabeth’s hair fluttered past him in the strengthening gale.

Dieter grinned and smacked his lips against the page of his manuscript, the brain-itch forgotten. “Brilliant.” He chuckled. The clock above his desk read a quarter past seven. He had been

holed up in his rooms for nearly seven hours now! Seven hours, seven days a week, seven months out of the year!

Then the itch hit him like a grand piano: an unspeakable flaw in his design. Dieter ran to the room that he had visited frequently over the past months. He had never seen anything wrong in the room during those times—nor did he *see* anything amiss now, but he sensed it. Something just did not *fit* here.

Dieter inhaled. What’s this? A foreign stench. Dieter sniffed various objects in the room, but could not pinpoint the odor’s source.

“Elusive stench!” When he shook his fists at the cracked ceiling in frustration, his own reek throttled him.

“How many days has it *been*, Mr. Love?”

Yet his own body couldn’t be the fatal error in his design. His eyes roamed over all the items present; they stopped on the chair, whose roses seemed to blush deeper than they ever had before. God, what a gorgeous chair! So soft, so deep, so immutable in its position under the salmon glow of his reading lamp. He felt roses surface on his own cheeks as he considered the chair and, overcome by a sudden inexplicable emotion, Dieter dashed from the parlor. He did not stop running until he was safely tucked into his rooms, and he did not leave them for days.

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“Why, if it isn’t the future Mrs. Dieter Love,” he said with a confidence that overwhelmed him. “Ah, my Elizabeth. Hello, Elizabeth.”

Dieter was in the parlor again crouched next to the chair. He caressed the handsome upholstery with a tender hand, running the calloused palm over the curves of the chair as over

a lover’s neck. And the chair responded to his embrace, drawing him closer into its warmth. Dear Elizabeth! He took part of the fleshy bulge of its high back between his front teeth and pulled. A dusky pink rose bud tore off into his mouth and left behind only a tattered stem and ragged hole exposing sad yellow stuffing. Dieter, the pale flower dangling from his lips, turned to the grandfather clock that now stood against the far wall of the room, as far as possible from the chair.

“You saw nothing, sir.” His eyes widened significantly and he rose a little in his crouched position. “Nothing.”

The still hands of the old clock, which had ceased its ticking years ago, assured Dieter that they had no intention of seeing or saying anything at all.

“Good. What is there to say?” Dieter awaited a response. “No? What did you see? Nothing whatever? Nothing whatever.”

Dieter stood. “Well, my sweet, love hurts.” He chuckled and patted the chair’s arm. “But now I must go to bed. Until we meet again, my lady.” He swept forward in an impressive bow and, pocketing the fabric flower as he rose, retired to his rooms.

The next day held many surprises for Dieter, not the least of which was the disappearance of his love. His wailings and lamentations could be heard throughout the neighborhood.

“Oh, God in heaven!” He swung his shaggy head from side to side as he searched the room for the missing chair; a thin string of drool dangled from the corner of his cracked lips. The late afternoon sun filtered in through the spotless windowpanes, illuminating the place where Elizabeth had so recently stood.

“Oh, courtly love! Savage love!” His eyes squeezed shut against the tears, Dieter grasped an abundance of oily hair in both hands and screeched. His voice was ragged and caught in his throat.

“Love! There is no love without Elizabeth! There is no God where there is no Elizabeth!

“WHERE IS ELIZABETH! ELIZABETH! ELIZABETH! ELIZABETH!”

Krissa ran into the room, one hand gripping the St. Michael’s pendant at her throat. “Mr. Love? Sir? What—”

“ELIZABETH!” Adam’s apple bobbing out-of-control. Up and down.

“—are you screaming about? You’ll have the entire—”

“ELIZABETH!”

“—neighborhood here in a minute if you keep—”

“Where is she?” Dieter’s right arm lashed out and knocked over the thin lamp nearby. “Where? Tell me where!”

He turned on the grandfather clock. “Where is Elizabeth? What have you said? What did you say to make her leave?” Dieter rushed at the clock and punched the glass panel in its door. Blood trickled from the cuts on his fingers. “Nothing whatever? Just as we had discussed…” He considered the clock’s silence. Krissa made a noise behind him.

Realization dawned on Dieter’s face like a bloody sun. “Red sky at morning.” He turned and pointed a trembling finger at the maid. “You. What have you done?

“What did you do to make my Elizabeth go away?”

“Nothing,” Krissa stammered. “I don’t even know who Elizabeth is!”

Dieter chuckled and spread his hands. “Nothing, she says. Nothing whatever! Hoho!” Dieter indicated an empty spot. “You think *that’s* nothing whatever? Well? Do you?”

“The chair? But there was a tear in the fabric! I only—”

“YOU WHAT? Jealous wench! WHAT ONLY? YOU ONLY WHAT?”

“I was only going to mend it!” The sound of her voice infuriated him.

She tried to back up but the hem of her apron had caught on a nail in the doorframe.

“So stupid! STUPID! ELIZABETH!” Dieter lunged forward and tore her throat out with his bleeding hand. “Oh, God in heaven!” he screamed. “Say something stupid now, you wench!”

Krissa’s body collapsed in the doorway and her stupid eyes rolled at the grandfather clock, who ignored them, saying nothing, seeing nothing.

“Elizabeth,” Dieter sobbed. He drew the rose from his breast pocket and kissed it. “A piece of you near my heart always.” His eyes widened at a dark spot on the fabric. “Blood? Oh, my dear.” He licked the blemish with quivering tongue and replaced the token of his affection.

“Ah, well. As they say, a rose by any other name.” Then Dieter laughed.

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“I should *think* she has learned her lesson.” Bits of raw egg dribbled down his chin. He awaited a response but the wooden bowl remained silent in the center of the table.

“Hello? Oh, useless! USELESS!” Dieter swept the bowl off the table. It clattered to the foot of the oven, whose door stood slightly open.

“Oh, shut your mouth,” Dieter snapped at the oven. “Never have anything useful to contribute. You always criticize.”

Dieter continued. “She *said* nothing whatever! What would *your* reaction have been?” He stabbed an accusing finger in the oven’s direction.

The silence enraged him. Hot blood course through his veins like raw dripping egg. “SPEAK UP! Don’t you SPEAK when spoken to?” He stood, toppling his chair, and smashed his porcelain dish against the appliance. Dieter rammed his dirty fork into its range.

“YOU’RE MAD!” Gooey egg-yolk tears dripped down the oven’s face.

“ELIZABETH!!!!!!”

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His eyes were open and bloodshot beneath the sleeping mask. He could feel light and heat; he could hear mocking laughter even through the closed bedroom door. Why? WHERE? Where was it coming from? Stupid Krissa must have forgotten to close the curtains over the window outside his room: he hated that! A merciless sliver of moonlight had crept into his house and was keeping him awake! He could feel it, smell it! Impetuous moon. Damned lunatic!

Dieter swung out of his dirty bed, knocking his forgotten manuscript from the bedside table onto the floor, and stomped out into the hallway. Ignorant. Couldn’t she see he had THINGS to do? Didn’t she know about the job of a genius? An artist? And that jealous wench had killed Elizabeth…

He would teach her. He would kill her all over again, once he shut those Godforsaken drapes!

A hole in a curtain admitted the moon. Dieter growled. His gaze rode the moonbeam down the dark stairs to the lobby below. The front door stood open a little; the runner was bunched as if someone had shuffled her way into—

“Elizabeth!” Could it be? His knees buckled and he could barely contain himself: he felt a warm stream trickle down his leg. Was this real or just some sick trick propagated by that wench Krissa and her cohort Father Time? Was it all in his head? All of it?

No! It was his love! Elizabeth! Is that?—how?—Elizabeth, is it really you?

At the foot of the stairs stood the future Mrs. Dieter Love. A bit more haggard than usual, and an unseemly hole gaped in her back; but the darkness obscured most of the ugliness, and to Dieter she appeared as beautiful as ever, perhaps even more so!, the way she was angled down there in a pool of light the color of piss.

Joy! Rapture! My love come back to me on a moonbeam! Oh, Elizabeth…

His dirty nails and bloody fingertips strained to touch his love; his arms felt as if they were being pulled from their sockets as his feet shuffled toward the edge of the landing.

“Oh, my love,” he squeaked. His lips widened into a smile, cracked, began to bleed, turning his hard white gums pink again. “How I have missed you. Why did you go away from me? Why did you leave?” He hissed. Dieter creaked. His sounds imitated the old stairs beneath his flat feet.

Dieter’s head, elevated by love, eclipsed the moon, throwing silent Elizabeth into darkness.

“Love?” Dieter’s eyes raced back and forth in their sockets, their tendons tensed to snapping. He smelled death. Elizabeth? Disappeared. “Where have you gone, Elizabeth? Gone? Gone? Gone?” Panic. Gone? Oh, not again, Elizabeth! How could you? Who is it? Knock-knock, who’s there? Who’s there? Dieter stiffened when he spied the grandfather clock standing in his peripheral vision.

Lids narrowed. YOU! He could hear himself shout. NOTHING WHATEVER, REALLY? Well, WHERE is she NOW? WHO TOOK HER? WHO IS IT? Where is it? Nothing? Nowhere? Nowhere whatEVER?!?! Jouncing, his feet almost lost their hold on the step; he stumbled against the wall and the light reappeared, revealing the whereabouts of that shameless whore once and for all.

Knock-knock, Elizabeth.

You shameless whore, ONCE AND FOR ALL! Dirty WENCH!

I will kill you ALL OVER AGAIN!

FEAR THE ONE WHO TEARS AND RENDS WITH NEITHER TOOTH NOR CLAW!

I WILL BURY MYSELF INSIDE YOU AND GNAW MY WAY OUT!

MY WORM IS NOT DECEASING NOR MY FIRE DYING OUT!

FEAR THE ONE WHO DESTROYS THE SOUL AS WELL AS THE BODY!

HE, WHO SPARES NOT SINNING MESSENGERS!

Dieter’s hysterical screams carried him several inches further toward the edge of the step; a rusted nail caught on his back as he slid down the wall. Oh, that stupid wench! He couldn’t quell the sob rising in his throat. Hadn’t she recommended that whoring maid, too? All a scheme to keep him sleepless, full of the moon and time and the wrath of God, sing Hosanna, all a filthy dirty whoring plan to keep him from his interior designs, to trap him inside this stinking filthy ticking mess forever. Who saved you, Elizabeth? Who rescued you from your garbage heap, rubbish, trash, ORPHAN?, who made you beautiful and whole again? Who will save you from the Wrath of God?

His teeth gnashed in his skull, several splitting to their rotting roots. But Elizabeth said nothing. The clock saw nothing; the maggots in Krissa’s black eyeless sockets saw everything.

Speechless? So am I. So much like me, you. So lovely. So cold… Elizabeth, I… I can forgive you. I give you another chance. I know you are sorry. Don’t cry, love, no! Dieter is here; I am here. Love is here.

He cooed. He swooned. He took an unsteady step toward the unmoved and unmoving chair. Elizabeth braced herself as Dieter came tumbling down the flight of stairs, his bones snap-crackle-popping in time with the rotting wood.

Catch me, dear! I’m coming, Elizabeth! Her arms were so close he could smell the mildew that shrouded her roses. He was suddenly ravenous. Wait for me, love! I’m going to catch you!

Love has come to you at last, poor girl, my Elizabeth, my poor stupid little girl whore girl Elizabeth, my darling Elizabethetheth Elizagirldarlibeth my love Elizalove Eloveabeth

Dieter landed with a thud at Elizabeth’s clawed feet. She shrank back in disgust at the blood issuing from the hole in his skull that gaped like a forgotten oven door. We match now, dear; she chuckled prettily. Both holy are we. Dieter’s eyes rolled in their sockets at the sound of her voice, drunk on love and dust and roses and rot and soft yellow interior, frenzied at the sight of the arms abandoning him. Oh no, love, don’t leave me again you said you would never go away again I trusted I loved I thought I designed you were mine are mine mine mine I almost had you almost you reached you close to so close to so you close you close to so almost had reached close so close you to you Elizabeth my design my Eliza my love my my my my my ELIZABETH!

Love hurts, my darling Dieter.

The grandfather clock knew nothing whatever but this: Love’s designs always fall short of its embrace.

Brittany Muscarella is a freelance writer living in Buffalo, NY.

{jcomments on}