Time of Night in the 7th Room

Roger Zelazny

(found in a bottle)

This is the story of Gricet and Lord Chek of the snail-fort, and of the wing-benders and highbeached-winders and of the Lightofday time they shared together (Gricet and Lord Chek) in the seventh room of the world, which some say is the largest.

—It is a comedy (she wrote). That is to say, it ends in heaven, for most of the parties concerned. She, being Grisek, who of the womanwanderkind was first to find a snail-fort of her own, to continue undiminished across the ages, and to diddle whatever Lords she chose for the furtherance of the new and longborn womanwanderkind.

This is the story of how she came to be:

—The Lightofday (which had been faltering for a time) clicked off, and the world wondered whether it would ever come on again. The snail-forts ceased their movement and dug into the floor of the world for the Timeofnight. The highbeached-winders uncoiled themselves and slithered off in search of prey. Occasionally, there was an orange and incandescent flash as one ventured too near a snail-fort. The Lords prepared to retire and sleep the long Timeofnight through.

The womanwanderkind emerged from the wilderness where they had been wandering, and they ventured rapidly across the countryside, being eaten by the ’winders and ’benders and the biggies and the crawlies as they went.

When they came upon a snail-fort, they would remove their garments, put aside their weapons, and bang upon the whorled side-plating of the curved fort-back. If the Lord was awake and watching through one of the great eyes, he did not always permit the fort to spray them with fires. He would stay the nozzle and tell them to go away; or, if he’d a mind to diddle, would select the most comely for his sleepmate, and, if he were a merciful Lord, would spray the others with the fires.

Lord Chek was old. Gods, he was old! A hundred generations of womanwanderkind had passed beneath his loins, and their daughters slept within the bellies of the things that went flash in the night. Two had even given him sons, for whom he had scouted for days and endless days until he had seen them fitted with snail-forts of their own, as became Lords of the Seventh Room. Now the chills were upon him, and he feared that his days were coming to an end. So it was not likely that it was the desire to diddle that led him to open his fort to Gricet. Probably, he was lonesome and wanted someone to be nurse to him and to listen to his ramblings a part of the long Timeofnight.

She came alone, this one, placed her belt knife and thin spear upon her piled garments, and pounded, shivering, upon the gray and faintly glowing shell of the fort.

Lord Chek spoke to her out of the night, saying, “What do you want, womanwanderer?”

“To come in, Lord of the snail-fort.”

A highbeached-winder stalked her as she spoke, pushing its head along the ground in her direction. She knew, though, that if she took up her weapons again she forsook her claim to sanctuary. She turned her head and watched it approach as the Lord continued to speak:

“What is your name, womanwanderer?”

“Gricet!”

The ’winder moved its head from side to side, preparing to strike.

“Will you diddle me a son, Gricet?”

“I do not know, Lord! I will try!”

“I suppose that will have to do,” he said, and sprayed the highbeached-winder with fires just as it sprang.

Then she fell back against the snail-fort and it opened and she was inside and in bed, and the wall closed and all was dark about her.

From beside her, the Lord Chek spoke again:

“Old am I and dying, Gricet,” he said. “So I want someone to speak to this Timeofnight, even if it is only one of the womanwanderkind.”

“Yes, Lord.”

“I am going to make a light now.”

“Yes, Lord.”

A dim light came on within the great, curved chamber. Having never seen a Lord before, Gricet had no notion one way or the other as to how they should look. So she simply stared at him, gray and withered, there on the floor of the chamber which was all bed, as he spoke and explained to her how to open and close the fort-wall, which was a thing she would need to know in order to leave, should he die during the Timeofnight—for a womanwanderer might not remain alone within a snail-fort—and as he explained to her how to switch the guns from automatic to manual control, so that they would not burn her as she left, and as he told her of the operation of the great eyes, which would permit her to scan in all directions before she left. As an afterthought, he told her where the foods and medicines were kept, and how their fabricator worked, should it be necessary for her to serve him with such.

As she stared at him, he stared at her, and he realized with a start that he was not too old to diddle after all.

After a time, they lapsed into slumber, and the chamber of the bed fed them and cleaned them and kept them warm and well-drugged until the Lightofday did, after all, come again.

Surprised to awaken at all, the Lord Chek studied the woman who slept at his side and whom he was about to turn loose again into the world, unless—

He pressed a button upon the wall.

“Yes, she is pregnant,” said the room.

“Amazing!” he stated.

Then he pressed the button twice again.

“The child will be of the womanwanderkind,” stated the room.

“That is generally the case,” he conceded, and he elbowed the woman awake.

“Good morning,” he said, “you are pregnant and may leave.”

“Where am—” she said. “Oh, Lord Chek.”

“Yes, I have survived the long Timeofnight. You are with child, and may return now to the wilderness to have your daughter. Your spear and knife still remain outside the snail-fort, though I note your garments are missing.”

“May I not stay for a time?”

“Whatever for?”

“I do not feel well.”

“That is only because you are pregnant,” said the Lord Chek. “It doesn’t last very long, when it is a daughter you are to have. You will feel all right afterwards.”

“But I have no garments.”

“You will find more.”

“You said that you wanted someone to speak to, even if it was only one of the womanwanderkind—”

“That was last Timeofnight. I feel better this Lightofday. Go now.”

“Yes, Lord.”

She arose, and as she walked away he noticed something.

“Stop,” he said, and pressed a button.

“Yes,” asked the room.

“Why is it that she is not yet big-waisted if she is going to have a womanwanderchild? She is still narrow at the waist, though an entire Timeofnight has passed. It is as if she bears a Lord.”

“Have her walk across the chamber, and stand in the middle.”

He did this thing.

“Well,” he asked.

“This is very strange,” said the room. “I have determined the gender correctly, but the rate of growth is such as will take her a sixth of her life to bear the child—as if it were a Lord.”

“What should I do?”

“Keep her here for a while, that I may study her.”

“Very well. —Gricet, come this way and I will give you a garment. Then we will eat breakfast and I will teach you how to read and to make small animals cry out as we remove their various parts—both of which improve the mind and are excellent pastimes. It appears that you will have your wish and remain here for a time.”

“Yes, Lord.”

After a time, she was as withered and old as the Lord Chek had been, and she gave birth to a womanwanderchild and lived for a time to attend it. The Lord Chek had since passed, requiring his medicine suddenly one day and sending Gricet after it. At length, when she returned, he was dead. So she operated the great eyes and scanned in all directions, switched the guns from automatic to manual control, opened the great fort-wall and dragged him outside to the place from which her clothing had vanished; and when she looked again later, he had vanished, too.

Before very long, she died herself, and the machine disposed of her body and raised the child, whom she had named Grisek.

So this is the story of how Grisek came to be, remembering no parent, educated by the bedroom—reading and writing and cutting small animals, she grew, generations of womanwanderkind passing, dying beneath the automatic guns of the snail-fort before she reached womanhood herself.

Later, after she had learned all operations of the snail-fort, she took the womanwanderers in and spoke with them. There was no need to dissect them, for the bedroom explained to her the difference between men and women.

Men lived a hundred times as long, and women were a thousand times as plentiful as men.

Except for herself. In her, the Lord Chek had fathered a freak. She was of the womanwanderkind, but she possessed the lifespan of a Lord.

The bedchamber had suggested that she might mother an entire race of her own kind. To do this, of course, she would need Lords to diddle. But going to them in the night, as did the wanderkind, was too risky. She was not anxious to feel the fires upon her.

So she directed her snail-fort to course about the floor of the Seventh Room, attacking those others which she came upon. Subduing their Lords, she begat daughters which she gave into the keeping of their bedchambers. The Lords, she turned loose to wander the wilderness.

Of the nine and ninety Lords with whom she lay, it was only Lord Dimijon whom she regretted sending into the wilderness where the ’winders and the ’benders and the biggies and the crawlies go. For he had been young and dark, and had looked on her long and smiled slowly, and when he held her he had told her that he wanted her with him always. Almost, she had relented. But then he had pressed his mouth against hers, as if to draw life from her. She called then upon the machines of her fort, to expel him to wander the world.

Their reconciliation was a strange one.

The chills were upon her, and she feared that her days were coming to an end. It was likely, therefore, that she was lonesome and wanted someone to be nurse to her and to listen to her ramblings as part of the long Timeofnight. It is not likely that she would have opened her fort otherwise.

The men had emerged from the wilderness where they had been wandering...

Notes

Zelazny suffered frequent criticism for initially failing to create strong female characters; however, this early story does feature such a woman.

The seventh room in the title probably refers to heaven, and the story suggests a creation myth, possibly that of Inanna, the Summerian nature goddess who leaves her realm to visit her sister Ereshkigal, queen of the underworld. The gatekeeper there removes all of Inanna’s clothing, and she enters the seventh room, the throne room, naked and disarmed (Naked, Gricet enters Lord Chek’s throne room). Inanna is killed there, and nature dies with her. Only her resurrection can revive nature (in Zelazny’s story, daughter Grisek’s emergence renews the world). Psychologist Carl Jung detailed the psychological aspects of Inanna’s (alternatively Ishtar’s) descent into the underworld (the unconscious). Zelazny incorporated Jungian psychology into other works as well. He was fascinated with dying and resurrecting gods.