

Stamina

by Edith Lyre

The Isabel Fall thing ruined his life. Sam could not detach the eighteenth chapter of Success's opera from this shudder, now volting through the "community" who fed his Patreon and kept his name afloat. During Success Maximum's voyages in the Altaverse – while he brokered peace between the savage and red-eyed, albeit brave and honourable Prime Qeseln and the cool and kindly, yet treacherous Alternate Qeseln; while Success and the most reliable of his crew, by strangling, skin-chewing, mind-tearing gauntlets, breached the ancient domain of The Marfish Intent, host to a server old as the galaxy (the hardware of the Intent's simulated, extra-dimensional civilisation, and seat of their long jurisdiction

over this reach of the Altaverse) and, by guile and subterfuge, extorted the schematics to craft Interthreaders all their own and, thereby, skip cosmos-to-cosmos and cross the limbos between – the Prime Universe, all the while, trudged on, and, in the absence of Success, turned cruel, once peaceful systems collapsing to animalistic warfare, as in the system of Fall, Success’s home planet. The planet was destroyed, surface antigerminated, atmosphere blighted. During this period, Sam – the abbreviation given even by his family, due to some unaccountable intuition, perhaps it was, despite forever introducing himself as “Samantha Lawson,” his pronouns as “she, her” – wrote the legendary Captain Success Maximum with a different name: Suicide. Captain Suicide Mary. In the latter arcs of Chapter Seventeen, though, the captain was already decided, in fact already at it. For now, Success took the testosterone, but asked that everybody stick with “Suicide,” or “Captain Mary.” “For now.” “Until I pick another.” The superstition of the Falline was such: by giving something a name, one stole the named property. The Falline thought it unusual – wrong, even – to call a child Alexander, as to do so ensured the child would never be great. Success’s family was typical: there was Suicide, which deadname, per the superstition, guaranteed the child would die some other way, a

name given by Laxity, the mother, and Hunger, the father. And Fall. The planet that never would. When Success returned to the Prime Universe and, at the close of Chapter Seventeen, learned of Fall's destruction, his grief, rage, and the urgency of his vengeance led to these utterances: "When even Death may die, a Fall be fallen, then so Suicide may end its own sojourn, and I am she no longer but he who endures. I am the destroyers' night-terror, the phantom in their twilight. I am Success Maximum." For some, this read as an obvious, symbolic response to Isabel Fall's mistreatment by parts of her community and, from Sam, a statement of wilful allegiance to Fall and other, similar targets. But Sam never heard of Isabel Fall. Sam never read other people's posts. He went on apps to post story-updates. There was nothing Sam liked reading and nothing he liked writing except his own saga, *The Transitory Opera*.

Sam didn't like people calling him "Sam," or didn't know what he felt, but knew how he felt about "Samantha." It was correct, if correct was a feeling. He said people should use what came automatically, leave him out of it. "Correct" was the feeling something that's never changed will create in you. "She" felt correct because that's all he'd ever gone by. Water tasted correct. The small, occasional seizures in his shoulder – the ones

no one else suffered, but which bothered him too little to mention and, in any case, had whirled there, thrashed across that region as long as he remembered, so the pain wasn't conscious anymore – hurt correctly. When people didn't ask him things: that's what he liked.

Sam began the opera at fifteen. His instincts – characteristic of young artists whose exposure to and digestion of good art precedes their eye for it, beauty's dark materials at their fingertips without fear for the materials' delicacy, repeat-failures to bluff and falsify themselves that elsewhere would be pathetic and, here, still were, but also, miraculously, attained to a pathos and courage no less true – were sharp. Already, by the third update, he was regretting, in fact crying from embarrassment over Suicide Mary's name, the transparency of its wink-nod to "Mary Sue," which at first he thought would gain him a new aesthetic permission to extend the mistake, a new potential lent by force of his own knowingness and intent. But there was nothing except the page and what was on it. He saw as much. But – such was his genius – he saw something else too: if the problem were already visible at this developmental stage – strangely, he knew himself to be fifteen-years-old – so would it be to others, and more – what's more – Sam could use it, imply a third

dimension of wilfulness, a wink-nod toward the winking-and-nodding, set the thing on a fractal drift and annihilate it, let it be a signal to his audience to switch off their brains. Here: “The protagonist’s name is silly. We’re going to get a bit silly. Relax. It’s a decade old campaign. Everyone’s taken their turn DMing and the lore’s gone silly. Meet the hero, Suicide Mary.” And eighteen years along: “Here’s Success Maximum, the same hero but better and, now, a man.” Fifteen-year-old Sam returned to the computer and produced the fourth blogpost. Such was his peculiar talent: to see the error, and move with it regardless. So, he kept the opera alive, and after eighteen years, it endured.

Sam disliked cons, but it was too much effort to decline the one in his own city (they always put his stall in the YA wing too, which felt legitimising). At Sam’s first con, a fan asked if he knew about Dave Sim or about his talk first thing in the morning in the graphic novels-wing, or if Sam read *Cerebus* ever. Sam read his own stories back over, and over, and almost nothing else. He knew no *Cerebus* nor Sim and told the fan as much. They laughed, unconvinced. Another time, a fan did not even ask, but told him – the sort of thing Sam liked, generally speaking – that writing the Fall of Fall as a Road to Damascus-moment for a transmasculine transition-

narrative was a stroke of sly genius and his girlfriend's influences there ("your girlfriend – she's trans, right?" to which Sam nodded) were not lost on her, and the attention Sam must be paying to transfem voices right now was inspiring, a tier (that was her word, "tier") of allyship nobody aspired to or dared hope for, stumbling along, "even though you probably feel like a dad getting told he's a hero just for, like, watching the kids an hour a week, it's still so rare it's honestly touching. I doubt Isabel Fall even goes online anymore but if she does, if she ever reads your work, she'd be so grateful too." The fan smiled at him, sincerely but with a little difficulty, then seemed to wince, though the lightness persisted in her heavy voice. "Anyway. Thank you. I hope you get a chance to have fun this weekend, as well as this." The fan's wince followed to her somewhat clawed hand, which unfurled, casting a feathery gesture over the pens and water bottle and empty notepad and sheets of promotional material, stacked, sticking. A strange curtsy. A torsion of the neck and head, the rest of the body stiff, hunched. Then gone.

Sam's instincts gained and gained and there dwelt, in the depths of him, nothing that was not irradiated and alight and startlingly apparent to his own inward eye. Gained and gained from fifteen on. All was brightness

and knowing. A kind of rottenness and evil had, by force of his admitting to and accepting it, thus found a secure, although contained purchase in him. In theory, one acknowledged one's evil, that permanent facet of the soul, in order to better manage and, ideally, suppress it. At the heart of this theory was an assumption – the same assumption which led all those astronomers in the 70s to litter the night with star-maps directing the galaxy's monsters to our planet – that wisdom begets goodness. This, in Sam's estimation, was the maddest notion the species ever invented. By force of Sam's awareness, he was, in one sense, then, courageous enough to admit and, in another, identical sense, helpless to admit he saw his girlfriend as a man. His girlfriend's ex-girlfriend was a man too, and a woman, a woman who was a man and had no right to that which was women's, especially so when the evidences of her manhood were so great and her masculinity, set alongside the innate femininity she carried, so disgusting a fixture, which femininity was made equally disgusting by its accessorisation onto an undisturbable, also innate masculinity. So, paradoxes all the way down. (Everyone knows this.) But also: it was not Sam's fault if that, on the social level, was how it worked. And also: what other level was there? As a creator of science fiction and fantasy stories –

even one, continuous story – a draw toward second-hand living was inborn to him. He was a woman – not a man who was a woman: no one got to be that: everybody, masc, fem, etc., were all women who were men, on the social level: and, having never transitioned nor breathed a word in that direction, there was less complexity still: he was just a woman – and the caveat of him being a man, on some metaphysical, nonsensical, politically immaterial level, reconciled naught and troubled his womanhood none. But his girlfriend: in her there existed, as in Success Maximum, a manfulness both volatile and resolute.

She was only a month out when they met, and on their fourth date (at a cruel and tiresome exhibition-opening with over-dry wine and no ice for the water), asked Sam: would it be alright to come in “boymode”? As far as he could tell, her boymode was identical to her girlmode, bar the non-use of mascara, which anyway cloyed when she wore it, thinned the eyelashes and, given the too-soft brown she insisted on wearing out of the misogynistic assumption so many of them made that one should be modest in order to be authentic, if anything cast the lashes an even lighter shade, pale skin shocking through. He had no issue, and in fact when she asked him – if the need to make introductions arose – to use her new,

“real” name, he liked the idea. The conflict, to think of it. “Here’s my boyfriend. He says he’s my girlfriend. Am I scared of him? How he flaunts his deception, dares us to call it out? How I won’t even retreat to “they”? It’s the terrible, uncompromising mass of him that demands I say “she” and ask you now whether you’ve met “Josephine.” What a spot. What a man to put me in it.” It was uncommon, sure, but that play of appalment and nervousness and respect wrapped in pity was frequent enough to satisfy, more frequent at least than outright, caveat-free surrender to Josephine’s pitch at womanhood, a manner of sign and countersign seen not more than twice a year, which always ruined Sam’s day, the hideous – hideously unintelligent – joy and comfort it filled Josephine with, budding an odd levity in the girl which came close, in passing moments, to persuading Sam of her sincerity.

Sam’s girlfriend’s ex, whose name he could never recall, was a fan of the opera. With Josephine on her arm, in the dark, string-lit back-gardens of a party put on by a cis man Sam fucked about once a month (at the time the only person he was fucking), Josephine’s then-girlfriend had asked whether Sam knew a place, a thing with a name like “Bread House,” and whether he might come to Bread House the next Friday.

Sam saw the girl on her arm – high, heavy-lidded, and one month into HRT; he couldn't even tell she was meant to be a woman – smiling at him and agreed. Next Friday, in a grimy, too-yellow, Bread House bedroom, Sam and Josephine fucked, and before she entered him, Josephine's final words were about her girlfriend, "She could be here too," and the last thing Sam said was, "Fucking fuck me, god." Sam was loud during sex, a trait he defended, as in, "not every tiny fucking thing a person does needs to get shoved under the microscope and psychoanalysed," a line he was forced to repeat every time a new partner confronted him on it. Thus, every Bread House-guest overheard them, and because Josephine's then-girlfriend was trying to find her, in fact had called her five times, asking whether anyone had seen her, when she overheard Sam's furious, almost mournful screams and, along with everybody else, guessed their cause – i.e., the notorious missing person – she (in a way open relationship-stuff didn't usually feel) felt neglected and humiliated.

They fucked until the moaning quieted, the shaking stilled, but, when she came in him, a new round came about, as if Sam were Bread House's crier, set on proclaiming Josephine's victory for all to hear. That very Sunday, Sam and Josephine met again, fucking turned into dating,

and soon Josephine and her then-girlfriend, now-ex were trialling poly. But, because it was the case and because Sam made little effort to conceal it, Josephine's ex suspected Sam of trying to create a rift between them. There was a certain cosmic unfairness – an unfairness it was not Sam's responsibility to account for – about the glare and blatancy of his own unconscious. Yes, he was trying to create a rift, but so would anyone else in his situation – only they would ignore their own minds, not see it in themselves, muffle their own will. He was under no obligation to neglect his desires, or deny himself the stratagems of desire availed by everyone else. So, when Josephine recounted her then-girlfriend's suspicions, that is, of intentional sabotage, and Sam retaliated by saying the suspicions were obviously paranoid, it was as good as true. If she accused anyone else of wilful conspiracy, she would do their intelligence too much credit – though she would, almost always, be right about a conspiracy, the “wilful” part was raving. So, the demands of common morality were not fair: when all others reaped the benefits of self-ignorance, Sam deduced, it was his right to reap the benefits of a more robust interpretation of honesty. He held the thick-veined and meaty lengths of Josephine's fingers and, with nothing but the truth in his mouth, said, “I could talk

about this delicately and try to extract all emotional reality from what I need to say but if I did it would, I think, be a kind of inaccuracy. Like, my instinct is I would be failing myself, in a way, what I feel and see with my own eyes. To be sincere, really, actually, to not lie to you, I think there's a not-delicate gravity, gravitas that's necessary and so, to not apologise exactly but express, I guess, I'm sorry how probably hearing this will feel, in this way. I am sorry but in my view she's losing her fucking mind and honestly it's because she can't do poly but you and I can. Is she getting aggressive? I mean it's easy to dismiss things that are aggressive as not-aggressive."

Now, three years on, Josephine would still thank Sam for getting her away, every time a reminder of the ex popped up or some mention of her name, whatever it was. The nearer Josephine cleaved to Sam, the easier it was to reassure Josephine of her beauty, impress the need to think past, overcome, confront her dysphoria as a psychological, rather than real object, what, when "these days you look even more like a woman than I do." In voicing that, Sam's gut churned. Most of his distortions were reconcilable with some version of the truth, but it was an outright lie, he always knew as he said it, and it fouled his tongue and guttered his

appetite. It didn't matter. The relationship was over anyway, minds made up. There was nothing left to take from her, her manfulness near-spent, unreplaced by femininity of course – that, let flourish, would bulwark against the extraction, his sympathetic pleasure whenever the masculinity spilled out of her, oozed and unwanted, her with nowhere to retreat, settling as a limp husk on the floor of their loungeroom every workday night. Though still good, the sex was much worse, nothing new in it. When the con was over, Sam would ask Josephine if she ever read the attack helicopter story or heard of Isabel Fall. He thought the odds uncertain, but good, that Josephine had neither read nor heard of the story. 'Therein, he would say, was the problem, because there existed realms, dimensions of trans life – transfem life, if one could say that – a woman needed to access, eventually, and those fields were going unnurtured, in ways he and she would never overcome together because he could not go where she must go and where she, therefore, must go without him. If necessary, if she resisted or tried to hold on, the line (and it was not a lie) would be: this lack of any nurtured sense of transfeminine-belonging was physically unattractive. Maybe, with time, they could try again, but right now the campaign was at an end, yeah? Didn't she feel it?

Had she not, equally well, known something was wrong, broken, a thing only distance could repair? He rehearsed as he signed, the dialogue of it slipping his lips, sneaking into the handful of phrases he rotated through. To yet another question about Cerebus the Aardvark, a question he did not hear, he answered, “I think maybe thinking of me as a close friend is probably not the right way to do this. Messaging’s maybe something we shouldn’t do except for, like, organising things, if that makes sense.” The question-asker asked another question and Sam laughed, went with, “I honestly can’t remember what I just said.” Rays thinned, shadows lengthened, and a rattle of applause sounded the con’s end and the creeping forth of night, before the crack and sizzle of a dozen melancholy afterparties. He and Josephine were undecided about one afterparty and were to meet at their apartment, first, to see how things felt – such was the line. Sam found the back-kitchen, refilled a water bottle, took several gulps, then set off to get the breakup in motion.

Three days later, the Transitory Opera’s Tuesday 5PM-update was late without explanation and, a week on, still unaccounted-for, Sam’s accounts fallen to silence, his social media empty of content. Sam Lawson was alive, the trans woman-friend who designed the author’s website told

everybody, and “okay,” apparently, but otherwise not answering questions. A month later, finally, the opera got its update, Sam’s link to the blog captioned, “It’s rare I use my own life as inspiration for writing, but here.”

Following from the last update, Success Maximum and the crew of The Transitor awaited a triple eclipse over Fall, or at least, over the ball of poisoned air and boiling dust that remained of the planet. Previously, the crew’s top-tech was able to conclude that, if the Destroyers were concealed in Fall’s sub-atmosphere, to remain so would require solar power. She expressed a confidence-interval of 95.39%, even as she reminded Captain Maximum her confidence of the Destroyers even being on the planet was no more than 32.02%. “They’re here alright,” said Success. “Don’t worry. We get what you’re saying. Next eclipse, they’ll need to switch to backup and, when they do, there’ll be no out: our sensors will ping their power-source and it’s Goodnight, Nuke York.” Then it was all fan-service, all palling in the candle-lit dim, overheads killed to evade detection, wrapping up with the escalation of a romance-arc for two minor characters.

Now, at the opening of the awaited update, fixed on the swirling redgreyblack gumball of his former planet, Success's eyes twitched and, twitch by twitch, the gumball marbled and glistened, glossy, green, and blue. Fall. As though never fallen. The vision would not stir. Success screamed at the mockery of it, asked to be mediscanned, but everyone saw it, and mediscans showed no abnormalities in any of the crew. Fall had returned and, rushing upon them hours ahead of schedule, here surged the triple eclipse. Automatically, as it did, their own energy diverted to backup, and so – in the general confusion – the Destroyers pinged them first, bypassing their netshields and telestepping a boarding party into the command centre. Guns were levelled. Cooperation was urged. But the boarding party stressed they wanted to talk, not fight, and as every crewmember recognised and – so, so deeply – trusted the intruders' leader, compliance came easy. The crew of The Transitor forfeited their weapons and, in silence, awaited Suicide Mary's next words. To their shock, she did not lower her gun, instead aimed it at the stoic, yet reddening face of Success Maximum. "Tell them," she said.

"It makes no difference," said Success.

"If it makes no difference..."

“It’s not like I planned it. I trusted my gut and the crew trusted me.”

She sank a bullet into that gut. The old captain winced, but did not groan. “What’s your gut telling you now?” When he stared on, unspeaking, she explained, “This is not the Prime Universe. There is no Prime Universe. It’s *his* universe. The Altaverse is one of uncountably many cosmoses, but it was into that universe *he* stitched himself and, there, stole aboard The Transitor, tampered with the telestepper, and shifted me into a cosmos he thought empty and, because it was empty, inescapable, ensorcelling you so – stitching you so – into *his* universe. I give a little, not much, but some credence to superstition, and in all but one of the universes I’ve traversed in search of you, my dear crew, Fall endures – as it does in our universe. And that’s how I escaped the emptiness he trapped me in – for, you see, it was not empty. One holdout endured. A world called Fall. Top-Tech! What do you call it when a thing is true for all but one scenario in a billion?”

“Ah,” Top-Tech glanced at Success, then back at Suicide, and therein saw her real commander. “An asymptotic fact, ma’am!”

“And what’s another kind of fact?”

“Ma’am, there is none!”

“And, Top-Tech, what’s that tell us about my homeworld?”

“Always and forever Fall endures, ma’am, in this and every timeline!”

“You fucking heard her, everybody. Now, you,” weapon levelled at Success’s face, “you must think you’re going to click that Interthreader attached to your wrist, that secret bit of Marfish tech you’ve been keeping from everybody, and yeah, it would work, and we might never find you, you’d cause more ruin, pursue the destruction of ever more Falls out of your ugly resentment, but the thing is – because of that – well, there’s no clean way about this, so...” Captain Suicide Mary discharged her firearm, twice, into the impersonator’s frontal lobe, now a heap on the command-centre floor. “I’m taking this ship back,” said Suicide, “and then we’re all going home.”

But Success Maximum’s neural lacing was spread across his entire nervous system, and though the core processor was blown, there remained flickers of his consciousness, enough to will some few last words through the oral interface. “Fall is gone, though. These asymptotes

are nothing but math and language. Look out the window.” Everyone looked, and realised the turquoise wonder they beheld truly was Fall – the return to their home-universe already complete. “You see the dust, the black hell that’s there? That’s my reality. It’s real.” Success, the wreckage of him, could not rise or see what they saw. “Truth doesn’t change across universes, and it’s true in mine. It’s a fact. In my universe, I am a fact.”

“Actually,” said Suicide, “truth does change across universes, and now, you’re in mine.”

“The people who destroyed my Fall exist. They’re out there. They... it... massacre... trillions... my people...”

“I’m sorry, Mr Maximum, but that’s just not the case.”

With the least ceremony permissible under galactic law, Success’s remains were pulped, fed to a recycler, and dumped in a donations-bin outside a clone-research lab. That done, Suicide took the command-seat, activated the ship-wide intercom, and announced, “As we return, I’ve got to say, whatever your expectations of Fall or the changes it’s undergone, you better prepare yourself to have those expectations... wildly exceeded.” That was the last clump of dialogue, Sam ending the update

with a description of The Transitor sailing slow at first, then blurring as the shields activated, before all at once vanishing into the nebula-ridden sky.

People asked the obvious questions, but, after hearing, again from Sam's trans woman web designer-friend, about Josephine's sudden death, for the most part left it alone. The opera tied up quickly, its twenty-year saga ending with little ado. "Josephine," Sam wrote some months later, in answer to the outstanding mystery of how his personal life inspired that section, "said this was her way of fixing the relationship, something she, in her gut, felt was the only way. In a note. She did not commit suicide. She did not take her own life. I want to be clear. But she wanted to die and part of why she died... Her feeling was part of why she died. Which doesn't make sense. I know. But I mean every word." There were more words, things Sam wanted to express, things he was good at expressing, or supposed to be, ways around the central thesis, to the effect, in any case, Josephine dying put something away, for Sam, some brittle head-shape, hoary where it struck the inmost contours of the self, the mind, the unconscious, bouncing, bouncing, sticking, sinking and sliding off, dripping all through. Instead, the words were "no matter how Josephine

died, what matters is it's fixed. The shape's gone. It's not all so bright anymore." Sam hit send and the thing sent. Spine sunk in a stack of cushions, spread-out stiff on the floor of the lounge, the laptop sighed and stared back. Deliberately and with great care, as if fearful of attention, some forgotten magic drew down the eyelids. So great was this magic's power and so delicate its grace that, when oblivion came for Samantha, she did not even notice.