

The Reason For Armor *by Rebecca Wolsk*

Russ Jobelin, one of the new kids, wore a chain mail tunic to our orientation picnic on the Friday before school started. Picture bulky, blackish mesh on a skinny guy's frame. I didn't even know what it was until Jill, my worldliest friend, noticed the tiny metal links.

"It's definitely chain mail," she whispered. "I just saw a roomful of armor at the British Museum." I thought we'd gaped enough, so I walked over to the long picnic table and picked up a Styro-foam plate. Jill followed.

"Why don't you go over and see what he's like?" she asked. "You're supposed make all the newbies feel welcome. It's

one of your few powers as senior class president."

"I'm aware of that," I answered, scanning for potato salad. "I need to eat first."

Rosedale College is small and cliquish. The few juniors we get usually enter inconspicuously, apologetically. Many of them hated the schools they left, and are eager for their clean slate to last as long as possible. I ate my lunch slowly, with my eyes on Russ. His hair was not bad, straw-colored and spiky.

Jill was watching him too. "I bet Mr. Dunning loves him." I agreed. During Russ's admissions interview, they would have discussed their mutual interest in all things medieval.

I decided not to go over and intro-

duce myself. Guys like Russ had gross hands, and I didn't want to shake his. Besides, he didn't need my welcome. Within a few days, he would find like-minded friends in the bowels of our multi-levelled lunchroom. He would coast through Rosedale, into the cushy computer labs of Waterloo or MIT.

Russ wore the chain mail at all times, even during his cross-country practice. When he jogged past my field hockey team, I saw him wearing it over his shirt and shorts. By Thursday morning, everyone was talking about him.

"Holy Camelot!" my friend Jared said as Russ walked alone into the lunchroom. "That's some attention-getting garb he's got there."



Illustrated by Susie Mah

"Did you miss the announcement about the joust this afternoon?" I responded, hoping to make him laugh. Jared is extraordinarily handsome. He answered my rhetorical question by grazing my cheek lightly with a french fry.

Russ wound up in my Canadian history class. Even open-minded Mr. Franey couldn't help saying something about the chain mail. Franey's a popular teacher because his non-academic questions are diplomatically phrased, his academic questions lead to good discussions, and he never throws curveballs on tests. He was quick to find a friendly, educational way to break the ice with the new kid.

"Russ, your decision to wear armor to school brings to mind our unit on the Constitution. We could have quite a debate about the Rosedale dress code's stance regarding chain mail. The handbook never explicitly mentions metal garments, you know." Everyone looked at Russ, who smiled. He seemed pretty confident. Maybe he wears the tunic to get attention, I thought, or to inspire people to ask him about it, or to dare them to pick a fight with him.

It wasn't long before someone asked Russ what the deal was with the chain mail. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "Why not?"

On Friday, my friend Jill and I saw Russ at Mel's Diner. He was writing in a notebook, but looked up and nodded to acknowledge our presence. She and I exchanged glances. Later we would talk about him, but for now we sat down across from him in the only empty booth. Jill launched into our usual conversation topic: how much university admissions stuff there was to do, especially in light of the double cohort. She felt particularly discouraged. In a meeting earlier that afternoon, our coral-pink lip-sticked guid-

ance counselor had scoffed at her list of safety schools.

"Not only did she put me down for not being realistic enough, but she was so mean. It's not like we've ever been through this before," Jill grumbled. We ordered grilled cheese sandwiches and coffee to fortify ourselves. After we'd talked a long time, we began to look past one another. Russ was still there, writing absently.

I wondered what he was writing about. At an antique store a few months earlier, I'd found a bunch of red fabric-covered diaries that had belonged to a woman named Iphigenia Parker. Her first name intrigued me, and I was so curious about her that I bought all five volumes. Unfortunately, the diaries weren't as old as I'd anticipated. Iphigenia chronicled only chores, visits, and church schedules, and her bad handwriting made the boring entries hard to decipher. Russ's attire suggested his journal contained more diverting material.

Jill must have shared my curiosity, because she came right out and asked,

"Hey Russ, what are you writing about?"

I thought he would say, "Nothing," instead, he looked up at her and said, "I'm writing about how the first week here has gone."

Now I was even more curious about Russ's journal. What a train-wreck his first week must have been. Like me, Jill loves hearing about other people's foibles, but she felt too socially superior to inquire further. So when she responded, "That's cool," she said it in a monotone that ended their conversation. Russ looked embarrassed. He hunted for something in his backpack, and left shortly afterwards.

A few weeks later, I ran into Russ at the copy shop. I was Xeroxing university

applications paperwork, and the two of us were planted at adjoining machines. I was in a happy mood that afternoon, proud of my organizational skills and careful record-keeping. Part of my game plan was to make copies of anything I sent off to the universities, so that if they lost anything, I wouldn't have to fill out the forms a second time. I struck up a conversation with Russ so I could describe my system. When I concluded my explanation, I wondered whether I'd sounded like I was bragging. Of course, I didn't care too much about what Russ thought of me, since I still figured he was cluelessly dorky. There was a silence, and I didn't want him to think he had to fill it with a compliment, so I asked him what he was doing, even though it was obvious he was Xeroxing a notebook.

Russ didn't answer right away. He made mumbling sounds, and I guessed he was trying to think up a way to deflect my question.

"I write down all these experiences that I don't want to forget," he said, "and things that take a long time to figure out how to say. I make copies of my journal entries pretty frequently, so that if I lose my notebook, I'll only lose the most recent entries."

"That's so neurotic!" I said, in what I thought was a friendly, joking tone.

Russ flinched.

"I don't mean neurotic in a bad way," I assured him. "I think you're doing the right thing. You're just being careful. I keep copies of all the papers I hand in, and if I kept a journal, I'd back it up."

"Yeah," Russ said. He nodded amiably, as if to say "no harm done," and resumed his Xeroxing. I didn't blame him for wanting to get back to business. Those copy machines are always in high demand, and while the shop was relatively empty for the moment, it was inevitable that either or both of us would soon be

approached and asked testily, "How much longer will you be?"

That night I dreamt that Russ and I were together, enclosed in a warm space. I gradually realized we were inside an army tank, surrounded by sounds and vibrations of war. I knew my body was shielded from gunfire by the tank walls, but I feared the tank would roll over, leaving me upside down or sideways, and vulnerable to suffocation. It was terrifying not to know where anyone else was, and I felt relieved to have Russ with me.

Later in the dream, everything was quiet outside the tank, and we were eating sandwiches. I guess the presence of food relaxed us, because we talked without mentioning the war. I asked Russ why he still wore his chain mail—wasn't the tank protective enough? He didn't say anything, so I said something like, "You wear armor to protect yourself from other people." I don't remember his response.

Upon waking, I was surprised to have dreamt about a guy I'd thought I wasn't attracted to, and I felt bonded to Russ. During that morning's dull assembly, I described the dream to Jill in whispers and in detail. Even when I whisper, my voice carries. I noticed some other girls were beginning to tilt their heads the way I do when I'm eavesdropping.

I leaned toward them. "Can I help you?" I asked. They shook their heads, mortified.

Jill teased me about my Russ dream by slipping me the following note in Pre-Cal:

Russ Jodelin is your knight in shining armor.

I didn't feel put down. Her note was funny, and she was right about my change of heart. I felt myself succumbing to the unlikelyst of crushes. How could I want this guy? He looked like an idiot. I'd look like an idiot if I went out

with him. After brooding over this problem for a few days, I decided to hang out with him anyway. As a popular senior, I really had nothing to lose, and even suspected I might elevate his status, instead of impairing my own.

I find that whenever I have a crush on someone, my schedule morphs. No matter how busy I've been, I suddenly seem able to accommodate spending time with my prospective flame. I walk to assembly with him, I chat with him at lunch, I sit near him in study hall. My Russ campaign was no exception. The history class affiliation was particularly helpful: as a result of my subtle maneuvering, we wound up studying together for Mr. Franey's tests.

The second time we studied together, I asked Russ if he wanted to go to the November Moon dance with me, or rather, to arrive with me by meeting me first in the hallway of mailboxes outside the lunchroom.

Russ showed up late. By the time I saw him coming around the corner, I'd become lightly self-conscious. I stood against the wall of tinny, ancient mailboxes, rattling the tips of my fingers against their little doors.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he muttered, wiping the damp hair off his forehead. "I missed my train." I noticed how red his face was, and then I realized he wasn't wearing the chain mail tunic. He had a blue windbreaker on, and it made his shoulders look broader than the vest had.

"It's okay," I replied. "I just got here too. Shall we go in?"

"Sure," he said. "But I'm not much of a dancer."

I snorted. "No one dances at Rosedale dances. It'll be just like at lunchtime, without the daylight."

"That's a relief," he replied.

A great weight had been lifted from

both our shoulders. Though I'd invited him to walk in with me, I'd felt apprehensive about being seen with the unalliant Sir Galahad. Now that the chain mail was gone, I believed I had nothing to worry about. We entered the lunchroom, and sat down at one of the round tables. Russ took off his windbreaker, and was wearing a perfectly normal white t-shirt underneath. I saw Trudy Blake and Cate Malone look him over. A little while later, Jared approached our table. He stopped behind Russ's chair. "You're looking summery, young Lancelot," he said, squeezing Russ's shoulders.

Russ turned paler. "Um, yeah," he said, looking down at his jeans. Jared didn't look at me.

As far as I know, Russ never wore the chain mail again. I congratulated myself for drawing him into the anti-Eden of social acceptability. Our relationship puttered along platonically, but we hung out a lot. There was just one hitch: Russ became withdrawn when I made fan of people.

Despite my usual ability to conform to whomever I like, I couldn't seem to keep my snarky mouth shut around Russ. The habit was too engrained, maybe, and I suffered for it. During a long study session for our winter exam, I restlessly scanned the library while he fished through his binder for a missing timeline. My attention settled on Andrea Waverly, a grade ten who bothered me. Andrea seemed inappropriately childish whenever I asked her how she pronounced her name. Was it "AnDRAYA" or "ANDreca"? People probably asked her this a lot, and so she was sick of it, but I was a popular senior, and she was an invisible peon. In light of this hierarchical difference, I felt she should answer me more graciously, or at least neutrally, even if I never recalled the answer. I said as much to Russ, making it clear I didn't approve of her.

When he didn't respond, I remembered his discomfort with sniping and gossip. Instead of recoiling, however, I bristled. What a goody-two-shoes he was! So I called him on it.

"Lighten up, Russ! I didn't kill anybody."

"I know, but you're so mean."

"I'm not saying it to her face," I retorted. "I don't see anything wrong with talking about people behind their back. It relieves me of my annoyance, so I'm actually nicer when I have to deal with them."

"That is so two-faced," Russ said. He sounded exasperated, and I was taken aback by his harshness. "People like you freak me out."

"Why?"

"You're so critical, and it's all hidden, so people can't even defend themselves." Before I could respond, he let a bomb drop. "I don't even know why you hang out with me. Are you trying to improve your grades, or something?"

Russ, the most self-protective person I have ever known, was being paranoid. I wasn't surprised, but I wasn't sure how to respond.

"Of course not," I finally muttered. "My grades are fine."

After a pause, he said, "I have to get going." He picked up his study sheets, and slid them into the pocket of his binder.

"Don't be mad," I said.

"Okay." He looked hunched as he walked away.

I sensed the prick of someone's stare; it was Andrea. I raised my eyebrows at her challengingly. She smirked then tucked herself back into the paperback she'd been reading. I felt furious at her,

and furious with my own delusions of interpersonal omnipotence. Russ would never let down his guard down with me.

At least Russ didn't hold a grudge. Our friendship resumed, but I kept conversation topics impersonal, as he always had. By April, Jared and I were beginning to hang out more, and met at Mel's most afternoons. One Tuesday afternoon,



when I was on my way there, I saw Russ through the front window of the copy shop. I couldn't see what he was photocopying, but I imagined it was the journal, and that gave me an idea.

Jill and I had often contemplated the following question:

"If you had to choose, would you rather go out with the guy you like, or

find out what he thinks of you?"

Now that I knew Russ and I would never be more than friends, my curiosity shifted back toward his journal. Had he written anything about me? Even if he hadn't, I craved access to that record of his innermost thoughts. If I could peek at just one opinion, from one journal entry, I'd be able to come up with some ways to pique his interest in me. Maybe he wrote

about the books he liked—I could walk into Franey's class with a book Russ had just read in my hand.

I continued on to Mel's, but only hung out with Jared through one cup of coffee. My nonchalance would be good for Jared, I thought. Keep him guessing.

After Mel's, I walked back to the copy shop, and just as I'd anticipated, Russ was gone. I pushed the door open, activating the annoying wind chimes, and headed for the electric blue recycling bin next to the machine he had used. I was hoping Russ shared my messy Xeroxing style: whenever I make Xeroxes, I get the dimensions wrong at first, or make too many copies of something. By the time I'm done, the recycling bin next to me is always

full of unwanted copies of whatever I'd been Xeroxing.

I began rifling through discarded papers. All were copies of documents or book pages; no promising handwriting in sight.

"Excuse me," I heard an older man say.

I was too engrossed to look up.

"Excuse me!" the voice said again, with more insistence. "My machine's jammed." Then this guy had the nerve to tap me on my shoulder.

I whirled around. "I don't work here, and if you touch me again I'll scream."

He retreated instantly. I dove back into the heap of papers. After a few minutes, I realized it was a lost cause. I

straightened up to leave, and walked right into Francie Martin. From the look on her face, I could tell she'd been watching me for a while.

"What's the matter?" I growled. "Haven't you ever seen anyone practicing to become a squirrel?" She scampered away. "Oh, I see you already are one," I added, but too quietly for her to hear, and

she wouldn't have understood anyway. I figured I'd given her some pretty good material to chew on with her lame friends. She'd enjoy telling them she'd caught me ransacking a recycling bin. Perhaps I was becoming sort of like Russ. Different.

Exceptional.

Maybe he'd notice. ☞
