

*The Grail Keeper*, by Rae Toonery

The Grail Keeper sits at the mouth of his cave, watching the dragon hunter stride gallantly into the distance. It is an especially pleasing distance: what with the setting sun flambeing itself on Dozmary Pool, the magnificent oaks of Brocéliande Forest silhouetted against the picture-book sky, and the imposing outline of Tintagel Castle. And that's just due North. East a bit, it's Castle Dracula, and further East, Xanadu; to the West there's Narnia and The Emerald City. Behind the cave, The Garden Of Eden nestles cheek-by-jowl with Mount Olympus and The Circus Maximus. Author would say how lucky he was to be the surveyor of such a rich tapestry of fabled lands.

"Another false hero?" Brad, asks, a little out of breath from his evening work-out.

"Another Georgina, looking for her dragon," sighs the Grail Keeper, hanging his head.

"Well, it's an easy mistake to make, isn't it?" Brad concedes, sitting down on the chez log next to his spouse. "I mean, if you miss the hidden left turn coming out of Slaughterbridge."

"Easy mistake? What kind of hero sets off on a quest without basic orienteering skills? I mean, a D of E certificate ought to be a basic requirement at the very least."

Over the years, The Grail Keeper has become increasingly disillusioned with the quality of candidates crossing the Threshold. They came stabbing their fingers at their 'screens', expecting them to show them the way. Zero imagination. If it wasn't Georgina looking for her dragon, it was some dragon looking for its fire, or Andy's Toys trying to get back to Andy, or Dorothy looking for the Wizard, or those two bodacious students looking for help with their history project. Lately there had been a whole slew of minor players with no clear goal at all. When he asked The Question: "*what is it you seek?*" They would adopt a very grave expression and tell him how they were on a journey of self-discovery. He knew it was wrong sending them into The Valley Of No Return, but at least it kept them busy for a few months before they turned up again. Usually with no recollection of ever meeting him.

And who could blame them? In this Magic Land, he was a mere cave dweller. He had resigned himself from boyhood never to aspire to anything more than guarding the Shekel-shop beaker. How his father loved to impose upon him the gravity of their situation: the great sacrifice they must make to continue the Quest Narrative. But his father belonged to a different generation; they believed in Three Act Structures and The Seven Basic Plots. They looked to Author as an omniscient being, finding the security they craved in his predictable scripts. It wasn't like that anymore. They'd entered a Post-Myth age.

"You know you'll have to tell him soon, don't you?" Brad asks, looking back into the darkening cavern at their only son, Isaac.

"No. I won't do it. I was never going to amount to anything. Every time Gramps and Dad went on about being the great-great-great-great-great grandsons of Joseph of Arimathea –"

"I think you've missed some greats out," Brad says, trying to lighten the mood.

"Of course I have. Don't you think I've had long enough to count them up over the years? But look at him," The Grail Keeper says, glancing back at Isaac. "He's got a real talent. And we're just sitting on it." He slaps the log, which Isaac has fashioned into a pair of lips. At first, they thought he might be able to trade as a carpenter as a side-line. After all, the role of Grail Keeper was fairly undemanding. But Isaac had quickly progressed from woodwork to cave art. The entire place was now adorned with murals depicting scenes from modern life in the Magical Realm; nothing like the official illustrations commissioned by Author. Instead of heroic posturing, Isaac constructed everyday scenes, packed with everyday folk in settings ranging from the marketplace, to the bath house, to the courthouse, to the chariot track. In honour of his father, each piece in this collection had a number of hidden chalices. People flocked from across the Realm to study these puzzling portraits. When Author found out, he was not happy.

He made a special journey to The Caveum, as the cave was now known to locals.

"The purpose of art is to elevate those aspects of life that promote Mythical Tourism to our Realm. If questies start to think grails are ten-a-Shekel, the whole plot

collapses.” He chided. Isaac was disappointed that Author hadn’t managed to find more than three cups in The Bath House. He seemed more interested in the bathers quite honestly. All the same, he promised not to pursue this trend any further.

But the more Isaac tried to deny his artistic impulses, the more new and subversive ideas came to him. Completing his first “Unholy” creation, he stepped back, dropped his brush, and called for Brad, who was three reps into his mid-morning crunches.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” he said, hanging his head. “What will Author say?”

Brad stared at the image: a rather cartoonish Author, peeing into The Grail. “It’s… genius,” he said, immediately clamping his hands over his mouth.

Behind them, The Grail Keeper left his sentry post on the chez log, and came to see what the excitement was all about.

“Dad, I’m sorry,” Isaac began, “I don’t even know why – what – how – “

“Don’t apologise, son,” The Grail Keeper said, moving in for a closer look. “I know how you feel about my calling. I see how you look at me when the heroes show up; I can never measure up to them in your eyes. What you don’t realise is, I never wanted this for myself, let alone for you.”

His mind racing, he wondered if this could be the answer to all his prayers. Surely Author could not allow him to continue his guardianship now. Perhaps he would make him choose: the boy or the cup. It was a no-brainer, even Author would have to see that. Or would he banish them all? And how would Brad react to that? He always had a sneaking suspicion that Brad was a tad too comfortable with their little arrangement; a spouse who was permanently on duty allowed him to spend all his time perfecting his physique. What did he have to offer Brad, or anyone for that matter, beyond a secure job that came with free lodgings?

For possibly the first time in his entire preordained existence, The Grail Keeper made an executive decision: Isaac must paint over the Grail with The Cart Prix trophy (coveted accolade awarded to champion charioteers). All he would need to do is add a second handle and some ribbons.

"I think you're missing the real issue," Brad suggested, pointing to Author's stream of piss.

"Oh that's an easy fix," Isaac said. "I can just add a bottle of mead."

He quickly got to work, painting out the offending elements and covering his tracks. The end result was somewhat confusing, after all, Author wouldn't set sandal in a racing chariot: The Cart Prix was far too dangerous an undertaking for someone of his stature. He'd never get insurance. Still, he no longer looked like some common drunkard, relieving himself in public. That was all that mattered.

The next day, The Grail Keeper watches the familiar approach of a lone figure heading towards the cave. "Here we go again," he says to himself, wiping his foot through the tally he's been marking out in the sand with one of Isaac's old brushes. Once upon a time, he allowed himself to dream of the day he would stop being Keeper and become Giver. But all he ever gave was directions.

"Hello there!" A badly sunburned fellow, struggles up the hill, beneath an enormous weight of wool. Hardly appropriate attire for the climate. "I wonder if you can help me?"

"I'll do my very best," The Grail Keeper says. "Shall I take that fleece – Jason, isn't it?"

"Indeed. Jason the sixty-third, at your service." He clutches the golden ramswool tightly. "But I'll hold onto this, if it's all the same to you – risked life and limb for it, after all."

It transpires that Jason has become separated from his crew. Mooring the good ship Argo on the edge of the Magific Sea, they agreed to spend three hours ashore - sightseeing and visiting souvenir shops. Jason had spent far too long looking for just the right wedding gift for Medea, his bride-to-be.

"I can't go back to the boat empty handed," Jason says, shaking his head.

The Grail Keeper spots his opportunity. "I have just the thing you're looking for," he says, producing the Grail. He gives it a rub on his toga and holds it up to the light.

"Nah," says Jason. "She's got a collection of cups already – uses them for mixing herbs. I need something Princess-worthy – wait – what are these?" He's spotted Isaac's murals.

"Oh, they're just some old drawings our son did." Says The Grail Keeper, steering Jason back towards the cave's entrance. "He also made this," he invites Jason to take a seat on the chez log. "Can I offer you some elixir – I mean – water? Must be thirsty work: fleecing golden rams."

But Jason is glued to Author Claims Cart Prix. He marvels at the attention to detail and wonders at the characterisation. He begs The Grail Keeper to allow Isaac to paint a personalised portrait for Medea. Having only ever worked on wood or stone, the lad is reluctant at first. But, buoyed by all the flattery, he agrees to have a go. Jason lays out the fleece, skin side up, and the young artist gets to work.

"His first official commission," Brad says, as they watch their son escort Jason back to his ship. "I couldn't be prouder."

"Yes. How can I ever pass on this cursed bloody cup now?" The Grail Keeper asks, kicking the tinpot tankard off the edge of the chez log.

"Isaac's smart enough to know what's expected of him. Maybe his painting phase is just a way to amuse himself until he has to face his responsibilities. I mean, we all get to a point in our lives where we have to do that, don't we?"

"Do we really, though Brad?" The Grail Keeper asks. "Because as I see it, before we settled down and had Isaac, you spent all your time working out. And now Isaac's fifteen and you still spend all your time working out. So, I don't see how your philosophy on adult responsibilities actually applies here. Can you help me out with that? Because I'm all ears, Brad."

“My! Someone’s been building a tower of resentment.” Brad says.

“Yeah,” says The Grail Keeper. “That’s right. I built that tower FOR YOU. To trap you. See how you like it. I’m off.” And with that, he steps outside of the cave.

And quickly steps back in again.

“You can’t do it, can you?” Brad gloats. “When was the last time you actually went anywhere?”

“I don’t even remember,” sobs The Grail Keeper.

When Isaac fails to return home, for two nights and two days the Grail Keeper paces the cave. Brad runs laps of the realm and comes back with disturbing news.

“They’re everywhere,” he says, barely out of breath. “Tell-tale sketches that may as well have Isaac’s signature all over them. Except he’s signed them Pranksy.”

“Sketches of what?” The Grail Keeper asks.

“Well, there are variants on the pisspot idea, for starters.” Brad says.

The Grail Keeper gulps. “Oh no. You don’t mean – not shit-pics.”

“Worse.” Brad says.

“What could possibly be worse than that?”

“Cup-stacking,” Brad whispers.

“What? Author, stacking cups?”

“Yes. And playing mini-grailf. And tapping two grails together to make clip-cloppity horse sounds. And singing into a grail-mic. And using two grails as binoculars.”

“We have to stop him,” The Grail Keeper says. Again, he steps out of the cave.

This time he keeps going.

"I'll stay here and hold the fort," Brad calls after him, retrieving the Grail from the dirt floor of the cave.

The Grail Keeper has barely covered half a league when he comes across his first Pranksy, daubed on the milestone that marks the road to Brasov. The stone has been divided into nine perfect squares and in each square: a facsimile Grail. The next, emblazoned upon the city walls, is of Author, replenishing the shelves of a Magic-Mart with Grails. There's a whole pallet of them. It's clear that Isaac has progressed from hiding his contempt for the Grail to brazenly flouting Author's instruction against duplicates. The Grail Keeper's chest swells with pride. He reaches out and places his hand on the logotype.

"Still wet," he rubs the tacky paint between his thumb and fingers.

"You a fan?" A voice behind him asks.

He spins around, standing in front of the wallart, but taking care not to get paint on his newly washed toga. "Fan? Of who?" He asks, coming face to face with a freckle-faced lad holding a sketch book. The Grail Keeper scans the text on the cover which reads: property of Otto.

"Pranksy," Otto says, opening his book to reveal a clumsy copy of Author playing mini-grailf.

"Careful," says the Grail Keeper. "You don't know who's watching."

"You think he'd mind? I've heard he encourages imitations. It's kind of the point, don't you think?"

"I don't mean the artist. I'm not talking about copyright." The Grail Keeper whispers, pointing to the badly drawn Author. "I mean Him. He's everywhere."

"Pf! You don't believe that, do you?" Asks Otto.

Aware that he must be well into the second act at this point and that he needs to find allies to accompany him on his journey, The Grail Keeper fumbles around in his toga and produces Isaac's paintbrush.

“What would you say if I told you this was his?” The Grail Keeper asks.

“I’d say show me the provenance.” Otto replies, holding out his hand.

The Grail Keeper hands over the brush and Otto studies it. His naivety does not extend beyond his artistic abilities. “Do me a favour.”

The Grail Keeper is forced to spill the whole story and has to promise Otto an exclusive tour of the Caveum once they’ve found Isaac. The pair enter the city gates and head for the first tailor: Otto, in his frock coat and riding boots, blends right in, but The Grail Keeper needs to lose the toga if they’re going to avoid suspicion.

Otto refuses to address his new companion by his job title. “You must have a name,” the boy insists.

“My name is Joseph. Just like my father, and his father before him, and his father before him, and so on, and so on, all the way back to Joseph of Arimathea.”

“Pf! Don’t make me laugh.” Otto says.

Joseph shakes his head. “I know, talk about lack of imagination. God knows where Isaac gets his creativity from.”

“Well, that’s easy – his Mum, of course.” Otto says. “What’s she like?”

“Now that’s a whole other story.”

Heading towards Castle Dracula, the pair soon find another Pranksy – this time Author is wearing a couple of Grails fashioned into a cone bra. Joseph nods in approval at the drag make-over.

“Very feminist,” says Otto, gently patting the signature. “It’s bone dry. We’re going the wrong way.”

They head back to the crossroads where the paths to all legendary lands converge, but Joseph is completely overwhelmed by the choices that lie before him. He

realises that he has no idea where his son would wish to go because the topic of travel has never been discussed. Why would it have?

“I don’t even know my own son,” he tells Otto. “What kind of father am I?”

“The kind that is risking everything to find his son,” Otto suggests.

But what would he do if he found Isaac? Drag him back to the cave and confiscate his paints? What kind of life would that be? He’d always wanted more for Isaac and he was clearly making quite the name for himself. He had fans, he was seeing the world, he was expressing himself.

Then again, if he continued on this paint-spree, how long would it take for Author to intervene? And it would surely be more than a verbal warning this time. The only way to break free of Author’s shadow would be to cross the Threshold. To enter The Ordinary World. Did paint even exist there? According to Author, it was a drab and austere place where every waking hour is spent toiling at machines. Everything Ordinary has a practical function. Magic is confined to boxes.

“YOU’D BETTER BELIEVE IT!” A voice booms from the sky.

Joseph and Otto look up. Otto hides his sketchbook under his frockcoat and Joseph, taken by a sudden protective impulse, steps in front of the boy.

Joseph clears his throat, “Author?” he says.

“Who else?” comes the reply.

“Look, I know you’ve probably gotten wind of this Pranksy character.”

“The Pranksy who painted yours truly blowing a party horn and wearing an upturned Grail as a hat? That Pranksy?”

“I haven’t seen the particular piece you’re referring to, but it does sound like him.”

“It was signed Pranksy.”

“Well, you know Pranksy isn’t his real name.” Joseph says.

“No poh Joe!”

“Pranksy is my son, Isaac. You might remember a little chat you had round our cave the other week? You see, he’s not a bad lad. Just, you know, spirited. A little too much imagination. Then again, he is of the Magic Realm, isn’t he? If we aren’t allowed a little imagination here, quite frankly, what’s the point? We may as well pack our hammers and sickles and head across the Threshold.”

“I wouldn’t advise it. The glass always looks cleaner on the other side, I know. But that’s just because they have Sparkle & Shine.”

“Author, I may as well level with you: you know what we’re all thinking anyway. I’m just not sure our Isaac is really cut out for Grail Keeping. He’s not one for waiting around – he’s more of a doer.”

“I see. And what do you expect me to do about it?”

“Well, give your permission for me to find a replacement, I suppose. I mean, it’s got a lot to offer the right candidate: job security, free lodgings, physically undemanding. There aren’t that many working from cave opportunities these days.”

“It’s not about permission, Joseph. If it is written, it is written. I can’t unwrite the entire Grail Myth.”

“I see. Yes, of course.” Joseph kicks at the dirt with his new buckle shoes, which are beginning to pinch. “Can you give me any indication how much longer the myth will go on? I mean, is the worthy claimant likely to show up anytime soon? Is Isaac’s tenure likely to be permanent? Could he not go off and get his adventures out of his system until it’s His Time. I mean, I’m only in my fifties, hardly an old man yet.”

Otto stifles a ‘pf’.

“Let me see...” The sounds of chair legs scraping on wooden floorboards and drawers opening and closing can heard from above, followed by much flapping of paperwork.

“He’s lost the plot!” Otto cries, giving Joseph a playful shove.

“NO I HAVE NOT.” Author replies. “It’s here somewhere, I just need to find the right version.”

“Can we help at all?” Joseph offers.

“Yeah, throw some down here,” Otto says, holding his arms aloft.

It’s the story of Joseph’s life: even when he embarks on his quest, he ends up waiting. Otto manages to rustle up some sundries: a couple of apples, a pocketful of walnuts, and some legendberries. After they’ve eaten, he produces a set of knucklebones and challenges Joseph to a game. They play into the night, sharing a flask of ale. As the stars come out, Otto points out the shapes of mythical creatures: golem, troll, sphinx, hydra, cyclops, minotaur, banshee, griffin, merman, centaur, and his personal favourite, the Jabberwocky.

As the new day dawns, just as Brad and Isaac are tucking into their eggs, Author wakes the two sleeping pilgrims with a gentle breeze before confessing that he had in fact not gotten around to finishing the Holy Grail off. In return for their silence on this oversight, he declares that Joseph and Isaac be freed of their Keeper obligations. Otto says that actually he might quite fancy it himself – as long as he can live in the Caveum.

