



love spells,  
rainbows,  
and  
rösie

mara hill,  
witch

a marchverse short story

k. a. cook

absolutely  
NO  
love  
spells

# imprint

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# blurb

Lovers' Day is good trading for a witch who deals in enchantments, ribbons and dyed flowers. For Mara Hill, it's long been a holiday of tedious assumptions and painful conversations—once best handled by casting petty curses on annoying customers. This year, when a girl asks about love spells, it may be time to instead channel a little Aunt Rosie.

Contains: a sapphic, allosexual, lithromantic trans witch enduring the most amatonormative holiday extant—in a small town still in want of open conversations about aromanticism.

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# content advisory

MUCH OF THIS PIECE CONCERNS the amatonormativity surrounding a real-world holiday, because unsubtle allegory is a wonderful thing. Please note that this story also includes a non-specific reference to an off-screen character's suicide attempt and the ableism of the way people talk around mental illness. A character also uses the phrase "kill me" where we'd would use something like "fuck me" in keeping with the Sojourner's followers' regard of death.

While I don't explain it in text, it's meant to be unholy awkward in keeping with the above. Dead Horse Hill's religion is terrible at reconciling suicide with the way it frames and refers to death, and Esher talks more about this in the sequel to *Love is the Reckoning*.

# author's note

THIS STORY IS SET A year and a half after **The Sorcerous Compendium of Postmortem Query** and a year before **Love is the Reckoning**. It is readable if you haven't read *Reckoning*, but I do suggest first reading *Query* as I spend little time rehashing the story of the night Mara learnt about aromanticism from her great-aunt's shade.

# love spells, rainbows and rosie

LATE SUMMER IS THE BEST time of year for a witch to make her living. True, Mara Hill renews cooling spells and hangs witchlights for festivals year-round; she never lacks for work as Dead Horse Hill's unofficial midwife and herbalist. Now, as the season creeps towards That Day, the bell above her door rings long and loud with folk entering her workshop. Where people put off renewing degrading spells and grumble over the cost of lighting, they spend a few weeks each year throwing money at Mara for objects and spells that are ephemeral, pretty and functionless.

"Hey, Mara! I want rainbow-coloured roses. A bunch of them." Lis Sascha, Mara's cousin and the heir to a long line of insufferable meddlers, bounds into the shop, shouting his request heedless of Mara's ears. He smells of sheep and wears a short-sleeved shirt over smudged tan trousers, grinning with a broad-lipped, gap-toothed enthusiasm. "Can you tie them in a bow? And make the ribbon change colours?"

Rainbow flowers require more dye and time in the preparation than magic, although Mara suspects she made a mistake in offering them: they've become much too popular. She pulls out her order book, frowns and scans the page as though unsure how to fit Lis's work around her other orders. "I am busy, but I think I can squeeze you in. For family. Seven fifty, because you want roses."

She didn't expect to ply her sorcery on gardening over necromancy, but Mara has spent the last few months putting her demons Saluria

and Sillemon to work on a small yard crammed with out-of-season herbs and flowers. Planting seeds and watering seedlings is cheaper, if more involved, than ordering preserved roses from Malvade, where magic workers charge wondrous monies for the frivolousness of Old World flowers in unnatural colours.

She staked ward spells around her garden to stop schoolchildren from climbing over the wall to nick her daisies.

“Seven fifty?”

“Don’t come to me a week before, Lis.”

Lis grumbles, pulling out his wallet. “Seven fifty’s bloody steep, Mara.”

“A *week*.” Mara closes the book and takes the money. “Pick up the afternoon before. If you come around in the morning like Hettie did year before last, I’ll do what I did to *her*.”

“Her wife was so mad that you gave her green hair for Lovers’ Day.”

It was a sickly, pond-scum green that looked terrible against Hettie’s sallow skin, but Mara tries not to flinch at Lis’s mention of That Day. “Don’t come around early, then. And if you *really* love a woman, you’ll love her green hair, too.”

“Rachel will kill me.” Lis shudders with too much vehemence for anything but drama and flashes Mara another grin. “You hear from Esh? He’s been gone for so long.”

Her brother Esher will be spending That Day in the company of two dogs, two horses, a lonely mountain valley, many cattle and one other drover—according to a note obnoxiously gleeful at the prospect. Mara did suggest to Benjamin that they take Olive on their first trip as a family somewhere similarly lonesome and quiet. Benjamin observed, without too much rancour, that Mara spent last year at Sirenne and they can’t afford to miss this year’s holiday earnings as well. Difficult to argue against that, as much as Mara still dreams of a day spent with nobody to annoy her.

“He’s still droving.” Mara coughs, trying to clear the heaviness in her chest. “He’s got a wolfhound, now. Esh says that however big we think the dog is, Bill’s bigger.”



“A dog? He hasn’t met someone yet?”

Mara sighs. Not only do people in romantic relationships spend That Day displaying their affection for all to see, they also assume everyone else is caught up in a similar romantic haze or hoping to be amongst the ranks of the joyfully partnered. “I never saw Esher as wanting to,” she hedges, wondering if Esher has had the “I’m not interested in romance” conversation with Lis, not wishing to out him if he hasn’t. “He’s happy. He has two dogs and countless cows that don’t try to talk to him.”

“He can’t be happy if he’s alone.”

Oh, the urge to roll her eyes, draw on her demons and ruin Lis’s hair! How can he be that oblivious? How didn’t he notice that his friendship with Esher oft left Lis navigating family, school and work for the both of them? Or was Lis too busy talking to pay his cousin any mind? Esher isn’t shy—he and Lis got into too many scraps for that—but Mara realised long ago that Esher’s choice in boyhood companions, however irritating, provided a protective illusion of sociability.

He’s far too good at hiding himself within and among other people’s expectations.

She wonders, sometimes, if that’s what drove him that night.

“Esh attempted suicide while living in a village *surrounded* by family.” Mara tries not to sound too acidic; she doubts she succeeds. “How’s a partner going to make any difference to his sanity when he doesn’t care about having one? And if it were, don’t you think the priests would’ve mentioned it?”

Lis’s argument kept Mara from suggesting Sirenne to Esher until that desperate night and it haunted her every step of the long ride to the Sojourner’s healer priests. Yet the priest who took charge of Esher’s care, Moll, only asked why Mara accompanied Esher and spoke not a word about relationships thereafter. Later, they showed Mara Sirenne’s library: an astonishing selection of tomes by Eastern priests and healers. Books that not only treat all the shapes of romantic attraction as normal human experiences but also assign them identifying words.

Moll wouldn’t let her take home the book discussing lithromanticism, but they did have an initiate copy out all the pages Mara wanted.

Lis blinks, his lips parted. Does he lack a counter argument? Or is he startled into silence, however momentary, by her use of the word Dead Horse Hill goes to absurd lengths to avoid speaking? “I ... yes. So, what are *you* doing for Benjamin this year? Do you have special spells you save for her?” Lis leans over the redgum counter to nudge Mara in the arm. “A witch like you must have something really good for her on Lovers’ Day.”

As if the words and gesture aren’t obvious enough, he winks.

Rachel won’t be too mad if Mara locks Lis in the broom cupboard, not if she lets him out in time for tea. Uncle Sascha, though, will let Pa and Da have it over any insult done to his favourite son. Mara doesn’t care what Sascha does to her, but Da doesn’t cope well with Sascha on a good day. Better not, as much as Lis deserves it. Not after last week.

Why, of all subjects, does he ask *that*?

“Yes.” Mara speaks as flatly as she can. She tries to still her face, projecting a mien of dark impassivity. “I have something amazing *and you’re never going to know what it is.*”

Lis blinks. His smooth jaw, large eyes, lowered chin and aura of youthfulness leave Mara thinking him akin to a wounded puppy. “I was just asking, Mara.”

That’s the problem! People *just ask* these questions, innocent but still trying to shove her, her love and her relationships into a box they don’t fit. People don’t understand the pain of that shoving, the way it forces her to justify and explain. Even though Mara now knows that a good number of folks don’t dance the same way to romance’s song, much of the world still behaves as though everyone knows the steps and yearns to pirouette.

Benjamin loves Mara this way, romantically. Mara doesn’t mind when free of the pressure to return it herself—when they can discuss and negotiate what expressions of love they need from the other. That afternoon in the schoolhouse was no easy conversation, but it inspired several since. Real discussions about affection, relationships, what they want and need from the other, what they can and can’t give to the other. They asked questions and shattered assumptions in their wake, and

Mara didn't know that she'd spent a lifetime wanting this, a relationship where she can lay her feelings on the table and have someone else return to her the same honesty and clarity. Even if Benjamin's feelings aren't the same as Mara's.

She isn't in love with Benjamin, not the way the world praises and prizes as its ultimate form. As she told Great Aunt Rosie last year, this feels better for her.

She does mind, though, that everyone else thinks her sexual intimacy with Benjamin must also be romantic.

"I know. Rainbow roses, colour-changing ribbon. I'll get it done, Lis."

Lis looks for a moment as though he's about to protest, but then he jerks a nod. "See you around—"

The bell rings again as her door opens, letting in another gush of warm, grass-scented air and one of the new Miller girls, the eldest. Abelia. She wears her blonde hair coiled around her head in the city fashion and floral-sprigged skirts too long for ease of walking. Despite the impracticality, there's something winsome in the way she holds up said skirts, *accidentally* offering a flash of leg above her leather slippers.

Benjamin, yesterday, ranted about people who spend too much time flirting in the classroom and not enough time correcting their spelling. *I'm all for a good flirt*, she said while Mara grinned at both finding a boon companion in her dislike of That Day and Benjamin's own tendency to outrageous flirting, *but can the students keep it outside the classroom?*

Only a week longer, Mara thinks, and then the world can return to its regularly-scheduled degree of romantic omnipresence.

She liked, though, the feeling of kinship through shared antipathy.

"Mistress Hill." Abelia Miller bobs an unnecessary curtesy, flashing a wry smile. "May I see your selection of love spells? There's a cute boy in school and—"

"*Kill me*," Lis mutters, not quite under his breath.

Mara, unable to find any string of words that stand a chance of emerging as comprehensible language, points at the door. "Out."

“Excuse me?”

“*Out.*”

“Mistress—”

Mara folds her arms. “*Out.*”

Abelia’s plump cheeks flush scarlet. “I just want to buy something from you! I’m telling Father! I’m telling everyone how you treated me!”

“Do that.” Mara speaks with the supreme confidence of being the only practicing witch in Dead Horse Hill. “*Out.*”

Lis heaves a sigh. “Mistress, just ... read the sign beside the door.” He smiles at the girl and then, showing the only hint of sense Mara has seen from him in weeks, beats a hasty exit. “Rainbow roses, Mara!”

Abelia looks at Mara, gulps and lunges after Lis, the bell pealing as the door slams behind them. Mara shakes her head and then, burning with curiosity, rounds the counter and crosses the small room to the six-paned window by the door. Sun-faded miscellanea form the display under the window—bunches of herbs, an unused mortar and pestle, a vase of wilting rainbow-dyed daisies that Mara should replace with fresher, a small cold box containing a half-empty bottle of milk and an apple. Advertising, although she’s the first to admit that she doesn’t bother with it as much as she should.

She watches from the side of the window, her head and neck tilted so she can’t be seen from the street. Outside, Lis walks towards the pub, whistling. The Miller girl stands before the closed door, frowning; with some effort, given her wide skirts, she bends down to snatch a torn, dusty piece of paper.

Mara’s handwriting forms one sentence in black ink: *absolutely no love spells under any circumstances.*

It’s a terrific exercise in redundancy, but some people find the words “no love spells” a bewildering subtlety.

“Oh, *shades!*” Mara sighs. Should she run outside, apologise and pin the sheet back up on the wall, using every drawing pin lurking in her drawer? Should she retreat to her counter and write Lis’s request in her book, knowing Dead Horse Hill will talk but gossip will pass? Should

she tell Benjamin to have another lesson on the Accords and consent-violating magic?

That, of course, leads Mara into a disaster of hypocrisy, as much as she wants to think that love spells aimed at unknowing students and transition magic for her sibling are two different creatures.

What else should she have done? What else could she have done? She sold her soul only to find a solution after one conversation with Aunt Rosie, leaving her with a bewildering, unused potential of magic. Esher needed a body he can live with; she'd made a deal with two demons able to work such miracles. Why save that power when her brother's survival depended on it? Why put him through the horror of waking up one more time in a skin that tortured him? Why risk the chance of his making another attempt? It was expensive magic—she didn't expect to use so much of all that Saluria and Sillemon offered her—but Mara has no regrets beyond the shining relief that it worked.

No, this isn't the same thing as Abelia's request to witch an unknowing suitor. Her demons, unprompted, suggested she use their magic for Esher. They showed her how to direct a wild sorcery unconcerned with spells, restrictions and books written by judgemental necromancers. Yet they did nothing to help her, beyond offering the power to speak with the dead, during all those months when Mara sought her own love spells. They did nothing for her, despite possessing the power to change a person, until *after* Mara spoke with Aunt Rosie. Doesn't that mean those things can't be the same?

Yet even that conclusion leaves Mara prey to a creeping duplicity. She wanted to witch herself into a love she can't maintain. She sold her soul to demons and tried to raise the shade of her long-dead great-aunt because of that want; she would have done worse to herself if her demons hadn't held back. Would she have found happiness without a ghost offering explanation and validation?

Aunt Rosie isn't the easiest of conversational partners in life or death, but she gave Mara the knowledge and reassurance she needed—not the solution she thought she wanted.

Mara barges out the door and into the street, chasing after the spectre of straw-coloured hair and pink floral-patterned skirts. “Wait! Wait!”

Abelia jerks and turns. “*What?*”

Her fingers clench tight around the crumpled paper.

Mara coughs, struggling to get her breath: it’s harder, these days, to run like she once did. “Why do you want a love spell? To make a boy be with you on That—on Lovers’ Day? So you won’t be alone, because ... because you’re supposed to have a partner for what the world thinks shows romance, and if you don’t ... they look at you with pity? Asking you when you’re going to find someone? Reassuring you that you’ll have someone next time or—when I was older, telling me how to find anyone, soonest, because life is a tragedy without a partner? Is that it?”

Tears trickle down Abelia’s flushed cheeks. “I’m not—my sister, she has a girl, and she said—”

Mara can’t imagine the pain of a sibling engaged in the love she’s supposed to find. Esher’s lack of interest always came as a relief, offering no comparative demonstration of the way she’s supposed to be. Now, she guesses, it may be more the other way around. Perhaps one of the many reasons he never speaks of returning to Dead Horse Hill?

Not as big a reason as the way their kin regard his illness, but a reason.

“Come with me.” Mara gestures at the shop. “I’ll tell you about my brother, who never wants a partner, and my aunt, who never married. And I’ll show you how to make rainbow daisies, if you promise to keep the secret, so you can go to school on Lovers’ Day wearing a crown of flowers and watch everyone wonder who got you so many.” She tries to smile gently: Abelia needs something softer than Aunt Rosie’s famed tongue. “It isn’t a terrible thing to be unpartnered. It’s only terrible because the world says we shouldn’t be. Come, please.”

Abelia wavers and sniffs, wiping her sleeve over her face. “My sister won’t stop talking about her girl and everything she’s *doing*. And school is as bad. Everyone’s planning and I’ll have to walk home alone.”

People, Mara thinks, both impossible to be around while insisting that sanity and worth demand their close presence—but that’s the

catch, isn't it? If one fits in, like Lis does, there's no enduring required. Just the comfort of companions with similar experiences and values who can't imagine that others feel differently.

She turns back towards the shop; Abelia falls in step beside her. "Then walk home with Benjamin. Reggie's coming to tea. We're going to play games, eat cake and write my brother in my mirror journal. If you don't mind not knowing anyone, and Olive poking at your skirts, you're welcome. I know it isn't what ... what you're supposed to want, but it's better than forcing someone to feel something false just to fit in. You *know* that won't be real."

She hesitates, holding open the door; Abelia darts inside, perhaps hoping that nobody sees her tearstained face out in the street.

Mara turns around the "open" sign and locks the door. "The problem isn't that you don't have someone. The problem is that the world won't allow you to not have someone—someone in a specific, romantic way. And there's a day all about celebrating that way, a day that doesn't include the rest of us."

Abelia's lips tremble; new tears splash down her chin and the bodice of her dress. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry. I just..."

Mara reaches into the window display and pulls out the apple and the jug of milk. A box under the counter holds mugs and a few utensils saved for food preparation; she pours the mugs, slices the apple and sits on the floor with her impromptu picnic. "I *hate* love spells," she says, working to sound conversational. "I wanted one to change *me*, a couple of years ago. I thought I couldn't love my wife enough if it wasn't romantic."

Abelia blows her nose on her sleeve and sits opposite Mara in an ordeal of swishing skirts and petticoats. "You don't love your wife?"

Maybe the girl is aromantic kin, her flirting the desperation of Abelia's trying to force herself into a mould she doesn't fit. Maybe she isn't, just caught up in the expectations That Day brings to the surface about love and relationships, a set of rules that does nobody any kindness. Maybe it doesn't matter, if more people come to understand

that the flowers and gifts of one heavy, frustrating day so often leave a desperate girl asking for a love spell.

People put too much weight on the performance of this day when love is too diverse, unique and optional to be so constrained.

“I love her.” Mara reaches for an apple slice. “I’m not in love with her. I didn’t need a spell to make me something I’m not just to fit in. Neither do you.”

She just needed an aunt to tell her that the lithromantic Mara Hill can and should exist.

Abelia frowns and nods. “I don’t think I understand.”

Love, Mara thinks, is a woman who realises that Lovers’ Day will be most comfortably spent with an unpartnered friend and, through the pages of the magical mirror journal, Mara’s aromantic brother. Love is a day spent with the people she loves who don’t fit into the romantic rhythms of the world and the people who love Mara so much that her inability to stay *in* love doesn’t matter. Love is their allowing her to hide as best as possible from a painful holiday. Love is an invitation offered up to anyone else who needs safe harbour. Love is the living, as well as the dead, gifting wisdom and acceptance to another.

She takes a bite of apple and starts to explain the woman who, not so long ago, so feared her own shape of being that she sought to erase it.

Aunt Rosie won’t be walking the earth tonight, but Mara doesn’t doubt that she’ll approve.



# additional works

mara and esher hill

The Sorcerous Compendium of Postmortem Query  
Love is the Reckoning

amelia march

Old Fashioned  
Conception

efer and darius

Certain Eldritch Artefacts  
Love in the House of the Ravens  
One Strange Man  
The Adventurer King

# the eagle court

Their Courts of Crows  
A Prince of the Dead  
The King of Gears and Bone

Crooked Words  
The Wind and the Stars  
Hallo, Aro

# about the author

K. A. Cook is an abrosexual, aromantic, agender autistic who experiences chronic pain and mental illness. Ze writes creative non-fiction, personal essays and novels about the above on the philosophy that if the universe is going to make life interesting, ze may as well make interesting art.

Ze is the author of several short fantasy stories combining ridiculous magic, cats, disability, bacon, mental illness, microscopic gnomes, aromanticism, the undead, verbose eldritch entities and as many transgender autistics as any one story can hold.

Ze blogs at **Queer Without Gender** and runs the aro media blog **Aro Worlds**.