



Portrait of Ari
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About Kowal:

Mary Robinette Kowal (born February 8, 1969 in Raleigh, N.C., as Mary Robinette Harrison) is an American author and puppeteer. She also serves as art director for Shimmer Magazine and secretary of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. In 2008, her second year of eligibility, she won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. Kowal has worked as a professional puppeteer since 1989. She has performed for the Center for Puppetry Arts, Jim Henson Productions, and her own production company, Other Hand Productions. She also worked in Iceland on the children's television show Lazytown for two seasons. Kowal's work as an author includes "For Solo Cello, op. 12," (originally published in Cosmos Magazine and reprinted in Science Fiction: The Best of the Year, 2008 Edition), which made the preliminary ballot for the 2007 Nebula Awards. Her fiction has also appeared in Talebones Magazine, Strange Horizons, and Apex Digest, among other venues. Source: Wikipedia

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Tom bounced with the music that blared on the art studio's CD player, trying to use its rhythm to stay awake. Pulling all-nighters gave him a certain masochistic joy, but he had passed the point of diminishing returns two hours ago.

Ari looked up from the mat she was cutting. "So the secret to getting you to dance is sleep deprivation?" One strand of her hair had escaped its bun and hung like dark silk across her face. Tom wanted to tuck it back for her.

"Dancing! Don't you wish."

"What's wrong with wishing my boyfriend would take me dancing?"

He grinned and repositioned his ruler, holding it in place with his left hand.

He is placing a ruler and laughing with Ari. The fluorescent lights hum at the edge of his hearing, insistent and irritating. It is late. She leans across the table to kiss him and her eyes seem to glow with an inner fire.

"Whoa." Tom shook his head.

Ari frowned. "You okay?"

"Just déjà vu."

"Ah." She laughed. "So, you feel like you've pulled an all-nighter before?"

"Yeah. I mean, I've only done, what, eight this semester?" After double-checking that the ruler rested cleanly against his marks, he pressed hard on his mat knife, pulling down the length of the pencil-line. His finger turned white as he bore down on the shaft of the knife. "When I'm a wealthy artist—"

"Ha!"

He glanced across the table at her and continued, "When I'm a wealthy artist, someone else will cut all of my mats."

"Someone else is cutting your mats."

"But not all of them."

Ari stuck her tongue out and then laughed. "Maybe I won't cut any, then." She put down her mat knife and pulled her dark hair loose from its bun; the heavy sheen of it snared Tom with longing.

He watched her out of the corner of his eye as he set up the next cut. "Maybe I won't take you dancing."

Looking toward the ceiling, Ari raised her arms as if she were one of Goya's martyrs. "See the unjustness?" Her raised arms stretched her T-shirt against her small, high breasts. He tried to capture the gesture with his eyes so he could hold on to the moment longer.

Tom pulled his knife across the mat.

In the silence, in the darkness, Tom loses himself beside her. Ari slips out of her shirt and presses against him. Tom reaches for the light, hungry for the sight of her. She stops him with her warm mouth against his neck. He moans and his thoughts vanish into the night.

Tom choked on a cry and jerked away from the mat on the table, dropping the knife. He was bleeding. A lot.

The mat knife had sliced deeply into his thumb where it had lain across the ruler. He clutched his thumb in his right hand, trying not to get blood on his drawings, trying to stop the wash of cadmium red that ran over his hand. His heart raced with an unsteady beat of caffeine and fear. Ari ran around the table and took him by the arm. "Hold still."

Tom stopped. The calm intensity of her voice held him with the tantalizing promise of safety.

"Let me see." Ari bent her head over his hand as she loosened his grip on his thumb. The skin pulled back, gaping away from a cut under the first joint of his thumb. He had been told so many times not to rest his weight on his palm, not to let his thumb stick out over the line. Habit. Stupid, stupid habit.

Ari inhaled sharply and clamped her fingers on the wound. "You've cut a tendon."

Tom started shaking. Nonsensical thoughts tumbled through his head in a litany of denial. "It's okay, it's my left hand. I only have one mat left to cut. They can fix this. I didn't bleed on my drawings. It'll be okay, it's my left hand . . ."

Ari kept her head down.

The sharp pain in his thumb dwindled, replaced with cool tingling waves as if his thumb were asleep. The room receded through a tunnel framed with darkness. Out of the corner of his eye, a transparent viridian green fire enveloped Ari's hands, dancing in time with the tingling in his thumb. The CD ended. Stillness and quiet saturated him with each surge of the viridian, green as an emerald at the bottom of a pool.

His head aches. He rubs the bridge of his nose, wishing the pain would go away. Ari is kneeling behind him. She places her hands on his head and massages gently. Viridian dances at the edge of his vision, foreshadowing his migraine, but his pain recedes.

Ari raised her head. "Nothing a little direct pressure can't fix. You'd better wash that."

Tom's head throbbed with echoes and half-memories. He blinked. The blood covering his hand had dried to a thin crust of burnt sienna. Still in a tunnel of shocked calm, Tom turned from Ari to the sink.

Water rinsed the blood away, stinging a little as it splashed against the cut. Across the inside of his thumb, under the first joint, was a thin line like a paper cut. Nothing more.

"I thought you said I cut a tendon."

Something hit the ground behind him. He spun at the sound. Ari was crumpled on the floor. Fear thudded into his chest again as he dropped to his knees beside her.

"Ari?" He felt her forehead. Cold and damp.

Her eyes fluttered open. A piece of film occluded them, and then it was gone. "I'm fine. Just tired." She smiled at him. "No more late nights for me."

Tom's brow creased with worry. "Are you sure?"

Ari nodded and yawned. "But don't think this gets you out of dancing."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Tom massaged her head, tangling his hands in her hair. He could barely see the cut. "Where did all the blood come from?"

He felt Ari tense slightly under his hands. "It just needed direct pressure."

The bright, liquid red runs away from his thumb. His flesh gapes in shock at the cut. Something has gathered under the skin and his thumb will not move. Ari's hand holds him so tightly the pressure burns.

"You've cut a tendon." Her mouth does not move.

Ari's fingers are on either side of the cut. Viridian green flickers in his peripheral vision.

"No." He shook his head, grimacing, fighting to hold on to his train of thought. "You said I cut a tendon."

"You're imagining things."

"I'm not." He stood up, fascination and fear churning in his brain. There had been so much blood. And her eyes. Something had happened with her eyes after she had passed out. Unnamed panic buzzed in his veins.

Ari clasped her hands in front of her so hard he could see them turning white. "Tom, sit down."

"No!"

Her eyes widened and she reached up to take his hand. "You have to—"

He shook her hands away. "Have to what, Ari?" Anger, sudden and insistent, came from nowhere. "I know what I saw."

"What did you see?" Ari pushed herself off the floor and leaned against one of the desks. "Show me something that's not the product of sleep deprivation."

He held out his hand. "It didn't look like this." The cut traced a pencil-thin red line below the first knuckle of his thumb. "What did you do?"

"Fine, then." She raised her hand and wiggled her fingers in a childish wave. "I do reiki. Ancient Chinese healing art, so if you're gonna laugh, do it now."

"Why would I laugh?"

Ari shrugged. "Most folks think it's a crazy crackpot thing." She shook her head. "You could at least thank me."

He noticed the stillness in her shrug. The way she shook her head too deliberately. "What about the thing with your eyes?"

"What thing?"

"When you passed out, there was a film over them. Like a skin." Something nagged at him. There was something else, just beyond the edge of his memories. "You're not—" To say it aloud was ridiculous.

They are working late. Ari rubs her eyes, yawning. She stiffens. Tom puts down his pencil and asks, "What's wrong?"

She has a hand over one eye and is halfway out of her chair. "I lost a contact."

"Do you need help finding it?"

"No." She shakes her head. "I'll be back in a minute."

From the shadow of her hand, her eye peeks at him. A deep luminous amber fills the whole orb, leaving no space for white. Light reflects back from her pupil.

She was not human. Tom passed his hand over his face. That was insane. There were thousands of other explanations for her eyes.

He waited for his brain to offer one.

Ari stood in the same pose of fragile patience, watching him. "What's wrong?"

His breath caught in his throat as if he had forgotten how to inhale. He swallowed, unable to let the thought go now that it had entered his head. "Will you take your contacts out?"

Ari held his eyes, motionless, as if willing him to stop. "Why?"

"I remember—there was this time you lost a contact. I know it's crazy, but I want to see . . ."

"Don't be silly." She laughed.

The words sucked the sound out of the room. Tom backed away from the harsh sound, shaking his head. "No. I saw your eyes."

"I think you've pulled too many all-nighters."

"Ari!"

She jumped as if Tom had raised his fist.

"Please." Ari glanced at the door. "Please don't shout."

"Then do it."

"Why? What are you hoping to prove? That I'm not human? That I'm a witch, or how about an extraterrestrial? Maybe you'd like your girlfriend to be an elf." Sweat beaded her upper lip.

"Are you?"

She backed away from him with her palms raised. "This is crazy."

"Tell me what I saw!"

"I can't!"

Ari's words echoed around the studio. She closed her eyes and the breath went out of her like someone losing a fight.

Tom looked away from her and stared at the Escher print on the studio wall. His world turned inside out and upside down like one of those impossible buildings. "What—?" He stopped. Exhaustion kept his mind climbing stairs that led down until his thoughts were back at the top of the first crazy idea. She was not human. He took shallow breaths, trying to stay calm. "Why not?"

"Don't." She sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands. Her hair hung like a curtain around her face.

"How can you expect me to not ask questions?"

"You don't understand what you're asking."

"So tell me."

She laughed as if it hurt and shook her head.

"Ari, please."

She lifted her head, and reached out to take his hand. He flinched involuntarily at her touch. She drew back.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay, I should have expected it." Ari looked away as if that would hide the pain.

They are in Ari's dorm. Her roommate has gone down the hall for a soda. The phone rings. Ari answers it and looks away. Her eyes close and her face goes slack. She stops breathing for a moment and says a single word. "No."

She fills his awareness and grief radiates out of her like fire. He stands and puts his hands on her shoulders. She leans against him as she listens to the phone.

Tom ran his hands through his hair and clutched his head. "When your mom died, and you had to go home . . . ?"

Ari turned her head back to him, eyes bright with tears. "My mother died. I had to go home."

Tom wanted to weep with her. "I'm sorry. I'm—I'm trying to understand."

"I wish I could tell you."

"Why don't you?"

She groaned and put her head down on the desk, wrapping her hands around the back of her neck like a shield. "I can't win. Either you're angry or I lose my job."

"Your job?" Tom felt something in him die. "I'm a job."

"No!" Ari sat up, her eyes wide with panic. "Dating you is different. You don't understand." Her voice was ragged. "I'd be reassigned and never see you again. I can't—" She choked on the words, and hid her face again, shoulders shaking.

Tom stood for a moment, feeling palpable anguish roll out of her. He took a step forward. Stopped. Then he knelt beside Ari and put his hand on her back. "Hey." He stroked her hair, trying to soothe her. "I'm sorry."

She lowered one of her hands and held it out shyly. He took her hand. They sat quietly as Ari wept.

She sat up slowly with tears still streaming down her face. Tom reached out to brush them away. Ari caught his hand in her other, and kissed his palm. "Forgive me," she said.

Calm descended on Tom like a storm and held him.

"This isn't the first time this has happened. Healing your thumb to-night drained me so I couldn't push the thought out of your mind."

He could not move.

Despair etched the lines of Ari's face. "The worst part of this is, you won't know why, but you'll know you don't trust me anymore. You'll feel like I'm lying to you, because underneath, you'll know I'm not what I appear to be." Tears ran down her face. "Just try, try to remember that I love you."

Tom woke slowly. A crick in his neck spasmed as he lifted his head from the desk. Something was bothering him. He opened his eyes and looked for Ari.

She was bent over one of the tables, cutting the last of his mats. "How are you?"

He sat up, rubbing the back of his head. "Headache."

"That's not surprising."

He grinned. "Too many all-nighters. Have I slept long?"

"About half an hour."

"And you finished my mats for me."

She smiled. "You were tired." She picked the last mat up and held it in front of her so she was framed like a portrait.

"My favorite piece of art." He stood and put his hands around her waist.

She set the mat down and pressed against him, burying her face in the hollow of his neck. "Oh god, Tom. You have no idea how much I love you."

He kissed the top of her head, wondering why he thought she was lying.

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