

THE
TO
THE

{ {EXCEPTION} }

RULE !!!

(WHAT RULE???)

By

Alison Gadsby

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Alison Gadsby's, "The Exception to the Rule," is, I suppose, one of those horror tales of fundamentalism, radicalism, and a pseudo-antichrist-ish warning terror. I say horror in the sense that, as you read, you can imagine the scenario as being plausible, given the openly recent rise of fascistic mindsets, as opposed to an extraordinary imagining the worst that could happen – the worst is already here and has always been here (there are simply no shadows in which they lurk).*

Mason, our protagonist, is a college theology student who manages to impregnate probably one of the worst humans ever. Not only that, her beguiling wiles convinces him that he must kill her father, a self-proclaimed chieftain of moronic cultists. If that weren't terrifying enough, how do you save a baby from the clutches of insane humans?

There, uhhhh, aren't many decent scenarios to a happy ending are there?

I like this story because of the structure, the Tarantino-esque breakdown of the present versus the how-the-fuck-did-I-get-here setup. Gadsby has crafted a tale and not just made a lukewarm bath of fiction with which to surround yourself. There is intent with these words. There is foreboding in the lines. There is a palpable fear in the knowledge that the people in this tale actually can and do exist somewhere in their own shithole of hate.

I suppose I should say we fight.

I suppose I should say we don't have faulty trigger fingers.

I suppose I should say that we don't fall for the tricks of those that have already been tricked.

I'd like to say that violence should always be the last resort.

But if violence is already upon us, then what do we do?

What is the first exception we make that is necessary to kick the shit out of tyranny?

I don't know.

But read this story and get to thinking.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (*for the love of language...*)

Jack's roaring laughter ricochets off the walls and lands on Mason's ears like a boxer's punches. He wraps his arms around his head.

Mason circles the room trying to escape the sound, but instead he is swimming in hate, drowning in this dying man's confidence. He slams the gun down on Jack's head and he falls forward, chair and all at Mason's feet. Silent. Mason collapses beside him.

The Exception to the Rule

How's Mason going to explain the missing pillowcase to his mother when he brings his laundry home next month? His mother gifted the set of sheets for his tenth birthday and the boys at the party made fun of the childish glee with which he tore open the plastic.

He brought the sheets to university and now the pillowcase is dripping with blood and Mason watches Buzz Lightyear slowly drown. He's been trying to kill Jack in the living room of some derelict house ten miles from campus and all he can hear is those boys laughing at his little boy sheets. It's still a joke when friends see them on his mattress. Only difference now is he could give two shits.

All he can think is how he'll explain the missing pillowcase to his mother. Irony is long gone. If he can muster the courage to finally pull the trigger, he might get the pillowcase back to his room to soak in baking soda, soda water, vinegar or whatever gets blood out of a 50/50 cotton blend. Lizzie, his pregnant girlfriend, will know. More than anyone she will want it to be cleansed of her own father's blood.

"You don't have to do this," Jack says above the prayers he's been chanting since everyone left them alone together.

“Please stop talking,” Mason says. The gun is dangling from the tip of his finger. He has been staring at it for ten minutes. If it drops, he shoots him in the head. If it hangs on, he doesn’t.

Mason grips the gun firmly in his trembling hand and points it again at the man who he knows should be dead by now. The man and the chair are wrapped with some rope with flags they’d stolen from the swimming pool.

This abandoned space was once a family room. A yellow and brown sofa with wooden armrests has been pushed into a corner. An old nicotine-yellowed telephone still clings to the wall with a black cord dangling lifeless without its receiver or any kind of phone service. Mason can see his sisters on their own yellow sofa, fighting for control of the remote, laughing as they moved between one sitcom and another.

He wants to go home. He wishes he could use that phone to call his mother.

“Nothing changes,” Jack says, “action doesn’t affect truth.”

“Shut up,” Mason says.

“People turn toward truth, not away from it.”

“You don’t speak for me,” Mason says.

“It is a universal truth.”

Mason pulls the slide on the gun.

“The classification of nature allows humans to eat an entire subspecies of animals. Man has defined himself as predator.”

“Please stop.”

“We prey upon the weak,” Jack says, “not the strong. Your actions will only disrupt, not liberate...”

“Stop,” Mason says, pressing the gun to Jack’s head.

“The truth. You can kill me, but you cannot kill the truth,” Jack says.

Brother Jack Barr Andrews is the soon-to-be-chief of a clan that has already influenced recent elections in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. Their doctrine outlines errors made in taxonomy throughout the past three centuries and promotes a moral imperative to uphold what they believe to be God’s divine will. *Our Great Chain of Being*, their sacred text, was written in the 18th century by then Chief George Barr Andrews. It outlines the hierarchy of humanity, according to them, not others who write about the natural order. And of course, they, and all their white descendants, are above everyone. Just beneath the angels and demons, in the hierarchy of beings. They classify people of colour just above animals, barely in the humanity division.

Mason has to kill him.

How could Mason allow his own child to enter into that world? They have no choice but to kill him. For months, Lizzie pleaded with Mason. “It’s the only way. If my father becomes chief, they will stop at nothing to get their hands on my baby.” And when Mason refused, she conned a bunch of boys into grabbing her and her father, taking them to this house.

“How did you get here, son?”

“Stop talking,” Mason repeats again and again.

“Elizabeth is a traitor and she loves no one but herself.”

Mason tells him to shut up and that Lizzie is desperate and that desperation has led them to this point where the only way she can escape his tyranny is to kill him.

“She doesn’t want an escape,” Jack says.

“Yes. For once in her life, she wants control of her own destiny,” Mason says.

Jack's roaring laughter ricochets off the walls and lands on Mason's ears like a boxer's punches. He wraps his arms around his head.

Mason circles the room trying to escape the sound, but instead he is swimming in hate, drowning in this dying man's confidence. He slams the gun down on Jack's head and he falls forward, chair and all at Mason's feet. Silent. Mason collapses beside him.

Mason met Lizzie in his second year of Theology when he and a bunch of friends organized a Christmas worship service. He had faith in God, but was having a hard time reconciling this with his even stronger faith that human beings were scumbags who used God's word to hurt people, mainly women and the marginalized. So, the service was planned as a fun event without sermons or readings, or God, even.

After the last carol, Lizzie approached him.

"What was the point of all this?" she said. Her eyes rested on his forehead and every time he moved to look into them, she glanced from the altar table to the window, only to come back again to his forehead.

"We just wanted to create a safe and fun space where everyone could come and sing, regardless of their denominational faith."

"Not a single scripture reading?"

"Well, no, see that's just the thing. We didn't want to shove it down anyone's throat," he said.

"Shove what? That Jesus Christ was born the son of God, to save their fucking asses?"

Mason stepped back. Although he'd only known her for a minute, he didn't expect the petite pink sweater clad girl to swear.

“We get to sit through all these professors’ lectures, proselytizing their liberal-biased dogma. Why can’t you have a Christmas service that references the saviour’s birth?”

Mason asked her major, hoping he might find her in one of his theology seminars, but she said she was undecided because she left her small town to learn what everyone was thinking about *everything*, not just one thing.

“In my community,” she said pausing before she whispered, “the town doctor is the mayor, the minister, and the law, so people don’t do a lot of thinking there.”

Then tears trickled down her cheeks. Her face frozen like a weeping statue of the Virgin Mary. Lizzie’s face and her glossy eyes stared straight into his and he couldn’t take another breath because if he did he’d have to say something and he had no words. Maybe she was homesick, but the tears made no sense to him. Suddenly, some ignoramus started beating the keys of the portable organ, which made Lizzie jump back. She nearly fell over a chair as she dashed off, rubbing her face violently with the sleeve of her woolly sweater.

He didn’t really speak to her again until the next Christmas service, which he only agreed to host because he’d hoped she’d turn up. Although he saw her hundreds of times on campus and in one of his classes, they never said more than hello. Once he stood behind her for coffee and they chatted about the weather as if they didn’t know each other.

She smiled at him when she sat at the back of the chapel. After the service, they sat together, both apologizing for whatever they might have said or done the year before.

“I’m glad you came,” he said.

“We don’t really have a church back home, so this is nice,” she said.

“You don’t? I thought you were part of some real evangelical thing, the way you were talking about Jesus and all.”

“Well, ya, I mean we believe in God. And Jesus, well, Grandfather says Jesus is the only mortal man better than him.” Lizzie folded her lips inside her mouth as if she was trying to pull the words back inside.

“Your grandpa. Is he a Minister?”

“Grandfather. No. More like a leader, I guess.”

Mason wanted to leave it at that because he was worried she’d ask him about his family. After his father died, his mother fell into a hole of devout Catholicism with her ritualistic morning mass and weekly confessions. His father ran over the adored Doberman, whose owner ran the pulp mill that pumped its waste into the town’s water source. He was only given three years, but it quickly became a life sentence when he was shot dead by a guard. He allegedly lunged at him with a paint brush after the prison refused to remove all the lead paint from the peeling walls.

Lizzie stayed at school over winter break, and as resident advisor, Mason also stayed to get paid for the extra hours. They spent every moment together and neither brought up their childhoods or families. They kissed for the first time on Christmas morning and came together on Boxing Day without either of them removing clothing. They did this every day until New Year’s Eve when she talked him into going all the way. Mason had sex with a bunch of girls in first year, but for some reason it didn’t feel right being naked in front of Lizzie.

“I just feel like we have to,” Lizzie said.

“Why? Do you think that’s what I want?” Mason said.

“No, but I do wonder why you haven’t tried. I mean everyone’s doing it,” she said.

“Ya, I’m not sure everyone is,” he said.

“Will you want to marry me?” she said.

In that moment, he thought he loved her. It wasn't the idea of marriage that turned his erection soft, but something else. She had light blue eyes that blackened when she climaxed, like the closer she got to God, or the devil, the darker they went.

"I won't ever get married," she said, "And you won't fit in to my family anyway."

And then she spilled her guts. "You don't have what it takes to be a Barr-Andrews."

He had no idea why she was referencing the infamous family he'd studied in the Philosophy of the Middle Ages class in second year.

"You're too soft to be my husband," she said, "Like plasticine, you can be too easily molded into a mindless, obedient follower."

How dare you, he wanted to say, but she started unbuttoning her blouse.

"Your fustian self-righteousness spills out in every word and action. 'How could you' prefaces every sentence and precedes every nonsensical attack on arbitrary objects, figures of speech and humans who lack a self-defined humanity." She didn't even sound like Lizzie. Her voice lowered an octave and he could swear he detected a Scottish accent.

"What the hell does all that mean?" he managed to say as she unzipped his pants and lifted his t-shirt over his head.

He wasn't turning into his father if that's what she meant? He'd joined only two campus coalitions: one for the removal of Styrofoam containers and the other for an all-out ban on plastic bottles and packaging. But he also feared the anti-establishment picket signs of his father's generation weren't going to change anything. Sitting in front of Lizzie, he didn't know who the hell he was or who he wanted to be. Maybe he *was* just a follower.

When they were lying naked, Lizzie put her hands around Mason's face, forcing him to gaze into her eyes. She straddled him and moved one hand down to massage herself. She

groaned, but not with pleasure. It was some guttural animalistic sound like he was her prey and she was there to prove her power. It was humiliating. She slammed herself on to him over and over again and every time he closed his eyes, she plucked one of his pubic hairs, forcing him to watch her pupils expand beyond her irises, like ink spilling on to white paper.

When she left, Mason fell asleep and didn't leave his room for two days.

"You know who she is, don't you?" A revived Jack kicks at Mason's back and he rolls on to his belly.

"I don't care who you think she is. She has my baby inside of her and you'll never get your hands on him."

"Oh, it's a boy, is it?"

Mason scrubs his face with the filthy carpet, back and forth until it burns. Lizzie will kill him for revealing the gender of her baby.

"Well that changes everything," Jack says. Again, with the roaring laughter.

"Stop." Mason screams, begging him to be quiet.

For a couple of months after they had sex, he and Lizzie hung out a few times, watching television in the common room of his residence or in the living room of her apartment. Mason avoided intimacy, always leaning away from her and leaving if she placed her hand on his knee or removed even one sock.

And then in March, she stepped into his seminar, Theology of the Mind. It was a men's class intended to give guys the freedom to speak about religion without any attacks on its patriarchal underpinnings. Mason was taking it with the hopes of writing a well-researched paper

protesting the class' existence. She pushed a chair between Mason and a fellow classmate and sat down. She smelled of rotting chicken and her long blonde hair was both greasy and frizzy. She wore a plaid smock two sizes too big with no bra or t-shirt covering her boobs. She looked like a child who'd been discovered playing in the sand on a deserted island.

“Can I help you?” the TA asked.

“No you can't. And I'm not here to speak with you, so don't address me as if I'm one of these unconscious plebes.”

“Can this wait until after class?” Mason said.

“I'm pregnant,” she said, “and you're the father.”

She walked out and threw all the men in his class the finger. By then he knew who she was. A descendant, if not full-fledged follower, of the Barr-Andrews clan of white supremacists and alt-right freaks who had branched off the original Anders clan of northern Scotland to protest the marriage of their chief to a Morisco woman in the 16th century. This might have proven a move in the right direction, except the chief quickly murdered his wife in favour of a young girl barely into her teenage years. They had become, over time, well known for creating colonies of self-sufficient and superiorly educated people who held themselves above all humans, even the whitest most devout neo-nazis. They married among themselves and Mason had figured out Lizzie was part of the largest in North America, the Andrewsville group, who lived on the Maine-New Brunswick border. He believed she was trying to escape them, but every once in a while, she creeped him out when she spoke in strings of long rhyming sentences that were either her own made up poetry or extracts from their bible.

Mason felt like an animal caught in a trap with metal teeth piercing his head. Mason closed his books. As he followed Lizzie, the hall narrowed and the people walking just beyond

the fountain grew larger and started flying above him and through him, crashing to the ground. All he could hear were the screaming panicked voices of students dying all around him.

“It was only one time,” Mason said.

Lizzie finally stopped outside the food court, leaning casually with one leg bent and her foot pressed against the wall. He wanted to choke the smug smile from her face.

“Stop shouting,” Lizzie said.

Was he shouting? Why were his books and pens scattered on the ground?

He kneeled to pick them all up.

“It only takes one time,” Lizzie said.

Her condescending tone ripped his head wide open and when he got to his feet, he lunged at her, gripping the top of her sweater before his hand reached her neck.

“I fucking know,” he spat at her.

Mason now sits cross-legged in a meditative pose, covering his ears.

“That explains everything,” Jack says.

Mason stands and removes the pillow case from Jack’s head. Lizzie convinced Mason it was the only way to save his child from becoming a hate-filled racist like her father. Three hours ago, Mason wanted this man dead. But now exposing Jack’s battered and bruised face, Mason wants to run.

“If you stop talking, I won’t kill you,” Mason says. But the threat is emptied of any power when his stomach contents fly out on to the carpet.

“That is a meaningless promise, my boy. If it’s not done by you, Elizabeth will do it herself. She’s got a future chief in her womb.”

Mason had asked if she’d get an abortion. Lizzie said, maybe.

Mason then asked, what do you mean, maybe?

Lizzie said, if it’s a girl, she’ll go, and if it’s a boy, he’ll stay.

And when she found out the gender, she begged Mason to help her save him. Lizzie said they’d steal the baby away and that Mason would never know his son. She said, you don’t want your own child to become like my father, do you?

“Lizzie wants to save the baby from *you*,” Mason says.

“No,” again Jack laughs, “she wants her son to be like her.”

“What does that mean?”

“You see. The thing about us is with every generation, we make progress. Things change. People change. The world changes. When Elizabeth’s mother Sheila was sent to me from Argentina, she was nine years old, but smart beyond her years. She had questions, so many I couldn’t help but try to answer them.”

“Shut your mouth,” Lizzie stands in the open doorway with a baseball bat hanging from her left hand.

“Sheila and I, we learned together and we hoped to one day lead the people of Andrewsville out into the world.”

“Poor Sheila,” Lizzie’s voice. Again. Some strange Scottish sing-songy tone fills the space, as she circles around Mason pushing him out of the way before standing in front of her father.

Lizzie cracks the bat against Jack’s shins and Mason hears the bone break.

“Barr-Andrews have evolved and while we still don’t want to mix up our blood, we no longer wish harm to anyone.” His words sound as though they’re being squeezed through a hole in a punctured tire.

She hits him again.

“We have counted on that evolution to promote our group,” he tries to take a deep breath, but it gets caught, somewhere in his battered body, “expand the population, because people change, just as the world does. What is it you people say? They’re seeing the light.”

“Mason, you need to shoot him. You need to kill him now. Please, help us.”

Lizzie clutches her belly, which is days away from spilling out the baby boy he so desperately wanted to save. He is here because she asked. Because Lizzie said, if you could go back in time and kill Hitler, wouldn’t you do it?

“See, Elizabeth is the exception to the rule. She doesn’t want to change. She wants to kill her own father for inviting change.” Jack stops speaking when Lizzie tries to grab the gun from Mason.

While they fight he continues, “She killed her own mother. Stabbed her to death while she slept.”

Mason wins the gun and points it at Lizzie.

She strolls very slowly toward him, with that fucking smile streaked across her face like a cut into a freshly butchered animal. Mason tosses the gun across the room.

Lizzie continues toward him and squeezes his arm. She says words, but he’s not sure he’s hearing them. How their life together is over. How it will only be over her dead body that he will ever see his son. Her fingernails dip into his skin like a knife into warm butter and as the blood

trickles down his forearm, he opens his mouth to scream and Lizzie shoves her tongue straight into it and he can't breathe. The room grows dark.

In one swift moment, she is off of him. Three men are untying Jack while one large woman grabs Lizzie's long blonde ponytail and swings her against the wall.

Lizzie calls for Mason to save her. She's looking at the gun in the corner.

"He's lying. *He* killed my mother."

Mason sees the gun leaning against the wall.

He feels the cold wet darkness of Buzz Lightyear cover his head. As he is lifted to the chair and wrapped in the flags, the men tying Mason up are laughing and Lizzie is singing what sounds like a Gaelic anthem or hymn. He hears Jack's laughter again before a gunshot rips Mason's ears wide open and all he can hear is what sounds like the brakes of a train screeching to a halt.

Lizzie's lips press the bloodied cotton to his cheek and then his lips. He can barely hear her speak.

"I told you, you wouldn't fit. I was going to make an exception."

Mason's hand comes loose from under the flag-rope, but he keeps still.

"One day I'll come back and kill you."

AUTHOR'S NOTE; *In thinking about the philosophical question, if you could go back in time would you kill Hitler, I wanted to ask what might one do if they learned an unborn child was going to become a racist? It's an impossible question to answer because it feels like we're never going to shake society free of hateful scumbags, but I wanted someone to (maybe) die trying. There is blood and sex that has been described by another editor as "extremely uncomfortable."* (Also if you want to read about colonialism, capitalism and racism in Canada, read anything by [Alicia Elliott.](#))

I love darkly funny, but very human short stories, especially those by George Saunders and Alice Munro, but I have most recently enjoyed the collections of [Kim Fu](#), Norma Dunning, Alex Pugsley, [Cary Fagan](#) and [Alix Ohlin](#).

AUTHOR BIO: I am a first-generation Canadian living in Toronto. I hold an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia and an HBA from York University in Creative Writing and English. My work has won awards and scholarships, both at UBC and at York, and appears in various literary magazines, including *The Writing Disorder*, *Coastal Shelf*, *antilang*, *Dreamers Creative Writing*, and more. I am the founder/curator/host of Junction Reads, a prose reading series in Toronto. I am also facilitator/member of a writers' workshop where I continue to work on another novel project and a collection of short stories.