

## A Protagonist's Poignant Journey of Reminiscence, Remorse and Love

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**Abstract:** *Ann Patchett's The Magician's Assistant is a passionate story of a magician and his assistant who is left with nothing else but regret and contemplation of the life she spent with her cunning husband. This is a telling depiction of recurrence of events about a performer-cum-conjurer who dies leaving his assistant to detect the lies he told her about his past. Parsifal, the magician, is in relationship with Phan, a Vietnamese lover of him. After the demise of Phan, Parsifal marries Sabine, the woman who has always extended her assistance and respect to him for twenty years. Before his death, Parsifal always said that he had no living family and that he came from affluent upscale Connecticut stock. The reality is very different, as Sabine learns from his lawyer that he came from a poor Nebraska family and the family is still alive. What Sabine must now deal with is coming to terms with her husband's horrible past and the reason he kept himself isolated from his family and native place.*

**Keywords:** Compromise, Conjurer, Contemplation, Family, Magician, Rebuilding, Relationship

The novel begins with the line, 'Parsifal is dead. That is the end of the story' (3), gesticulating the barrage of setbacks that Sabine, the protagonist, would have to face throughout her journey for compromise and rebuilding. The shattering news of the death of Parsifal, the husband of Sabine, instantly grips the attention of the readers and persuade them to believe that fate will have commanding position in shaping the future course of action for Sabine.

Just after a few pages, the reader finds that the unlucky and beleaguered Sabine is sitting beside her master magician, Parsifal who is gradually inching towards tears causing fatality. The hand she has been holding for about 20 years is limp now. It has no more strength to buttress her in magical performances and hard circumstances. She stands there against the massive MRI machine, her arms around her chest, waiting- God knows for what; because her mentor is no more leaving her almost dead. This appalling and untimely death of Parsifal from aneurism throws Sabine into an altogether new and full of desperation situation. She is left with no option but to accept life as it comes to her. She at the same time feels a little bit happy because her lover's sufferings are now over. But as she thinks of him, she becomes somewhat exasperated and hopeless and starts mulling and squeezing the silver dollar given by Parsifal till the time she feels the metal edge cut painfully into her palm. Such are the inflictions of pain she has to bear until she takes the path of reconstruction and redemption.

Sabine, with her heart torn apart to pieces because of the loss of her lover, goes back to the days when she along with Parsifal used to enjoy life. She recalls the time when Phan, the gay friend of Parsifal, had died and the later had become nervous and confused. During this critical time Sabine played the role of the redeemer by loving and ultimately marrying Parsifal. She here onwards embarks on the journey of unraveling the mysteries and secrets of the life of her departed husband. She after the funeral enters Phan and Parsifal's room in order to keep their memories alive. She sleeps endlessly by pushing her head beneath their feather pillows and even after waking up she keeps on lying in the bed thinking about the bygone days. She uses their daily use items like shampoo, soap, towels, hairbrushes, etc. Every item she uses here has significance in her life. She is of course the last stop for all of the accumulations and memorabilia, all the achievements and sentimentality of two lives. Fate has taken its toll on her, but Sabine's destiny gives her power to move forward and go on discovering new relations in life. The audio CD on this book sounds right that 'Sabine's extraordinary tale captures the hearts of its readers just as

Sabine is captured by her quest.' While flipping through Parsifal's letter box, she finds a postcard from Nebraska addressed to Guy Fetters/NBRF/Lowell, Nebraska. The letter reads as follows...

'Dear Guy,

Just to say you have a beautiful baby sister waiting for you at home, very healthy, as am I. Kitty says come home soon.

Sent with Love from your mother' (33).

After reading the card, Sabine turns it over and over again. All of a sudden, she hears the phone ringing and in a flush of her love for Parsifal thinks that it was a call from the later. But on the second ring she remembers that he is dead. Here comes a twist in her fate when she answers the fifth ring of the phone and comes to know about Parsifal's mother Mrs. Fetters and that of his family, a thing Parsifal always kept secret. The following telephonic conversation takes place here:

"Mrs. Fetters?" the voice asks, not stating a name, but requesting one.

"No," Sabine says, as confused as the voice.

"I'm calling for Mrs. Guy Fetters. Mrs. - The lawyer tells there was another name.

"You're Mrs. Fetters," Sabine says.

"Yes," the voice says, friendly, Midwestern, relieved.

"Yes, that's right. Is it- Mrs. Parsifal? That's the name I have here. He was Parsifal the Magician."

"I'm Mrs. Parsifal," Sabine says.

Mrs. Fetters feels glad to talk to Sabine, but suddenly becomes quiet and says,

"This is very awkward for me."

"Guy was my son. I guess you know that, I want to tell you how sorry I am about his dying. I mean, sorry for you and me both. There's nothing in the world that compares to losing a child" (35-36).

Such emotional and heart tearing circumstances brought by bad luck embolden Sabine to fight against all kinds of odds resulting into her firm decision of compensating Parsifal's family for the loss they have suffered because of Parsifal's negligence. Without putting it to thought, she offers her help to Mrs. Fetters. The following conversation between her and Mrs. Fetters bears testimony to her caring nature:

"Mrs. Fetters," says Sabine, "You've received the information from the lawyer. I'm assuring that's why you're calling me."

"Yes," she says

"Then tell me how I can help you" (36).

After this offer of help from Sabine, the time and place for meeting is fixed, and Sabine promises to pick Fetters up.

The unbroken chain of fear and confusion continues tightening its grip on Sabine and disallows her to sleep. In order to keep Parsifal's memories quite alive in her inward eye she drinks coffee and plays Parsifal's Edith Piaf records loud. The questions about Parsifal's identity haunt her. She asks herself whether the person in photograph was Guy Fetters. Whether Guy Fetters lived in Nebraska and worked at a Shell station; whether his name was embroidered over his heart in a cursive and script; whether he wore fingerless gloves in the winter as he stood at the window of his car, counting out change. The cruel fate has told its decree and only time and destiny can help Sabine to recover from this dilemma. She has no way out but to grin and bear it. It is one thing to spend one's life in love with a man who cannot return the

favour, but it is another thing entirely to love a man one doesn't even know. The poor protagonist has become the victim of the second kind of love. It is not any coincidence or accident but sheer fate that has been conspiring against Sabine's good luck. The irony is that Sabine takes Parsifal, though now dead, to be a liar because in spite of her true love he concealed a lot of things from her.

Sabine, because of her good attitude, has to some extent been able to live happily with her dead lover's family. Her strong sense of destiny gives her strength to face the world. The Fetters have also accepted her as the member of their family. When Sabine cuts her hand, the Fetters attend to her in the hospital. When the doctor gives her an injection to cause numbness in her body, Mrs. Fetters stands up and takes hold of Sabine's other hand to show the part that hurts her.

The crusader's fate turns again when she along with Mrs. Fetters is sitting at a bar. The bar stays open until two A.M. It is quiet now, no piano player, only one waitress. The bartender waves them back into the fold like lost friends, brings them the same drinks without being asked. This meeting between Sabine and Mrs. Fetters provides Sabine with some hope to live as reflected by the following dialogue between the two:

"We'll drink to your husband and my son," Mrs. Fetters says, and they touch their glasses.

"Guy," Mrs. Fetters says.

"Parsifal."

They drink together as the dialogue keeps on. But Mrs. Fetters picks to begin the dialogue in a surprising way.

"Tell me about that fellow in the cemetery."

"Phan?"

Mrs. Fetters nods, her hair holding fast. "Him"

"He was a friend, a friend of Parsifal's, a friend of mine."

"But more a friend of Guy's" says Sabine (73-74).

Sabine runs the thin red straw around the rim of her glass and tells Fetters that he worked in computers and that he designed software programmes. She also tells her that he was a very successful designer and developed game namely knick-knack.

This talk makes Parsifal's mother sorry about her dead son. She expresses her grief and opens one of so many secrets of her son's life. She tells Sabine that Parsifal was a homosexual. The mother's motherly emotions pour out when she says:

"I know nothing about Parsifal. I've been out of the picture for a long time. But I know one true thing about my son, Guy, one thing that is making all of this difficult to figure. Guy was a homosexual" (74).

The story reaches its climax when Mrs. Fetters requests Sabine not to fake her prettiness for somebody. The trail of suffering is again picked up in Sabine's confession of love for Parsifal.

Now Mrs. Fetters behaves like a satisfied detective and asks Sabine where she finds herself at this juncture of life. She sympathizes with Sabine by calling her pretty. Sabine in reply to Fetter's question confesses here that she was very close to Parsifal and that they both worked together as friends. She also tells her that the reason of their getting married was Phan's death. The paradox here is that even after Sabine's confession of her love for Parsifal Mrs. Fetters does not relent and keeps on asking tough questions. The following conversation between the two presents before us the true picture of the sufferings Sabine has to undergo to justify herself:

“But why didn’t marry somebody else?” asks Mrs. Fetters.

“I was in love with him,” Sabine says.

“Everyone was in love with that boy,” Mrs. Fetters says, making Sabine’s confession common as ice. “But weren’t the two of you ever”- to hear the word – “together?”

“No” replies Sabine.

“And that was okay with you.” Investigates Mrs. Fetters.

“Oh, Christ I don’t know,” Sabine says. “No, not at first” (75).

The torturing questioning embarrasses Sabine even now, and Parsifal is dead. Mrs. Fetters without caring of Sabine’s inability to answer keeps on asking vexing questions.

“It seems to me that you got a bad deal.” Mrs. Fetters says.

“I had a very good deal,” Sabine says, and picks up her drink.

Mrs. Fetters nods respectfully. “May be you did. There are a lot of things in this world I’m never going to understand.

“Do you understand why Parsifal told me you were dead?” asks Sabine.

Mrs. Fetters polishes off her drink in a clean swallow and catches the bartender’s eye, which is easily caught.

“I do” says Mrs. Fetters.

“Good,” Sabine supports. “Tell me about that. I’m tired of confessing” (76).

It’s not Sabine alone who has got wrong fate, but Mrs. Fetters has also been suffering from the same. After telling about Parsifal’s birth and childhood days, Mrs. Fetters comes to the crux of the story. She explains how she sent Parsifal to the Nebraska Boys Reformatory Facility up in Lowell to get him cured. She repents for the strict decisions she used to take in order to bring improvement in her child. She curses herself. Macci’s observation of the characters is true when he writes that ‘The focus of this story is the loss that Sabine feels after Parsifal’s death and how she begins to live again. The characters are deep and intriguing, wounded and lost.’ It is true not only about Sabine but also Mrs. Fetters who tells Sabine that Parsifal did not pay much attention to the sufferings the family faced in his absence. Though he used to send them money, he did not write to her mother and his younger sister Kitty.

Sabine having heard about this irresponsible attitude of her departed lover tries some of her drink; but now it tastes spoiled in the glass.

She sighs and says, “Well”

“I’m not looking for your forgiveness,” Mrs. Fetters says. “I haven’t even come close to forgiving myself. I’m just telling you what I know. He should have told you. You’re a nice girl. You deserve to know what’s going on.”

“I appreciate that,” Sabine says. ‘Parsifal in prison. Parsifal in hell.’

Then, for the last time that night, Mrs. Fetters surprises Sabine. She reaches across the table and picks up Sabine’s good hand and holds it tight inside her own. She smiles at Sabine like a mother and says:

“It’s a long winter out there, you know, lots of time to think” (77).

Sabine looks down at the table where her hand is swallowed up. Suddenly she is tired enough to cry, tired enough to sleep. She knew it would come sooner or later. She requests Mrs. Fetters for some time to think before taking any decision. When Mrs. Fetters pressurizes her, she promises to tell her in the morning. Mrs. Fetters gives her time to think by calling her ‘honey’. Sabine pushes back from the table and stands

up to leave the place, but Mrs. Feters plans to stay for a while, contemplating last call. She says ‘thank you’ to Sabine for coming there. Sabine nods and gets to the door before she stops. There is no one left at the bar, just the bartender. The music is off. It is like speaking across a dining room. She does not raise her voice.

“Thank you for going with me,” she says, and holds up her hand.

“That?” Mrs. Feters says. “That’s nothing” (78).

The meeting gives some consolation to the otherwise broken hearts of Sabine and Mrs. Feters. But this consolation does not last long and the author herself points out the gloomy picture of Sabine’s life because of the death of latter’s magician man. She writes...

‘Magicians all across the world managed quite well without assistants, but without magicians, the assistants were lost’ (98).

Even if Sabine had never loved magic the way she loved Parsifal; she realized that it was one more thing that was over for her. She had been a brightly label, a well-made box, a bottle cap. She was never the reason.

The author further adds,

‘What a night it had been when Parsifal first took Sabine to the Castle, how impossible it was to think that something they would perform there. Inconceivable that one day they would get tired of performing there’ (99).

The chronicle of miseries and unwelcome goings-on continues for the poor Sabine even at the time when she along with the Feters (Dot Feters, Bertie Feters, and Mrs. Feters) goes to mourn at the Castle bar where she used to perform with her husband Parsifal. Spender (Parsifal’s companion in magic) begins the patter, the Ladies- and- gentlemen, to attract the attention of the audience to Sabine. He starts introducing her to the people present there. “Ladies and gentlemen, Sabine Parsifal one of the truly great magician’s assistant,” he says (101). He invites her to the stage, but Sabine holds the armrests of her chair firmly. She does not want to perform again. When Sam Spender puts the hoop on her hand she finds no place to go, but to stand there still on the stage. She cannot walk off the stage; all she can do is check the hood, and so, over and over again, she does. Mrs. Feters encourages her to perform but for no response from Sabine as she (Sabine) feels emptiness. The hoop suddenly goes out of her hand. The situation becomes so pathetic that Sabine starts weeping unstopably. Mrs. Feters and Bertie rush on to the stage to stop her crumple up; and the three of them leave the magic parlour. Mrs. Feters consoles her by saying ‘sorry’. She recognizes her fault and promises never to ask her again to reach this place and perform. She also assures Sabine of taking care of her.

This sympathetic promise from Mrs. Feters brings new confidence in Sabine to live. The story of the death of Mrs. Feters’ husband in an accident subsides Sabine’s grief to some extent. The cruelty of fate has dazed Mrs. Feters too; as she describes the death of her husband.

She says, “He was in an accident. It was a real shock. One minute he’s there, the next minute...”  
“Gone” (105).

The author again takes the story back to the days when Sabine had Parsifal in her life. She recalls the time when she asked Parsifal to show her the pictures of his family, and Parsifal told a lie that he had no family, and that all the family members had died in a car crash. The little conversation that occurred between them runs-

“I didn’t keep anything from that time,” he says. “I told you that.”

“Nothing? Not even a sock? You stripped yourself naked and started over again?” she says.

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He looks at her and repeats “There are no pictures” (111).

Sabine lived happily with Parsifal; but this man never bothered to tell the truth about his family.

It is not only Sabine and Parsifal’s family that have been fated to suffer but Phan, too, underwent almost the same difficulties, but in a different way. Since his birth, he had been facing terrible things. In his childhood he was sent off alone because of the death of his parents and sisters in the Vietnam. He lost almost everything in his life and lived the life by himself until he found Parsifal. When unaccompanied, he used to sleep next to the swimming pool without any tentativeness on his face. He was always peaceful. When he came home from work in the evenings, there was always something in his pocket for the rabbit, a carrot stick from lunch, a cluster of green grapes. He made elaborate birthday cakes with thin layers of jam in the middle. He ironed Parsifal’s handkerchiefs. But what about night! Did they hold each other tightly? Did Parsifal whisper in his ear, “My love, my father put me in the refrigerator and left me there to suffocate?” Did Phan then bury his face against Parsifal’s neck and say, “Darling, they killed my mother? They killed the boys who sat next to me in school. They killed even the birds in the trees.” Did they rock one another then? Was there comfort? Did they stay up until dawn, recounting things too unbelievable to say with lights on, and then decide in the morning to keep it all a secret? Was there always a brave face for Sabine?

These questions remain unanswered, and the story of doldrums continues to overshadow the relations among so many persons of disparate nature and attitude. The secrets Parsifal hid from his beloved and wife are open now. Sabine joins the family of her dead husband. The cruelties of fate are overcome by the positivity of destiny as Sabine is now enjoying a beautiful feast with the Fetters. She feels great when Bertie, the bride, brings her a piece of cake. She compares her with the cake itself, shining white and in every way decorated. She cuts a piece with a frosting rose on top just like Parsifal used to do. The novel ends with a small discussion on the tricks Parsifal used to play. Jawin rightly reviews that ‘this story isn’t just about a magician’s assistant, but the everyday magic that people work on each other to improve their outlook on life. The magic of everyday miracles people become so accustomed to that they overlook--the magic of friendship and family’.

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