

# FICTION

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## The Man Who Sang So Well

BACK IN THE SPRING IT SEEMED the house had required endless cleaning, and no sooner would she finish sweeping the top stair of the third floor than she'd have to start all over again. Facing the door that led to the narrow attic, she'd say, there now, my work is finally done. But once down the stairs she'd notice just how much dust had accumulated over the intervening days, and she'd take up the broom once more.

But she was old, and who was there to clean for? Cat had died five months ago, Bird nearly a year ago, and all this was filthy habit. There was a time when she had hated habit, had travelled far and wide and had lovers in many distant cities. But now, standing in the late-dusk sunlight on the second-floor landing, she swept.

Cat used to curl here, up in the sunlight. Up the stairs and careful everyone, don't step on Cat, that's Cat's spot right there.

Cat used to roll and show his fluffy tawny belly, lay paws up and tongue hanging dumbly like a dog's would. Sleeping Cat like that.

She swept the dust into the dustpan. Moving about the house like this, revisiting Cat's spot, it stirred a bit of wind, moved things and kept a flow going, though a slow flow. Not the air, but just what everything was, or once was. Well, she knew what she meant. She lifted the dustpan and looked out the second-floor window, but it wasn't right. Everything was off.

It was off in the way a bad TV is off, when a naughty child plays with the knobs. It was off and she didn't want look at it anymore, but it was on the floor, on the floor through the light in the window.

Oh, that's not right, she said, and went down the stairs to the kitchen.

But it was off there too, so she closed the curtains and shut her eyes and repaired to the sitting room, where she drew the heavy drapes and sat in the darkness. Maybe I should turn on the radio, she said to herself.

Or maybe I should go to bed. It's been a long day, this is such an endless house....

So she moved from the sombre sitting room to her bedroom, which was the adjoining room, which held a canopied bed the colour of night sky with crescent moon, and she slipped beneath the cool duvet. She moved her feet, trying to find a comfortable position, feeling the weight of phantom Cat, who used to curl there. Sometimes Cat still came to her, in her dreams, and Bird once, though Bird was all wrong, Bird was off. No, it wasn't Bird that came to her in a dream, it was something else, though who knew what. Best not to think about these things. The lover she'd had in Rome had a body full of moles, and one humid night she tried to count all of her lover's moles, but she couldn't count them all. He had thousands of moles, that lover in Rome. She told him he would probably die from them, if he didn't get them pulled off. More dark moles than stars in the dark.

It was noisy. It was as if all of her neighbours were shutting doors and opening doors and shutting doors. And calling to each other. And cars in the street, and jets in the sky and perhaps she would dream of them crashing, because she often dreamed of them crashing.

Shutting doors and calling to each other.

Moving her feet she slipped out of bed and went to the window. Through the window's still lilac shadows she could see the streams of it, this offness. She wrung her hands, which were dry like snakeskin. She paced about and then moved to the sitting room, turned the radio on and turned the radio off. Oh, it was there, too, on all the stations, everybody opening and shutting doors on every station. Everybody calling their loved ones in, like she used to call Cat in. Or Jacob, before he left.

The radio said that they were coming, they were all coming from the North. Airplanes and cars all coming from the North. They were fleeing the North because things up there were off, the radio had said, it was terrible for them and they were all coming. She returned to the bedroom and sat at the edge of the bed, thinking of the lilacs, the third floor, her son. She slipped back under the duvet.

Oh, and she had missed her favourite show, the man who sang so well, the man with the voice like honey. He had died a long time ago, and they had never been lovers, but radio played him anyway. Songs coming from the radio in the dusky sitting room, the honey-voice of a dead man, this man now long underground like a bed of tulips, or twisty roots. But that thing of him, his voice, like honey, living on. His sweet voice in the air. Cat liked him, but Bird, well Bird went bonkers, that's what Bird did, nuttered around in his cage screeching, or, if he was free, flying straight into windows.

Or out the door.

Jacob came in that one time, and there went Bird.

He's bonkers, she screamed, terribly bonkers, and now he's gone. And Jacob went to look for him, but he was gone, long gone. Jacob and Bonkers. The house quiet with curled up Cat, for a week like that. And it was such a lovely summertime stretch, and she had really forgotten about Bonkers, was washing the dishes and then there he was, in the lilacs, staring at her, her homing parrot.

Well, she called Jacob right away, Bird is back, she said, Bird is back. Are you sure it's the same bird, Mother? Are you sure it's not a grackle or a penguin? Oh no, she said, it's Bird all right. Listen up. And then she turned the radio on and poor Bird went bonkers again.

Then Jacob, laughing Jacob told her to shut the damn thing off, he had some news, he had some terrible or wonderful news, it being terribly wonderful that he was moving up North, couldn't resist the pull of the North.

Just flew out the window and went North, he did.

She could see the patterns of distant streaming reflected on the bed's canopy, and maybe that meant dawn was coming. At first light she would have to get up and get the broom, would have to get up to the third floor and sweep, even though on the third floor she knew she'd feel closer to whatever it was, whatever it was that was so off, because Jacob's room was on the third floor and Jacob would be coming any minute now, would be here seeking shelter and would bring his beautiful wife and their beautiful little boy, they would want to be safe, there was no place for them to go.

So again she slipped her feet onto the floor and made her way through the sitting room to the kitchen. She took the broom, then decided on the mop, and the bucket, and started in the foyer. Soon they would all be here, would come running through the door, the creepy awfulness behind them, the screaming sky behind them, they would come in running and they would dirty the floor. Oh, she'd have to tell them to remove their shoes, especially the little boy, who would run all over the place, open and shut all the cupboard doors, jump wildly about on her duvet. If Cat were here, Cat would hide, if Cat were alive, that's what Cat would do, Cat would curl in a corner, all flashing eyes and ears peeled back, all teeth at the ready.

She opened the front door thinking she had heard them, the car, the slamming doors, the fast footfalls, but she wished she hadn't have done that. It was hard on the head, and there was no one.

Oh, why are they so late? she murmured while moving the mop and bucket into the kitchen.

And was mopping the kitchen floor, getting it really shining, when she found the first of them. One of those. Swishing it about with the mop's slopping tendrils, she fought it, but it wouldn't go away, it stayed there in the mop's grey slopping. She jabbed it this way, then jabbed it that way, cursed it under her breath, hissed it to bugger off, but it stayed, though it wasn't anything, really, wasn't anything but an old grey toy of Cat's, perhaps. An old grey scaly toy of Cat's, perhaps, and it was so hard to mop without music, surely there would be some good music now.

But no, it was still there.

And under her feet, in the sitting room, gripping to her orange slippers, more of them. Oh, what were they called? She lifted a foot and shook it before the radio's punched-out silent mouth and one or two of them went flying across the room, but then so did her slipper, and then her bare foot came down on the more of them, they were everywhere, the patterned Persian was littered with them. Oh dear. She would have to burn the Persian, she realized, would have to shake it out and really burn it. It was filthy. But how could she go out? How could she go out with the sky like that and all those falling airplanes? The moment she went out, the door would slam behind her, and she'd be trapped out there, Jacob would come and she'd be trapped out there. We can't get in, she'd have to confess, we're locked out and there's no one in the kitchen to see us sitting in the lilac bushes.

Back to bed, that was the idea. But oh, they were just all over the place, you could smell them, that animal smell, that musky and intoxicating animal odour. They would be there, too, under the duvet, sliding up her legs. Maybe they had been there all night. Cat would know what to do; Bird would know what to do. Bird would fly far from here, and Cat would curl in a corner. She knew she couldn't curl in a corner, she was no dummy, not like one of her lovers, that thin man from Cairo, that tall one who wore the top hat, now he was a dummy.

Though he had the most wonderful fingers . . .

A woman's body is like a musical instrument, he would tell her . . .

She was at the stairs, staring at the turns in the stairs, the first landing and then the higher other landing. The long grey things were there too, leading everything up. She saw them. She knew what they were. She had seen them before.

But where?

Was it an old book, was that where? Perhaps she had seen this house and had read about these things lying about. An old book that was kept downstairs, perhaps, in the cellar, in the dark. Well, I'll have to go down there, she said to herself, there's no other way around it. I'll have to find that old book, though who knows when I saw it last. Maybe the last time I

saw it was when I carried Cat down there, carried Cat and put him in that box that held those metal things like handcuffs. Put Cat in that box, flat like that, back in the winter, snowed in for a week, no news from Jacob for months, Cat shaking all day, all night, yowling like a headache. Yes, that was the last time I was down there, in the dark down there....

And Jacob had been so good, the winter before all that. Stayed with me night and day and held my hand, read my favourite magazines, said Mother I'll never leave you until you're feeling better, I won't let you die here alone. And I told him no, no, oh dear, don't linger for me, I have Cat and Bird and that's enough, they'll look after me. But he didn't go, he's such a good boy, so much like his father, before the earthquake took him. Oh, that was a terrible night, things were off that night, the radio played no songs that night, that terrible night that never ended.

The door handle was cold and old and brown and squeaked when she turned it, and the cellar stairs squeaked with each step she took. There was no railing to lead the way down to the cellar. That chilling animal smell was here too, and so was the offness, the streaming, where it wasn't dark the cellar was bright with it, coming in slow through the low, slitlike windows, wavering there on the dark-green boxes, wavering on the pale cobwebs, she couldn't close her eyes to it, she had to find the book. Certainly she had seen it as a child, had spent many days down here as a little girl, before her life became such a tangle of travels and lovers, like the little man from Paraguay who had a hoop in his nose, who spoke so strangely, like his mouth was on backwards, and who gave her Bird. Yes, she'd come down here and open an enormous trunk, heave an old book and set it on her lap. It would open as wide as her arms, and with a little cloud of mystery dust. Illustrations there, in colour. So bright. And sit there shivering. The things that could happen to a house, that could happen to a mother and a father or a sleeping child in a house. Turn the pages. Infections and infestations, things that live on in a wall, that pop out of the wall at night and eat your eyes, if you don't shut them quickly enough. Oh dear, that's what it was. Oh yes. Near the end, yes, the drawings, the little headless snakes which were tails, *have you seen these?* And the next page, the picture of the Queen, the eyes glaring....

*Then she's up there ....*

She went back up the stairs and shut the cellar door.

Oh dear, she said, wringing her hands. This was no job for someone her age, there must be someone to call. Sitting on the table by the kettle was the telephone, but all the lines were busy, all the lines were dead.

What was happening in the world? All this awfulness had started with her sweeping, if only she had stayed in the sitting room, stayed and listened to the honey-voice .... But no, she had to get up and stir things

about, move the air, that was it, she got things moving when things were meant to stay still. Yes, she should have sat quietly, unmoving, in the glowing dustmotes, breathing only lightly, thinking of nothing....

Were they here?

Hello? Jacob? Please don't come in, please don't come in. It's all my fault, I've done it all, I've let you all down, couldn't clean the house and now look at what I've done. Is it because I've lived such a life? But I loved them all, I honestly did. No, send him in, let me see him, let me see how he's grown, he's so beautiful ....

Jacob?

*Mother?*

No, don't come in, it won't be good for you here.

*But we have no place else, we're already very ill, can't we come in, can't the boy rest awhile in your nice bed?*

Jacob?

*Mother?*

It's all my fault.

*What is?*

The infestation, in the attic, those filthy.

*Mother?*

Take the Persian out and burn it, but don't set the boy on fire.

*Mother?*

No, it's not time for that, not yet, you were so good to me, that winter, shame about that, shame about that ....

*But Mother?*

Shame about what's lost ....

Now she had the broom in hand, was standing at the bottom of the stairs. The streaming was bright, wavering like woodgrain on the banisters, flowing and pooling on the landing where Cat used to curl. Taking a breath, she started to climb the stairway, went past Cat's spot, curled Cat who would look up at her with those golden eyes, those cold, alien eyes. Cat who would eat every fuzzy black spider. Then she was past that, broom at the ready, the second landing in sight, recalling the lover who was hairy like a gorilla, who carried her one evening and dangled her over the railing laughing. His hands were like tarantulas. Then she was in the full bright of the last landing, the window here like a portal, the awful sky also lovely, and she could see her neighbours down there, on their sidewalks, stirring around, talking. With the broom she poked open the attic door, started up the narrow stairs. There was so much dust, so long since she had last swept. She slowed, began to sweep. This was an awful, dirty place, and it smelled too, smelled worse than ol' hoop nose, who never bathed. But at least he

gave her Bird. Oh yes, it smelled like him, ol' hoop nose, it smelled like the jungle at night. Yes, it was him alright, that man who gave her Bird. Yes, it was him alright. She could smell him, in bed like that, the filthy man. Yes, yes, yes ....

She was at the top of the narrow stairs.

And when she looked up there he was, fully nude, standing in the streaming with his umber sex throbbing, standing and flexing his jungle muscles and wearing, on his face, a green parrot's beak. And then his wings began to unfurl, and he began to sing softly. Oh, she knew she shouldn't listen to him, that this was no good for her, that she had things to do. And what if he opened his big-beaked mouth and tried to seduce her all over again, like the man who sang so well? What if he did that?

But what if he gathered her in his arms and flew her to her son, flew her up North, to her son and his son. Yes, she should be there. Yes, he was filthy, terribly terribly filthy, but surely there were worse things in the world than that?